

A critical look at the Gender Responsive Budgeting approach in the development discourse

A feminist contribution to postcolonial politics of development

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Abstract

Whether, and how, marginalised groups can locate their voices and achieve change within mainstream development organisations is one of the driving concerns of both political scientists interested in policy development and activists seeking social improvement. In development circles, the Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) approach has come to be seen as an effective tool in strengthening women's voices and interests in policy and budgeting, particularly among the poor and marginalised (UN WOMEN, 2015). Indeed, budgets can play a key role in transforming societies, but much depends on how this approach is used and for whom. Enabling individual females to be better accommodated within highly unjust and unequal patriarchal societies is not enough. In this paper, I analyse how GRB has been framed in the current development discourse from a postcolonial feminist economics lens. I discuss the core GRB assumptions regarding women's oppression and its implications for the female subaltern. In developing the argument, I map the GRB framework's implicit *a priori* social analysis and its promotion of idealised modernist institutions and reformulated neoliberalism, and I then criticise its widespread assumption that paid labour empowers women. I argue that feminist concepts and political tools like GRB must return to and reaffirm their transformative dimensions, thereby reasserting their association with forms of postcolonial collective action and solidarity that involve possibilities of social change.

Keywords: postcolonial feminism, politics of development, feminist political economy, Gender Responsive Budgeting, global capitalism, neoliberalism

Possible worlds are created by ethical relations, through mobilizing resources previously left unused.

Braidotti, 2014, p. 246

1 Introduction

The mainstream development discourse has shifted in the last years from having a systematic institutional bias against women in economic policy to lauding the importance of offering women a more substantial role in economic development. Central to this shift has been the remarkable rise of microfinance models, where poor women were gradually seen as hard-working, easier to mobilise, more responsible, and better credit risks compared to men. Politically, women were soon imagined as great poverty alleviation agents and gender equality ambassadors that needed a 'helping hand' with their businesses – to help themselves and their families – even as women were integrated more deeply into global circuits of capital. In this vein, 'Women' have become 'the heart of development' (DFID, 2007), 'the secret weapon to beat hunger' (WFP, 2011), and 'Smart Economics' (WB, 2012). In the words of the UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon: 'As women thrive, so will we all'.¹

In this framework, the Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) approach – identifying interventions to address gender gaps in government policies, plans, and budgets – has gained the status of development orthodoxy. It is considered as an efficient tool in making gender equality and women's empowerment 'more than a mantra (...) a lived reality'.² Over the last decade, advocates for gender equality in many parts of the world have begun to engage with government budgetary processes, as researchers, organisers of women's groups, elected representatives, or government ministries. These distinct actors have come together under the premise that involving marginalised women more directly in the process of governance makes for 'gender-responsive' citizens, 'gender-responsive' decisions, and 'gender-responsive' government. Gender-responsive policies are seen as contributing to guaranteeing the access of marginalised women to social services, thus enhancing prospects for economic and political inclusion, and for development (UN WOMEN, 2015b). GRB is understood as a helpful tool to track these policies through the way that budgets respond to women's priorities and the use of government funds to promote gender equality (UN WOMEN, 2015). Therefore, in development circles these days, it would be difficult to find many organisations that are not at least trying

to integrate GRB into policy or programming. Even the World Bank, once the object of severe criticism for never truly being able to grasp the concept of 'gender' (Cornwall, Gideon & Wilson, 2008), appears to have acquired a growing interest in GRB and has taken it up with enthusiasm. But such appeal should perhaps give us pause. It may be argued, as this paper does, that GRB has been incorporated into neoliberal discourses with important implications for subaltern females. In this regard, I argue that GRB appears to convey one thing but, in practice, has been deployed to legitimise and reinforce existing unjust structures and relationships. Further, it has had the function of ensuring that resistance and the desire for transformation remain out of the picture.

GRB arose from a feminist critique of government, macroeconomic policy, and the professed neutrality of economic tools. It is an important right-based means for citizens to hold governments accountable to what they have signed up to. Both scholars and activists, however, have repeatedly expressed concern over the ways in which some of the 'small' ideas initiated in localised contexts by feminist analysis and women's struggles become 'big' ideas when appropriated by international development organisations. They have noted how this process can 'crowd out' alternative, locally derived strategies (Nagar, 2003) and shape Gender and Development (GAD) agenda(s). At the core of GRB is a claim of democratising budgetary and macroeconomic policies and promoting women's economic empowerment for 'more and better jobs, higher incomes, better access to and control over resources and assets, and greater security' (UN WOMEN, 2015, p. 234). However, enabling individual women to be better accommodated within a highly unjust and unequal patriarchal society is not enough. Budgets can play a role in transformation as many feminist and development practitioners have argued, but much depends on how this tool is used and for whom. In this paper, I analyse how GRB has been framed in the current development discourse. I discuss the core GRB assumptions regarding women's oppression and its implications for the female subaltern from a critical feminist postcolonial approach. In developing the argument, I pull out the GRB framework's implicit *a priori* social analysis and its promotion of idealised modernist institutions and criticise the widespread assumption that paid labour empowers women, an argument made forcefully by feminist economists within GRB narratives.

This paper is positioned in the intersection of three major debates in postcolonial studies: neoliberalism, feminist political economy, and development. Neoliberalism concerns the extent to which recent shifts in global governance and economic policy represent a change from the agenda pur-

sued in the late 1980s, where the emphasis was on 'market fundamentalism'.³ Since the 1990s, conversations about international development recognise a role for states in building the institutions necessary for free markets to flourish, and international development organisations articulate explicit social concerns regarding inclusion of the marginalised, poverty eradication, and equity. Conditionality has now been officially abandoned, replaced by an idea of country ownership, and increased emphasis has been placed by development organisations on 'gender-responsive' governance as an arena for donor intervention and direction. These shifts have led to the emergence of what has commonly been labelled post-Washington Consensus or 'neoliberalism with a human face' (Molyneux, 2006, p. 430).

In this deepening project, I argue that, as a contemporary development policy instrument, GRB is distinctive in its invocation of 'women's economic empowerment', 'participation', and 'gender-responsive' and in its attempts to engender changes as a condition for promoting modernist political liberalism and market success. By so doing, development organisations reinscribe an ethnocentric ideology in modernist developmentalism that legitimates and naturalises power, reproducing unequal relations and, therefore, epistemic violence. Thus, in this framework, GRB does not 'speak truth to power' as feminist analysis and feminist collectives have framed it but, on the contrary, accommodates and naturalises power.

It must be noted that economics has long been a hegemonic discipline within the field of development (Zein-Elabdin & Charusheela, 2004). As a discipline, it has upheld narratives of 'development' and 'poverty' more than any other discipline, organising what it means to be poor (or underdeveloped or rural) or wealthy (or industrialised or developed) (Kapoor, 2008). Due to economics centrality in development discourses and progress on 'mainstreaming' gender equality concerns since the United Nations Decade for Women, it is not surprising that feminist economics and its objects of study – i.e. the division of labour by gender, race, and nation; women's position and status in labour markets; the importance of social reproduction; and the increasing disparities of wealth and income that accompany globalisation – have gotten much attention for the development agenda.

Feminist economics has contributed immeasurably to interrogating economics as an hegemonic discourse in development, criticised the presumed gender-neutrality of development policy outcomes, and brought up questions about the ways in which gender intersects with race, sexuality, and class. Yet it is constantly challenged by its modernist bias and teleolo-

gical assumptions about history and society highlighted in postcolonial feminist discussions (see Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1999; Charusheela, 2008). The strong analytical emphasis on 'women' in feminist economics analysis in development discourses, coupled with the profound influence of modernist philosophy (Zein-Elabdin, 2004), leads to a certain treatment of non-western societies that overlooks patterns of immense relevance to feminist economics. Given the overlap between gender and other historical instruments of domination and hegemony in development, for instance colonialism and cultural hegemony (i.e. the cultural bias of colonial Europe), the particularity of women's economic subordination can be carried only up to a point, and gender itself cannot be fully structured as an analytical category. I locate this essay within such difficulties, looking critically to the GRB narratives within the development discourse and proposing a post-colonial feminist contribution to politics of development.

Placing the mainstream development discourse (henceforth development) – i.e. the dominant representations and institutional practices that structure the relationships between the 'modern' West and the Third World⁴ – alongside postcolonialism and feminist critique turns out to be a highly productive exercise. It helps us to examine strategies to decolonise development and locate radical and postcolonial feminist solidarities. Second, it provides a basis from which to criticise the modernist universalisms in the development discourse for legitimating uneven structural power and perpetuating gender inequities. In this vein, a postcolonial feminist economics approach to politics of development follows a transdisciplinary method:

Instead of drawing on material from different disciplines that maintain their philosophical core and methodological tools, a transdisciplinary method reveals the common preanalytical premises of different disciplines. Thus, a feminist postcolonial approach to development would push feminist economists to look anew meaning of development, empowerment and so on. (Zein-Elabdin, 2004)

To this extent, I use a transdisciplinary method to what in Arturo Escobar's terms is an 'anthropological approach to policy', whereby policies are understood to be productive instruments that result in concrete practices of thinking and acting (1995, p. 11). As Escobar and others who focus on the productive power of development organisations argue, policy documents are central mechanisms in which social reality is shaped. Without privileging words over actions, I suggest here that discursive framings are impor-

tant in shaping development practice and feminist agendas. Thus, to comprehensively trace the current GRB development discourse, I analyse the last policy texts on GRB elaborated by the United Nations (UN), mainly the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN WOMEN), and the World Bank (WB) – the world’s largest and most influential development organisation – as well as external research done by feminist economists for those institutions. Particularly, I examine the last UN WOMEN global report *Progress of the World’s women 2015-2016. Transforming economies, realizing rights* and the key documents (n=20) and public statements posted in the official UN WOMEN website on GRB since these are the same documents used in the WB current GRB approach.⁵ I also analyse the World Bank reports on gender equality highlighted in the World Bank Group on Gender Key Reports Section⁶ (n=8).

The next section, Section 2, lays out the universal modernist normative assumptions of Gender Responsive Budgeting. Section 3 questions development insistence on locating female subaltern voices, and Section 4 provides a conclusion.

2 Gender Responsive Budgeting and its normative assumptions in development discourse

GRB was pioneered in the Australian women’s budget model in 1994. It was initiated and developed by the women’s movements, specifically by the Australia’s ‘femocrats’ (Sawer, 2002). Interest in gender-responsive budget analysis, by women’s movements, governments, and NGOs, accelerated following the UN Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The UN Conference endorsed GRB and included it in the Platform for Action ratified by 189 states. This global call for gender mainstreaming and analysis of actual government expenditure and revenue aimed to further the key themes of government accountability for its gender equality commitments. But, what is being done in the name of Gender Responsive Budgeting? While GRB in development discourse appears to resound with participation and empowerment, it camouflages strong modernist assumptions of a universal technology of governmentality and developmentalist modernism. As used here, modernism is

a social vision that includes a liberal-democratic nation-state, an industrial capitalist economy, and a series of other specific institutions of public life and “civil society”, reframing a particular mode of interaction between indi-

viduals, individuals and the state, and individuals and society. (Charusheela, 2008, p. 47)

In the GRB framework, there are two general assumptions regarding female oppression in the Third World. The first one, a central tenet of feminist economics, is that unpaid care and domestic labour (housework or household production) constitutes a form of women's exploitation (UN CEDAW, General Recommendation No. 16). It is also argued that unpaid and domestic work is not accorded the status of an economic activity in the budgets, nor is it incorporated in any meaningful way into mainstream economic analysis.

Unpaid care and domestic work severely limits women's economic opportunities. Recognizing the economic value of this work, reducing its drudgery and redistributing it more equally between women and men, and between households and society, is critical for the achievement of substantive equality. (UN WOMEN, 2015, p. 70)

GRB is considered a helpful tool to recognise unpaid work as 'an essential part of the formal economy' (Caglar, 2013, p. 259) and therefore key to achieve gender equality (UN WOMEN, 2015). However, if we take a critical feminist postcolonial perspective we see that fitting unpaid care and domestic labour into new definitions of economic activity does not necessarily achieve feminist goals. The concept 'unpaid care and domestic labour', for example, is itself a theoretical abstraction that excludes much of the work performed by Third World women as part of their unpaid domestic responsibilities, largely because it is a concept constructed in opposition to '(decent) work' as experienced and defined in the west. Here, a two sector model that celebrates the market is implicit. It separates the household (traditional institution, unpaid work) and the market/society (progress, paid work), even when they occur in the same household and are done by the same woman simultaneously. For example, UN WOMEN (2015, p. 83) uses the concept of unpaid care and domestic work in two ways: a) 'Unpaid work that involves the production of goods for self-consumption (e.g. collecting water or firewood)' and b) 'Unpaid work that involves the provision of services for self-consumption (e.g. cooking or cleaning as well as person-to-person care)'. Why is firewood or collecting water the production of a good, but cleaning or cooking a meal is a service? There are many meals prepared in non-western contexts that are meant partly for the market and partly for self-consumption. Is the distinction to be made based on

whether the meal is primarily intended for the market so that 'leftovers' are consumed at home, or it is primarily meant for home consumption, and leftovers are for sale? If a meal is cooked with some idea of how much will be marketed and how much will be consumed, is only part of the labour involved in producing that meal excluded (Wood, 1997)? How much? There is surely a large percentage of water hauled that is meant exclusively for self-consumption, with the 'possibility' of selling the water being no more important to the person doing the work than its use in washing clothes. This approach assumes that the main cause of women's subordination lies in their exclusion from employment and ('formal') market and consequent entrapment and isolation in the household. Thus, the key to women's emancipation lies in their entry into the workplace. However, by choosing to maintain the distinction household/market, unpaid care and domestic labour continue to be marginalised at all levels of economic analysis and budgets, even though feminist economists and UN WOMEN are claiming for the need to recognise it. Further, one cannot assume *a priori* that women's 'formal' employment will be translated in greater freedom and equality. As Charusheela (2003, p. 298) argues, '[t]he actual experience of work, far from being a liberation from the bonds of home, was and is often demeaning, undignified, and oppressive.'

The second assumption is that female subordination is found in 'traditional' patriarchy and placed in the 'household' or the sphere of the family and that 'efficient' budget allocations can amend it, as the UN WOMEN GRB Policy Brief argues:

Through its budget allocations, the state has the potential to redress inequalities and discrimination in the household, in asset ownership, and in labor and credit markets. This can be achieved through various measures including spending on education and training that close gender gaps, investments in access to health care, and expenditures that reduce women's care burden. (Seguino, 2013, p. 6)

Here, inequalities and oppression are located in the household but never found in the actual politics of institutionalisation itself – i.e. the process through which social institutions operate and reproduce themselves. Far from the nuanced understandings and analysis of the specificities of gender relations as power relations that feminist scholars and activists have advocated, we are left here with 'gender' as a descriptive term that is reduced to a monochromatic simplification. Further, in this approach, GRB is seen as a tool to simply disaggregate various equations into male

and female components in a 'gender-responsive' way to close 'gender gaps', adding 'women' and 'men' subscripts into variables in already existing categories and frameworks. None of this allows for a conceptualisation of either the relations between gender and poverty or how the process of impoverishment implicates gender relations and gender resistance. Feminist thought today examines those mechanisms of power through which unstable and contingent performances are stabilised into behaviours that 'operate as a policing force which generates and legitimizes certain practices, experiences, etc., and curtails and delegitimizes others' (Nicholson 1998, p. 293). Hence, we should not begin with pre-given gendered definitions of economic activities and 'inefficient' households that treat gender as an individual manner and leave the structure untouched but with *an analysis* that deals with complexities, the specific context, and the dynamics of power.

Many GRB initiatives apply a gender analysis to the formulation and implementation of the budgets that is usually an 'explanation' about gender bias and discrimination and 'explains' how a society is organised and functions (see UN WOMEN 2015). However, the concomitant question is: what type of analysis is used? Take, for example, the UN WOMEN'S GRB mission statement:⁷

GRB initiatives seek to create enabling *policy frameworks*, build capacity and strengthen monitoring mechanisms to support accountability to women (...) Our work aims to strengthen policy, planning and budgeting processes at national and local levels for *improved government accountability, transparency and service delivery*. The full and equal participation of women and civil society is central to achieve these objectives. (emphasis mine)

The reconfiguration of state-society relations that is taking place here is a view of the 'state', 'civil society', and 'participation' as an universal ahistorical normative ideal of an appropriate institutional unit for social organisation (i.e. nation state), portraying it as an autonomous and homogenous technology of institutions and 'women' as a homogenous monolith. What this discussion seems to ignore is the need to understand both the state and civil society as heterogeneous and mutually constitutive terrains of contestation as well as the differences, complexities, and heterogeneities of the lives of women (Mohanty, 1991). This approach calls for a view of governance participation as a contingent outcome that negotiates relations in a pre-existing terrain that constrains and facilitates particular kinds of actions and goes beyond the introduction of standard 'good-gov-

ernance' packages (i.e. accountability, transparency, and social delivery) associated with WB liberal democratic reform progress (see WB, 1992). In this liberal framework, 'gender-responsive' governance is not an outcome or consequence of development but a necessary condition for development. Although the WB and UN WOMEN argue their work is mainly management of development policy rather than politics, it is quite clear that 'good-governance', and its reformulated 'gender-responsive' approach, is a package for liberal-democracy or a 'democratic capitalist reform based on the Western model' (Chan, 2002, p. 17), with a specific and deliberate focus on marginalised women being added. This implies that a policy framework (i.e. 'democracy') can be inserted at almost any stage in the developmental process of any society irrespective of its social structure, power dynamics, economic conditions, political traditions, and external relations, and that it will enhance development. Using this perspective, development organisations use GRB with a focus on 'fixing' gaps rather than exploring power dynamics.

Redolent with purpose, GRB resounds with a decisive ring of social justice and citizen engagement. It evokes a participatory approach where everyone gets a chance to take part in making the decisions that affect their lives and where opportunities exist for all to thrive. Yet it masks unequal power structures and gender myth-making with iconic images of women (i.e. women are more industrious and responsible than men; 'good mothers'; peace-makers; women care more for children and the environment) to make the world that the neoliberal model would have us inhabit. For example, The World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim claimed:⁸

[T]he great news is that gender equality doesn't require trade-offs; it only has benefits. And the benefits accrue to everyone, not just women and girls. Societies benefit and as even MEN are beginning to understand, economies benefit, too. That's good news for all of us. The governors of the World Bank Group have set ambitious goals to end extreme poverty by 2030 and to boost shared prosperity for the bottom 40 percent of the population in developing countries. If we are to reach those goals, investing wisely in women and girls needs to be a major part of our work. (...) [G]iven the evidence we already have about the role of women – the world will be more peaceful, more prosperous, more just and worthy of the mothers who gave birth to us all.

Here, we see how the result of listening to previously silenced voices, with a focus on women's agency – instead of victimhood – has been now replaced by the no less essentialist vision of the Third World woman as a



One dance group dancing tufo in Ilha de Moçambique in the Northern Province of Nampula, Mozambique. The dance, heavily influenced by the matrilineal Makuwa culture, emphasizes the relationship between the physical body and the soul, the living and the dead, the individual and the community. It contrasts with the notion of development 'transferred' through project-based activities as mainstream GRB approach which emphasis only the physical body, the living population and the individual.

Picture taken by: Gisela Carrasco Miró, Nampula, Mozambique, May 2010

heroine. Also, this vision posits the Third World man as absent or irremediable. These representations of the Third World woman supplement what Tsing (1993, p. 172) discusses as the 'invocation of the narrative of progress and development to justify why and how development is "done", particularly to women'. Thus, all this gender-making makes for a promise to investors of a safe bet, and a guaranteed return.

These essentialist generalisations have a marked tendency to reproduce and reinforce deeply conservative notions of womanhood, women's role within the family, the 'good mother', and heteronormativity as 'the norm'. And, again, this has decisively shifted attention away from both material structures of power and gender ideologies. Foucault (2000) has shown that a range of institutions that affect our lives can play interlocking disciplining roles that draw on, naturalise, and reproduce a discursive structure of 'normal' or 'proper' gender performances or 'plausible' households. In this vein, normative heterosexuality is not simply a form of sexual expression but it also 'defines a normal way of life' (Jackson, 2005 quoted in Bedford, 2009). Thus, government budgets and policies do not simply place women in a lower position than men. They literally participate in constructing a 'normalised' heteronormative family by the way in which they treat fe-

males, single mothers, migrants, and same sex partners. Essentialising women's concerns leaves little scope for females to *participate as citizens* rather than as 'good-responsible consumer mothers'. This use of ideas about 'gender' that rely on essentialised images of women (and men) may be one reason why mainstream gender-responsive discourses in development so often tend towards universalism.

Despite the emphasis on power relations and the relational dimensions of inequality and inequity that are part and parcel of feminist scholarship, agendas and, activism, GRB is often conflated with neoliberal ideological projections of an average Third World woman being more concerned with 'responsibility' (i.e. better and efficient neoliberal subjects). Indeed, GRB is repeatedly understood as a universal tool to simply disaggregate various equations into women versus men into already existing gendered economic categories rather than as an analytical and transformative approach that looks at the gendered economic structures. Thus, 'gender-responsibility' has run adrift, as once-focused energies have been dissipated and have then made 'gender' equal to 'woman' or 'women versus men'. By so doing, desire for structural change is increasingly constructed as not only irrelevant, but culturally insignificant to postcolonial contexts. If GRB is spun into an apoliticised practical tool, then its use in development policy may offer little hope of a world free of gender inequities and inequalities that GRB had previously evoked.

3 Female subaltern voices in the era of globalisation

Why do development organisations insist, especially now, in an age of transnational capitalism, on listening to Third World women's previous silenced voices? Spivak suggests that there is ideological significance to the 'revision of women in-development (modernization) to gender-and-development (New World Economic Order)' (Spivak 1999, p. 223). That this transition is tied to a new need – and constant insistence – to listen to subaltern voices is equally significant, not least because it 'apparently grants the woman free choice as *subject*' (p. 291). More recently, Spivak has used the notion of 'the new subaltern' in order to highlight global capitalism's current interests in appropriating rural indigenous female's labour and knowledge(s) for capitalist profit (Spivak, 2000).

In this vein, we see that women's empowerment in the development agenda has come to be associated with a model of individual self-improvement and donor interventions rather than collective struggle and feminist

resistance. The *WB 2014 Report Voice and Agency. Empowering women and girls for shared prosperity* highlights this neoliberal consensus of disciplining the subaltern female body as the ‘solution’ to poverty:

Removing constraints and unleashing women’s full productive potential can yield enormous dividends that help make whole societies more resilient and more prosperous (...) [C]onstraining women’s agency by limiting what jobs women can perform or subjecting them to violence, for example, can create huge losses to productivity and income with broader adverse repercussions for development. We argue that overcoming these deprivations and constraints is central to efforts to end extreme poverty and boost shared prosperity. (Klugman et al., 2014, p. 2)

Here, this narrative uses a ‘feminisation of responsibility’ as a survival approach and offers women entry into labour markets (also see UN WOMEN, 2015, p. 8). Yet it continues to devalue female labour and does nothing to challenge the structural inequalities that produce and sustain their disempowerment. So, only insofar as there is a coincidence between women’s needs and labour force participation as well as market growth along lines defined in a modernist way, will those needs be considered for policy implementation. Hence, this approach aims at ‘disciplining’ subaltern females bodies – by the state, the market, and development organisations – in order to transform individual powers into labour-power. Further, the use of ‘agency’ in this context frequently has the effect of ‘reassuring us that women do in fact exercise choice in situations where structural constraints mean that women are simply “choosing” survival’ (Wilson, 2011, p. 317). This instrumentalisation of marginalised women is perhaps best epitomised in the UN WOMEN slogan: Equality means business. Gender equality itself is here depicted as ‘smart economics’ in that it enables women to contribute their utmost skills and energies to the project of world economic development. Yet, as the Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar’s (2006) work has shown, attention to collective action to enable women to challenge structural discrimination has been downplayed by development discourse in analysis of what women’s empowerment means in non-western contexts. In the apparent absence of any problematisation of the current global order, the ‘positivity’ of contemporary development images and discourse, from which any contradictions seem to have been removed, implicitly confirms neoliberal narratives. In a reworking of modernist representations, relations of oppression and exploitation are thus obscured, or reconfigured as ‘impediments’ that can be overcome through hard work, self-improvement, and a helping hand from the development practitioner/

western(ised) consumer. The relatively recent emphasis on 'listening' and 'giving voice' to the female subaltern and on her point of view has resulted in increased publication and dissemination of testimonial short stories such as the 'In the words of...' UN WOMEN section or the UN WOMEN Global information hub that features 'diverse voices, testimonies of personal experiences and achievement'⁹ with colourful pictures of smiling and laughing 'working' females. While these initiatives could be an opportunity to take seriously diverse females' own agency from non-western contexts, locations, and experiences, it has played into the hands of neoliberal institutions and policymakers. These testimonies and short stories have become a useful tool to promote individual agency that requires marginalised females' voices to constitute them as rational and neoliberal economic actors in the service of modernist developmentalism. These narratives are presented as a set of women's voices and 'best' GRB experiences on the ground compiled by UN WOMEN bureaucrats. Yet these stories connect a discourse of freedom – through the introduction of subaltern females into capitalistic markets – in which the causal links between literacy, work skills, and gender equality are presumed, with an instrumentalist view of liberating women from the shackles of an oppressive and violent culture. They thereby pay scant attention to the structural roots of women's disempowerment. One such example is the UN WOMEN *Budgets respond to the needs of women* section. The first testimony you find is that of Fadma from Morocco, 'one of the beneficiaries of the [UN WOMEN GRB] programme':

Before I was housewife and was in charge of domestic work. One day I decided to change my life and I joined classes. For two years, I learned to read and to write. I also learned Arabic, calligraphy and plastic arts. Today, I create my own paintings and with the other women in my course, we decided to create a cooperative to better market our products.¹⁰

The modernist logic here seems to be the creation of a productivist society where subaltern females are constructed as naturally inclined towards precisely 'promising opportunities and entry points for lasting transformation' such as education (Klugman et al., 2014) and the market. For example, the UN WOMEN *Progress of the world's women Report for 2015-2016*, the Chapter 2 Recommendations Section states:

Enable women's lifelong access to education, training and mentoring, including basic literacy, on-the-job training to upgrade their skills and training in non-traditional skills to support them to move up the occupational ladder (UN WOMEN, 2015 p. 95)

However, by assuming that those without literacy are not yet equipped for or are incapable of undertaking income-generating work at a level of those who are literate, international organisations institutionalise literacy as a criterion for attaining equal access of jobs or resources. What if literacy is used and indeed promoted by development organisations to *justify the unequal labour market* and exclude subaltern females and privileged educated elites (Charusheela, 2008)? I am not suggesting that Fadma may not benefit in some ways from these policies or that education is not a goal in itself or that literacy programmes are not useful in some contexts. Rather, I question the universal emancipatory role of education that the GRB mainstream narrative claims. If poverty is attributed to a lack of education, there is a counterpart assumption that the privileges enjoyed by educated people are appropriate and merit. So, normalising privilege creates inequality and makes mechanisms that institutionalise inequality invisible to us.

In rejecting a modernist representation of subaltern females we must allow not only the possibility that some females may actually be housewives, or illiterate, or traditional, but also that these may not be deficient characteristics. So, is literacy essential for *comprehending issues* or for locating voices and being heard? If it is really about locating voices and being heard, a serious and more complex analysis is required about why other voices are not heard and whether simply a causal relationship between illiteracy and gender equality and literacy and women's employment will be enough. As Charusheela (2008, p. 9) puts it, 'learning to read and write in a local language may not make one better able to reach the English [and Arabic UN]-language email world of global NGOs and transnational organisations'. Thus, by uncritically privileging literacy as a main strategy of GRB and in its gender analysis, the higher value accorded to the literate is naturalised and normalised, which legitimises the very power structures that the GRB claims to be undoing.

Critical evaluation of the current status of the GRB in development discourse points to the conclusion that its political and analytical bite has been blunted not only by a lack of gender analysis but also by modernist discourses that accommodate neoliberal ideology and impose moral authority. Refusing to regard questions of social analysis as settled as well

as declining to take the idealised modernist institutions of political liberalism for granted, GAD and feminist economists contributions could reflect beyond a project of adding gender responsiveness and closing gaps to neoliberal and ethnocentric metanarratives and budgets. Further, listening to previous silenced voices in postcolonial contexts is certainly more complex than development practitioners envision it to be, and may be impossible in the way that they intend.

4 Final remarks

In this article, I have analysed the GRB approach in development discourse from a postcolonial feminist perspective. I have worked out the ways in which development organisations shift the spotlight away from structural issues of social and economic justice onto the self-improving individual and modernist developmentalism. I have highlighted that, by so doing, it dislocates feminist agendas from precisely the concern with relational dimensions of power that animated GRB initiatives in the first place.

If GRB is to be useful, it must be recuperated as a critical and transformative analytical approach from its current use as a modernist descriptive tool for ‘disciplining’ the female subaltern and locates women’s oppression in the family and kinship. Gathering sex-segregated numbers as GRB or producing descriptive documents that claim to portray a self-liberated and entrepreneurial woman in the Third World must be disrupted. Neither these, nor the ubiquitous term ‘gender-responsibility’ have much to do with feminist knowledge concerned with making visible and transforming inequitable power relations and assessing specific people and places and comprehending the contexts in which people live. Rather, it perpetuates epistemic violence by linking the subaltern to a modernist progressive cultural transformation with the gift of the individual since the very same institutions and processes that enable and support the promised freedoms of individuals do not reach them. We gain much more from our feminist conversations if we critically refocus attention on the issues of power and build feminist analysis on globalisation that does not simply recognise the importance of gender in economic processes. A feminist economics postcolonial analysis can dramatically expand the scope of ‘the economic’, entitling an engagement with power and the complex ways in which power works at multiple scales and contexts, including those of the body and households. Further, a feminist economics postcolonial analysis of the politics of development can emphasise different forms of female agency

and therefore call attention to the resilience, collective actions, solidarities, and creativity through which people and communities survive, negotiate, and resist global processes that involve possibilities for social change.

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Notes

1. UN Speech at the 59th opening session on the Commission on the Status of Women. 14 March 2015. Retrieved from: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/wom2021.doc.htm>.
2. UN Speech by Michele Bachelet, head of UN Women at that time (10 September 2010–15 March 2013) at the Sixty-fifth General Assembly. 11 October 2010. Retrieved from: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2010/gashc3977.doc.htm>
3. Here, it refers to the insistence on a single path for the Third World, one that believes that market forces and transnational corporations work best, regardless of Third World institutions and industrial state.
4. I recognise the problematic nature of homogenising dichotomies such as West(ern) and the Third World. Here, I use these terms to refer to an unequal structure of knowledge production, rooted in postcolonial hierarchies. I use the term 'Third World' in this essay well aware of its pejorative meanings.
5. See <http://wbi.worldbank.org/boost/tools-resources/topics/general-techniquetopics/gender-budgeting>
6. See <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender>
7. Retrieved from: <http://www.gender-budgets.org/>
8. Remarks by World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim. 5 March 2014 at CARE Conference on Gender Equality. Retrieved from: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/speech/2014/03/05/remarks-world-bank-group-president-jim-yong-kim-gender>
9. Retrieved from: <http://beijing20.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2014/5/beijing-plus-20-campaign-launch-press-release>
10. Retrieved from: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/3/budgets-respond-to-the-needs-of-women-in-morocco>

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