

A Feminism for Everyone? How the Developed Should Help the Developing

Allen Zhu

Abstract

This paper addresses both liberal and multicultural feminist concerns for the Western feminist's duty to help women around the world. Liberals accuse multiculturalists of falling into the trap of cultural essentialism, wherein they fail to hold cultures accountable for blatant human rights violations. However, liberal feminist theory both perpetuates and assumes what Alison Jaggar dubs the "West is best" thesis—that the West is morally and culturally superior to non-Western cultures. I propose an agenda that accommodates concerns at both ends of the feminist spectrum. In my "multidimensional sequence for women's liberation," Western feminists must first de-Westernize the notion of human rights and seek allyship with women overseas. Then, they must hold Western institutions accountable for their previous and ongoing violations of human rights and provide reparations to the populations they have harmed, using the demands of those most oppressed to guide the process. Only after these measures have been implemented, I argue, can Western feminists critique outside cultural practices without hypocrisy, having already held their own institutions accountable for their own rights violations.

Introduction

Despite straddling two large bodies of research and scholarship, feminist philosophers have struggled to answer many fundamental questions that guide activism and policy regarding women's rights. In this essay, I address one of the most crucial questions: "What should the Western

feminist do to help women in developing parts of the world?” Scholars proposing solutions to this question have typically self-identified as one of two types of feminists: the essentialist, liberal feminist, who advocates for forms of social policy resembling those in the West, and the multicultural feminist, who argues that activists should be attune to cultural differences in the creation and implementation of gender policy around the world. In order to address this issue, I first discuss the causes of women’s oppression, addressing both essentialist and multiculturalist arguments. Then, I argue that scholars must conceptualize human rights as not belonging to any single culture in order to understand how best to ensure them. With these two issues addressed, I present the “multidimensional sequence for female liberation,” which gives Western feminists an agenda that accommodates essentialist and anti-essentialist concerns.

Causes of Women’s Oppression

Scholars have often discussed culture as the root cause of women’s oppression. Peggy Sanday claims that the gendered nature of a society’s origin story predicts the status of women.¹ Arguing cross-culturally, Susan Okin writes that the preservation of cultural practices has a “much greater impact on the lives of women and girls than those of men and boys, since far more of women’s time and energy goes into preserving and maintaining” the private sphere, where practices are largely determined by culture.² Culture, to Okin, disproportionately regulates women’s behavior compared to its influence on men’s.

Okin also concedes that culture dictates much more than domestic life, having an influence on public practices as well. However, she fails to address how domestic life itself is dictated by more than culture. Economic structures—ranging from the dominant national industry to wages—change the gender distribution of labor in the public and private sphere alike, and government programs, marriage laws, and subsidies further blur the lines between the state and the household. Even if one were to perceive culture as insulated and self-imposed (a claim that Jaggar problematizes in “Saving Amina”), she cannot deny that Western

1. Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Female Power and Male Dominance: on the Origins of Sexual Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 7-9.

2. Susan Okin, “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?,” in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4.

liberal countries have huge stakes in the economies and political systems of developing countries. In fact, Jaggar argues that “contemporary processes of economic globalization, regulated by the Western-inspired and Western-imposed principles and policies of neoliberalism, have dramatically increased inequality both among and within countries.”³ As women are generally poorer than men in most cultures, wealth inequality is a gendered process and feminist issue. Western-imposed worldwide cutbacks to social services also disproportionately affect women because of their major role in the private sphere. Not only does this further increase the responsibilities of caretaking mothers and wives, but it also depresses education opportunities for young girls as household labor becomes less subsidized.⁴ Thus, Western countries are guilty of perpetuating women’s oppression in countries outside of their own.

Granted, Western countries are not solely responsible for increasing the wellbeing of women around the world. Individual cultures and governments have moral obligations to serve the people within their borders. However, Western governments have the negative duty not to inflict harm and cause inequality, and when such instances occur, they have a positive duty to bear the consequences of their actions. Liberal feminists need to enforce their countries’ negative duties in order to fully understand women’s oppression around the globe. By discussing almost exclusively the role of culture, Westerners do women everywhere a great injustice.

The temptation that follows, then, is for radical, intersectional feminists to subscribe to cultural essentialism: the idea that simply because another woman belongs to a different culture, Westerners are able neither to understand her oppression nor to help her without committing the crime of cultural imperialism.⁵ This, however, also does injustice to all women because it presumes cultures as homogenous and ahistorical. Just as there is no representative “American woman,” there is no single “Indian woman” that can claim to represent every aspect of Indian culture. Ethnic and cultural minorities exist within countries that Westerners often generalize as uniformly “Other,” and such broad assumptions about women

3. Alison Jaggar, “‘Saving Amina’: Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue,” in *Global Ethics: Seminal Essays*, ed. Thomas Pogge and Keith Horton (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2008), 574.

4. *Ibid.*, 574-576.

5. Uma Narayan, “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism,” *Hypatia* 13, no. 2 (1998): 91. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1998.tb01227.x/>.

in other cultures erase minority groups that may already face great erasure and oppression.

Moreover, a cultural-essentialist stance may seem appealing to Western feminists because of the West's violent history of colonialism, which is still being perpetuated today, albeit through more subtle practices. Leaders of postcolonial states have often unified their people through the notion of "cultural preservation," wherein any scrutiny of a culture's traditions or practices is lambasted as xenophobia. Such bigotry does indeed have dangerous consequences. Islamophobic hate crimes in the U.S. skyrocketed from 28 incidents in 2000 to 481 incidents in 2001, likely because of the 9/11 terrorist attacks,⁶ and xenophobic rhetoric fueled public support for the war on terror.⁷ To many in the West, the hijab became a symbol of female oppression, and liberation through war and Western-imposed cultural reform was the only answer.

Though this concern is valid and historically supported, as Narayan notes, cultural practices are not the ahistorical traditions that we may assume. She uses female circumcision practices in Sierra Leone as an example, wherein traditions associated with the circumcision "have fallen by the wayside because people no longer have the time, money, or social infrastructure for them."⁸ Cultures abandon customs that are perceived as no longer feasible, but, more nefariously, political groups often use the embracing of certain practices and abandonment of others "to justify the exploitation, domination, and marginalization of religious and ethnic minorities."⁹ Thus, activists and philosophers should be skeptical of the political motives for and social consequences of perpetuating a certain tradition.

In order to understand the factors that contribute to women's oppression in the developing world, Western feminists must first acknowledge the variety of facts and arguments that are obscured from liberal feminist literature, cultural-essentialist feminist literature, or both. Economic

6. Kueng Keng, "Data: Hate Crimes against Muslims Increased after 9/11," Public Radio International, September 12, 2016, www.pri.org/stories/2016-09-12/data-hate-crimes-against-muslims-increased-after-911/.

7. Michael Welch, *Scapegoats of September 11th: Hate Crimes & State Crimes in the War on Terror* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 65-66; Arun Kundnani, "Integrationism: the Politics of Anti-Muslim Racism," *Race & Class* 48, no. 4 (2007): 30, doi:10.1177/0306396807077069.

8. Narayan, "Essence of Culture," 95.

9. *Ibid.*, 91.

and political factors affect women's opportunities worldwide, and Western countries have hindered progress in the developing world for the sake of their own expansion. Nonetheless, they should be wary of blindly supporting cultural practices that serve primarily to perpetuate political, oppressive interests.

Conceptualizing Human Rights and Its History

The very essence of the debate between multiculturalism and women's rights relies on a perceived tension between inherently Western human rights and non-Western culture, but this assumption is problematic. Jaggar argues against this notion, which she calls the "West is best" thesis, in writing that "cross burnings, burning of black churches, domestic violence murders, and gun deaths are not usually treated as manifestations of United States culture."¹⁰ Though Westerners are quick to attribute human rights violations overseas to the cultures in which they occur, very rarely do they treat similar occurrences as integral to their own, even if acts of, for example, anti-black violence in the United States, were permissible for centuries.

Jaggar further problematizes the notion of human rights as innately Western by citing the "feminization of poverty" in the Western world; the adverse effects of globalization, which create "conditions that make non-Western women vulnerable to local violations of their rights;" and the West's support for "undemocratic and gender-conservative regimes abroad," coups, dictatorships, and civil wars.¹¹ With the West's past and present violations of human rights both at home and overseas, one can hardly claim that rights are a cornerstone of Western civilization. On the contrary, standards of human rights emerged "as a result of political struggles by various excluded groups in both Western and non-Western contexts," struggles that were often against Western imperialism.¹² One need only look at any of the countless United Nations peace doctrines, such as the *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*, to see how contemporary standards of justice exist largely to keep Western powers in check.

10. Jaggar, "'Saving Amina,'" 581.

11. Ibid, 583.

12. Narayan, "Essence of Culture," 97.

Nonetheless, developed states continue to use human rights and democracy as a justification for meddling in the affairs of other nations. Anti-American sentiments are abundant in nations that have experienced American military interventions, yet the U.S. continues to fuel conflicts worldwide. Women have the most to lose from these military campaigns as they comprise 80 percent of the refugees dislocated by war.¹³ It is no surprise, then, that non-Western peoples resist the ideology of the “Global Policeman” out of fear of political destabilization and corruption.

Posited Solutions

How, then, are Western feminists and human rights advocates to understand their duty to aid the global feminist cause? To Okin, women’s oppression in developing nations is similar to that experienced by Western women, but simply to a greater degree. Levels of wealth inequality, violence against women, and discrimination can be conceptualized as consistent variables across cultures, and her policy implication that follows “closely resembles solutions proposed by Western feminists primarily concentrating on their own societies.”¹⁴ Namely, Okin argues for strategies implemented by Western countries that challenge the public-private dichotomy and policies that increase female economic participation and productivity.

Okin’s argument falls short in two main areas. First, it ignores the effects of colonialism and its contemporary manifestations—such as U.S. military intervention and multinational corporations—which create complicated obstacles that most Western women do not face. Second, it fails to assign responsibilities to either Western humanitarians or their institutions, implying that they play no part in perpetuating global patriarchy and misogyny. As a result, her proposed solution neither accommodates for differing national contexts and histories, nor does it demand enough from Westerners.

Moreover, Okin, like other gender essentialists, dismisses the desires of women opposed to her proposal as operating under “false conscious-

13. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *The State of The World’s Refugees 1993: The Challenge of Protection*, (Geneva: United Nations, 1993), 37.

14. Susan Okin. “Gender Inequality and Cultural Differences,” in *Global Ethics: Seminal Essays*, ed. Thomas Pogge and Keith Horton (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2008), 247.

ness.”¹⁵ Despite arguing for strategies to end women’s oppression, essentialists portray non-Western women as passive objects, somehow less enlightened than and more prone to harmful cultural influences than their Western counterparts. Proponents of this argument erase the non-Western woman’s unique, lived experiences involving Western intervention and foreign policy. Consequently, her conception of human rights that follows from these experiences is rendered inadequate and self-harming to the essentialist.

On the other hand, anti-essentialists argue that universal frameworks, such as the one offered by Okin, are too generalized. To the multicultural feminist, women’s rights must be understood within specific cultural contexts, with some even claiming that the rights themselves differ by country. I shall not address the latter point at the current time, for it warrants an entirely different discussion, but in the case of the former, I agree with multiculturalists. To achieve women’s rights worldwide, Western feminists must be wary of overgeneralizing. But, similar to the argument of essentialists, multiculturalist considerations are too broad. Combating sexism requires a more specific agenda for women’s advocates, and I propose that a “multidimensional sequence for female liberation” is the most effective approach. This theory has four parts:

- 1) De-Westernizing the notion of human rights
- 2) Seeking allyship with non-Western peoples and cultures, especially those most negatively affected by the status quo
- 3) Fighting Western countries’ ongoing economic and political exploitation of the developing world and demanding compensation on behalf of exploited states
- 4) Peassuring misogynistic cultures and their political structures to end women’s oppression

15. Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 294-296; Okin, “Gender Inequality,” 233; Okin, “Is Multiculturalism Bad,” 117.

De-Westernization of Human Rights

In order to take the actions that follow in the multidimensional sequence, scholars, activists, and policymakers must first refute the idea that human rights are—and have been—a cornerstone of Western culture. The purpose of this step is threefold. First, it forces Western actors to acknowledge their past and ongoing violations of human rights. Consequently, this step refutes the implication that if human rights are inherently Western, then the only way to enforce them is through the dissemination of Western culture, an ideology that has a violent history of ineffectiveness. With this accomplished, Non-westerners can view shifts in their cultures—which are also to be conceptualized as neither ahistorical nor static—as reform rather than cultural imperialism. Thus, de-Westernizing human rights removes the false dichotomy between rights and culture.

Allyship with the Developing World

With human rights understood as acultural, Western feminists should strive to understand and to unite with people abroad. Regardless of the extent to which people in a given population are being oppressed, cooperation is essential for Western feminists to make a meaningful, positive impact. Essentialist dismissals of differing preferences as “false consciousness” prevent an understanding of non-Western women’s desires and goals. Only through allyship can the Westerner grasp a culture’s colonial history and effectively advocate for what he knows to be in the best interest of those overseas.

However, one must be especially wary of falling into the cultural-essentialist trap of constructing only one image of the “Third World woman.”¹⁶ The desires of people within cultures are wide and varied, and following only the voices of the majority dangerously ignores those of minority groups—individuals who are often the most marginalized within any given society.¹⁷ As a result, one should incorporate the Rawlsian consideration of concentrating on the needs of “the least advantaged.”¹⁸ Allyship allows Westerners to demonstrate a willingness to act on behalf

16. Narayan, “Essence of Culture,” 87.

17. Narayan, “Essence of Culture,” 91.

18. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 65-72.

of humanitarian and global feminist interests, not national, self-guided ones.

Cessation of Western Exploitation and Provision of Compensation

Though populations are heterogeneous and complex, one common demand throughout cultures and groups will surely be to end Western-inflicted oppression. As Jaggar writes, before considering any other measures, “Western philosophers should begin by taking [their] own feet off [of the developing world’s] neck” if their true aim is to promote global human rights.¹⁹ Large-scale initiatives such as the 2017 Women’s March show that Western feminists are capable of mobilizing for political action. To help women around the world, they must further organize a movement that has pressuring institutions to end the ongoing exploitation of and political interference in foreign countries as its primary goal. Countries that supposedly advocate for human rights should actually do so, for in order for Western states to assume any positive duty of combating injustice, they must follow their negative one of not inflicting harm first.

However, realization of this negative duty is not enough. Advocates must pressure their Western institutions to provide compensation to countries they have harmed in the past. Their societies are guilty of benefiting from the suffering of the global poor, and only through improving the unjust conditions they created can the West begin to truly commit itself to human rights. Furthermore, the process of allocating compensation—whether it be through payment or debt forgiveness—should not be taken lightly. The current global economic order has caused massive wealth disparities within cultures, and haphazard implementation would surely result in compensation falling into the hands of local elites. Here, the importance of allyship is self-apparent; Western nations should design programs that benefit those most oppressed to the greatest degree. While the implementation of this approach is likely difficult, it is nonetheless a framework that enforces justice and strict moral standards.

Implementation of Cultural Reform

Only after following the previous steps can Western feminists begin

19. Jaggar, “‘Saving Amina,’” 590.

to denounce non-Western misogynistic practices. It would be unlikely that those most harmed by the practices interpret Western criticisms as morally superior or harmful, for feminists would have already demonstrated a strong commitment to allyship through communication and activism. Without the other steps in the multidimensional sequence, however, criticism of culture is inherently hypocritical and misguided. It fails to hold the West, perhaps the world's largest violator of human rights, accountable, and it does not sympathize with the plights of those it claims to help.

The previous measure, cessation of harm and compensation to developing countries, is especially important to this step, as it improves the status of women without demanding cultural change. Because cultural practices are largely motivated by financial incentives,²⁰ widespread economic improvement can reform misogynistic cultural practices. Nonetheless, Western feminists, having followed the previous steps, should not be willing to excuse oppressive, politically motivated cultural practices if such reform does not occur.

Conclusion

On a national scale, implementing gender equality is a task that arguably no country has accomplished. On a global scale, the challenge becomes infinitely more complicated, requiring one to consider an endless spectrum of essentialist and anti-essentialist feminist premises, arguments, and implications. However, I argue that understanding the causes of female oppression and the history of human rights are necessary to arrive at my multidimensional sequence for women's liberation, which attempts to mediate concerns and counterarguments at both ends of the feminist spectrum. This theory requires Western feminists to de-Westernize human rights, to seek allyship with non-Western peoples, to advocate for their governments to cease exploitation and to compensate countries they have harmed; and to demand cultural reform if oppressive practices still remain.

Although the multidimensional sequence guides Western feminist efforts more effectively than essentialist and multiculturalist feminist theories,

20. Wendy Lee, *Contemporary Feminist Theory and Activism: Six Global Issues*. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2010), 142-144.

it cannot accommodate for a host of closely related problems. The multi-dimensional sequence does not claim any universal standard of women's rights; rather, it defers to the preferences of women within a culture to guide standards of rights. Because cultures are so heterogeneous and varied, as noted by Narayan, I further give weight to the voices of the most oppressed women. Nonetheless, without a general principle to establish universal rights, this framework provides little guidance to how one oppressed group's preferences should be treated if at odds with those of a similarly oppressed group. Similar dilemmas problematize even the strongest of moral theories and arguments, and the multidimensional framework offers a specific agenda to Western feminists concerned with flaws in both essentialist and multiculturalist theories.

References

- Jaggar, Alison. "'Saving Amina': Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue." in *Global Ethics: Seminal Essays*, edited by Thomas Pogge and Keith Horton, 565–603. St. Paul: Paragon House, 2008.
- Keng, Kueng. "Data: Hate Crimes against Muslims Increased after 9/11." Public Radio International. September 12, 2016.
- Kundnani, Arun. "Integrationism: the Politics of Anti-Muslim Racism." *Race & Class* 48, no. 4 (2007): 24–44. doi:10.1177/0306396807077069.
- Lee, Wendy. *Contemporary Feminist Theory and Activism: Six Global Issues*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2010.
- Narayan, Uma. "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism." *Hypatia* 13, no. 2 (1998): 86–106. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1998.tb01227.x/>.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Okin, Susan. "Gender Inequality and Cultural Differences." in *Global Ethics: Seminal Essays*, edited by Thomas Pogge and Keith Horton, 233–257. St. Paul: Paragon House, 2008.

Okin, Susan. "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, edited by Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Nussbaum, 2-26. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.

Sanday, Peggy. *Female Power and Male Dominance: on the Origins of Sexual Inequality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *The State of The World's Refugees 1993: The Challenge of Protection*. Geneva: United Nations, 1993.

Welch, Michael. *Scapegoats of September 11th: Hate Crimes & State Crimes in the War on Terror*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006.