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Research Note:

Giving What to Whom? Thoughts on Feminist Knowledge Production

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I have not given back to my research participants. And I do not intend to.

For several years, I explored how a loosely assembled network of American environmental activists and development agents thinks about, and advocates for, international family planning policies. The group expands and contracts, but is nearly always comprised of college students, community activists, NGO workers, donors, and scientists. They walk the halls of Congress and the United States Agency of International Development, huddle in conference rooms and staff literature tables on campus quads, and they write books, articles, blog posts, all designed to link women's fertility and reproduction in the global South with climate change and other major environmental problems. In so doing, they produce knowledge about women's bodies, lives, and responsibilities as environmental and sexual subjects. They circulate this information widely, they talk to legislators, and they work to produce a different world, one with fewer people in it. On the whole, their efforts vary in success. In some years, Congress allocates more money for family planning than others; at times, legislators sponsor new bills proposing the expansion of women's access to contraceptives and other reproductive technologies and services. While the shifts of Washington, DC politics hold tremendous

sway in whether or not it is a “good year” for them, the network forges on, constantly recalibrating its lobbying strategies and fine-tuning public messages.

1. “Poor Global South Women”

For a time I was a member of the international development community, working to implement family planning and other reproductive health programs in East and Southern Africa. My organization did good work supporting women’s access to high quality health services, a mission I was happy to add my efforts to. However, after returning to graduate school and beginning to delve more deeply into the history and politics of international family planning programs, I began to listen to the messages constructed by family planning advocates in the US with a more critical ear. Provision of comprehensive, community-based services gave way to discourses linking poor women’s childbearing to population problems and ecological crisis. Women were cast alternately as victims of poverty and gender inequality, and as (potentially) powerful agents of change who hold the tools to solve pressing global environmental problems through limiting their childbearing. Victimized and powerful, problem and solution—“poor global South women” are at the center of dialogues and debates swirling thousands of miles from them, debates that shape knowledge about the contexts and conditions of their lives, and debates that have exerted a powerful influence over US foreign policy for the past 60-odd years.

On the whole, my interlocutors are a relatively powerful group. Some of them hold the purse strings of multimillion dollar portfolios administered by private donor organizations. Others develop complex scientific models and frameworks that advocates draw on to press their case, claiming the facticity of population growth as a driver of climate change. All of them have constituencies through which they argue their platforms and circulate the knowledge produced in advocacy slogans and campaigns, articles and PowerPoint presentations. But what of the lives of women? As a feminist scholar, this was my starting point, and the question I return to again and again as I grapple with the complexities of my research project. There are women in the development network I study, to be sure. But the conditions of their lives are not at stake in this work. It is the women at a distance in the global South, whose lives become knowable in the US through advocacy work and the knowledge that it produces, that I am concerned with. If I were to give anything back, it would be to them. But how to do so? I had developed a project that was committed to investigating the workings of power inside development institutions and policy networks, an experiment in “studying up” (Nader, 1972). I wanted to retrain the researcher’s lens, to take the very people and institutions that produce knowledge about marginalized others, and render them the subjects of knowledge production. A worthy goal, I think, but not necessarily one that lends itself easily to thinking with, and through, women’s lives. Could I still develop and engage a research project based on feminist methods and ethics, even if I was not studying women? I found that I could, by remaining grounded in a reflexive perspective and by constantly seeking to answer for myself the questions of who my research is designed for, who it benefits, and how. This is where giving back occurs for me. And I discovered over time that the answers to the questions lay in the design and implementation of the research process

itself: choice of research questions and methods, relations with research participants/interlocutors, and writing.

2. Choice of Research Design

Doing development is of course quite different from studying development; a focus on intervention is replaced with a focus on interrogating the logics, values, and methodological approaches informing how projects are being designed and implemented. Layered on top of that is the reality that in development policy work, women's childbearing is not simply something that exists in the world; in order to be relevant as a development issue, it has to be a problem to be solved. In the process of devising such problems, women themselves must be reduced to intervenable subjects—a universal “Woman” (Mohanty, 1988), available for development from without, a willing subject. Over the course of conducting my research, I held many conversations where I began to ask about how women's lives are transformed into problems for development actors to solve, specifically how the complexities of fertility and childbearing, sexuality and reproduction, contraceptive access, and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, become narrowed into a set of interventions.

My research focus was derived from my ambivalence towards the dominant discourses of international development. My research methods sought to privilege the standpoints of the marginalized women, whose lives the development agencies saw as needing intervention. These choices of research design allowed me to engage in a research practice that seemed right, given my desire to address particular power imbalances in international development. Naturally, it dictated the research projects I would undertake and the way I would proceed in the field.

3. Relations With Research Participants

Beginning any new research project can be a precarious process; it involves developing relationships with interlocutors, establishing trust, and negotiating the process of communicating how you anticipate that research will be used in the future, both academically and beyond. This process is all the more complicated when studying activism and/or policy advocacy. The lines between studying advocacy and doing advocacy work are easily blurred, particularly when the advocacy involves a group with diminishing resources, and the stakes of gaining new allies and supporters are high. My path was particularly challenging to navigate in this regard, because I was returning to a development community that I had gained familiarity with as a practitioner some years before.

As an insider-outsider returning to a space of familiarity, I navigated entry into the research community through the familiar languages and paradigms of public health. Interviews with research participants were facilitated through my knowledge of total fertility rates (TFRs), demographic health surveys (DHS), and knowledge-attitude-practice (KAP) surveys. I also entered the room with knowledge of the basic terms of climate change mitigation and adaptation, Kyoto Protocol, and Conference of Parties

(COP) meetings. Shared languages proved to be important, as demonstrating knowledge of necessary vocabulary gains points of entry as well as establishing common ground.

Yet, I was an outsider as well, one whose political values diverged somewhat from those of my informants. My political-economic critique of population messages produced by environmentalists was not widely shared by my informants, and this point of divergence was a challenging point to navigate through daily conversation. At the same time, it was clear to me that my research project was rooted in a politics in which I was excavating the workings of powerful knowledge-producing practices. Thus it was important for me to inhabit a space of constant discomfort. My position vis-à-vis research participants was one of engaged interest and deep ambivalence, particularly in the midst of repeated moments when arguments rooted in Neo-Malthusian logic bubbled from their lips. These moments reminded me again and again of the deep discomfort required to remain engaged in constant dialogue with interlocutors whose politics not only differed from mine, but whose narratives about population growth and environmental change threatened to replicate the violence done through those narratives time and time again. My goal remained to investigate the process of producing ideas, messages, narratives, and strategies informing family planning advocacy, but I began to feel that my role in giving back would have to involve producing a counter-narrative that could attempt to undo some of the power inequalities that my interlocutors' work upheld. It was when I turned my attention to analysis and writing of the project that I truly began to grapple with whether giving back would be possible, and in what way.

4. Writing

Because my research project focused on advocacy and activism, my writing has unsurprisingly become an activist tool, though not one that I wield. Reproductive justice and climate justice activists have used some of my written work to advocate for policies that favor expanded sexual and reproductive health care for women, while rejecting the linkage of women's fertility with climate change. I have been told that some of this work has been used to help activist groups think and dream up more radical ways of placing women at the center of climate change strategies, not as victims or as problems, but as sources of innovation and creativity. These uses are beyond my control; the written (or spoken) word takes on a life of its own once it has been released to the world. Nonetheless, I see my work as part of a larger project: continuing to contribute to the corpus of knowledge about women in the world while producing a feminist counter-narrative to some of the gendered knowledge and interventions produced by powerful development interests. If this can be seen as an act of giving back, then it is happily given.

References

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