

Other Subjectivities

^ The Global Fund for Women (GFW) is a “grantmaking foundation supporting women’s human rights organizations around the world working to address critical issues such as gaining economic independence, increasing girls’ access to education and stopping violence against women.”¹ Based in the United States, GFW funds a wide variety of programs in many places in the world and relies on a multiethnic, multinational board and staff. Unfortunately, the organization’s mission, language, and presentation of its website locate the US as a place from which concerned, comfortable women reach out to their “sisters in need.” GFW universalizes women’s issues in its presumption of “global sisterhood” and theoretically ignores many significant forces shaping the circumstances they are attempting to address.

The homepage itself is constructed of elements which signify foreignness to the Western gaze. The colors are “earthy” and the design informal. The logo features a stylized rendering of a woman balancing a globe on her head, below which “Global Fund For Women” appears in type that could easily be found on the tags attached to items in import shops. All of these features prompt a vision of the “ethnic”, the imported or foreign, and especially of the “village”: the logo evokes the archetypal Third World woman who toils under the hot sun with a basket on her head and who represents rural African or Asian underdevelopment to many in the West, thus constructing a representation of women in need as underdeveloped.

To use a single figure of a woman, a Third-World icon, to represent all women in need is problematic in itself—for women in need are found across the globe; GFW, in fact, does not fund organizations based in the US, nor has it funded any in Canada, although it does not

explicitly exclude women's groups located there. The website states that US-based organizations are not considered for grants because "financial resources are vastly limited across the developing world and, in comparison, far more available in the US. We prioritize requests from groups in the many parts of the world where small amounts of money go a long way."² However, GFW has awarded grants to groups in all countries in the European/former Soviet Union portion of that continent, excluding Finland, Norway, and Turkey. Given their assertion that their concern is for regions in "the developing world" where "resources are vastly limited", it is curious that they have funded organizations in countries such as France and the UK, which are typically considered able to offer high standards of living to their residents and where money would not easily "go a long way". The implication is that the US is the nation in a position to provide assistance even to "needy" groups in other wealthy nations, and thus that it is the most "developed."

GFW appears to offer its website in languages other than English primarily as an avenue for groups who speak those languages to find the site and apply for grants, and to solicit support mainly from affluent English-speaking women in the US. The site is available in five languages other than English. These versions are all different in layout and in the amount of material presented; the single apparent consistency is that there is a link at the top of each page on every site which reads (in English) "Get Involved" and links back to the English website. This is the only portion of the English site that deals with donations. "House parties" are suggested as a way for individuals to do larger-scale fundraising work for GFW; successful house parties described as examples were hosted by presumably affluent women or featured a scene of female domesticity, allying the organization with women who have the time, money, and space to host such a party.³ Additionally, the GFW makes a number of suggestions as to making donations

with funds generally only available to those of the upper class, such as appreciated and retirement assets.⁴ The organization thus positions itself as speaking from the US, a place of comfort and wealth, to women in need, who are apparently everywhere else but the US.

GFW also oversimplifies women's experience in two ways. Financial assistance is offered to groups who are run by and for women as part of GFW's "appreciation of the value of women's experience. [...] [We believe] that women themselves know best how to determine their needs and propose solutions for lasting change."⁵ Local involvement is indeed crucial in the effort to effect viable and meaningful improvements, and this statement does avoid the paternalistic character of intentions to improve a group of women's lives through the imposition of projects supposedly for their benefit without their control or participation. However, GFW avoids an analysis of global or international forces—that is, structural forces—which contribute to the economic and social circumstances of many women's (and men's) disadvantaged positions, and which small, local groups have little chance of influencing. GFW imaginatively shrinks the boundaries of the system of power in which they are located from global to local in scope, and, as Inderpal Grewal notes is common to the "women's rights as human rights" movement, "assumes that 'women' live their lives as 'women' solely, rather than as parts of other communities."⁶

GFW also advocates a Westernized set of "universal" human rights. Their grantmaking is focused on organizations dealing with "universal issues such as reproductive health and choice, access to education, economic independence, political participation, the rights of sexual minorities, and the prevention of violence against women and children."⁷ While it is clear that the intent here is empower women to be self-determining, criteria for self-determination grow out of different historical, cultural, social, and political contexts, as does the notion that self-

determination or autonomy are criteria for the realization of full personhood. I do not argue that there is anyone who does not deserve a healthy life free from violence. However, whether all the rights enumerated by GFW as “universal” are truly so is certainly contestable. Lila Abu-Lughod wonders, “Is liberation even a goal for which all other women strive? Are emancipation, equality, and rights part of a universal language we must use? [...] Might other desires be more meaningful for different groups of people?”⁸ The persistent lumping-together of women’s and children’s rights in rights discourse treats violence against gendered subjects as theoretically separate and again reduces women to their gender.

This set of rights in fact developed, in part, in a very Western context, and many of them were raised by 1960s WASP feminism in the US, for which education and the “right to work” were major issues. That is not to say that there are not women’s groups all over the world for whom these are critical issues, and GFW has found plenty to support; it is the so-easy labeling of these rights as universal which is my point of contention. It risks misunderstanding or ignoring altogether the valid needs and desires of women who might make a different list; and by essentializing these rights as what women *should* want it continues to construct normative or acceptable subjectivity according to a Western model and risks the othering of women who do not profess these desires.

GFW also achieves this Western positioning by invoking what Uma Narayan refers to as “victimization by culture”, a “widespread tendency” of those in the First World to see Third World women as victims of atemporal and ubiquitous cultural, religious, or traditional practices.⁹ Historical, local, and social contingencies are often emptied from First World representations of the Third World, making “culture” there seem fixed and predetermining all aspects of life, masking “the fluidity of group boundaries, languages, and practices”.¹⁰ GFW continues in this

vein in one of its two Special Initiatives called “Rights within Religious and Cultural Traditions.”¹¹ The page dedicated to this Initiative tells us that “In many parts of the world...certain traditions may circumscribe a woman's right to vote, own or inherit property, drive a car, possess a passport, select a life partner, or simply go to school.” These restrictions are blamed on atemporal tradition and drained of any specificities which may be structuring them. The sexism of Saudi Arabia, for example, where women indeed cannot drive cars, is often dehistoricized and assumed to represent Islam and the Middle East in general; this generalization seems to have traveled to GFW.¹² The inference is that the victimization of these women is purely cultural or religious and that these restrictions are found everywhere.

GFW's two case examples of women's groups who successfully “stand up to aspects of their own traditions that conspire to silence or oppress them” are the Roma, or gypsies, of Europe, and, predictably, Muslim women. These two groups of women are seen by the First World as victims of their inescapably oppressive, timeless cultural or religious traditions. “Across much of the Muslim world,” we are told, “women are challenging the passage and implementation of ‘personal status codes.’” Not only does this statement invoke an Orientalist vision of the “Muslim world” as monolithic and homogeneous, in this context the personal status codes, which “help to legalize practices harmful to women”, are blamed totally on Islam, draining them of any historical, social, or political contingency they may have. The page's general inference is that while “women are demanding the right to practice their faith without compromising their human rights”, it is not within their faiths that their rights are to be found, but rather in “overcoming” them. This is satisfying to US perspectives, in which the women are not denied the practice of their religion—which is widely considered a fundamental right in the US—but in which the religion is effectively condemned and the women cast as loyal adherents.

For all of these things, the Global Fund for Women ultimately does much good in the world. It has supported over 2700 locally-conceived grassroots women's groups in 161 countries, supporting women's groups who intimately understand immediate needs in their community or region.¹³ Providing funds this broadly can help to circumvent the problems associated with cross-cultural understandings of who is in need of "rescuing" and from what women should be emancipated. Additionally, local efforts to address injustice and inequality are essential to the realization of these goals because of their specificity in approach and knowledge.

But local efforts are not enough. What will also be required is an honest analysis and self-critique of the global and international systems of power which are implicated in asymmetrical power and resource distributions—as well as local imbalances—and the ability to imagine women's subjectivity beyond gender. It is such self-critique that GFW not only fails but discourages by deploying, and thus reinforcing, mainstream US notions of who is violated, and how, and who is in a position to assist them. Without such analysis and imaginings, however, attempts to right the world's wrongs will at best be incomplete and at worst will further the hegemonic powers at work over the globe and will perpetuate the very violation of "universal rights" being addressed.

Notes

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- ¹ *The Global Fund for Women*. May 29, 2005 <<http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/>>
- ² <<http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/faq/>>
- ³ <<http://www.kintera.org/faf/home/ccp.asp?ievent=89315&ccp=43871>>
- ⁴ <<http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/2involved/giftplanning.html>>
- ⁵ <<http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/1work/>>
- ⁶ Grewal, Inderpal. "On the New Global Feminism and the Family of Nations: Dilemmas of Transnational Feminist Practice." *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*. Ed. Ella Shohat. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998.
- ⁷ <<http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/work/grants/>>
- ⁸ Abu-Lughod, Lila. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 788
- ⁹ Narayan, Uma. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*. New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 112
- ¹⁰ Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993, p.11
- ¹¹ <<http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/work/grants/rights.html>>
- ¹² AbuKhalil, As'ad. "Women in the Middle East." *Foreign Policy in Focus* v.5 n.30. April 1, 2003. International Relations Center. June 1, 2005. <http://www.fpif.org/briefs/vol5/v5n30women_body.html>
- ¹³ <<http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/1work/>>