The coloniality of gender expertise in professional environment and development contexts

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Abstract

As international environmental research for development organizations and their funders continue to build a requirement to 'mainstream' gender equality into their programming, disquiet surrounding gender expertise has emerged among those who bring reflections from feminist political ecology into professional development contexts. The perspective offered here builds from our earlier exploration alongside 'gender experts' of the uneasy navigation of epistemic and practical dilemmas necessary in environmental research-for-environment and development (R4ED) settings in the Global South. We consider the deeper trouble that comes from the embedding (and shaping) of gender expertise within the colonial project of development. Earlier postcolonial feminisms have demonstrated the difficulty in dislodging a hegemonic gaze on the "Third World woman", that has aligned a particular kind of feminism with international development's "civilizing mission." We suggest that gender expertise in professional environment and development contexts may be subsumed in the neutrality and universality of Eurocentric scientific knowledge, which has the effect of marginalizing non-Western perspectives and indigenous ways of knowing. Thus, the 'technocratization' of gender expertise for managerial purposes depoliticizes and blunts the potential for achieving the goals of social justice. We show how these issues take particular form in technical settings, where knowledge hierarchies, funding models and everyday exchanges may be shaped by coloniality. We argue that this amplifies the coloniality of gender, narrowing transformative agendas to those based around individualized entrepreneurial freedom, crowding out the generative and care-full possibilities offered from a plurality of contextualized and situated ecological feminisms. We conclude by considering "openings" in gender transformative thinking and action ('praxis') as waymarks for those navigating the complex ethics and politics inherent in professional feminist political ecology, built around the enduring salience of 'gender expertise.'

Key words: Feminist Political Ecology, gender expertise, coloniality, development praxis

Résumé

Alors que les organisations de recherche environnementale pour le développement and leurs bailleurs de fond continuent à exiger d'intégrer la dimension de genre dans leurs programmations, un malaise autour de l''expertise genre' a émergé au sein de celles et ceux qui apportent des réflexions issues de la *feminist political ecology* dans leur environnement de développement professionnel. La perspective que nous proposons ici s'appuie sur notre exploration antérieure aux côtés des 'expert.e.s genre' de leur navigation malaisée des dilemmes épistémiques et pratiques liés aux contextes de recherche pour l'environnement et le développement dans le Sud. Nous considérons le trouble plus profond qui vient de l'imbrication (et du façonnement) de l'expertise genre au sein du grand projet de développement colonial. Les féminismes postcoloniaux antérieurs

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ont démontré la difficulté à lever le voile hégémonique qui couvre les "femmes du Tiers-Monde", qui a rattaché une forme particulière de féminisme avec la "mission civilisatrice" du développement international. Nous suggérons que l'expertise genre dans les contextes professionnels d'environnement et de développement peut être subsumée dans la soi-disant neutralité et universalité des connaissances scientifiques eurocentriques, avec pour effet de marginaliser les perspectives non-occidentales et les modes de connaissances autochtones. Ainsi, la technocratisation de l'expertise genre à des finalités managériales dépoliticise et atténue le potentiel d'atteindre les objectifs de justice sociale. Nous montrons comment ces questions prennent une forme particulière dans des environnements techniques, où les hiérarchies de savoir, les modèles de financement et les échanges au quotidien peuvent être façonnés par la colonialité. Nous défendons que de tels environnements amplifient la colonialité du genre, réduisant les agendas transformatifs à des projets basés sur la liberté entrepreneuriale individuelle, étouffant ainsi les possibilités productives et attentionnées émergeant d'une pluralité de féminismes contextualisés et situés. Nous concluons en considérant les "brèches" dans la pensée et l'action ('praxis') transformatives en matière de genre comme des jalons pour celles et ceux qui sont confronté.e.s aux problèmes éthiques et politiques complexes inhérents à la *feminist political ecology* professionnelle, associés à la prominence persistante de 'l'expertise genre.'

Mots clés: *Feminist Political Ecology*, expertise genre, colonialité, praxis du développement

Resumen

A medida que las organizaciones internacionales de investigación medioambiental para el desarrollo y sus financiadores siguen imponiendo la exigencia de «integrar» la igualdad de género en sus programas, ha surgido inquietud en cuanto a los conocimientos especializados sobre género entre quienes aportan reflexiones desde la ecología política feminista a contextos de desarrollo profesional. La perspectiva que aquí se ofrece se basa en nuestra anterior exploración, junto con «expertas en género», de la incómoda navegación de los dilemas epistémicos y prácticos necesaria en contextos de investigación medioambiental para el medio ambiente y el desarrollo (R4ED) en el Sur Global. Consideramos los problemas más profundos que se derivan de la integración (y configuración) de los conocimientos especializados en materia de género en el proyecto colonial de desarrollo. Los feminismos poscoloniales anteriores han demostrado la dificultad de desprenderse de una mirada hegemónica sobre la «mujer del Tercer Mundo», que ha alineado un tipo particular de feminismo con la «misión civilizadora» del desarrollo internacional. Sugerimos que la experiencia de género en contextos profesionales de medio ambiente y desarrollo puede quedar subsumida en la neutralidad y universalidad del conocimiento científico eurocéntrico, que tiene el efecto de marginar las perspectivas no occidentales y las formas Indígenas de conocer. Así pues, la «tecnocratización» de los conocimientos especializados en cuestiones de género con fines de gestión despolitiza y embota el potencial para alcanzar objetivos de la justicia social. Mostramos cómo estas cuestiones adquieren una forma particular en los entornos técnicos, donde las jerarquías de conocimiento, los modelos de financiación y los intercambios cotidianos pueden estar moldeados por la colonialidad. Argumentamos que esto amplifica la colonialidad del género, reduciendo las agendas transformadoras a aquellas basadas en la libertad empresarial individualizada, excluyendo las posibilidades generativas y de cuidado que ofrece una pluralidad de feminismos ecológicos contextualizados y situados. Concluimos considerando las «aperturas» en el pensamiento y la acción transformadores del género («praxis») como puntos de referencia para quienes navegan por la compleja ética y política inherentes a la ecología política feminista profesional, construida en torno a la perdurable relevancia de la «pericia de género».

Palabras clave: Ecología política feminista, experiencia de género, colonialidad, praxis del desarrollo

1. Introduction

What happens when feminist knowledges and research practice aimed at achieving social justice goals 'land' in professional environment and development contexts dominated by positivist science and technology, and amidst enduring knowledge hierarchies? We sought to explore this question through a series of polyvocal conversations with 'gender experts' and feminists (including feminist political ecologists) drawn from technical research-for-environment and development (R4ED), advocacy and donor organisations working in the Global South (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2021). Through the conversations we assembled in our book entitled *Negotiating Gender Expertise in Environment and Development: Voices from Feminist Political Ecology*, we learned of gender experts' uneasy navigation of epistemic power relationships in spaces dominated by biophysical and engineering science, including climate change adaptation and mitigation, energy development,

disaster management, integrated coastal development, plant breeding, water governance, and sustainable agriculture.

The conversations enabled us to deliberate together on the emergence and position of the 'gender expert' within the technical R4ED sector, where organizations were adopting gender mainstreaming programs as required by international donors. We saw how maintaining a role as a 'gender expert' tasked with delivering transformative gender equity involves challenges and compromises amidst reverberating critiques that point to the risks gender mainstreaming carries when it results in instrumentalizing and simplifying complex social dynamics. Prügl and Joshi describe this as a 'solidification of gender expertise in a way that is amenable for policy and resonant with agency missions' (Prügl & Joshi, 2021, p. 1440). Informed by feminist science and technology studies (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2011; Nightingale, 2003; Nightingale *et al*., 2020), we had started from the premise that feminist imaginaries of transformative change were even more elusive in settings governed by technical and positivist science, where 'gender experts' traversed knowledge hierarchies and epistemological divides, primarily between science and qualitative social science, and also between academic, social movement and everyday feminisms. Our conversations led us to conclude that 'transformation' itself was a troublesome term in such contexts where undoing broader structures of power (capitalism, patriarchy) lie out of reach or off-limits. Change happened through small, incremental steps, often in everyday spaces, sometimes unintentionally, generally in non-measurable ways. We were also struck by the ways in which 'gender experts' navigated and bridged academic, activist and everyday feminisms in their work and everyday life through alliances made within and outside the organizations in which they worked. This inspired us to consider what was necessary for the 'doing' of feminisms within professional environment and development contexts, specifically, through engagement with ideas, principles and ethical orientations from a plurality of (academic, activist and everyday) environmental feminisms, bringing these into bureaucratic spaces of R4ED. We were not alone, and not the first to examine feminist political ecology questions in professional R4ED contexts: similar propositions are being made by others with long histories of research and praxis in this and associated areas and in multiple ways; these contributions inspire our thinking (Arora-Jonsson & Sijapati Basnett, 2018; Cantor *et al*., 2018; Ojeda *et al*., 2022; Rocheleau & Nirmal, 2015).

Much of our book's discussion focused on disquiet around 'blunting feminism's transformative edge', echoing parallel debates around professional 'gender and development' practice in general (Collins, 2018; Cornwall, 2007; Kunz *et al*., 2019; Prügl, 2015; Weerawardhana, 2018). Yet underlying our deliberations has been a set of deeper questions that were not confronted directly in the book. These include the challenge to mainstream 'Development' and its associated imaginaries of transformation that follow postcolonial and decolonial critique (Fanon, 1963; Quijano, 2000; Said, 1978; see also Biekart *et al*., 2024 for an overview) and, more specifically for our purposes here, the undoing of what have been labelled 'whitestream' Western feminisms and associated formulations of 'gender.' Perspectives from Black, Postcolonial and Decolonial feminisms (Lugones, 2010; Mohanty, 1988; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Spivak, 1988) have – in different ways – underpinned efforts to address racialized hierarchies of knowledge and knowledge producers in Development (Kothari, 2005; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Noxolo, 2016; Radcliffe 2017). Focus has been on tackling 'asymmetric power structures, the universalization of Western knowledge, the privileging of whiteness, and the taken-for-granted Othering of the majority world' (Sultana, 2019, p. 34, see also Kothari, 2005). Critical discussions in this vein continue to press these ideas 'from margins to center' in Feminist Political Ecology scholarship (Sultana, 2021; see especially work by Mollett & Faria, 2013; Ojeda *et al*., 2022; Rocheleau & Nirmal, 2015; Sundberg, 2014; Zaragocin *et al*., 2024). The question must be, what does this critical agenda mean in practical terms for 'gender expertise' in technical R4ED contexts, operating within dominant colonial, Eurocentric and patriarchal structures that shape priority setting, funding, decision-making and divisions of labour?

In this short perspective, we work through some of the issues raised by the scholars seeking to decolonize the knowledges on which Development theory and practice are built (e.g. Biekart *et al*., 2024; Kothari & Klein, 2023), focusing specifically on what this means within the R4ED professional contexts in which 'gender expertise' plays out. With the aim of bridging and coalition building, we look to scholarship that seeks to decenter mainstream white feminism (de Jong *et al*., 2019) and ask whether 'gender expertise' aimed at equity and social justice in professional contexts can itself be disentangled both from the legacies of colonialism that

continue to define development, and from feminisms that are entrenched in coloniality. Put simply, is the *coloniality* of gender expertise inevitable? We focus on what this disentangling might mean and could look like for feminist work within technical environment and development organizations that are seen by critics as architects and implementers of hegemonic forms of (capitalist) Development, and that are predominantly embedded in dominant colonial, Eurocentric epistemologies. Such organizations may be geographically located in the Global South, but maintain a reliance on knowledges (including feminist knowledges) developed in institutions of the Global North (Mohanty, 1988; Vergès, 2021).

We follow Mendoza (2016, p. 114) in adopting the term 'coloniality' to describe the "long-standing patterns of power that emerge in the context of colonialism, which redefine culture, labour, intersubjective relations, aspirations of the self, common sense, and knowledge production in ways that accredit the superiority of the colonizer. Surviving long after colonialism has been overthrown, coloniality permeates consciousness and social relations in contemporary life" (Icaza & Vazquez, 2016; Mendoza, 2016; Quijano, 2000). This framing draws attention not only to the coloniality of global political economy structures and hierarchies in which R4ED is placed, but also to the local materializations of those structures in the lived experience and everyday practices of gender experts and the communities and networks in which they live and work. Given our focus on professionalized spaces (Batterbury, 2015) and in the spirit of contributing to affirmative feminist political ecology, it is this latter dimension that provides our modest and somewhat pragmatic focus as we seek "to repair what is still possible to repair … exploring opportunities in the present to crack open spaces for agency" (Alhojärvi & Sirviö, 2018, pp. 1-2).

Our motivation for writing this comes out of the discomfort that each of us has felt as partial insiders/outsiders in relation to the world of gender experts in professional R4ED. We are both academics and teachers of Feminist Political Ecology but are located in different and specific ways within the intersecting colonial, geographical, racialized and academic hierarchies that structure our professional lives and situate our perspectives. Working at different times within professional R4ED spaces and in transnational feminist academic networks, we have discomforting personal experience of our positionalities (Elmhirst as white, both of us as Western-educated) being signifiers of 'expertise' (Pailey, 2019) in development contexts, but also being simultaneously racialized and epistemically 'othered' as gender experts in R4ED contexts where this expertise is questioned as legitimate 'technical' knowledge. We have felt awkward complicity in the stratifying effects of our Western education backgrounds while working in Global South institutions. We take this discomfort seriously and wish to stay with it to work through difficult questions as we look for possible openings and ways forward in professional contexts that might undo the inevitability of coloniality.

Our discussion is organized as follows. We begin by unpicking what we mean by the coloniality of gender expertise and consider the dimensions of R4ED through which this is expressed. This includes (i) the framing of transformation on which gender expertise rests, (ii) the forms of gender knowledge that comprise and are widely acknowledged as expertise and that are narrowed further in contexts dominated by positivist science, and (iii) consideration of who gets to be an expert in the context of gender networks of expertise shaped by colonial, geographical and academic hierarchies. From here, we go on to discuss disentangling gender expertise from coloniality, taking inspiration from those who are learning across plural feminist knowledges, adopting relational practices and ontologies, working reflexively and, finally, reckoning with and subverting techno-managerialist approaches to gender. Our aim in the final section is to consider "openings" in gender transformative thinking and action (praxis) as waymarks for those entangled in the thorny ethics and politics involved in professional feminist political ecology where this is built around the continued salience of 'gender expertise.' In writing this perspective article, we would like to underscore that we share in unfinished efforts to grapple and engage with issues of coloniality with other scholars in both the Global South and North. We recognize and acknowledge that the process of 'decolonizing' requires forging careful coalitions and alignments of thought and action across geographies, which in turn requires us to carefully select whose work we cite in this article regardless of whether they are from the Global North or South. Even with this in mind, our citations are limited by the ways we are situated – linguistically, academically and in the partial perspectives offered by our own 'rooted networks' (Cantor *et al*., 2018).

2. Development, coloniality and gender expertise

The coloniality of gender expertise reflects its embeddedness in the wider project of Development, and specifically, research-for-development professional practice. Indeed, Lugones (2010) argues, colonialism, capitalism and race shape ideas about gender. Within the Development firmament, gender knowledges and praxis are constructed through forms of 'civilizational feminism' (Vergès, 2021, p. 4) largely gathered around a framing of gender equality that is realized through processes of empowerment, built through entrepreneurial freedom and market engagement. Narayanaswamy asks what is the 'Development' that we seek to decolonize? (2024, p. 227). Seen through a decolonizing lens, 'Development' connotes a project of universalizing the way of life of developed countries, it centers on an economic rationality based on accumulation and marketization, it serves to legitimate interventions into the lives of people defined as less developed, and is grounded in hegemonic models of politics (nation-state and liberal democracy), economy (neoliberal globalized capitalism) and knowledge (Western science) (Narayanaswamy, 2024; Ziai, 2017). Development agendas rooted in economic growth paradigms rely on colonizing and exploiting nature and labor (Federici, 2012; Hickel, 2021; Malm & Warlenius, 2019). Wider social processes, practices and relations that fall outside the logics of capital accumulation, for example, human and ecological well-being or relations of care and reciprocity, are undervalued or not recognized (Biekart *et al*., 2024; MacGregor, 2010).

Development practice and the knowledges that support R4ED are rooted in Western ideas of progress and growth, in ways that perpetuate Eurocentric domination and the coloniality of power (Amin, 1989; Sultana, 2019; Tuana, 2013; Two Convivial Thinkers, 2023). Powerful global institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and United Nations, bodies which are largely controlled by former colonizing countries, shape agendas (for example, through the Sustainable Development Goals), funding priorities (for example, the World Bank's Global Environmental Facility) and policies of development (Sultana, 2019), normalizing the widely accepted behaviors, knowledge, practices and tools of 'development expertise' applied mostly in Global South contexts 'in need of development' (Kothari, 2005; Narayanaswamy, 2014; Rivas, 2018; Scott, 2024; Vásquez-Fernández & Ahenakew pii tai poo taa, 2020). Efforts to prioritize equitable partnerships between institutions and their partners in Lower Income Countries in R4ED contexts are compromised by power asymmetries associated with geographical/colonial, gender, and academic hierarchies that take intersecting forms (Snijder *et al*., 2023, p. 352). Within this broader 'coloniality of Development' context, we suggest there are three interrelated dimensions to the coloniality of gender expertise: Coloniality in the 'mandate' that sets out what is meant by transformation in gender, environment and development, the narrowed gender knowledges that provide the 'content' of gender expertise, and the coloniality of the networks that shape the 'doing' of gender expertise. We deal with each of these in turn.

The framing of transformation

Within the R4ED space, recent years have seen renewed impetus to a specific kind of transformative agenda around gender equality. Global climate change and disaster agreements and protocols contain clauses for the integration of gender equality in intervention programs, building on multi-lateral conventions such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, and earlier platforms such as the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development Agenda 21, the Convention on Biological Diversity and Section K of the Beijing Platform for Action. This has been further extended through the adoption of 'feminist foreign policy' (with its focus on women and girls) by national governments such as Sweden, which is prominent in funding R4ED and shaping technical assistance programs (Achilleos-Sarll *et al*., 2023). Thus, 'gender' has emerged as an important issue in global environmental governance and associated R4ED, driven by a requirement to address the 'gender inequality gap' and its social and economic consequences (Arora-Jonsson & Sijapati Basnett, 2018). The adopting of gender mainstreaming has been accompanied by the appointment of professional gender experts charged with moving organizations along a continuum from using gender-sensitive approaches (using sex-disaggregated data and perspectives) to gender-responsive approaches (reducing gender inequalities by responding to gender-differentiated needs and through the inclusion of women and girls in development processes) (Lopez *et al*., 2023).

The latter point – including women and girls in development – has provided a central focus for many of the recent critiques of the 'gender agenda' in the context of neoliberalism, where a donor-driven focus is placed on inclusion as 'market inclusion' and empowerment in terms of entrepreneurial freedom. Achieving strategic outcomes meant redefining social norms, power structures and attitudes, particularly where these present challenges to 'market inclusion' and entrepreneurial freedom. The focus on efficiency, effectiveness and measurability compounded the diminishing of any transformative power (Chant & Sweetman, 2012; de Jong, 2017). Not only have such perspectives conflated empowerment with modernization, the embrace of modern-rational technologies to manage and assess interventions reify colonial power relations (Keahey, 2023; Radcliffe, 2015).

Partly in response to such critiques, a recent surge in the transformational language around gender is apparent within R4ED development spaces (Moser, 2021). Although it has been noted that 'transformation' is rarely specified within so-called gender-transformative approaches (Connell, 2014; Parpart, 2014), researchers are being more explicit in setting out what is meant by gender-transformative change within their work (MacArthur *et al*., 2022). This includes transformation as building agency, changing unequal power relations and changing discriminatory practices (Lopez *et al*., 2023) or through addressing the social norms, behaviors and social systems that underlie them (Puskur *et al*., 2012). Some iterations of this involve interventions that seek to transform gender roles by focusing on social norms and behaviors at the individual or community level, seeing these as associated with organizations and wider enabling environments (Kantor *et al*., 2015, Puskur *et al*., 2012).

However, a singular focus on social norms and behaviors carries risks. Earlier postcolonial feminist critiques, such as that advanced by Mohanty (1988), have highlighted the issues raised when mainstream Eurocentric gender and development policy approaches view patriarchal and traditional culture as markers of cultural backwardness, attributing it as the principal cause for women's impoverishment and marginalization (Mohanty, 1988). When the focus is on assessing, disrupting and transforming local gender norms, or even what Kantor *et al.* (2015) term 'enabling environments', this overshadows or conceals the broader political and socio-economic factors that drive other forms of oppression and injustice that are interconnected and work in collaboration with patriarchy. For example, a focus on transforming gender by dismantling the norms that act as barriers for the inclusion of women and girls in agricultural value chains (a focus for some R4ED programs) evades wider questions of power or politics, by disregarding the workings of capitalism's coloniality and the ways market inclusion oftentimes involves (microfinance) debt and the extraction of wealth from poor and smallholder farmers by powerful and wealthy elites (Cook *et al*., 2021; Green & Estes, 2019). Black feminist analyses of intersecting structural processes provide the tools for moving towards a more systemic analysis of the relationship between gender and colonial-capitalist power (e.g. Crenshaw, 1991; Mollett, 2017). However, this is difficult terrain for mainstream environment and development practice, where programming and policy options must disavow a reckoning with deeper relations of power, rooted in coloniality and (racial) capitalism – factors typically beyond their ontological radars. What MacArthur *et al*. (2022, p. 9) refer to as the 'revived language of gender-transformation' is not sufficient in itself for undoing the coloniality of gender expertise if 'transformation' is imagined in narrow terms and through the situated perspectives and specific feminist knowledges of 'gender experts.'

Narrowing feminist knowledges

A second dimension to the coloniality of gender expertise in R4ED contexts relates to the forms of gender knowledge that comprise and are widely acknowledged as expertise. Postcolonial and decolonial feminist scholars point out how gender and development practice has hinged on a bureaucratized version of (white, Eurocentric) feminism that circumscribes 'the nature and scope of what constitutes knowledge to those concerns that correlate with economic development objectives' (Narayanaswamy, 2016, p. 2160; see also Icaza and Vazquez, 2016). We suggest that these are narrowed further in contexts dominated by positivist science, where particular kinds of knowledges are required. A point that emerged in the reflective accounts in our book (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2021) was the need for gender experts to ensure the translatability of knowledge about gender (understood variously as gender inequality, women's empowerment, gender inclusivity) within

the technical-environmental settings in which they were working. We noted that the technocratic aspects of gender mainstreaming – that have been subject to so much feminist scrutiny – were coalescing with the positivist frameworks that guide applied science, technology and environmental research and policy. In the context of the ascendancy of science in shaping environmental agendas (Nightingale *et al*., 2020), technical organizations were welcoming a particular version of gender expertise and 'gender knowledge products' into their assemblages of modelling, GIS and other types of quantitative indices to track, measure, evaluate and predict environmental outcomes.

The impact of this is manifested in several ways. First, a conventional gender analysis in R4ED is premised on a priori notions of gender, generally understood in a binary, heteronormative and adversarial (men versus women) form. Drawing on work by decolonial scholars such as Lugones (2010) and Oyěwùmí (1997), critics argue that this approach is rooted in colonial discourses of heteronormativity and "has silenced other forms of embodied and social experience that do not belong to the geogenealogy of the West" (Icaza & Vazquez, 2016, p. 67; see also Weerawardhana, 2018). This is despite the ground-breaking work by Western and Global South feminist academics and NGO activists who brought more diverse gender and women's issues into international development (e.g. Sen & Grown, 1987), only for these to be disciplined and professionalized into a consensus created by Northern neoliberal priorities (Narayanaswamy, 2016).

Secondly, the use of professionalized terminologies around gender, research tools and management artifacts within gender expertise contribute to its coloniality. Many such tools aim to manage gender inequality transformations in disembodied ways and as part of the techno-managerialist turn in conducting gender 'business.' These tools are shaped by colonial power structures, relying on the powerful myths of modernization, and legitimizing complex and demanding technocratic procedures that hide the political nature of Development. This is accomplished through tools with standardized methods, allowing experts to evaluate the situations they aim to change in a way that is depoliticized (Scott, 2024). One example of this is the current focus on gender norms as an object for change: a fixed representation of an identifiable gender norm is a function of dominant ways of knowing, professionalized modes of communication that are taken for granted and not scrutinized in and of themselves (Narayanaswamy, 2020). One of the consequences of the professionalization of ideas around gender in R4ED spaces is how this reinforces bias against Global South knowledges and hinders ability to deliver meaningful change in peoples' lives (Keahey, 2023). Desalvo *et al.* (2023) describe how monitoring and evaluation requirements continue to legitimize patriarchal, imperialistic and colonial forms of knowledge, with markers of progress defined by funders, and where evidence of impact is based on predefined indicators and logframes. This has the effect of excluding other ways of knowing, and shapes who can hold and produce gender knowledge. Narayanaswamy goes further, arguing that the professionalization of globalized gender knowledges means even Southern feminist NGOs can be sites of exclusion for grassroots knowledges (Narayanaswamy, 2016).

Thirdly, the coloniality of gender expertise is reinforced in contexts where scientific neutrality and requirements for scalability risk amplifying a universalizing view of gender from nowhere. For example, one of the performative aspects of gender expertise is to weave myths about women's vulnerability and victimhood, which rationalizes the need for gender equality in planned intervention designs echoing the 'civilizing mission' of Development (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; de Jong, 2017). Reified ideas on women's victimhood are fueled by a 'fixation on harmful impacts both measurable and material' that calls for marshalling the necessary evidence to validate gender in interventionist agendas (MacGregor, 2010, p. 223). Feminist scholars inspired by Black, postcolonial and decolonial thinking have advocated for a more complex understanding of gender that emphasizes its intersectional foundations and interconnected power dynamics, its agentive potential, and its rootedness in embodied locations and experiences (de Wit, 2021). As the feminist philosopher Nancy Tuana reminds us, the understanding of gender as an analytical category must always be richly situated acknowledging that the production of knowledge is not "a view from nowhere" and where we, as researchers, must invariably be "responsible for what we learn to observe." (Tuana, 2013, p. 29; see also Haraway, 1988).

Western science, intertwined with colonialism, is seldom disrupted by gender experts working for environmental programs due to the hegemonic belief in its neutrality and universality thus ignoring diverse perspectives (Harding, 2011; Kunz *et al*., 2019; Resurrección and Elmhirst, 2021; Rutazibwa, 2018). For

example, Asher's (2017, pp. 20, 21) account of her intellectual journey and forays into forestry research within a forestry institution demonstrates this:

> They implicitly and explicitly rejected any form of advocacy or politics. Thus, feminist insights were suspect, but women's contributions to forestry or natural resource management were valid as long as they were empirically and objectively verified. Unsurprisingly, attempts to talk about gender beyond a natural, neutral, biologically determined difference between women and men were dismal failures. I argued that gender in forestry research means not just adding women but asking questions about our assumptions, approaches, and explanations about gender and forests.

Another case in point, Méndez Cota (2019) compellingly narrates actions to advance 'gender and science' in Mexico, aiming to bring more women in the sciences without troubling the institutional dynamics of knowledge production. These initiatives have also largely failed to engage critical race, disability, and decolonial critiques of the sciences' extractive relationship to Indigenous knowledge and communities of color (Subramaniam & Willey, 2017).

The coloniality of gender networks of expertise

The third dimension that contributes to the coloniality of gender expertise comes from the racialized, colonial and geographical dynamics of the professional networks that shape the 'doing' of gender expertise. In their discussion of the professionalization of gender knowledges in Development more generally, Kunz *et al*. (2019) draw attention to a pervasive belief among gender experts that those who received training from universities in the Global North are generally considered "global gender experts", reflecting the traveling nature of colonial rationalities. Development training and instruction has been historically rooted in institutions that often played a role in providing intellectual support for imperial pursuits and the 'civilizing mission' centering Eurocentric knowledge that reflected the perspectives, values, and priorities of the colonial powers while excluding non-Western perspectives and Indigenous knowledge. Given its developing from within this legacy, gender expertise can inadvertently invisibilize other feminisms thus becoming complicit in cementing colonial practices (de Jong, 2017; Paramaditha, 2022; Prügl, 2013).

Weerawardhana (2018, p. 219) notes their experience with working in development organizations which have an oppressive history of seeking white expertise, part of a "racially stratified colonial perception of the cis-heteronormative white Western colonizer as the savior carrying knowledge, skills, culture and most importantly, funding." In some instances, however, this oppressive history is rectified through gap-filling actions such as donor instructions to forge partnerships with local partners or involve women to normatively address issues of social exclusion. Our experiences in environmental programs tell us that this does not fully erase colonially rooted hierarchies within these organizations, especially in major realms such as framing agendas, what counts for successful program outcomes, and who gets epistemic privilege within organizations and these so-called local partnerships. Sources of asymmetry in networks of gender expertise reflect those found in partnerships in R4ED work more generally: for example, in relation to divisions of labor in joint projects, the dominance of the Global North in decision-making (objectives, approaches, methodologies), the unidirectional framing of capacity building and access to rewards (Aboderin *et al*., 2023). The power geometries of producing knowledge generally mean the submission of Southern, non-metropolitan and extra-university scholars to output-driven, Anglophone-oriented scholarship (Radcliffe, 2017, Noxolo, 2017). Authority within professionalized networks is identified by the extent and form of their knowledge, who they are and where they come from (Kothari, 2005): naturalized ideas of expertise and rigor are often framed by Western higher education (Narayanaswamy & Schöneberg, 2020).

The division of intellectual labor in relation to gender expertise reflects a colonial logic: fieldwork and data are located in the Global South, while theory is the preserve of the Global North. This shapes the way gender knowledges circulate within R4ED networks, and is reinforced as expertise circulates through toolkits, universalizing concepts and terminologies, with requirements to fit to 'objective' and measurable parameters, even in the context of efforts towards knowledge co-production. An exemplar of this comes not from the Global

South but from an Indigenous space in lands now known as Australia: an autobiographical account of two Aboriginal women experts outlines their work for their own communities within institutions they describe as structures of whiteness (Tynan & Bishop, 2019). They become starkly aware of white experts within the Indigenous Affairs Industry they refer to as 'disembodied experts' who are detached from "the knower's standpoint, ontology, and raced and gendered corporeal form" and are deployed to mask the subjugation of Indigenous Peoples through positivist notions of objectivity (Tynan & Bishop, 2019, p. 223). "The most mined resource in the Indigenous Affairs Industry is our ability to perform poverty. Our mobility from disadvantage is possessed by organizations and sold to funders as a program outcome" (Tynan & Bishop, 2019, p. 227). The authors' embodied and relational ties to their land, histories and communities prompted them to publish their autobiographical reflections as an act of epistemic refusal, colliding with perspectives from disembodied experts' epistemic privilege. Similarly, this reminds us of development programs' propensity to contract and deploy gender consultants to distant places. Their troubled accounts tell of 'parachuting from nowhere,' as they were invited to make assessments and judgements on gender inequality in contexts they were not familiar with to justify gender equality inclusion in future planning or to measure the 'success' of gender equality interventions (Ferguson, 2015; Harcourt, 2017).

Feminist organizing principles are being used within some R4ED organizations to try to address these forms of hierarchy, but there are many barriers. Describing the role of Global South feminists who oscillate between North and South, Paramaditha (2022, p. 38) draws attention to multiple layers of epistemological marginalization, as "feminist knowledge produced in the North is not always accessible either due to language barriers or the circulation of this knowledge, which tends to be limited to urban intellectual elites… and as women in the Global South are constantly excluded from knowledge production at local levels due to patriarchal systems that disregard them as authoritative figures or valid sources of knowledge." This suggests that addressing the coloniality of gender expertise involves addressing the coloniality of epistemic power – the authority to validate, confirm or formulate new knowledge – within the networks in which professional R4ED practice sits, and which may act as a reproductive mechanism of existing modes of thought and the reproduction of a colonial white (feminist) gaze (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Pailey, 2019).

3. Disentangling gender expertise from coloniality: relational openings

Scholar-activist Giovanna di Chiro (2016) describes 'life-writing' as a genre "embodied in personal struggles and life choices" that reflect and enable "active hope." She quotes Rebecca Solnit who elaborates on this sense of hope:

> It's important to say what hope is not: it is not the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine. The evidence is all around us of tremendous suffering and tremendous destruction. The hope I'm interested in is about broad perspectives with specific possibilities, ones that invite or demand that we act. It's also not a sunny everything-is-getting-better narrative, though it may be a counter to the everything-is-getting-worse narrative. You could call it an account of complexities and uncertainties, with openings. (in di Chiro, 2016, p. 1)

In our reflections alongside gender experts working in professional environment and development contexts, we turned to Feminist Political Ecology as a convening space of thinking and practice that may offer possibilities for ways forward (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2021). Feminist political ecology (FPE) and related decolonial ecological feminisms, in addressing power structures, explore how various systems intersect to produce injustice and environmental destruction (Ojeda *et al*., 2022, p. 12). While there is an imperative to avoid practices of inclusion that result in a renewal of coloniality of power in novel forms (Sondarjee, 2024), interesting possibilities are emerging that may have resonance and applicability in the professionalized spaces of R4ED that avoid or at least help subvert the coloniality of gender expertise.

As we discussed in the preceding section, gender expertise, as a body of knowledge and practice is entangled with the coloniality of development. In the same vein, mainstream environment and development programs are premised on scientific rationalities that perpetuate dualisms between nature and society. Gender

and environment expertise is co-opted into these rationalities when it focuses on 'mainstreaming gender' in technological and 'environmentally smart' interventions without addressing underlying social structures and power dynamics, reinforcing the notion that nature (climate or environment) can be controlled or managed by technical solutions. Professionalized gender expertise then becomes an instrument of techno-managerialist surveillance, policing words and bodies through tools and other managerial artifacts (Lugones, 2008; Scott, 2023). In other words, professionalized gender expertise becomes an instrument of epistemic power.

In contrast, relational ontologies emphasize the intricate and intertwined relationships between people, nature, and power structures. This way of thinking and acting recognizes the entanglement of nature and society in shaping gendered experiences and the diversity and complexity of gender-intersectional identities and relationships. As Rocheleau and Nirmal point out, relationality refuses simple binary thinking and understands the world as always already networked, embedded and rooted. It highlights the radical interdependence of all things (Escobar *et al.*, 2024) and the importance of complex intersections among social actors, institutions, processes, and practices that effect change in society, space, and environment (Rocheleau, 2011; Rocheleau & Nirmal, 2015). Relationality foregrounds the persistence of colonial, capitalist and imperial relations (de Jong, 2017; Gay-Antaki, 2022; Mohanty, 1988), prompting an analysis of intersecting systems of oppression that shape relationships with the environment with unequal and unjust outcomes (Mollett & Faria, 2013; Ojeda *et al*., 2022).

Puig de la Bellacasa (2012) highlights this ontology of connection and relationality in the realm of research and knowledge production through a process of 'thinking with care.' What might this look like in practice, particularly in R4ED contexts that remain dominated by positivist epistemologies, bound by the rationalities of bureaucratic accountability, and seeking to adhere to principles of (equitable) partnership work? One example that seeks to develop a feminist ethos for caring knowledge production in the context of transdisciplinary sustainability science is elaborated by Staffa *et al*. (2022). They note that while the main modus operandi of transdisciplinarity is about drawing on different kinds of knowledges, this requires attentiveness to addressing questions of epistemic and everyday power. To address this, parameters for working in ways that subvert the top-down, positivist, technocentric rationalities of mainstream R4ED are set out. This involves:

(i) "Thinking-with" – Cultivating caring academic and praxis cultures and long-term partnerships with non-academic actors;
(ii) "Dissenting-within" – Accepting the presence of conflicting interests and values in research and promotes reflexivity to interrogate power dynamics and positionalities; and
(iii) "Thinking-for" – Advocating for the inclusion of marginalized groups in research and critically examining how systems of oppression shape research questions and methodologies.

Others working in R4ED contexts have also sought to develop principles for research practice, seeking a more explicit engagement with epistemic justice by including decolonial thinking and postcolonial critique alongside feminist care ethics in their praxis. For example, Snijder *et al*. (2023) offer a reflective account of five R4ED programs funded by the UK government's Global Challenge Research Fund that have adopted decolonial, feminist and participatory approaches embedded within a similar relational ontology to that outlined above. The programs described were conducted in the realm of sustainability, ocean governance and disaster risk. Each aimed to work from locally defined challenges, practicing an ethics of care, reflective practice and critical thinking about power, judgement and positionality, and decentering positivist epistemologies. However, among the challenges they examine was the question of gender: "physical science co-investigators were less likely to see gender as relevant to their work than social scientists", instead seeing this as a political exercise (Snijder *et al*. 2023, 369). In a transdisciplinary R4ED context, the point must surely be that all forms of knowledge production are political: the reflections in the article suggest this can be lost.

Other professionalized spaces in R4ED have sought to address the challenges of epistemic hierarchy (between science and feminist knowledges) in a way that draws on feminist organizing principles, built around

challenging taken-for-granted, hidden structures of power within organization cultures, and foregrounding feminist reflexivity. For example, gender experts working often in isolation within science-based research centers of the CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) – including those featured in our book (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2021) – have recently sought better ways of translating social justice ideals into R4ED practices in their work. Working from a set of agreed feminist organizing principles, they have developed a social learning space or community of practice that provides peer support, evaluation and sharing of best practice (Lopez *et al*., 2023). As they acknowledge, this is not immune from reproducing hidden (and not-so-hidden) structures of power that can silence and exclude, particularly as their work means navigating 'international' and 'national' expert positionalities. Despite a commitment to a feminist ethos of care, there is a danger of flattening out differences and reproducing the coloniality of gender expertise as feminist expert consensus is being built.

Even where there have been explicit efforts to address Global North epistemic dominance in R4ED through relational, care-full collaborations between Southern gender experts, issues remain. Taela (2023) presents a self-reflexive case where partnerships between Brazil and Mozambique build on the colonialist idea of intervention in an underdeveloped world. Accounts from Brazilian gender experts active in Mozambican development interventions unravel professional pathways that construct 'Southern expertise and new knowledge hierarchies.' Brazilian development workers are complicit with and benefit from these knowledge hierarchies created by the South-South cooperation regime characteristic of the aid industry conventionally defined by North-South aid colonial relations and hierarchies. Such epistemic hierarchies are also shaped by "the extent and form of their knowledge but often because of who they are and where they come from" (Taela, 2023, p. 12).

In terms of undoing the coloniality of gender expertise, living a feminist life (Ahmed, 2017) within organizations and research partnerships is an important but insufficient step. Decolonial thinking means widening the relational openings offered by a feminist ethos of care through a deeper reflexivity that means asking with whom, from where and with what epistemologies am I (are we) working (Icaza & Vazquez, 2016). This means pluralizing the (feminist) knowledges on which gender expertise is built, not by assimilating 'local feminisms' into the logic of gender mainstreaming (Chávez & Contreras, 2021), but instead by adopting a feminist pluriversality. However, while efforts to convene across Global South feminisms is a hallmark of transnational feminist organizing in the 1990s (e.g. Sen & Grown, 1987), this produced its own "regime of visibility" (Fernandes, 2013, p. 122) as NGO-ized feminisms were more easily heard. Similar risks abound in relation to donor agendas, and those of the state, especially in the push towards iterations of Feminist Foreign Policy in countries ranging from Sweden to Mexico (Achilleos-Sarl *et al*., 2023).

Feminisms in plural acknowledges the plurality of points of departure and spatially situated genealogies of thought that inform practices and struggles seeking to undo inequalities and violence emerging from the intersecting structures of racism, capitalism, able-ism and patriarchy (de Jong *et al*., 2019; Icaza & Vazquez, 2016). This means returning agency in thinking and doing to Indigenous people, local practices and contextual epistemologies (Foley, 2019). Yuval-Davis (2015) names this process as one of transversal dialogue. There is a multiplicity of ways in which these agencies in thinking and doing 'gender' have and are being articulated. For some, this means gender not being taken for granted as an always existing category, but understanding it from its underside, and from the relations that give it its form, as Latin American decolonial feminisms argue (Blidon & Zaragocin, 2019; Lugones, 2010). Critical African feminist perspectives undo assumptions of Western constructs of gender or individual agency, challenging in very direct ways the assumptions of current gender mainstreaming and attendant ontologies of gender norms (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Tamale, 2020; Tsikata & Ossome, 2024). From South Asia, Desai (2020) describes an evolving South Asian feminism that draws on discourses as diverse as Adivasi conceptualizations of *eco-swaraj* (protecting the subsistence economy and relations of care) and the Marxist-ecofeminism of transnational scholars Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies (1993). The interweaving of these discourses in the feminism Desai (2020) explores belies any misconception that 'situated' feminisms means geographically bounded or primordial. Similarly, in Indonesia, there is a plurality of feminisms that is socially and geographically complex, reflecting ethnic diversity and the history of anti-colonial struggle, the interplay of Islam and modernity, histories of struggles for land and livelihood, urban-based feminisms centered on human rights, violence against women and social justice in the context of the state,

and complex situated struggles for voice and recognition in extractive landscapes (Budiman & Budianta, 2023; Gina, 2022; Paramaditha, 2022).

We see examples of work that has sought to embrace a relational understanding of knowledge production across epistemologies and beyond the conventions of research knowledge and communication in R4ED. The Extracting Us Curatorial Collective (Owen *et al*., 2023) offers an example of the different registers through which place-based knowledges around coloniality, extractivism, socio-ecological degradation and its alternatives may be expressed and shared. Creative interventions from a diversity of knowledge makers (from community-based counter-mapping to arts practice, Indigenous song, and poetry) were brought together in this project, which blurred boundaries between situated, place-based feminisms, activisms, and professional development work. A recent special issue of the journal *Gender and Development* focused on decolonizing (feminist) knowledge and practice included a reflective analysis from a climate change research project in Indonesia that demonstrates how the local arts and strong oral traditions have been invalidated by the colonial civilizing tropes of European empires, which share similarities with policymaking and knowledge production about climate change. The authors show that arts-led methodologies have provided a 'third grey space' for subversively highlighting the lived politics of marginalized groups and their "local ontologies confront(ing) coloniality as it manifests in research, climate change action, and daily life." (McQuaid & Pirmasari, 2023, p. 591). These openings are just that – they invite further exploration and consideration, with an ethos of care that ensures an engagement with pluriversal feminist knowledges does not simply become part of a perpetual cycle of cooptation of radical ideas into the development mainstream (Kothari *et al.*, 2024, p. 239).

4. To conclude: Owning discomfort and moving forward

We began this piece by asking whether the coloniality of gender expertise is inevitable in R4ED contexts, where the logics of coloniality are reinforced by the project of big 'D' development and in the structured colonial-racial-geographical hierarchies of Eurocentric science. Critiques of current formulations of gender expertise point to its entanglement in white Western feminisms that are themselves entrenched in coloniality. We have examined some of the recent relational openings that are being offered as researchers grapple with transdisciplinary research, equitable partnerships and commitment to a feminist ethos of care in professionalized R4ED contexts and conclude that while the coloniality of gender expertise is not inevitable, these maneuvers are not in themselves sufficient within technical environment and development organizations.

This article reflected on the coloniality of development from the prism of gender expertise. When mainstream development legitimizes interventions into the lives of people defined as less developed, as defined by organizations and the people within them who claim expert knowledge (Ziai, 2017), a feminist, anti-colonial ethical practice requires the questioning and disruption of the *coloniality* of gender expertise within the professionalized spaces of environment and development. From this exploration, we conclude that gender expertise needs to be decolonized, experiencing a transformation of purpose and a re-imagination through critical self-reflexivity. We would need to see a more honest reckoning with techno-managerialist expertise in so-called underdeveloped regions replaced by respectful and humble acknowledgement of local ontologies and epistemologies that have their own visions of change.

We have explored whether there is a role for addressing difficult questions around coloniality, equity and social justice through carefully curated coalitions across different kinds of feminist epistemologies and if it is possible to take these into the bureaucratic spaces of professional R4ED. This bears out in our book conversations which hint at the continuous search for 'openings' within R4ED for more genuinely equitable partnerships that channel more collective efforts towards addressing recurrent and persistent gender equity and social justice setbacks, which in turn can create difficult conversations.

In relation to development as an overarching global infrastructure, a relational focus departs from the dominant orientation of 20th-century international development fueled by Overseas Development Aid (ODA), and that isolates 'poor countries' and 'poor people' and their need for aid. It views that many of the causes of underdevelopment cannot be segmented along North–South or national boundaries (Horner, 2020, p. 424). It advocates viewing development and environmental governance processes as inherently comprised of unequal and intersectional webs of social and power relations among heterogeneous actors, both human and non-human

(Kenney-Lazar *et al*., 2023). This also abandons the idea that experts from other places prescribe change and actions for marginalized groups but instead, alternatively seek meaningful co-production of knowledge and collaborative learning and action.

All that said, 'normalized coloniality' in global and local environment and development institutions (funders and research organizations) is deep-seated and persistently endures. While mainstream development vocabularies and practice may adopt new and critical ideas and decolonizing concepts, they do not necessarily challenge orthodox development. As funding arrangements and methods for counting 'success' work against attempts to confront coloniality in development practice, ideas are often co-opted into the mainstream, losing their radical edge and in turn become depoliticized, disembodied, and ahistorical, a story that resonates well with the discourse of gender equality. Decolonizing is an often-unfinished process beginning with addressing the tensions of our positionalities, deep listening, co-exploring problems and avenues for change by creating spaces of care, respect and humility while working and learning with diverse groups of people who live with and navigate the precarities of risky environments. It is also about learning from those who resist oppressive power in their own contextual and agentive terms in ways that may not align with conventional definitions of overt feminist activism characteristic of those from more privileged social classes or in less constrained professional or occupational circumstances (Nagar, 2014; Paramaditha, 2022).

Nevertheless, as we write this and as exemplified above, ongoing conversations among feminist scholar-activists share wisdom and envision relational openings – or "untested feasibility", a term Paulo Freire (2000) used to denote "a realization by individuals and communities that they can go transformatively beyond their current experience of the world, to new and as yet untested (and probably counter-intuitive) possibilities" (Pearse & Connell, 2016, p. 48, clauses ours). For some of us, it may be necessary to 'vacate the space and be silent' in the wake of efforts to decolonize and dismantle white privilege in development thought and practice (as Kothari *et al*., 2024, p. 240, put it). But here in this article, we are inspired to stay with these discomforting questions, joining an emergent coalition of feminists (in activist, academic and bureaucratic spaces) engaged in the ongoing project of replacing the coloniality of gender expertise with something better.

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