FEMINIST FUTURES

Bi-Annual - Fall/ Winter Newsletter

In this newsletter:

Letter from Co-Chair - Rethinking Aid Edition

What a poignant time to join the Feminist Development Council. Coming on as Co-Chair in September, I'm grateful to be working alongside experienced council members as well as new faces. Together we face crushing blows to feminist development both in the field and in the academy. The one-two punch of the USAID shutdown and the "gender ideology" Executive Order, alongside cuts to research funding and crackdowns on academic freedom in the US, leave feminist development in a precarious position.

From the more pessimistic view, the Trump administration's decisions signal and amplify a chilling effect against best practices for gender equality in and through development work. The erasure of gender equity tools, data, and reports leave development practitioners with a diminished evidence base to continue their programming. Furthermore, the development community faces the withdrawal of funding by one of the world's biggest donors. This depletion of personnel, money, and expertise has had (and is having) devastating effects across the globe as programs abruptly close, valuable resources are destroyed, and millions are expected to die preventable deaths. Development practitioners and organizations who maintain a commitment to feminist work will have to grapple with inconsistent protocols across partners where even saying the word "gender" has become verboten for some.

Yet, out of the crude and cruel razing of USAID and its implementing partners come critical opportunities for change that many have been calling for for decades. Yes, USAID was a huge donor. Yes, it had a gender policy. Yes, it did life-saving work. AND, it was a mess. Bureaucratic procedures, gag-rules, and the ever-present shadow of paternalistic soft power constrained the Agency's potential. True power-sharing, responsive programming, and localization were routinely on the agenda, championed by dedicated workers, yet maddeningly difficult to realize. And, while I do not agree with the government's claims that USAID was an indulgent cesspool of waste, development professionals often lamented its limitations, even despite its progress toward more intersectional feminist work.

This period of destruction has left both rubble and open space for building something new. However this new space will take shape, a few things are clear: voices from the global South must take center stage; processes for change must be less cumbersome and more adaptive to local conditions, needs, and ideas; and intersectional feminist perspectives must inform programming and analysis to advance equity and belonging around the world.

The Feminist Development Council looks forward to supporting scholarship and reflection as the community mourns, recalibrates, and innovates in this period of change. In support of these efforts, we will organize events that center the scholarship of academics from the global South and offer space to reflect and breathe for all members of the feminist development space. The Council hopes to facilitate breaking down barriers between donors and partners, researchers and practitioners, graduate students and faculty, and North and South, supporting stronger community bonds as we rethink aid and our roles in it. I am humbled to serve as Co-Chair as this work unfolds.

Dr. Sophia Boutilier

FALL/ WINTER ISSUE

FEMINIST FUTURES

Letter from Co-Chair - HerStory of the Feminist Development Council

During the 2016 ASA Sociology of Development conference at Cornell University, I joined a group of 10 scholars who spontaneously came together to establish the Feminist Development Subsection. Essentially, we sought to revitalize a dormant gender and development initiative that had begun when the Sociology of Development Section formed in 2011. At that time, Section Co-Founders Sam Cohn and Rae Lesser Blumberg established a norm of intellectual diversity to ensure that the Section would remain a welcoming space for scholars working on topics related to gender and inequality. While feminist scholars were active in bringing Sociology of Development into being, the gender and development coalition struggled to retain visibility in the 2010s, when the Section experienced an era of rapid growth, as scholars flocked to the first ASA section to enshrine intellectual diversity in its governance.

Rae was present at the 2016 Cornell conference where she inspired us to get organized. As the Past-Chair of the Section, Rae played a key role in helping us establish Sociology of Development's first Subsection. Our efforts to create a formal space for feminist scholars has opened a new era of grassroots organizing for development sociologists more broadly. Since 2016, several additional subsections and interest groups have formed to advance development research in intellectually diverse ways. Within Feminist Development, our membership has grown from 10 inaugural scholars to 180+ regular and affiliated members, making us a powerful voice within the Section and the broader ASA.

This growth has been made possible by successive Feminist Development Councils who have tirelessly worked to serve our members. In addition to our traditional practice of organizing panels and sessions at conferences where we congregate, we have introduced online panels that are bringing feminist scholars from around the world into dialogue. While we continue to arrange convivial dinners at the ASA's annual meeting each August, you may now look forward to attending an inaugural Wine and Unwind event at the 2026 Sociology of Development Conference that will be held in Princeton this February.

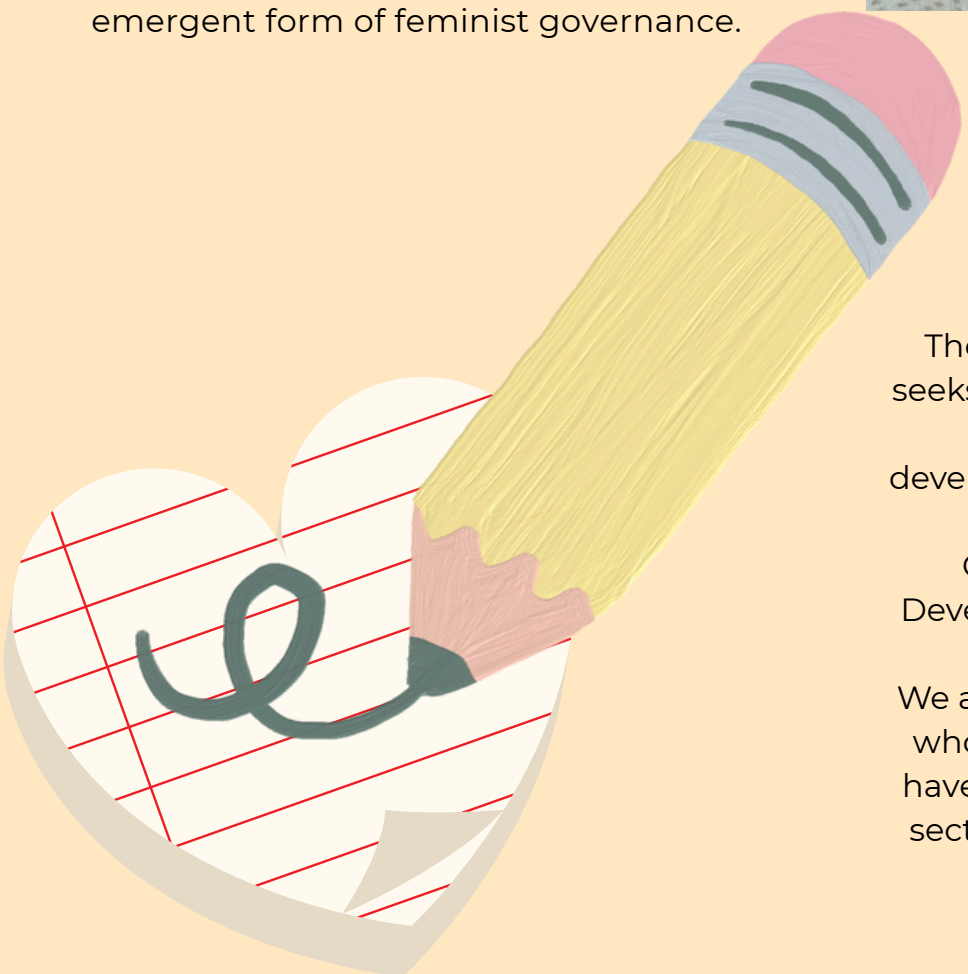
In December 2024, our now Past Co-Chair Rebekah Burroway launched the inaugural issue of Feminist Futures, a newsletter designed to keep our members more connected to one another. Under the leadership of our current Graduate Student Representative, Sarai Richter, we now are pleased to release an expanded and more formalized newsletter that will be published on a biannual basis. We hope you will enjoy it and the other community-building services that we are offering. If you have any ideas for us or would like to volunteer for Feminist Development, please reach out to us and learn how to become involved.

Dr. Jennifer Keahey

Meet Your Editor:

Sarai Richter,
Arizona State University

Sarai Richter, is a Ph.D. Student in Sociology at Arizona State University. They hold Bachelors degrees in Anthropology and Political Science and a MA in Human Rights and Social Justice. Their research explores how co-mentorship functions within Cambodian feminist NGOs as a relational practice of care, governance, and endurance amid donor withdrawal and institutional precarity. It reconceptualizes mentorship as the lateral transmission of relationships, affect, and values rather than hierarchical skill transfer. Using feminist, arts-based, participatory action research, the project theorizes co-mentorship as an emergent form of feminist governance.



Join the Sub-Section

The Feminist in Development Council seeks your help in continuing its efforts to support feminist scholarship on development within sociology and related disciplines.

Current members of Sociology of Development are encouraged to join the sub-section in 2026.

We also hope to reach graduate students who have interests in development but have not yet joined the section. Our sub-section is vibrant, inclusive, and open to scholars from a wide range of backgrounds.

Meet the 2025 - 2026 Feminist in Development Council

Jennifer Keahey, Ph.D. - Co-Chair
Jennifer is Associate Professor of Sociology in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Arizona State University. Having begun her career teaching English in Japan, she has worked in seven countries and four continents. Jennifer is broadly interested in the topic of global justice. She has conducted qualitative and participatory fieldwork with small-scale farmers in Latvia and South Africa, producing numerous articles that culturally situate knowledge on local food and fair trade movements. She also has co-edited a volume on energy democracy, bringing an international body of scholars and practitioners into dialogue. Her most recent book, Decolonizing Development, engages the comparative historical cases of Latvia and South Africa to unpack agrarian change over the longue durée. While women are not always the primary focus of her work, Jennifer is passionate about bringing feminist theory and praxis into broader discourses on political economy and social change.

Sophia Boutilier, Ph.D. - Co-Chair
is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at California State University, Fresno. She began her career in international development, working on gender equality and education projects in Kenya and Ghana. Wanting to better understand the effects of burnout and cynicism she witnessed among development workers, Sophia earned a PhD in Sociology at Stony Brook University.
Her research examines how promising approaches to social change often fail to reach their potential. She unpacks the limitations and unintended consequences of policies ranging from affirmative consent to sexual contact, the promotion of Information and Communication Technologies amongst women's groups in the Global South, to the declaration of international solidarity as a feminist development principle by a bilateral aid agency.

Aarushi Bhandari, Ph.D. - Treasure / Secretary
is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Davidson College. Her book *Attention and Alienation: The International Political Economy of Information and Communication Technologies* describes the complex evolution of the attention economic system and related forms of alienation through social media and emergent communication technologies. Her NSF: CAREER winning project "Individualized and Organizational Solutions to the Globalized Risk of Mental Illness" evaluates cosmopolitan wellness trends as they intersect with the attention economy.

Jessica Kim, Ph.D. - Member at Large
Jess is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. As a political sociologist studying topics related to development and globalization, she explores the cross-national diffusion and contestation of global cultural norms to nations' policies, practices, and opinions. In her work on gender, Jess examines the ways in which development endeavors help or hinder gender equality and women's rights. In her published work, she explores how globally salient gender-focused institutions, organizations, and activists shape outcomes such as domestic violence legislation passage, the adoption of egalitarian attitudes, and support for women in politics. She received her Ph.D. in Sociology from Stony Brook University.

Meet the 2025 - 2026 Feminist in Development Council

Rita Jalali, Ph.D. - Member at Large
Rita is a Senior Scholar in Residence in the Department of Sociology and in the Center on Health, Risk and Society at American University. She received her M.A. and Ph.D in Sociology from Stanford University. Her research has focused on cross-national issues of race and ethnicity, social movements, disasters, civil society, gender inequalities, water and sanitation deprivation, and menstrual health and hygiene. Her primary field work has been in various regions of India and Turkey. She has published in numerous peer-reviewed journals. Her most recent publication, "Global Health Priorities and the Neglect of Menstrual Health and Hygiene: The Role of Issue Attributes," was published in *Sociology of Development*.

Sarai Richter - Student Representative
is a Ph.D. student in Sociology at Arizona State University. Their research, *Khmer Feminist Ecologies: Co-Mentoring as a More-Than-Human Entanglement*, investigates how Khmer feminist NGOs practice co-mentorship as a form of resistance to donor-driven constraints, neoliberal governance, and the nonprofit industrial complex. Drawing on PQI, socially engaged Buddhism, and posthuman-animist feminism, their work theorizes co-mentorship as feminist labor, an intra-action of entangled, affective, and more-than-human practice of care, refusal, and solidarity that reimagines world-making beyond extractive NGO logics.

María Ximena Dávila - Member at Large
is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research examines the interplay between gender, development, violence, and the politics of care and welfare in Latin America. Her dissertation specifically asks how risk and violence become woven into the intimate domains of reproduction, motherhood, and the family. Drawing on ethnographic and historical research, she traces how domestic life, gender roles, and everyday forms of risk management are reshaped by dispossession, environmental collapse, and the aftermath of armed conflict. María is also a human rights lawyer and has worked extensively on women's rights in the Americas, with a focus on advancing sexual and reproductive justice.

Rethinking Aid Interviews

Mary-Collier Wilks Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington

Why might we want to rethink aid? What might be a feminist way to do so?

I don't know if everyone wants to rethink aid, but I think we don't really have a choice. We're in a moment of aid transformation, and the global order as we've known it is coming undone. The closure of USAID accelerated that in a very visible way. It disrupted U.S. dominance in the aid system almost overnight. At the same time, non-traditional donors have been rising for years, especially through South–South cooperation and initiatives like China's Belt and Road.

Even people who once defended the old system now recognize this shift. I recently participated in a "Future of Foreign Aid" lecture series that included a lot of USAID old guard, and even they were saying that we're moving toward regionalized aid models in ways they never would have imagined a decade ago. So yes, we have to rethink aid.

Part of why this moment feels so unstable is that the aid model many of us came of age studying isn't actually that old. Modern foreign aid emerges from colonization, when European powers reordered economies around extraction and export-oriented monocropping, creating the deeply unequal global economy we still live with. After World War II, the Marshall Plan formalized foreign aid as a tool, first to rebuild Europe and then to counter communism. What we think of as "soft" development aid doesn't really emerge until the 1960s and 1970s, alongside Global South feminist mobilization, the Non-Aligned Movement, and demands for a new international economic order.

That mobilization mattered. It shaped gender and development, the capabilities approach, and later the global development norms that defined the 1990s and early 2000s, including gender equality, women's empowerment, global health, and the MDGs and SDGs. When I started graduate school in 2014, there was still a real belief that there was something like global best practice for development, even as feminist scholars rightly critiqued aid for being deeply entangled with neoliberalism and donor power.

What's fallen apart now is that consensus. We're seeing Western donors become more isolationist, funding for civil society and feminist organizations shrink, and NGOs scramble or shut down altogether. At the same time, new regional actors are offering different models of development, and people in the Global South are actively debating and reshaping what "development" should look like, often by decentering the West as the default reference point for modernity.

Questions:

- Why might we want to rethink aid? What might be a feminist way to do so?
- What theorists, empirical work, or stories are shaping how you think about aid at this moment?
- Despite challenges, what examples of reimagined aid give you hope right now?

My research in Cambodia really illustrates this. I studied women's health programs funded by the U.S. and Japan and followed them across the entire aid chain, from donors in Washington and Tokyo to INGOs, local NGOs, and state institutions. What I found is that Cambodians are not passive recipients of aid models. They are actively combining, contesting, and hybridizing different development imaginaries, drawing strategically on ideas of "Asia" and "the West" to redefine the role of the state, markets, civil society, and gender itself.

Gender is central here. Sometimes "Asian tradition" is used to justify very conservative practices, like focusing only on mothers in health programs. But the same imaginary is also used to critique market-driven healthcare and to argue for strong public systems that serve citizens. In U.S.-funded NGOs, Cambodian practitioners pushed back against a narrow, individualistic model of women's empowerment by insisting that equality also requires family leave, community care, and state responsibility. They actually succeeded in changing institutional policies.

That's why I think we need to rethink aid now, because the people most affected by it already are. And they're doing so in ways that challenge long-standing power hierarchies and development norms.

So what would a feminist approach to rethinking aid look like?

At its core, feminist development has always been structural. It addresses economic inequality, power imbalances between donors and recipients, and the historical legacies of colonization. This this is a serious moment of retraction, but it could be an opportunity. Global norms around gender equality are weakening, funding is declining, and backlash, especially in the U.S., is very real. At the same time, because the old aid regime is unraveling, there's space to imagine something different.

A feminist approach would mean truly decolonizing development. That includes educating donors in the Global North about colonial histories and global inequality, centering voices from the Global South not as symbols of suffering but as political actors, and working in genuine partnership rather than through rigid donor demands. Practically, that could mean things like unconditional cash transfers, debt cancellation, flexible funding, and allowing communities to define what success looks like.

It also means revaluing things feminists have long argued for, including care, community, and states that actually serve their people. My research suggests that hybrid models, drawing on both Western commitments to gender equality and non-Western traditions of collective responsibility, can open up new feminist possibilities. They are imperfect and strategic, but they can work.

We're at a crossroads. Aid is being remade whether we like it or not. The question is whether feminist voices, especially from the Global South, will be central in shaping what comes next.

What theorists, empirical work, or stories are shaping how you think about aid at this moment?

There are two books in particular that are really shaping how I'm thinking about this political moment and about aid as the culmination of decades of neoliberal economic policy.

One is The Gender Order of Neoliberalism by Solari and Radhakrishnan. It offers a deeply historical and transnational account of how neoliberalism has reshaped gender relations across multiple country contexts. What's powerful about the book is how clearly it shows that what we're experiencing now isn't sudden. It's the outcome of long-term political and economic restructuring, with very specific gendered consequences.

The second is Sarah Bellows-Blakely's Girl Power: A History of Girl-Focused Development in Nairobi. It's an incredibly detailed history of the relationship between an African women's network and the United Nations. The book traces how these feminist activists initially produced sophisticated critiques of the global economy and grounded analyses of gender inequality in African contexts, and how that work was later erased and co-opted by the U.S. and the UN into a universalized "gender and development" model.

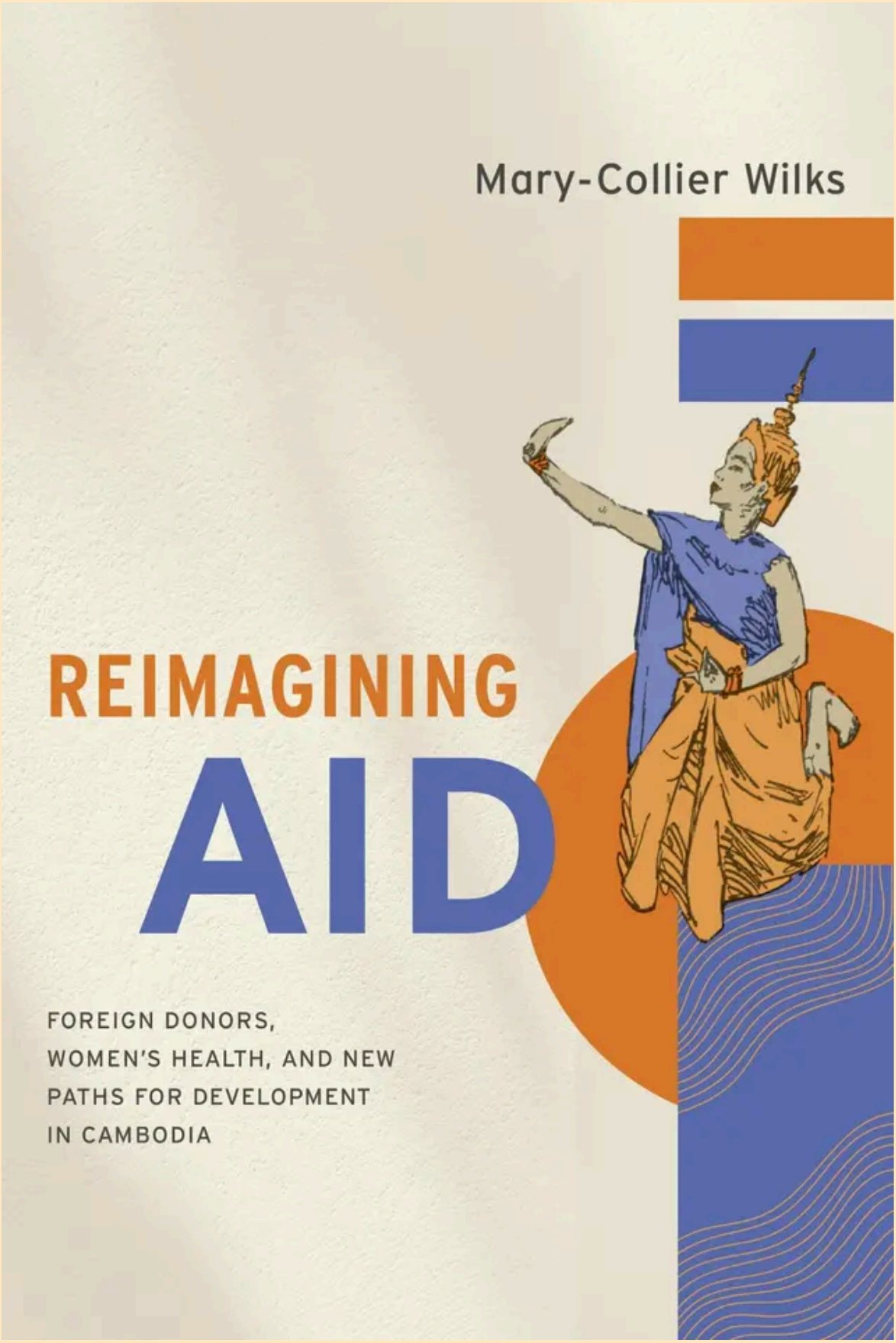
That model essentially says we will save Global South women and girls by empowering them to become entrepreneurs and workers in for-profit markets. What gets obscured, of course, is that these are the very workers whose labor continues to be the most exploited, underpaid, and appropriated in global capitalism. The book really captures the moment when neoliberal feminism emerges, when contextual, structural feminist critiques from the Global South are transformed into what Solari and Radhakrishnan call a "cover story" for neoliberalism.

Those two books have been especially important for helping me think through the moment we're living in.

Of course, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes Revisited" is always foundational. Her insistence that feminism must confront global capitalism feels even more urgent right now.

Another book that has really reshaped my thinking was suggested by Gowri Vijayakumar during my book workshop. She recommended Uma Narayan's Dislocating Cultures and Identities: Traditions and Third World Feminisms. That book fundamentally changed how I think about strategic hybridization. Narayan shows how feminist groups in India have long navigated accusations that engaging with Western feminism means abandoning their own cultures. Instead, they selectively take up what is useful and reject what is not. It has never been a passive or uncritical adoption of Western agendas.

That framework has been incredibly helpful for how I think about my own participants, how they strategically use "the West" and "Asia" as imaginaries, drawing from each to serve their own goals. I found that insight really powerful, both analytically and politically.



Now available through Stanford University Press

Despite challenges, what examples of reimagined aid give you hope right now?

What gives me the most hope, coming directly out of my data, is this moment of agency and strategic hybridization. I saw participants actively refusing the idea that “Asia” necessarily means conservative family norms, that Asian tradition is simply about women staying in the home. They would say, very clearly, no, that doesn’t have to be what it means. Sometimes they even drew on older Cambodian histories, pointing to women as queens and as political leaders to challenge those assumptions.

At the same time, they were also quite critical of what they saw as Western models being too individualistic. What was hopeful to me was how they brought these imaginaries together, taking what they saw as the strengths of Western gender equality while also drawing on Asian ideas about community, care, or strong states to imagine something different. Not a rejection of one in favor of the other, but a reworking of both.

This matters because we often assume that Asian aid models, whether Japanese or Chinese, are simply silent or regressive on gender. But Cambodians have a long history of being strategic with donors, going back to the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) era, and I saw that same strategy at work here. People were saying, let’s take what we need from each model and make something better.

Of course, this isn’t uniform. There are also actors, often men working within Japanese-funded organizations, who invoke “Asian values” to argue for conservative family roles. That tension is real. But alongside it, there are people using these same frameworks to make concrete demands. We can’t be sent into the field before we finish breastfeeding. We need maternal leave. We need working conditions that actually support care.

These are small changes, but they matter. And they’re the kind of changes that could be scaled up. That’s where my hope is, not in a perfect model of aid, but in these moments where people are actively reshaping development to meet their own needs rather than simply receiving it.

Rethinking Aid Interviews

Yeva Avakyan
former Associate Vice President,
Gender Equality & Social Justice at Save the Children.

Why might we want to rethink aid? What might be a feminist way to do so?

Why might we want to rethink aid? What might be a feminist way to do so?
Aid has never been neutral or purely benevolent, nor has the broader development enterprise built around it. From its origins, it has been shaped by colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist systems that produced and sustained global inequality. Those histories continue to inform how aid works today.
I want to position myself in this conversation as someone who has spent more than two decades working in international aid and development. I often describe myself as a femocrat, a feminist working within bureaucratic systems of aid. My perspective is not that of an external critic, but someone who has spent a considerable amount of time attempting to work for change from inside the system.
From that position, I have observed that even feminist gains within aid have increasingly been technocratized and depoliticized. Feminist critiques that once challenged power have been absorbed into bureaucratic frameworks that prioritize compliance, metrics, efficiency, and "results" over justice and transformation. As a consequence, feminist critiques that once sought to challenge power relations have lost much of their political force.
Many of the dominant tools of contemporary aid, including log frames, results-based management frameworks, and audit cultures, originate in systems designed for control and oversight, including U.S. military frameworks. They were not built to liberate. Contemporary
aid practices reproduce these logics through short-term project cycles, "value-for-money" mandates, and rigid accountability systems that translate feminist politics into procedural and technical outputs.
In practical terms, this shapes what is considered fundable. Interventions must be measurable and politically "safe." Individual empowerment, leadership training, and entrepreneurship are routinely prioritized, while structural change, systems transformation, movement-building, and collective struggle are often framed as too political or too risky. The outcome is an aid system that manages inequality rather than dismantles it, one that integrates women into
unjust systems without transforming the conditions that produce injustice.
This is why, claims about the neutrality of aid are difficult to sustain. Its bureaucracies, indicators, and data practices reflect colonial, patriarchal, and neoliberal logics. The system can appear progressive, full of gender analyses and empowerment programs, while leaving structural hierarchies largely intact.
To rethink aid in a meaningful way requires interrogating the architecture of power that underpins it. A feminist approach would push us beyond the redistribution of resources toward the redistribution of decision-making authority, political voice, and control. It asks us to focus less on treating the symptoms of inequality and more on transforming the systems
that produce it. That question, how to change the system rather than simply manage its outcomes, has been central to my thinking about aid, especially as someone who has been part of that system much of my professional life.

Questions:

- Why might we want to rethink aid? What might be a feminist way to do so?
- What theorists, empirical work, or stories are shaping how you think about aid at this moment?
- Despite challenges, what examples of reimagined aid give you hope right now?

What theorists, empirical work, or stories are shaping how you think about aid at this moment?

I keep returning to something quite old: Audre Lorde's insistence that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. This quote has stayed with me throughout my career. It functions both as a warning and as a challenge, particularly for feminists working inside aid institutions.

As someone who has spent years navigating those spaces, I'm constantly sitting with that contradiction: how to use institutional tools to open cracks in the system while recognizing that reform and transformation are not the same thing. True dismantling requires something fundamentally different. Feminists within aid institutions need to remain accountable to movements outside of those institutions, and I think that accountability has largely been lost. I say that as someone who knows the system from the inside.

Intellectually, my thinking has been shaped by feminist political economy and post-colonial critique, particularly the work of Naila Kabeer and María Lugones. Their work pushes feminists in aid to interrogate our own complicities in maintaining colonial hierarchies of expertise and value.

My interest in decolonial epistemologies and data justice is also deeply personal. I grew up in Armenia during the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a teenager, I watched an entire social, economic, and political system unravel. During that time of extreme scarcity, international aid arrived, often in the form of agencies parachuting in with authoritative frameworks, expert language, and technical solutions that felt alien and disconnected from local realities. Local knowledge was quickly dismissed in favor of imported models.

That experience shaped decades of my work in development. Even now, I see young expats dropped into complex crises while local staff are treated primarily as logistical or operational support. Knowledge travels upward in the form of reports and metrics, increasingly scrubbed of context, emotion, and contradiction.

This is why the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith on Decolonizing Methodologies, alongside broader scholarship on decolonizing data has been so influential for me. Datification and the obsession with "evidence" are cornerstones of modern aid, but they are also colonial technologies. They translate lived experience into extractive forms of knowledge. A central question for me has become how do we represent lived experience in ways that are less extractive. This is where my feminist and decolonial thinking converge, around questions of who is authorized to know, to speak, and to define reality.

Finally, empirical work on feminist movements and resourcing has profoundly shaped my thinking. Research by Htun and Weldon, drawing on data from seventy countries over four decades, confirms what feminist activists have long argued. Autonomous feminist movements, independent of states and political parties, are the most consistent drivers of gender-equitable policy change, particularly in relation to gender-based violence and human rights.

And yet, despite this evidence, less than one percent of aid funding reaches feminist movements. That disparity is not accidental. This inequity is embedded in the architecture of aid.

So the question remains: if the system is deliberately structured in this way, what are the limits of working within it? And how, as feminists inside these institutions, do we continue to open cracks, while keeping our eyes firmly on the need for more radical rethinking?

Despite challenges, what examples of reimagined aid give you hope right now?

This is a challenging time for aid. The recent dismantling of U.S. aid infrastructure and the broader hostile political climate have deeply shaken the system. That said, there are some developments that suggest alternative paths forward.

One is the growth of pooled feminist funding initiatives. These are large, intentionally feminist funds that channel resources directly to women's rights and feminist organizations while keeping decision-making power local. The Equality Fund is one example. Longstanding feminist funds such as Mama Cash, FRIDA, and the Global Fund for Women have been doing this work for years: providing flexible, rapid, core funding that proved especially critical during COVID.

Some bilateral donors are beginning to experiment with feminist funding practices, including non-competitive and multi-year support. These efforts are imperfect and deeply contested, but they do demonstrate that it is operationally possible to shift power, even slightly, within an otherwise resistant system.

What gives me more hope, though, is a growing recognition that technocratic fixes are insufficient. Gender work in aid has become overly managerial and depoliticized. Meaningful transformation requires sustained, collective, and relational forms of engagement. Latin American feminists often refer to this as acompañamiento: a deliberate commitment to walk alongside one another. This approach is not about capacity-building workshops or projectized versions of "empowerment." It is about building a care-centered political infrastructure grounded in solidarity.

I'm also encouraged by emerging efforts to build cross-movement alliances, particularly among feminist, disability justice, child rights, LGBTQI+, Indigenous sovereignty, and climate justice movements. These movements face shared structural barriers but have long been siloed and forced to compete for funding. There is a certain irony in the fact that anti-gender movements have successfully united highly divergent actors, while feminist and social justice movements, which arguably have far more in common, have often struggled to work in coalition. The challenge now is to do this in ways that are accountable, reciprocal, and politically grounded.

Finally, I think we need to move away from the increasingly hollow language of "empowerment" and return to the language of liberation. Empowerment has been stripped of much of its radical meaning and reduced to individual resilience or "girl-boss" narratives that leave structural violence intact. Liberation, by contrast, is systemic. It emerges when social, economic, and political structures are reorganized to support equity and justice, and when the ways we work are as important as what we aim to achieve.

If there is a future for aid, I believe it lies here: in collective care, cross-movement solidarity, and a willingness to measure progress not through outputs or indicators, but through the depth and durability of the transformation we achieve together.

From Our Communities: In Conversation With Practice

Liliane Boch
BA, Political Science, Fresno State, 2025
Research Fellow, Gendered Effects of American Cuts to Foreign Aid

In the fallout of the USAID shutdown, The Lancet has predicted 14 million preventable deaths by 2030. This is abhorrent, yet Trump names USAID as the criminal, insisting that its funding is an inexplicable waste.

Considering the lifesaving impact of USAID, one wonders – what exactly is it that President Trump considers a criminal waste of funding? Are lives outside the US worth so little that not even one percent of the U.S. federal budget can be spent towards saving them?

The implications of these questions are hard to fathom, but they also reveal that aid, as we know it, must be rethought. The following points reflect my own opinion, based on research findings.

Since June 2025, my research team has conducted focus groups and interviews with gender and development practitioners within the USAID ecosystem. Participants shared their experiences of being inside development organizations as they were being shuttered, as well as their dreams and fears for the future of the gender and development sector. Many reported tragic consequences resulting from the dismantlement, including data loss, partnership terminations, and the total abandonment of development programs and partners.

And, while the vast majority of these practitioners lost their own livelihoods and sense of identity as gender equality advocates, they emphasized the particular devastation facing people reliant on the services and supplies funded by American aid dollars.

The injustice of the shutdown is not in dispute, yet it can also be seen as an opportunity. Many participants from our research had criticized USAID's approach for years, claiming it was reminiscent of colonialism. The forced reckoning of the shutdown can be a chance to make aid more sustainable, empowering, and equal.

For example, research participants shared that some local partners and communities are continuing their work based on the training and resources they had received prior to the shutdown. One participant mentioned local leaders who have been the driving force in gender equality work and continue their organizing without external donations.

These stories provide valuable insights into how successful programs have fostered sustainable, locally driven development. Learning from these, as well as the programs that have collapsed, allows for a new narrative for development to be introduced. One that is locally grounded but includes collaborations with experts across regions to encourage mutual exchange and learning.

Many aid workers in our study further pointed out that the gender sector, which is especially vital for sustainable development through inclusion, human rights, and economic empowerment, has been treated as a "siloed [work] from other forms of discrimination or oppression."

With the need to reimagine aid, there is a chance to fully immerse gender within aid, including a feminist approach. This means ensuring more women are at the decision-making table to shape policies, foster women's economic empowerment, and secure their full participation in society.

Why not approach a fully feminist development policy, where equity and inclusion are the core principles? A goal that has been at the center of a centuries-long globally fought feminist resistance.

As incomprehensible and shocking these times are, the aid sector now has a chance to not only fix but also reinvent what is broken - enable local actors while pursuing a feminist-centered development that fights for lives and ensures they are led with equity.

Contributions - Special Issues, Chapters, Volunteer and Up Coming Events

11th Annual Sociology of Development Conference Rethinking Development in a Post-Western World

Dates and Location:
Feb. 13-15, 2026.
Princeton University
(Princeton, NJ)

Please direct any questions about the conference to the organizers (Yunhan & Livio):
socdevconference@gmail.com

Click on flier to RSVP

Kudos

PUBLICATIONS

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