

Cut the Strings: Bodily Autonomy Needs Sustainable Funding

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Development aid, in the form of Official Development Assistance (ODA), technical assistance, foreign assistance, development cooperation, international aid, and overseas aid, is often lauded as the most important policy approach to tackle extreme poverty, strengthen infrastructure and education, and promote peace, security, and prosperity in low-income countries. In the past fifty years, although fiercely protected by its proponents, criticisms of ODA--which accounts for the majority of development aid--and its impact, administration, restrictions, and focus have been significant. A number of economists, academics, activists, governments, and NGOs have highlighted ODA's perceived failures to ensure value for money, accountability, governance, or measures to tackle corruption. The "neoliberal critique" (Carbonnier, 2010) is often used by conservative and right wing voices to argue for a reduction or end to ODA, gaining worrying traction in some donor countries. However, this is vastly different from the critique shared by some left thinkers, both in recipient and donor countries, that considers how ODA serves predominantly the interests of donor countries and private corporations, and how it seeks to, or results in, keeping recipient countries in a state of dependence, thus masking the flow of resources from low-income countries to donor countries (Carbonnier, 2010).

The history of development aid and assistance is saturated in colonial, neoliberal, and imperial ideologies. From the British 1929 Colonial Development Act, aimed at strengthening British manufacturing through loans and grants to British colonies (Durano, 2012), to the failure of 'tied' aid in the 1990s, the myriads of conditionalities prioritise countries that showed 'good performance' and value for money. While those conditionalities are no longer explicitly seen in aid partnerships and agreements, they remain an implicit part of most (Brett, 2016). Many countries in the Global South have been gradually forced to transform their economies to adapt to policies through structural adjustment programs, loans, and increasing debts to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Harvey, 2005).

With a focus on gender mainstreaming in development assistance, initiatives such as Canada's *Feminist International Assistance Policy*, and the *She Decides* campaign led by the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, and Sweden, constitute efforts to mobilize funds to counter regressive measures, such as the Trump administration's attack on women's rights and bodily integrity. The Mexico City Policy, also known as the Global Gag Rule, was first enacted by Ronald Reagan's administration, and is a political game of back and forth, with Republicans reinstating the policy and Democrats rescinding it, depending on who holds presidential power. Women and feminized bodies, as well as the bodies of people socialized as women, are treated as disposable bargaining chips with the Trump administration reinstating the policy, or in the case of Canada's *Feminist International Assistance Policy*, monetized through a focus on women as 'economic actors' for development.

On the surface, the commitment to significant funds that would fill the enormous funding vacuum that will be left by the current U.S. administration's Global Gag Rule is a welcome step, especially in the era of shifting development priorities. However, denial or provision of funding from a single government can significantly affect the agency of thousands of women around the world over their bodies. The deep-seated problem of stark inequalities, the struggle to address North and South dynamics emerging from a long history of imperialism, and the far-reaching impact that development aid policy can have on women's agency and bodily autonomy remain ignored.

This is also telling of the entrenched economic inequalities that are rooted in colonial histories and maintained through imperialism and neoliberalism, and continue to play out in approaches to development assistance more generally. Approaches such as the 'corporatization of aid' favour the interests of multinational industries and private development consultants above those of local interests and needs, facilitate the extraction of care, or force countries to neo-liberalize their economies in exchange for IMF state loans. Even today, neocolonialism and extractivism depletes and exploits the human, land, and economic resources of Global South countries, only to disburse them in the form of comparatively meager aid (Moghalu, 2015).

In the case of *She Decides*, details of how funding will be spent have not surfaced yet. However, the long history of aid conditionality imposed by the countries involved in the *She Decides* campaign, paints a dramatically different picture of donor governments as the advocates of 'progressive' and feminist development aid. In 2014, when the Ugandan government signed legislation toughening penalties for homosexuality, these governments, as well as others European countries, the US, and the World Bank, suspended aid to Uganda. Cuts from the World Bank alone totalled 20% of Uganda's health budget 2013-2014, funds that were due to equip 13 regional hospitals and 27 health centres (IRIN News, 2014). Whilst Denmark and Norway redirected some funding to NGOs in the country, substantial funding intended for Uganda's judicial system, as well as an in-depth, country-wide HIV and AIDS research project into at-risk populations, and other projects, was suspended (IRIN News, 2014).

Such a move had the dangerous potential to negatively impact the lives and wellbeing of women and girls, with the probable redirection of funding to fill budget deficits. LGBT activists in the country spoke out against the decision's complicity in further marginalizing people with non-normative sexualities (IRIN News, 2014).

The announcement of the *She Decides* funding comes at the end of years-long shrinking of some European government aid spending, such as Dutch aid spending, where 3.25 billion euros were removed from its development cooperation budget between 2013 and 2017 (Fic et al., 2014). The government stated that it was part of a reimagining of development cooperation, and that new priority areas were "relevant to global poverty reduction efforts and to the Netherlands' economic and other interests" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). The commitment to spend 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) on ODA, dropped from 0.75% in 2015 to a predicted 0.56% in 2017 (Donor Tracker, 2017), and the list of countries that were to receive bilateral Dutch aid by 2015 was reduced from 33 to 15 (RNW Media, 2011).

Whether in the case of the Global Gag Rule or the aid cuts to countries such as Uganda, women's livelihoods, bodily integrity, autonomy, and well-being are among the first to be compromised in the tides of private interests and political play. Moralistic decisions, such as the Global Gag Rule, reduce funding for women's sexual and reproductive health, the implication being that women's health is not a part of a comprehensive approach to health. Similarly, decisions informed by value for money or private interests end up sanctioning funding beneficiaries for the very same governmental actions that the decision makers are themselves fighting against. Ultimately, development assistance and aid funding act as a neocolonial, neoliberal endeavor that secures North government's interests and agendas at the expense of women's bodies.

While the need for resources is necessary within the confines of the current capitalist system, financial sources are as political as the work being done, especially when these sources are one of the roots of the problems women face around the world. Foreign funds come with strings attached: the multiple and complex implications of the hierarchy among countries can have a deleterious

impact on our national policies, including blocking the possibility of progressive legal changes that could come from within.

Accountability, and a deeper critique of funding sources and their implications for women's human rights and justice, are crucial for the long-fought goal of inclusive sustainable development; we need to find mechanisms to address the deep inequalities that exist within and across countries to aim for the realization of sexual and reproductive justice globally. To improve the lives and wellbeing of women and girls in all their diversity, there needs to be consistent and sufficient funding, and long-term political will. A sustainable funding stream that supports justice for women with no strings attached might allow us to see the day when our bodies are no longer used as bargaining chips.

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