

# Philanthropy and Sovereignty: A Critical Feminist Exploration of the Gates Foundation's Approach to Gender and Agricultural Development

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## Introduction

In 2008 a group of us began a campaign in Seattle called AGRA Watch, through which we have challenged the Gates Foundation's participation in the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). We developed analyses and actions that contested AGRA's and the Gates Foundation's understandings of hunger and poverty in Africa, and that showed that the Foundation's impacts on the ground are often very different than the claims it makes about its work. The Foundation has been under increasing scrutiny from civil society organizations around the world for funding corporate agricultural research institutions, while claiming that it supports smallholder's and women's agriculture.

The Gates Foundation is not particularly novel in its approach to gender and development, and it reiterates much of the discourse on gender within the development industry. However, we find a feminist critique of the Gates Foundation necessary for two main reasons: first, they are the second

largest philanthropic foundation in the world, after IKEA's charitable branch, with an endowment of \$36.4 billion. Their financial dominance gives them enormous influence over international development agendas. Second, a targeted analysis of their work can highlight problematic assumptions about women and gender that have been critiqued more generally by transnational feminists (e.g. Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1988).

The Gates Foundation's *Gender Impact Strategy for Agricultural Development* (GISAD), published in 2008, appears to be the Foundation's most comprehensive public statement about its approach to integrating gender and agricultural development (although the document *Creating Gender-Responsive Agricultural Development Programs*, published in 2012, merits future analysis). In this paper, we investigate how gender is understood within the Gates Foundation's approach to gender and agricultural development, and we bring more general feminist critiques to bear on the Foundation's work. We then analyze how this idea of gender interacts with discourses of food sovereignty. Although we are presently focusing on the GF's gender discourse, we recognize a need to further develop impact assessments based more heavily on empirical data.

## Frameworks

According to Ann Vogel (2006), philanthropy exemplifies a number of elements that remain central to the U. S. capitalist ethic and self-image: an emphasis on personal responsibility and a limited state; voluntarism and aspirations to attain the "American Dream;" and the logic of how social welfare and wealth ought to be redistributed (637). Philanthropy in American society thus has enormous power, both ideologically and financially, and is one means through which the U.S. exports hegemonic ideas about civil society and democracy (Vogel, 2006). Philanthropy also integrates aspects of gender analysis that are in line with these ideologies, which in turn works to redefine the very notion of gender.

A number of scholars have traced the adoption of the “gender agenda” within development agencies and the implications this has had for feminist engagement with development (Cornwall, 2007; Cornwall, Harrison & Whitehead, 2007). Feminist concerns with gender as a locus of power relationships have often been mainstreamed, diluted, and depoliticized within the frameworks of Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD). The development industry has reduced gender to essentialisms that are divorced from historical and material power relationships, and has presented women either as abject victims or heroines. This bureaucratization of gender converts a nuanced and contested social construct into a singular empirical reality and a point of philanthropic intervention.

Development organizations are concerned with solving problems; as James Ferguson (1994) has argued, attempts to locate and distill a “solvable” problem have often led to misrepresentations of less developed countries through the bureaucratic “development” apparatus. Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead (2007) state, with particular reference to gender, that it is “almost a necessary condition for institutionalization for ideas to be blunted and reduced to slogans and ideals—they need to be domesticated to fit the exigencies of agency procedures and priorities” (7). The Gates Foundation’s approach to gender is inevitably shaped by the nature of what philanthropy can and cannot do, and by its understanding of its role in global development; specifically, gender is targeted as a point of intervention within a broader “problem-solving” framework around hunger.

### **Transforming Men, Transforming Agriculture**

In the Gates Foundation’s conception of gender, men and male-dominated societies are understood as denying women access to productive resources, thereby inhibiting growth and increasing poverty. Men are positioned as inefficient in development and irresponsible with household resources, and they must be “sensitized” and “trained” through

gendered development strategies (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead, 2007, 7). The Foundation then places itself in the paternalistic role summed up by Gayatri Spivak (1988) where “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (296).

The Gates Foundation instrumentalizes gender as a set of quantifiable, technical indicators of project effectiveness that Program Officers can use as a mechanism for disciplining and managing gender integration. For instance, empowerment is measured by “‘women’s control of agricultural decision-making’ and ‘women’s participation in leadership positions in farmer organizations’” (GISAD, 2008, 4). Through a Gender Checklist, the Program Officer and potential grantees can “establish expectations and considerations with regard to gender” (GISAD, 2008, 7). The potential grantee must have “specific milestones, processes, or actions” (GISAD, 2008, 5) that effectively involve women, and the Gates Foundation also offers its own techniques for measuring “gender effectiveness through Monitoring and Evaluation” (GISAD, 2008, 5). These guidelines are necessary because, as the Foundation states, their partners and grantees “may initially lack the ability or capacity to meaningfully address gender” (GISAD, 2008, 6). The checklist therefore acts as a disciplinary tool to bring men in the Global South in line with a universalized and bureaucratized conception of gender. As a result, states the Gender Impact Strategy, “We see increased understanding of the importance of gender dynamics in the communities where we work, among our partners, and within our programs” (GISAD, 2008, 2).

According to the Strategy, women face a number of social and economic limitations in accessing opportunities to maximize and profit from their contributions (GISAD, 2008, 3). The dilemma faced by small farmers is understood, in Bill Gates’ words, as follows: “Three-quarters of the world’s poorest people – most of them in Africa and South Asia – get their food and income from farming small plots of land. These farming families don’t have quality tools, good seeds, reliable markets, or money to get the most from their farms. So they

work hard, but they get no traction, and they usually stay hungry and poor” (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2011). In the Foundation’s analysis, African farmers have failed to keep up with farmers in Asia, the US, and Europe because they—especially women—lack access to improved seeds, techniques, and markets (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2011) The Strategy asserts that “these limitations constrain both female farmers’ ability to improve their lives and that of their families. These limitations also constrain the transformative power of agriculture to alleviate poverty and hunger” (GISAD, 2008, 3). This transformative power does not lie in agriculture as currently practiced by women; it is linked to the ability of agriculture to absorb capital in the form of technological improvements, mechanization, “improved” seed varieties, and the commercialization of staple food crops.

For the Gates Foundation, hunger and poverty are caused by lacks that are ahistorical and intrinsic rather than produced; by exclusively natural forces rather than by a combination of natural and political ones; and by a misuse and over-use of existing resources. The solutions prescribed for these problems include more market participation, increased productivity, and infrastructural development. Central to this effort is the development of agricultural technologies and seeds that are compatible with women’s labor, lives, and bodies. The Strategy states that consultations with women will ensure that new crop varieties will be adopted on the ground: “Women are also generally the food preparers, which needs to be taken into account when developing varieties of subsistence crops by taking into account taste preferences, and relative ease of preparation or impact on labor. Close consultation with the ultimate beneficiary will help prevent the development of a variety that is not adopted due to lack of consultation and consideration of the users [sic] needs” (GISAD, 2008, 12).

Women’s involvement is based on several assumptions: first, that women will benefit from the reductions in labor time that are offered by

technological advancement; second, that women’s tastes must be included at preliminary stages of research to ensure that new seed varieties can be effectively marketed and consumed; and third, that women are apolitical agents/beneficiaries who are willing to put their faith in Gates’ and others’ trusteeship over seeds and agricultural resources and who accept the theory that global poverty and hunger are motivated primarily by under-production of crops. The Gates Foundation’s analysis of gender acknowledges women’s work, but women are understood as requiring intervention and inputs in order to become fully successful. Fundamentally, this denies long histories of women’s success in seed selection, domestication, and marketing, not only in the development of agriculture on the African continent but also in the transmission of agricultural knowledge systems to other regions, as occurred with rice through the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Carney, 2001).

The Gender Impact Strategy frames its objectives as “opportunities for women to participate in income-generating activities, learning and decision-making processes continue to increase,” and “the quantity and quality of food available to women continues to increase; leading to improved health and nutrition in families because of the unique role of women in the household” (GISAD, 2008, 2). Women in the Gender Impact Strategy and the Gates Foundation’s broader agricultural development policies are wrested from historical geographies of power and inequality, and produced as doubly neoliberal subjects: first, as empowered capitalist agents and entrepreneurs, and second, as the caretakers of the community who must step in where the state and the market will not. Mercedes González de la Rocha (2007) has contested this neoliberal “myth of survival,” built off of the findings of specific studies in Latin America in the 1980s that discovered “resources of poverty.” The social networks, households, and relationships of solidarity theorized by progressive scholars were generalized into an idea that women and the poor have an infinite capacity to absorb hardship, which was highly compatible with the neoliberal policies promoted by the World Bank and development agencies. These

polices posited a temporary phase of “adjustment” and devolved responsibilities away from heavy state interventions; the ability of communities to withstand adjustment thus relied on individuals’ and especially women’s use of social networks and often unpaid labor (for instance, the informal economy grew enormously in many parts of the world in this period, as people sought to make ends meet). However, the capacities of social networks and women to absorb additional labor can and do run out (González de la Rocha, 2007), and faith in the ability of gender equality to automatically increase productivity and solve poverty has often not been borne out on the ground (O’Laughlin, 2007).

### **Gender and Food Sovereignty: An Alternative Approach?**

The GISAD’s emphasis on women and families shows responsiveness to criticisms of previous agricultural development approaches (such as the Green Revolution in Asia and Latin America) that privileged men. In rhetoric and to some extent in funding it highlights the importance of gender through women’s involvement and recognition. But participation does not necessarily equal empowerment, and some of the Foundation’s statements suggest that people are waiting around to be included in the Gates Foundation’s and its grantees’ agendas. For instance, the GISAD (2008) notes that “in order for women to contribute meaningfully in their communities and in agriculture, they need opportunities to engage in financially viable labor so they can have the ability to improve their well-being and that of their families” (9). This effaces what women already do in their communities, and it puts much of the burden of supporting the family on women’s abilities to generate income. The idea of food sovereignty, which was originally promoted by the international organization *La Via Campesina* and is gaining traction within activist and certain policy circles, offers an alternative way of examining issues of gender issues in agriculture. The Declaration of Nyéléni, held in 2007 in Sélingué, Mali, stated,

“Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.” Since then, food sovereignty has become a unifying but decentralized framework for organizational mobilization, transnational networking, and policy demands around the rights of farmers and communities to articulate their own visions of their food systems. The name “Nyéléni” was mobilized to pay homage to a legendary Malian woman who farmed to feed her people, and the Declaration concluded with hopes that food sovereignty would spread, such that “the spirit of Nyéléni permeates across the world and becomes a powerful force to make food sovereignty a reality for peoples all over the world.” In this formulation, African women, represented by Nyéléni, are not the recipients of external gender assistance, training, or “involvement”—rather, it is they who offer instructive lessons about food and farming to the rest of the world.

The food sovereignty movement has forcefully tackled gender issues, through a number of *La Via Campesina* declarations addressing women’s rights (e.g. *Via Campesina*, 2012). The focus on women’s contributions highlights the structural conditions that block women’s equal access to land and rights; but unlike the Gates Foundation, the food sovereignty framework locates problematic conditions both locally and globally, in the infringements of corporations and top-down development programs. Raj Patel (2012) has explained that women’s participation and rights are central to food sovereignty, because of vast gendered inequalities in rates of hunger and access to food. Women, though continuing to produce much of the world’s food, have borne the brunt of the negative social and economic consequences of liberalization, particularly in agricultural and care work. For instance, a study on Latin America noted a “feminization of agriculture,” in which women have become the primary workers on household farms as men have migrated to the cities (Deere, 2005). Additionally, a number of African feminist scholars and organizations have furthered

discussions of these links between land, livelihood, neoliberalism, and gender issues. The contributors to the 2009 issue of *Feminist Africa*, for instance, have generated multi-layered analyses of what patriarchy, agribusiness, land rights, and labor have meant for women's rights and lives (Tsikata, 2009).

Some women's organizations have also adopted the language of food sovereignty to frame their work. Navdanya, the organization founded by Indian environmental activist and eco-feminist Vandana Shiva, explains its Mahila Anna Swaraj women's food sovereignty program: "It is based on celebrating and rejuvenating women's knowledge and skills in biodiversity conservation, sustainable agriculture and food production and in artisanal organic food processing" (Navdanya, 2009). This underscores the knowledge and practices that women are already using; the website continues by noting the danger of corporate interventions undermining women's control over seed selection. Nevertheless, there remain opportunities to strengthen gender analyses within food sovereignty frameworks. The 2008 Maputo Declaration of *La Via Campesina* essentializes women as having a "special relationship" with nature, and in other statements by *La Via Campesina*, gender is largely defined as involving women rather than involving power relationships that shift depending on social, political and economic contexts. (For example, microcredit schemes' focus on entrepreneurial women can exacerbate gendered tensions, particularly when men experience high rates of unemployment.) Gendered roles and sources of power within agricultural systems are diverse—some women have complete control over certain crops, whereas others are responsible for seed selection and harvesting but do not ultimately make their own profit from the crop, and still others work for low wages in agribusiness.

*La Via Campesina* (2012) refers to such structures as "the patriarchal capitalist system that is more oppressive to women, regardless of their place in society all over the world." This understanding of women as globally oppressed, in spite of their particular social positions or assets, fosters a vision

of emancipation that follows a linear development trajectory and entails a vast generalization of women's experiences. *La Via Campesina's* critique of the patriarchal capitalist system also denies the importance of place, in contrast to food sovereignty's general emphasis on scale, place, and locally-defined food systems. Discussing women's history as advancing from one of oppression to one of future emancipation ignores the particularities of women's experiences, the unevenness of gender and power relations across space and time, and the sources of economic and social power that women may already have.

The idea of food sovereignty has mobilized global networks and has amplified unifying conceptions of struggle and hope in the food system, but the crucial connections it draws between the locally defined and the globally relevant could be matched by an equally dialectical approach to gender. Women's roles as successful food traders and entrepreneurs in parts of West Africa, for instance, may offer a counterpoint to instances of women's marginalization and oppression. Incorporating an understanding of existing spheres of women's power into a more nuanced "global" would thus open up the concept of gender, revealing both its possibilities and its constraints.

In spite of these critiques, food sovereignty does offer a plurality and flexibility that can resist a streamlined and instrumentalized conception of gender. The Nyéléni Newsletter (2011) highlights the many different forms of action women are taking at the grassroots level; organizations have appropriated the language of food sovereignty in order to participate in growing transnational networks and to articulate concerns about the corporate takeover of agriculture. Partly because it is a loosely knit organizational and ideological framework rather than a large funding apparatus like the Gates Foundation, food sovereignty provides opportunities for diverse organizations to network and learn from each other, and it accommodates multiple contexts for women's empowerment and gender equality. The paradigm of food sovereignty could incorporate something

like Ogundipe-Leslie's "Stiwanism," built on what she calls Social Transformation Including Women in Africa (STIWA). Stiwanism suggests that diverse indigenous African feminisms must be understood within their social contexts (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, 229-230)—an idea that resonates with food sovereignty's emphasis on communities' agricultural self-determination. Similarly, the broad-based struggle for food sovereignty resonates with the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP)'s "transformative feminism," which offers a conceptualization of solidarity and social justice that stresses the role of gender alongside class struggle, corporatism, and varied social, political, and economic positions (Mbilinyi and Shechambo, 2009). Food sovereignty could also incorporate numerous other feminist theories, examples of hope, and critiques of gender inequalities because, unlike the paradigm of global development, it does not seek a generalizable object in need of a large-scale intervention. Instead, it promotes the ability of communities to draw on their own resources and their own sources of strength.

## Conclusion

The Gates Foundation's philanthropic approach sees gender as a means of realizing and improving development. As the Gates Foundation's Gender Impact Strategy states, "Agricultural Development must address gender in order to achieve significant impact in the reduction of hunger and poverty" (2008, p. 2). Gender is "targeted" as a point of intervention, not because of the inherent value in gender equity but because it is "proven" to increase output and growth (O'Laughlin, 2007, p. 24). The Gates Foundation's conception of gender does material work in the world, and it may indeed offer women improved opportunities. However, it does so in a social, political, and economic context wherein other, more locally accountable sources of opportunities have disintegrated. By rendering this context invisible in its work, the Gates Foundation presents Third World women and their societies as eternally waiting for rescue from poverty, hunger,

and disease. They are stripped of socio-political agency in order to be cast as beneficiaries and re-made as entrepreneurial agents within the Foundation's development agenda. In contrast, food sovereignty offers a framework of re-politicizing and reclaiming both "development" and "feminism." We conclude, then, with some words from the 2008 Declaration of Maputo: "All of us together . . . make a responsible commitment to build new and better human relationships among us, as a necessary part of the construction of the new societies to which we aspire."

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