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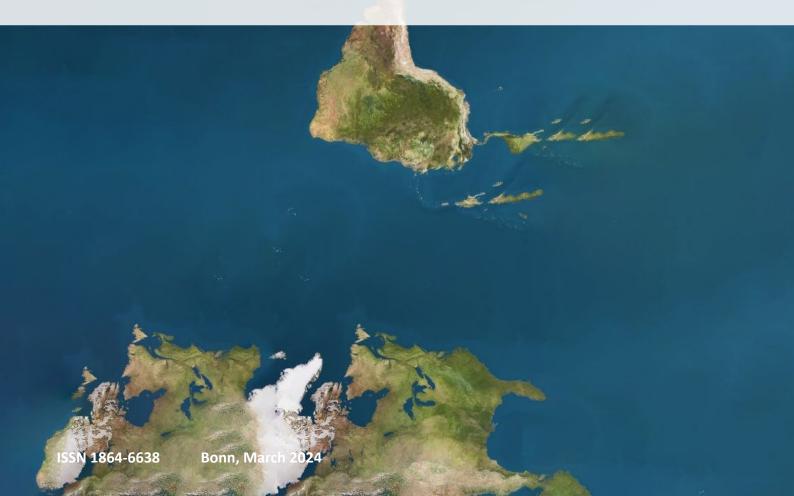# Working Paper 227

Dennis Avilés-Irahola & Eva Youkhana

Gender studies in development research:
a neocolonial agenda?

Authors' addresses

Dr. Dennis Avilés-Irahola and PD Dr. Eva Youkhana
Center for Development Research (ZEF), University of Bonn,
Genscherallee 3
53113 Bonn, Germany
E-mails: davilesi@uni-bonn.de
        eva.youkhana@uni-bonn.de
www.zef.de

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Dennis Avilés-Irahola - Eva Youkhana

Abstract

The systematic study of power asymmetries and inequalities between women and men and non-binary genders, have long been overlooked in development research. Within the complex framework of SDGs that, on the one hand aim at improving the quality of human life but, on the other hand, cement the global centrality of economic growth aligned to the capitalist economic model, we critically reflect on our own experience as female scholars in development studies and cooperation.

We argue that gender studies in development research need not only to frame their critical views within decolonial theories, but also to reflect on its practices. We discuss this affirmation along three areas of reflection: the reinforcement of 'internal colonialism'; the need to acknowledge and make visible women's and indigenous voices from the south; and our own decolonial position in our day-to-day practices within our academic spaces along language, recognition, and caring. We underlie that decoloniality can operate under 'patriarchal' modes, even if contradicting its principle of humans and non-humans as equally valuable.

We also argue that a critical engagement with naturalized gender relations, arguably the most pronounced form of a modern linear social reality based on binary oppositions, is a prerequisite for decolonizing scientific practices. Critical and reflexive gender studies can serve as a gateway to critical and reflexive development studies because of its potential to deconstruct discourses of 'legitimacy' (e.g., science vs. traditional knowledge); wealth (e.g., economy vs. social and healthy relations); and education (reproduction of knowledge vs. recognition and co-production of knowledges).

We conclude by affirming that gender studies in development research have the potential to be instrumental to the colonial as well as to the decolonial projects, depending on the extent of the conventional or pluralistic / critical views (re)presented in its theory and practice.

Keywords: gender studies, decoloniality, development, education

1. Introduction

The systematic study of power asymmetries and inequalities between women and men and non-binary genders have long been overlooked in development research. Moreover, development research has adopted utilitarian and instrumental approaches to gender and 'women issues' in both disciplinary and multidisciplinary studies commonly accommodated to the Western development paradigm towards economic growth, a driving goal to many research institutions and universities today. The ultimate goals of development embedded into economic gains with the *unique* potential to address human needs, implies that gender-based discrimination (as any other discrimination) within different societal spheres and historical contexts are analyzed rather superficially. In part, this explains the focus of development on providing technical and bureaucratic fixes to patriarchal expressions, such as violence against women, gender pay gaps and unpaid labor, gaps in education and women's increasing vulnerability to health issues. As important as they are, they have not been accompanied by serious attempts towards social transformation and questions about historical paths of power distribution.

Fernanda Wanderley (2022, 57) reminds us that the economy is embedded in a patriarchal order, "a structure of power relations with a male dominance throughout organized society and in personal relationships". The naturalization of male dominance permeated in development research resulted in a slow integration of 'gender' in academic studies linked to development, and this, mainly through feminist contributions that denounce the patriarchal order and scrutinize concepts of labor, economy, nature, and health, among others (Aguinaga et al., 2013; MacGregor, 2017; Shai et al., 2021; Wanderley, 2022). The feminist contributions to development research and practice, radically oppose seen women as savers of the world, translated in development projects aimed at, for example *tackling women's potential to increase productivity* or *acknowledging women's capacities to contribute to the economy*, because they constitute an inferiorization and utilitarian use of women's work that avoids issues of power, geo-political contexts and historical constructions of gender norms and stereotypes (Wisborg, 2014; MacGregor, 2017).

The current expression of the historical construction of 'development' is the sustainable development goals (SDGs). The 17 SDGs were adopted unanimously by all 193 UN Member States in 2015, setting out a 15-year plan to achieve them. The terms 'universal' and 'global' are rightly used in relation to the goals, since they constitute the compass of both development projects (multilateral, bilateral, national) and academic research in most of the world. In academia, the SDGs lead the formation of partnerships and exchange programs as well as the education and research agendas and, often, constitute the measure of academic performance. The universalism of the SDGs goes hand-in-hand with their embedded hegemonic conceptualizations of 'poverty', 'development', and 'health', to mention just some. They also carry with them the colonial heritage of epistemological and historical superiority assigned to the West and criticized since the 1950s (Carri, 1970; Escobar, 1995; Falquet, 2003; Rist, 2003; Lang, 2021).

Feminist currents criticize the SDGs' lack of political stand when, for example, using the term 'empowerment' without addressing issues of power neither globally nor in individual lived experiences, or when addressing liberal concerns of capitalist development ignoring the unequal distribution of power (see Section II). Within the complex framework of SDGs that, on the one hand, aim at improving the quality of human life but, on the other hand, cement the centrality of economic growth aligned to the dominant capitalist economic model, we critically reflect on our own experience as female scholars in development studies and cooperation.

Gender in development

The interest in women and gender in development dates back a few decades ago, after the publication of Esther Boserup's "Women's Role in Economic Development" in 1970. The focus on women in development unfolded through a series of international conferences and feminists' debates to what is now widely accepted as 'gender and development', the consideration of the asymmetric relations of the constructed idea of 'women' and 'men' in the social, economic and political human lives. The focus on binary genders, rather than on the *continuum of genders* in development responds to the persistent subordination of women as both the historical and the current most widespread form of oppression in the world; the women's unbroken fight to subvert this oppression and, to the patriarchal resistance to problematize the understanding of gender relations. In this article, we focus on gender and development as the representation of men and women, and their specific power interactions, in the framework of development studies. We do so in recognition of our decades of working experience on critical analysis of socio-cultural constructions of the male and female and their implications in development interventions and research.

Gender studies, as an academic field that looks at the world from the perspective of gender, is characterized by its interdisciplinarity and its focus on sociocultural representations. As an academic field, gender studies emerged under the influence of several disciplines and the fundamental essay of Joan Scott's "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis" (1986) laying the groundwork for the two most widely accepted characteristics of gender: its social construction and the power differentials that this construction imply. Her work coincided with an increased global acknowledgment of the need to establish a discipline on gender with its theories and methods, rather than being treated as part of different subjects such as history, literature, philosophy, psychology, and others. In development research, women and gender studies have followed the Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and Gender and Development (GAD) agendas set by international organizations, particularly under the umbrella of the United Nations, between 1975 and the present.

Gender studies in development specifically look at gender equality in (sustainable) development projects and programs, including design, planning, implementation, and evaluations. In development research, gender studies at high education level focus on developing analytical and practical skills among students to make development processes and interventions gender-sensitive, so that the outcome of present and future development outcomes are more equitable and sustainable in specific sectors (energy, water, health, and others) and policies. That is why, more than in any other area of science or arts, gender studies in development follow a global agenda with far-reaching implications. One of them is how development, its theories, and practices as well as its representations in science, are taught and discussed in university classrooms.

Development studies are still based on the conventional separation of the world's path of progress between the West (superior) and the Rest (inferior). The continued coloniality of the development industry is often reflected in the curricula and in what students are taught (cf. Cornwall, 2020). It has been argued for some time now, that Universities have been permeated by the liberal market, producing what is valuable in economic terms or what contributes to that end (Eschenhagen, 2021; Youkhana et al., 2021). Universities, therefore, would not have the incentives to offer epistemological alternatives that deviate from the hegemonic model of development and research focused on helping people escape poverty and ensure constant growth. Moreover, there would not be incentives to challenge the same global structures that keep people poor while national economies grow. Universities, however, still play a significant role not only in producing and reproducing knowledge but also in questioning the same construction of this knowledge. Furthermore, epistemologies

alternative to common wisdom flourish in academic spaces fertilized by critical thinking and a diversity of global views. Against this backdrop, and as scholars of critical development and gender studies, we argue that scholarly traditions in development research, including research aimed to contribute to the SDGs, have overlooked three research areas that are crucial in the field of development studies:

1. The hegemonic understanding of 'development', which follows the ideal of the Western countries' accepted modernization and economic growth, without considering existing alternatives to development inspired by theories of the South and decolonial perspectives. At the same time, they still consider the root causes for 'underdevelopment' as of internal or intra-social nature, which follow a normative order towards sustainability, and which negate the plurality of development designs.
2. A more critical approach to gender studies that disassemble multiple forms of discrimination (intersectional contestations along the categories of class, race, age, etc.), which should be considered along research cycles.
3. The histories and colonial legacies of countries in the "Global South" that have suffered from and that are targeted by the international development research community. This ignores the heritage paths of (under) privilege between the North and the South, male and female subjects, and among racial classifications as they were to be 'fixed' by the techno-bureaucratic specialization of our times.

We position ourselves as female scholars of critical development and gender studies, one of us from South America with more than 20 years of development practice in the "Global South", and the other from the North, a researcher and scholar for more than 25 years. Currently working in a European University (Germany) on projects that involve partners from the South, we argue that critical gender studies in development research focused on the observation, explanation, and transformation of authority and power requires from academia a day-to-day revolution, i.e. *a transformation of what we see, how we see it, how we explain it and whose answers we express through our work.* We approach these questions through the exploration of our own closer interrogations on, for example, how to co-construct knowledge without reproducing neocolonial agendas in the classroom and in the research field.

Methodologically, we approach the topic by critically reflecting on our own experiences as female scholars in development studies and cooperation. In doing so, we incorporate hints and insights from research and teaching. We seek to situate gender studies in development research through our scholarly practices in a diverse and international context, interactions with colleagues and partner institutions from around the world, often from countries with colonial experiences, engagement with theories of the "Global South", continuous reflection on epistemologies, and different forms of (academic) knowledge production, perceived still today as neocolonial.

In the remainder of this article, we discuss how development has been put in place by whom, and why the trade-offs between development goals situate women's empowerment and all its agency for gender equality within a neo-liberal and exploitative global agenda. The chapter further addresses how colonial legacies and epistemic violence have entered the way gender is taught; that is, as separated from historical contexts, from alternative epistemologies, and activism exercised by women, particularly in the "Global South". Ultimately, the article illustrates our efforts to reflect and implement different practices in an attempt to contribute to the decolonization of our day-to-day teaching and research in development studies.

2. Gender studies in development research and the SDGs

The adoption of the 17 SDGs, as followers of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), expanded the thematic scope of international and national development frameworks. The SDGs, in comparison to the MDGs, include more comprehensibly the multi-dimensions of human actions by moving beyond the MDG's focus on health and education, to economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection. As a result of wider consultations and criticism of the development paradigm, the SDGs are meant to apply to all countries and people in the world rather than only those in 'developing' ones addressed by the MDGs. For development research, these changes implied the incorporation of a wider range of social, economic, and environmental issues into research practice. In this section, we discuss how, as with the MDGs, the SDGs are still based on a commitment to the global design of Western ways of thinking and a techno-centric vision of efficiency without considering alternative and/or local approaches to development. In doing so, development cooperation applies social engineering approaches, which do not just overlook local ideas and interests, but also exclude social, political, and cultural processes related to questions of power.

To better understand the persistence of these ideologically driven scientific approaches, we need to take a digression into the postwar years when the concept of development was shaped.

In his inaugural address, US President Harry S. Truman (1949) called for a "bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped nations." The Point Four program (so-called because it was the fourth point in Truman's speech) resulted in millions of dollars in scientific and technical assistance–as well as hundreds of U.S. experts–sent to Latin American, Asian, Middle Eastern, and African nations.

The Truman Doctrine, as it was written in the subsequent years, was an important step towards a new era of understanding development in modern and post-war times. It was an instrument to approach so-called less developed countries and integrate them into the world market. Industrialization, rapid growth, urbanization, technicalization of agriculture, and so on were just a few of the many effects (Escobar, 1995, 4).

The greater idea for 'poor' countries was to 'catch up' with countries that had already passed through the industrialization process of their economy. Development was though associated with fast-growing economic sectors. The need and wish to follow industrialized countries rather than to find (or continue with) their own contextualized solutions for the widespread 'poverty' was very much taken from the claim of the capitalist world to overtake the socialist world. And, since then, the collective imaginary of "development" has been connected to economic growth with a linear path to be pursued by 'advanced' and 'less-advanced' societies alike.

In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 goals and 169 targets, was set up as a "comprehensive, far-reaching and people-centered" plan of action to transform our world (UN 2015, n.p.). The efforts to prepare the Agenda 2030 and to make it as participatory as possible in our vast and diverse world surpassed those made for the MDGs and, those of any other United Nations declaration before. The preparatory activities included consultations in more than 70 countries with governmental and non-governmental organizations, and a comprehensive preparatory report on progress in the implementation of the MDGs until 2015 as well as recommendations for further steps to advance the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015. As stated in the Agenda 2030 Declaration, the SDGs aim to complete what the MDGs did not achieve by continuing to address development priorities such as poverty eradication, health, education and food security, and nutrition,

but also by setting out a wide range of economic, social and environmental objectives. Moreover, the 2030 Agenda makes explicit recognition of other universally agreed principles and values, such as the respect for Human Rights and the explicit acknowledgment of gender equality. This enormous effort done by thousands of people and the mobilization of knowledge and economic resources resulted in the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by heads of state and ministers of all UN members at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 25 September 2015 in New York. They were the most ambitious transformative universal plan ever agreed upon (Razavi, 2016). Since then, and following the example of the MDG before, the international, national, and local development actors, including the private sector, adopted the SDGs as the most desirable horizon of development.

Despite the ambitious objectives engraved in the SDGs, however, and shortly after they were adopted, their gaps and contradictions met critical voices worldwide. Mostly, the critics do not aim for the goals themselves, but for the very foundations they are built on, that is, a world where economic growth continues to be at the center of human development, with all its negative implications for a great part of human and non-human beings. The preparatory document, "A dignified life for all", already stated that:

> *"A new post-2015 era demands a new vision and a responsive framework.*
> *Sustainable development — enabled by the integration of economic growth,*
> *social justice, and environmental stewardship — must become our global*
> *guiding principle and operational standard"* (UN, 2013).

The emphasis on a direct and unquestioned relation among economic growth, social justice, and environmental issues adopted in the SDGs preparatory document followed the MDG's same assumption, as declared by Jeffrey Sachs. In his role as Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General and former Director of the UN Millennium Project, he declared "When countries open up to trade, they generally benefit because they can sell more, then they can buy more. And trade has a two-way gain." (Cited by Fernández de Córdoba, n/d).

The SDGs superseded the MDGs by setting out a wide range of economic, social, and environmental objectives; without decoupling "sustained economic growth" from environmental protection and social justice. It is here, precisely, where two critical elements of colonial domination see their continuation:

i)   the ideal of Western countries accepted modernization and growth, without considering existing alternatives to development inspired by theories of the South and decolonial perspectives, and

ii)   the trade-offs between the singular SDGs, which still consider the root causes for 'underdevelopment' as of internal or intra-social nature, ignoring issues of global power, including gender asymmetries.

Modernization and economic growth as the ultimate destiny

The Agenda 2030 claims to place humans at the center of development and to be transformative; a vision that needed to leave economic rationale and profit-orientation behind, if not completely redefined. However, from a feminist perspective, shortly after the Agenda 2030 was adopted, critics and warnings emerged about the implicit capitalist economic rationale of the SDGs (Koehler, 2016; Razavi, 2016; Lang, 2021). Despite decades of critical voices calling for just social and environmental priorities to be placed at the center of the debate, (Koehler, 2016), the 'silver bullet' in the SDGs is still assumed to be economic growth.

The SDGs make an indirect reference to the multi-dimensional nature of poverty (Koehler 2016). That is a recognition of the wider nature of poverty, rather than being 'only' economic, but then, the SGDs fall short in including historical asymmetries and their current direct and indirect impacts as key contributing factors to poverty. Inequality in different dimensions is a global phenomenon driven by transnational forces often with financial means way stronger than those of nation-states and a free movement of capital (Razavi, 2016). As has been discussed by various authors, economic growth, under racist and patriarchal colonial rationality, needs the exploitation of nature as well as unprofessional and cheap care work (Shiva, 1993; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2002; Bakker & Gill, 2003; Folbre, 2009; Bergeron, 2018; Federici, 2018). Care work is not worthy of being paid or, more importantly, acknowledged in its intrinsic value. It must, nevertheless, oil the machinery of production and services that fuels the global economy.

The articulation between capitalism and patriarchy expressed through the obsession with continuous and unlimited economic growth as an irremediable path taints peoples and societies with its individualistic, rational, and emotionally-disengaged (white) male model. Universities do not escape the trap of seeing political, economic, social, and cultural realities through this model. This is also evident from the dominance of northern, male scholars in all areas of science. Even in humanities and social sciences, where female participation is larger, male authors and theorists are overwhelmingly represented and cited (Dion et al., 2018). In this scenario, gender in development, in academia or development practice, are at the edge of losing its critical character because the ends of conventional development capture its contents through the normalization of Western and male hierarchical knowledge, the constant use of development jargon, the spreading of technical fixes (tables, statistics) without reflections on meanings, and the repetition of 'gender equality' as a mantra that ignores the different paths traveled and to be traveled towards this end.

Trade-offs among the SDGs and issues of power

Since no aspect of development is gender-neutral, all SDGs have a gender dimension in practice (Esquivel, 2016; Koehler, 2016). The term 'Gender equality' stands alone on Goal 5: 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' and is included in different SDG goals through specific twenty-four targets. However, 'empowerment' has lost its subversive character since first used by the feminist movements (Cornwall, 2016), and it is now commonly equated to something given from outside, rather than the women's (individual and collective) struggles for justice and equal power relations. The notion of 'power' has different interpretations and it is still considered an "evolving field of inquiry within both feminism and gender studies" (Lloyd, 2013, 128), but the goal of "empowering women" is broadly and uncritically used across the SDGs (Esquivel, 2016). Is it empowerment about women having the capacity to contribute to development projects or is it about women gaining (collective) capacities to make strategic choices that affect their own lives? Moreover, is it about women and men changing gender constructions to balance power relations in specific contexts? Cornwall (2016, 356) writes:

> *"For all that they acquire spending power by becoming the entrepreneurs that development intervention would turn them into, women may find themselves unable to envisage the kinds of changes that could bring them greater empowerment, precisely because prevailing social norms and limiting self-beliefs conspire to restrict their ability to re-imagine the horizons of the possible."*

In general, the SDGs fall short in unveiling how women and men experience deprivation in different manners, situations experienced mostly by women (e.g., lack of access to property, legal assistance or managerial seats).

The pace of academia to draw level with activist feminism is slow in critically understanding the trade-offs of the SDGs; although, both are increasingly in conversation. Also, communication technology, for example, has allowed the multiplication of dialogs among different actors, overcoming the geographical distances between the Global North and the Global South, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, studies, debates, and practices on gender-inclusive teaching, feminist critical research, and transformative-gender research (even with contested meanings), have multiplied within and across academic organizations. Nevertheless, more often than not, the systematic and uncritical teaching of the SDGs without considering their internal contradiction, i.e., "leaving no one behind" while leaving power structures untouched, contributes to the modern-neocolonial simplification of the world. This simplification, functional to a concentration of privileges and economic power, must not be universally adopted.

Critical and alternative perspectives can be and are increasingly taken up in academia, for example, by not talking in the name of the 'subalterns' (Spivak, 1998); the epistemic disobedience through 'border thinking' (Morales Martinez & Girão Florêncio, 2018), and a decolonial thinking that leaves no space to patriarchal expressions. All these three critical views of promises of equality, made as homogenous and apolitical, also imply serious interrogations to gender scholars in high-level education. Most importantly, on how we (re)produce the hegemonic discourse of 'progress' (i.e., development) as a continuous civilization project that the "Global South" must follow to, finally, be modern (i.e., contribute to the global economic systems), and how we are ourselves swallowed up by its patriarchal swirling. While we celebrate the achievements of feminists and critical thinkers instilled in the socio-environmental problems addressed by Agenda 2030, we also approach them from our own pluralistic and life-appreciating path, rather than embarking on their homogenizing, contradictory, and ahistorical character.

3. Colonial legacies and gender studies in development research

Development studies are based on cosmovisions that separate the world into the West (superior) and the Rest (inferior). The continued coloniality of the development industry is often reflected in the curricula and in what students are taught (cf. Cornwall, 2020). As mentioned above, the international development research community tends to ignore the heritage paths of (under) privilege between the West and the Rest of the world, male and female subjects, and among racial classifications and, by doing so, continues with the colonial erasure of the history of 'others' and their knowledge.

With the conquest of the Americas, Africa, and large parts of Asia and the positioning of Europe as the center of the world, abstract universalities became concrete. All social spheres were subjected to a Eurocentric modern logic and in the interest of an exploitative economy. The colonial matrix, Maria Lugones argues in her 2007 essay 'Heterosexualism and the modern colonial/gender system', served a global capitalist system in which social classifications were made and populations, regions, bodies of knowledge, and productions were divided into superior and inferior, including gender relations. Drawing on Anibal Quijano, she describes how coloniality permeates all aspects of social life and social relations to organize the modern and capitalist division of labor along binary notions, modern vs. traditional, civilized vs. primitive, and man vs. woman (Lugones, 2007).

Women's movements had achieved to move the discussion of decoloniality from its focus on indigenous and the environment (Morales Martínez & Girão Florêncio, 2018) to one on gender disparities. The decolonial resistance in the Global South takes form, for example, in the construction of identities by reaffirming the own identity in relation to one-self, in relation to the own ethnic culture and language, and not in relation to the non-indigenous people, as it is the conventional form of education (see for example, Morales Martínez & Girão Florêncio, 2018). Resistance against hegemonic cultural views that pretend to be imposed by force or supposed rationale can be traced back to the era of colonialism. And they continue. As Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) has consistently argued, indigenous perform and display commitments to modernity, but their own, and Indigenous continue their resistance far from being 'unable to make their destiny' (p. 98).

Despite the arguments above, only in exceptional cases are non-Western perspectives, research approaches, methodologies, and corresponding methods incorporated into teaching. Rather, theories representing a Western civilized school of thought, and notions of being, becoming, existence, and reality are assumed to be naturally given. Alternative epistemologies, knowledge productions, and indigenous perspectives are not infrequently ignored, as expressions of the coloniality of knowledge where the epistemic alterity is negated (Morales Martínez & Girão Florêncio, 2018). Universities around the world are committed to modern knowledge production based on Cartesian dualisms. The demand for pluriverse ideas and actors in (developmental) research is blithely subjugated to the global drive for achievement, reward orientation, and the competitive logic of universities (Youkhana et al., 2018).

Inter- and transdisciplinary research approaches which are reflexive and critical to its discipline rather than instrumental and serving for the development industry, have partially challenged this ethos. Empirical and theoretical problems of the well-known scientific paradigms (positivism, relativism, interpretivism) have been identified and sufficiently discussed regarding their reductionist scope (Mollinga, 2008). Complex and messy realities could not be grasped or understood with dialectical and linear interpretive models, the "interdisciplinarity" argued (Donaldson et al., 2010). Even though this interdisciplinary advance is not new, and interdisciplinarity, as well as transdisciplinarity, is no longer to be excluded from any academic rhetoric, the scientific vision fails due to disciplinary academic practice. In most interdisciplinary research practices, although data are shared and different disciplines are integrated into analysis, collaboration is based on common epistemological approaches. We agree that this rather "functional interdisciplinarity" should give way to a "radical interdisciplinarity" that engages in new collective modes of working. We also argue that implicit philosophical assumptions should be subject to scrutiny, along with the taken-for-granted scientific cultures and working practices of different disciplines.

4. Reflections as scholars in gender studies and development research

During our work with colleagues and students from universities in the Global South, we ask ourselves how we could better understand each other's specific experiences; how we can come closer to the goal of co-produce knowledge, learning and being learned, talking and listening; and how to reconfigure our courses and refresh our paths. Very often, providing scholarships and meeting in symposia and workshops seem not to be enough. This format of 'conversation' between Northern and Southern universities often met criticisms when, for example, the need to produce 'outcomes' rushed the discussions, leaving everybody hungry for meaningful interactions. Our curriculum predominantly includes citations from scholars hailing from the Global North, as they are duly recognized by

academia, presented in English, and properly depoliticized (i.e., ignoring critics from the same indigenous and women we said need to be supported in their decolonizing paths).

We argue that gender studies in development research need not only to frame their critical views within decolonial theories but also reflect on its practices. The first area of reflection refers to the reinforcement of 'internal colonialism', as explained by Gonzáles Casanovas already in 1965 (Casanovas, 1965) when he warned about the dangers of using European concepts and categories without adapting them to the realities of countries of colonial origin and the need to overcome intellectual colonialism. Northern universities contribute to internal colonialism by, for example, relating only with the intellectual elite in partner countries who, unavoidably, 'translate' local knowledge within the frameworks of academia and international cooperation, that is, the frameworks of conventional development. Colonial practices have been also identified by authors such as Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) and Talpade Mohanty (1994), who placed northern Universities at the center of hegemonic power, and criticize them because they appropriate and recycle discussions (such as coloniality) for decades ago. Therefore, gender studies in development need to be deeply rooted in local historical contexts and avoid neo-colonization through appropriation of living reflections, past or present.

A second area of reflection from our position as academics of gender studies is the need to acknowledge and make visible women's and indigenous voices from the South, also when they make us uncomfortable. Partnerships with critical thinkers in universities and organizations in the Global South are a big first step, but it does not replace the conversation with women and indigenous people who embodied both colonial subalternities and spaces of resistance. While it is important to know and amplify multiple voices, this is not only about 'providing a platform' for marginalized knowledge; rather, it is a learning experience. An example discussed in classes with students is that, surprisingly, the need for rigorous gender analysis in research projects appears as a novelty in many universities in the Global North, particularly in those focused on life and economic sciences, chemistry, and engineering. Meanwhile, women's movements from the middle classes, rural communities, and working unions in the Global South have identified historical and gender inequalities as an obstacle to communal and individual freedom and well-being decades ago.

The importance of looking at specific positions in society (social conditions) of marginalized individuals has developed from political debates embedded in the socialist-capitalist divide, the heritage of dictatorships, and the development discourses of 'undeveloped' countries moving from the collective subject to the individual who embodies experiences, knowledge and the colonial heritage of his/her story. Decolonial studies and gender theories in development are far from new because they unfolded from concrete experiences of exploitation and resistance that go as far back as the arrival of Columbus to America (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012), and probably before. Therefore, there is still much room in our teaching practices to learn and integrate from voices from the Global South about *development* in general, and how to center this discussion on the individual and his/her differentiated experience, in particular.

A third aspect to reflect on our decolonial position in gender studies is the decolonization of our day-to-day practices within our academic spaces. We will only mention three of these practices here: language, recognition, and caring.

i) On language, it is tempting, and sometimes compelling, to adhere to the monolingual (bilingual, at best) readings, writings, and teaching. Meta-analysis for social science (and others), taken from large bodies of publications on specific research questions are conveniently done in English, the *lingua franca* in academic settings. For us, to break this domination does not necessarily mean to write or

teach in more than one language, it means to go beyond English and German texts to a myriad of (translated, if needed) works in the world of Asian, African, and Latin American publications.

ii) On recognition, it is publications, seminars, number of students, and academic exchanges, among others, that keep us in the loop and our positions. That implies a series of bureaucratic and administrative work, negotiations, and 'goal-oriented' meetings and activities. It is easy to get submerged in this world and move away from 'alternative' ways of seeing and doing in the world. A personal example of this is that, to be 'understood' in seminars where '(de)coloniality' is an unknown term, one must use conventional 'sustainable development' jargon. Approving faces express that our correspondents agree and the conversation can go on, even if we include critical gender analysis in our definition, and the others do not. The same happens in journals on development, where we have been asked to clarify what is meant by 'women's rights', instead of calling it 'human rights." In field research, some of our PhD students who made particular efforts to co-construct knowledge with local communities have encountered resistance within the academic system. The rhythm of PhD projects (largely determined by scholarships and supervision) rarely allows for long fieldwork stays which are, however, necessary to build trust and to interact and work meaningfully at the local level (Avilés et al., 2022). Another telling example is the teaching of historical "Feminist Waves", so rich in women's resistances and revindications but, which do not tell the stories of all struggles, also those without 'a wave'. Here, there are the stories of women who fought both forceful collective oppression and patriarchy as mothers, workers, and/or community members, such as those in Chiapas or the Bolivian mines. It is important to tell, and let them tell, that they do not belong and do not see themselves reflected in any pedagogically organized feminist wave.

iii) Finally, care and tenderness distance the force of competition inherent in conventional capitalist development from the force of recognition of the other as equal that characterizes decolonial practice. Collegial care and tenderness challenge the individualism and self-interest widely spread in academia and call for a very personal practice of decolonization. In our practice with colleagues and students from all over the world and from very different disciplines, kindness and respect are a common way of relating, but disagreements and competition mainly among people from different scientific disciplines are not absent. Our focus on gender studies very often adds to our image as "soft-science" scholars. We argue that the force of our 'feminist ancestors' and the fight of millions of women around the world provides us with the strength to express ourselves, without asking permission and without aggression or any kind of violence, neither on us nor on others, as strategy.

5. Conclusions

We acknowledge that universities are products and reproducers of ideas of modernity and function as far as they train professionals to ignore issues of power, environmental destruction, and historical paths of disadvantage. This is done by following well-traveled paths (programs, syllabi) based on the repetition of knowledge and theories produced at (epistemic) centers located in the Global North. While working on research and studies oriented to 'development', universities also reproduce practices of colonial continuations, such as the economic growth imperative embedded in the SDGs. On that, we have argued that the central assumption of hegemonic development is that is being put on the same level as economic growth, one that has to be universally pursued and where 'underdeveloped' countries need to catch up.

We argue that a critical engagement with naturalized gender relations, arguably the most pronounced form of a modern, linear social reality based on binary oppositions, is a prerequisite for decolonizing scientific practices. Critical and reflexive gender studies can serve as a gateway to critical and reflexive

development studies because of their potential to deconstruct discourses of 'legitimacy' (e.g. science vs. traditional knowledge); wealth (e.g. economy vs. social and healthy relations); and education (reproduction of knowledge vs. recognition and co-production of knowledge).

The decolonial perspective has entered the realm of indigenous and environmental studies (see Morales Martinez & Girao Florencio, 2018) in a way that gender studies from a decolonial perspective, in spite of its great relevance, has not yet been done in development research. Gender studies in development have much to contribute and enrich indigenous and environmental studies, as there are coincidences in the theoretical contributions. We must remember that decoloniality can operate under 'patriarchal' modes, even if contradicting its principle of humans and non-humans as equally valuable.

We conclude by affirming that gender studies in development research have the potential to be instrumental to the colonial as well as to the decolonial projects, depending on the extent of the conventional or pluralistic and critical views (re)presented in its theory and practice. The interaction with students and researchers provides daily opportunities to decolonize our practices in the way, for example, we populate our reading lists, present historical and located feminists' paths, and acknowledge each other's epistemic alterity and wisdom.

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Authors: Dennis Avilés-Irahola & Eva Youkhana

Contact: davilesi@uni-bonn.de; eva.youkhana@uni-bonn.de

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