

# Summaries

## **Introduction: Reclaiming Feminism: Gender and Neoliberalism**

*Andrea Cornwall, Jasmine Gideon and Kalpana Wilson*

Neoliberalism – that ‘grab-bag of ideas based on the fundamentalist notion that markets are self-correcting, allocate resources efficiently and serve the public interest well’ as Stiglitz (2008) puts it – has been a focal point for contestation in development. Feminists have highlighted its deleterious effects on women’s lives and on gender relations. They have drawn attention to the extent to which the institutions promoting neoliberal economic and social policies have undermined a more progressive agenda, as they have come to appropriate words such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘agency’ and eviscerate them of any association with a project of progressive social change. This collection of articles brings together reflections from a diversity of locations on prospects for reclaiming these ideas and using them to reframe and revitalise feminist engagement with development. To reclaim feminist concepts like ‘agency’ and ‘empowerment’, we argue, we need to return to and reaffirm their ‘liberating’ dimensions, reaffirming their association with forms of collective action that involve resisting and transgressing repressive social norms.

## **Beyond the Mantra of Empowerment: Time to Return to Poverty, Violence and Struggle**

*Uma Chakravarti*

This article examines some of the critical issues raised by the women’s movement in India on the violence experienced by women both within the family and through modes of development initiated by the state, and the manner in which the state has sought to both counter feminist critiques as well as co-opt them through state-initiated policies. It focuses in particular on literacy and microcredit programmes, to argue that the rhetoric of empowerment functions as a new ‘mantra’ which does little to dent the violence of women’s everyday lives especially when they are poor and located on the social margins.

## **Liberal vs. Liberating Empowerment: A Latin American Feminist Perspective on Conceptualising Women’s Empowerment** *Cecilia M.B. Sardenberg*

This article argues that, despite great diversity in uses of the term ‘empowerment’, it is possible to distinguish two basic approaches. ‘Liberal empowerment’ regards women’s empowerment as an instrument for development priorities, whether poverty eradication or the building of democracy. Consistent with liberal ideals, the focus is on individual growth from an atomistic perspective – the rational action of social actors based on individual interests. It de-politicises the empowerment process by taking ‘power’ out of the equation. In ‘liberating empowerment’, power relations are central. Women’s empowerment is regarded as the process by which women gain self-determination, is an instrument for eradicating patriarchy and is instrumental for social transformation, entailing women’s liberation from patriarchal domination. ‘Liberating empowerment’ is consistent with a focus on women’s organising, on collective action, without disregarding the importance of women’s empowerment individually. Sustained by Latin American feminists, this is evident in different projects and programmes implemented locally.

## **Vulnerabilities of Feminist Engagement and the Challenge of Developmentalism in the South: What Alternatives?**

*Josephine Ahikire*

This article examines the challenge of feminist engagement in the South today. The analysis proceeds from the position that feminist engagement has registered multiple successes with a major breakthrough in the ways in which it has made considerable dents into dominant development discourses. However, the author argues that this very success has created inherent vulnerabilities, with success appearing as a double-edged sword whose disintegrative effects are much fiercer and much more anchored, in terms of power regimes. By

trying to have a command into the development arena feminism had to reshape itself – even at the basic level of being understood. The efforts to make the gender question understood to bureaucrats and development actors at the international and national levels simultaneously engendered a different uptake on the complexity of gender relations and this is where the author looks at vulnerability, more or less, as success gone wrong.

### **Local Feminism: Between Islamism and Liberal Universalism**

*Islah Jad*

This article argues that the spread of universal women's rights discourse, based on the liberal individual notion of rights, potentially ignores the different contexts in which 'indigenous' forms of resistance by feminist movements takes place, and risks sidelining some important knowledge and gains that have been achieved by these movements. In the Palestinian context, detaching feminist struggle from the wider context of the emancipatory struggle for national liberation has led to the marginalisation of women's movements and the subordination of their claims for rights to a universal donor agenda.

### **Appropriating 'Gender' and 'Empowerment': The Resignification of Feminist Ideas in Nigeria's Neoliberal Reform Programme**

*Charmaine Pereira*

This article focuses on processes involved in the Obasanjo administration's appropriation of feminist language and meanings in its economic empowerment and development strategy, the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS). This appropriation of progressive ideas takes apparently gender-neutral forms, through the presentation of the government's economic and development agenda as partitioned from political practice, as well as forms that are more specifically oriented to the terms 'gender' and 'empowerment'. On both tracks, appropriation involves the erasure of power in the production of altered meanings. The author argues that NEEDS works ideologically to manufacture hegemony and the illegitimacy of dissent with regard to the government's reform programme. In this context, the struggle to reclaim feminism in the pursuit of social and economic justice in Nigeria requires the production of more nuanced, feminist knowledge about the workings of power, including ways in which feminist conceptions of women's empowerment might be realised.

### **'Whose Money is it?': On Misconceiving Female Autonomy and Economic Empowerment in Low-income Households**

*Penny Vera-Sanso*

This article argues that divergences between intention and outcome in policies addressing women and money lies in three neoliberal assumptions: individuals have clear title to their earnings; markets are not socially constructed; and viewing individuals and families as isolated subsistence units is a valid analysis. It argues that development policy critiques, rooted in individualised conceptualisations of female empowerment, do not adequately challenge these assumptions. It suggests that feminist critiques are based on the double standard that women should have clear title to earnings, while men should be supporting the family. Using research undertaken in South India, this article demonstrates that the construction of credit, labour, housing and marriage markets determine how women benefit from improved livelihoods. Unless analysis is extended to subsistence needs beyond earning an income, taking into account marital interdependencies and the social arenas on which citizens depend, feminist research will fail to benefit women in low-income households.

### **Holding it Together in a Crisis: Family Strengthening and Embedding Neoliberalism**

*Kate Bedford*

This article seeks to intervene in debates about the role of crisis in Post-Washington Consensus (PWC) policymaking. Gender and sexuality are largely absent from that debate. What do experiences of crisis reveal about the inter-connections between crisis, gender, and sexuality? In concrete crisis conditions, which common sense groundworks of the present (Nikolas Rose) get unsettled, which get re-entrenched, and what is the role of the development industry in this process? Using policy texts, interviews with World Bank policymakers, and fieldwork on a family strengthening loan in Argentina, the author argues that denaturalisation of free markets in the PWC is articulated partly through the renaturalisation of monogamous heterosexual couplehood. With the injuries of neoliberalism framed as injuries to loving couplehood, the World Bank and its allies resolve to (re)generate intimate partnership as the defining feature of the post-crisis era, raising crucial questions about new regimes of heteronormativity under construction in contemporary development practice.

**An Unholy Trinity: The Church, the State, the Banks and the Challenges for Women Mobilising for Change in Nicaragua**

*Sarah Bradshaw*

This article explores the increasing interconnectivity of the economic and religious 'right' through consideration of recent events in Nicaragua. It examines the policy discourse of state and international development banks through consideration of a Conditional Cash Transfer programme, highlighting how this draws on notions of family and family values, more generally promoted by the Church. The discussion highlights how women's movements tended to focus on threats to sexual and reproductive rights from neo-conservative forces, whilst those that work with women's groups at the community level have tended to respond to women's economic needs resulting from neoliberal policies. While links within women's movements, between actors and actions, are not made, the ability to resist encroachments on women's sexual, reproductive and economic rights is lessened. Not recognising rights issues related to economic deprivation may reduce chances for future collective action as young women become isolated and disillusioned with an unresponsive women's movement.

**Counting the Cost of Privatised Provision: Women, Rights and Neoliberal Health Reforms in Chile**

*Jasmine Gideon*

This article traces the reshaping of the right to health under neoliberal reforms and considers the new Plan AUGE that has been implemented in the health sector in Chile. The article highlights how women's right to health has been challenged by the

marketisation of health care services. At the same time, it demonstrates how a limited notion of women's health is being promoted, one that notably excludes women's reproductive rights. The Plan AUGE will improve women's access to health care services, but does little to challenge the underlying gendered assumptions around unpaid work, and women's reproductive rights remain severely restricted.

**Reclaiming 'Agency', Reasserting Resistance**

*Kalpana Wilson*

This article examines how concepts of women's 'agency' have been appropriated and transformed by neoliberal discourses. Within this framework, exercise of agency is sought in women's survival strategies rather than struggles for transformation, individually rather than collectively. Post-modern preoccupations and recognition of 'difference' have been incorporated alongside liberal definitions of the 'rational individual exercising free will' to pursue and legitimise neoliberal economic policies involving exploitation of poor women's labour. The emphasis on women's agency marginalises analysis of oppressive structures, and shifts focus away from patriarchal ideologies. Assumptions about women's relative 'efficiency' remain unchallenged in much of the GAD literature. This article draws on experiences, approaches and perceptions of women in rural labour movements in Bihar in eastern India, looking at implications for questions of structure and agency. It suggests that collective struggles by women may be accompanied by questioning of patriarchal gender relations which compel women to be more 'efficient'.