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To cite this article: Sarah Bradshaw & Rebeca Cruz (11 Mar 2026): Gender gaps as unknowns or un-knowings? Engendering development and disasters in an extractivist landscape, Third World Quarterly, DOI: [10.1080/01436597.2026.2625977](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2026.2625977)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2026.2625977>



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Published online: 11 Mar 2026.



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Gender gaps as unknowns or un-knowings? Engendering development and disasters in an extractivist landscape

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ABSTRACT

Despite the dominance of ‘smart economics’, what we know about women’s poverty remains limited, and what we know about other areas of women’s lives and deaths, even more so. More and better-gendered data is often presented as a way to improve policy response. This article questions whether the real problem is that policymakers do not know, or whether they do not want to know, highlighting a distinction between the unknown and un-knowing. It takes a disaster lens to engendering to provide a new perspective on an old issue. The article highlights how the current neoliberal model’s extractivist logic creates the environmental conditions that produce ‘natural’ hazards, and the human conditions – gender and other inequalities – that produce vulnerabilities, which, combined, create disasters. Disaster Risk Creation is built into the global socio-economic system as an integral component, not an accidental by-product. If a gender approach operates within this extractivist paradigm, it runs the risk of furthering extractivism, depleting the resources of women, for what and whose gain? The article argues that, if they are to have any legitimacy, Gender and Development and Gender and Disasters should focus on questioning ideas of development and disaster, as much as promoting gender.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 November 2024
Accepted 27 January 2026

KEYWORDS

Gender
Climate Change
Disasters
Extractivism

Introduction

Cornwall and Rivas (2015: 408), writing in 2015 for the *Third World Quarterly* on reclaiming a transformative agenda for Gender and Development (GAD), noted we should not be seeking to find ‘new ways to make gender equality or women’s empowerment matter to those engaged in the shaping of policy in mainstream development bureaucracies’, but rather should be seeking to forge new alliances that can take feminist engagement with development to those ‘travellers and pathways with a shared concern with social justice’. Ten years gone, this article similarly argues we should stop trying to make gender matter to mainstream policymakers, specifically *via* the production of new knowledge, arguing that it is not that policymakers don’t know or don’t want to know, but rather that they are actively un-knowing what is already known, rendering such efforts a somewhat pointless exercise. What we instead need to reflect on is how to make what we know known, which requires, as Cornwall

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and Rivas argue, alliances forged with fellow travellers. The still relatively small number of scholars and practitioners working on Gender and Disasters is one such group fellow traveller of the development pathway.

There is a clear double meaning to 'engendering disasters' – to mean both the processes and practices to include gender in disasters, and the processes and practices causing disasters. The article highlights that the current extractivist logic of the dominant global system both produces disasters and reproduces gender inequalities in the name of 'development'. Rather than focusing on the G in GAD, it revisits the D, utilising a disaster lens to highlight GAD's inherently problematic conception. The article seeks to spotlight not what is known about gender, development and disasters, nor what is not known, but what is actively un-known. With regard to un-knowing, it draws on McKittrick's (2021: 132) work on Black lives, which highlights that what has come to be 'known' is based on scientific knowledge systems that utilise 'credible scientific 'facts' (data)' to inform a publicly narrated belief system, negating other knowledges or even the drive to know. The article uses gender and disasters as an example not just of a policy area with many unknowns, but one which has been prone to 'un-knowing' – an intended ignorance – drawing on the related wider context of the environment and climate change to explore why this is the case. It then considers the dual move to both know the world through evidence and indicators and the move to un-know certain areas, challenging evidence-based policy making as relying on assumptions rather than facts, leading to social norm-informed rather than evidence-based policy. The final section asks, where do we go from here? It questions more and better data as 'the' solution and highlights the need to challenge the processes by which we know and, as importantly, un-know the world.

First, the notion of disaster will be considered, with the next section arguing that, like development, disaster is a useful construct for Western policymakers to influence how the world is known.

Disaster as a concept

This article reflects the standpoint that there is no such thing as a natural disaster (Chmutina and von Meding 2019). Such terminology suggests that 'natural' hazards – i.e. hurricanes, floods, or earthquakes – cause disasters. However, numerous earthquakes are felt across the globe many times a year. They only become a disaster when they result in a significant loss of life, livelihoods, and natural habitats. This loss is often presented as correlated to the size of the event or blamed on its rapid onset. Yet, time and time again, we see that buildings collapse not due to the magnitude of the earthquake, but a lack of building standards, while communities flood because the defences built to protect them are insufficiently robust and/or not well maintained (Davis 2025). Since the early 1990s, it has been understood that a hazard only becomes a disaster when it impacts a group of people who cannot resist, respond, and recover (Blaikie et al. 1994). That is, vulnerability to a hazard determines disaster as much as the hazard itself. Disasters, then, should not be seen as existing in and of themselves, but as outcomes/end products of the wider socio-economic structures of extraction and exploitation, and the political systems that fail to protect people and the planet. Rather than an abnormal disruption of the normal functioning of society caused by nature, disasters are arguably a natural consequence of the current

socio-economic systems and structures that create abnormal conditions for society and nature (Revet 2020).

For some, disaster, like development, is a Western invention, in that 'our interpretation of disaster inherently reflects a Western interpretation of the world' (Gaillard 2021: 195). That is not to say the suffering caused by, for example, a Category 5 Hurricane is not real, but that, for many, the suffering is not abnormal but an intensification of the normal (Hewitt 1983). Research has shown that those living at risk of disaster often name poverty and violence as key threats, not climate-based hazards (Campos Knothe 2025). However, disaster, like development, is a useful concept for the West. As Bankoff (2001: 29) notes, constructing (other) countries and regions as 'disaster prone' renders half the world unsafe and justifies international interventions, utilising scientific knowledge and technical skills from the West to address the problem and bring 'development' (Copans 1983: 83). Such interventions are presented as focussed on Disaster Risk Management or Reduction (DRM/DRR), yet to manage disaster risk is to accept uncritically the structures and systems that create that risk – structures and systems that place whole groups and geographies in danger of disaster or, better stated, are responsible for Disaster Risk Creation (DRC) (Bradshaw 2024; Lewis and Kelman 2012). Radical disaster scholars argue that it is the current neo-liberal model that creates both the environmental conditions that produce 'natural' hazards and the socio-economic and political conditions that produce vulnerability, which, combined, create disasters (see Special edition of Disaster Prevention and Management 2024 on Liberating Disaster Studies). However, the 'architecture of disaster terminology' (Tran and Kim 2024: 260) means there has been a depoliticisation of vulnerability as a concept, rendering it a sign of weakness and placing it in a discourse of victimisation (Marino and Faas 2020) that, rather than challenging colonialism, has enabled a new form of imperialism to emerge (Bankoff 2001). DRC is, then, built into the current global socio-economic system, not as an accidental by-product of a benign structure, but as an integral component of the dominant extractivist logic (Bankoff and Hilhorst 2022; Bradshaw 2024; Lewis and Kelman 2012).

For many feminist scholars and activists (Butler 1990; Fraser 2013; hooks 1984) gender inequalities, as with disaster risks and other systemic social inequalities – such as those patterned by race and ethnicity – are produced and re-produced by existing socio-economic, political and cultural systems. They are not an unfortunate by-product of these patriarchal systems, but are necessary for their functioning over time and space. The naturalistic discourses of both disasters and gender invisibilise the role of Western nations in historically constructing disaster risk and gendered inequalities. This includes the policies and practices related to development that post-development scholars have long highlighted as producing and reproducing inequalities, not as an accident but by design (Escobar 1995; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997).

The following section considers how gender has been appropriated into mainstream development praxis and presents the operationalisation of gender into such practice as a problem, rather than a solution. It begins from an understanding that Gender and Development marked a change from the previous Women in Development approach in two main ways. The change to 'gender' reflected the fact that it is not women who are the problem but the gendered relations between men and women,¹ while 'and' suggests the need to explore both gender and development as concepts. That is, it is not sufficient to add women into existing processes of development – there is also a need to problematise those processes.

The appropriation of gender into development: a critical lens

Considering the mainstream appropriation of gender into development, we might begin with the economic crisis of the 1980s, which saw neo-liberal Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) rolled out by the World Bank and IMF. While not gendered, these harsh austerity programmes highlighted the efficiency of women – in keeping families alive with very few resources – and their productivity – as they took on paid employment in addition to heavy unpaid care workloads, or took on extra jobs. As SAPs failed to achieve the hoped-for economic growth, research from the World Bank looked for reasons and ‘discovered’ that societies that discriminate by gender tend to experience slower economic growth and poverty reduction than societies that treat men and women more equally. Concluding from this research that social gender disparities produce economically inefficient outcomes, the World Bank (2001, 2006), when launching its plan to mainstream gender into its policies and practices, noted that addressing gender inequality was just ‘smart economics’.

As with many other development agencies, the World Bank, when looking to engender development, adopted a gender mainstreaming approach (Murphy 1997). Despite some arguing that mainstreaming has ‘opened up critical spaces for starting to resource women’s development’ (Subrahmanian 2004: 94), supporting incremental (though mainly small-scale) institutional shifts (Caywood and Darmstadt 2024: 10), gender mainstreaming has prompted much critique (see Bradshaw et al. 2019a). As Walby (2005: 322) notes, gender mainstreaming involves at least two different frames of reference – ‘gender equality’ and ‘the mainstream’ – making it ‘inevitably and essentially a contested process’. In mainstreaming, rather than equality-focused approaches, it is often instrumentalist efficiency arguments, such as the ‘gender as smart economics’ rhetoric, that are presented (Chant and Sweetman 2012). It is suggested that these are better able to convince policymakers and economists of the value of including gender. A complementary discourse also emerged from research highlighting that women are good with money, playing on their socially constructed (but assumed natural) altruism, which meant that, when placed in their hands, resources were used for the good of families/communities/others (e.g. WBGDG 2003). Women’s assumed efficiency in delivering policy outcomes brought what Chant (2008) has termed a ‘feminisation of obligation and responsibility’, placing women as central to development and seeing them targeted with resources they often do not personally benefit from.

At the turn of the millennium, women’s place in development was recognised through a goal of their own in the MDGs – Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women – further developed fifteen years later into the overly ambitious SDG5, which set targets for global development, such as ‘to end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere’. However, despite this recognition of the importance of gender equality, a financing gap exists, with SDG5 and SDG10 on reducing inequalities combined receiving less than 2% of SDG financing (Burgess et al. 2023). A recent OECD report (Williams and Hedman 2024) notes that only 4% of total bilateral ODA has been dedicated to programmes with gender equality as their central objective.

That gender equality is not really a policy priority is also borne out by data, or, rather, by its absence. The 231 unique indicators of the SDGs highlight that the persistent underlying positivist discourse in development is not limited to the World Bank, with the goals setting artificial, but seemingly objective, measures of development to which nations should aspire. Yet, UN Women warned towards the end of the 2010s that data was only available for 20%

of the key gender indicators across the SDGs, and over 76% of what was available was generated before 2010 (Data2X 2019). While advances have been made, in 2022 this data gap stood at 58% (UN Women 2022). In an indicator-led world, we still lack the data to measure even basic advancements of the world's women. The next section further considers what is known and not known about women in data terms.

Gender through a disaster lens: what we don't know

This section considers the disaster context to highlight the real paucity of fundamental gendered knowledge and how gaps in knowledge are often filled by assumptions, which at times are so often repeated, they become accepted as 'fact', forming the basis for global and local policy.

As MDG3 was being developed, in international disaster policy circles it was noted that the incorporation of a gender focus had 'not advanced much further than revealing the situation of women, as happened during the initial stages of feminist studies' (Fordham 1998: 127). Fifteen years later, while gender equality was a stand-alone SDG, in the disaster arena, a civil society intervention was needed at the inter-governmental negotiations over the international Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (The Sendai Framework) for gender to even be included as a term in the glossary (Bradshaw 2015). While gender is largely absent from the Sendai Framework, where women are mentioned in disaster policy, it is often to highlight their vulnerability and the need to protect them. Yet, there is a lack of gender data and evidence to support the notion that disasters have a feminised impact. Taking the most obvious and seemingly easiest measure of disaster impact – deaths – the most cited figure that 'women, boys and girls are 14 times more likely than men to die during a disaster' (attributed to Peterson 2007, cited in WUNRN 2007) has been reproduced in countless publications (e.g. Khan 2024; Oxfam 2021; UNDP 2013) and repeated so often it is taken as fact. Yet, a review of the basis for the claim finds that the evidence for it is missing (Bradshaw et al. 2020).

The most robust evidence base for a feminised disaster mortality comes from research by Neumayer and Plümper (2007). However, their sex disaggregated correlation analysis of national level data on mortality and on disaster events suggests not that women are generally more likely to die than men, but that this is the case in contexts of greater gender inequality. Further data analysis, focused on average disaster death rate per 100,000 population and the UN's 2018 Gender Development Index as a proxy measure for gender equality, highlighted that countries with high gender equality/a high GDI tend to have lower disaster death rates, while a low GDI is associated with high disaster death rates. However, as the category of 'medium-low' gender equality is also associated with low death rates, the study concluded that 'it cannot be assumed that increasing gender equality leads to reduced disaster losses' (Bradshaw et al. 2020: 5). As gendered risk is socially constructed and context specific, who is at risk can vary over time and space. For example, in some countries and contexts, women may remain in their homes in the face of hazards, such as bushfires or rising rivers, as patriarchal cultural practices mean they feel they cannot leave home without male agreement and/or accompaniment (Ariyabandu 2009). While women may die sheltering in their homes, men are more often killed outside, seeking to fulfil their socially ascribed roles to protect the home (Haynes et al. 2010). In disasters, then, women and men do not die due to biology – they die from patriarchal practices. Yet, the assumption that women are more

likely to be impacted means we know little about actual impact, including on men (Rushton et al. 2020).

Despite the evidence, or lack thereof, of a feminised risk/impact, policymakers still work on the basis that women are more vulnerable than men, which can be partially explained by the social acceptability of this focus (Carpenter 2005: 319). In many societies, the dominant image of women is as mothers (or potential mothers), as pregnant and/or encumbered by small children, making them 'naturally' more vulnerable (Bradshaw et al. 2022). Moving beyond this naturalistic discourse, statements such as the UK's Department for International Development's claim that 'female headed households are among the most asset poor and have been found to be the most affected by natural disasters' (DfID 2004) seek to justify the construction of women as vulnerable, linking vulnerability to disaster to women's assumed greater poverty. A good example of how this assumption is played out in practice is how, post-hurricane Mitch, higher proportions of female-heads received support for housing and agricultural losses than men and than women with male partners (Bradshaw and Arenas 2004). In the impacted region, around a third of households were female-headed, yet whole settlements were constructed solely for female heads. Female heads disproportionately received aid for agricultural production, but little thought around what they actually needed, i.e. training and money to pay men to undertake certain tasks, meant they were less likely to have produced crops in the following years than men (Bradshaw and Arenas 2004).

As noted above, we do not actually know that women are most affected by disasters, nor how they are affected, nor which women are affected. Similarly, little is also known about women's poverty (Bradshaw et al. 2017) – an aspect explored further in the following section.

Poverty through a gender lens: what we thought we knew

Relentless repetition in academic publications, policy and programme documents of the (in)famous claim from the Beijing conference in 1995 that '70% of the world's poor are women and it is rising' constructed feminised poverty as fact. It was the basis for the highly contested, but widely accepted, feminisation of poverty thesis (Chant 2008). However, in 2015, UN Women itself questioned its validity, noting 'the much cited 'factoid' that 70% of the world's poor are women is now widely regarded as improbable' (UN Women 2015, 307, 92n) and recognising 'it is unknown how many of those living in poverty are women and girls' (UN Women 2015, 45, Box 1.4). Analysis of the data we do have on gendered poverty also tells us the situation is not clear-cut, nor consistent across time and space (Bradshaw et al. 2019b).

In 1995, the outcome of the Beijing conference, the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), called for 'gender-sensitive databases, information and monitoring systems and participatory action-oriented research, methodologies and policy analyses, with the collaboration of academic institutions and local women researchers ...'. Rather than spend the intervening years expanding and refining what we know based on BPfA's recommendations, the latest UN Women's 'gender snapshot' still only provides a vague statement on the world's women, suggesting '1 in every 10 women is living in extreme poverty' (UN Women 2023: 8). While poverty reduction is at the heart of the SDGs, UN Women also note that only 42% of countries have poverty data disaggregated by sex. In 2022, of the 193 countries that signed up, not one country had all the data available on gender-specific SDG indicators, suggesting that a lack of gendered data is the norm, not the exception.

Given the indicator-led nature of international initiatives like the SDGs, the question is: why has there been so little advancement? It could be argued that it is too difficult to know more about the situation, since to better understand differences between men and women means changing established methodologies that focus on the household as a unit, going 'past the front door' and interviewing men and women separately within the same household. While this is time-consuming and costly, it is possible to conduct such research, and on a large scale (see, for example, Wisor et al. 2014). On the international policy stage, some agencies are now seeking to refine data and data gathering techniques and use this to highlight women's roles and responsibilities, e.g. ILO's (2024) important work around the care economy. Providing evidence to support what is 'known', e.g. that it is women who bear the care burden, is important, and studies that confer with existing policy assumptions can help to visibilise and quantify women's work. That said, while they may get policy traction, they run the risk of supporting, rather than challenging, gendered social norms, with resulting policies 'helping' women do 'their' job better, rather than challenging why this is considered to be women's work in the first place.

Where evidence might not – or does not – support existing policy assumptions, filling in the knowledge gaps may be unwelcome to policymakers. For example, for as long as the idea that female-headed households are the poorest of the poor has existed, it has been contested (Chant 1997). Yet, the notion persists. The alternative – that women in male-headed households often live in 'secondary poverty' due to men withholding income from them/ the household for private consumption – is less palatable to policymakers. It shifts the focus from presenting those women living outside the (heteronormative) norm as the problem, towards challenging men's behaviour as a social norm (Chant 1997). Policymakers may then already 'know' what they want to know, and prefer alternative truths to remain un-known. Who and how knowledge is constructed is key to this un-knowing.

Evidencing women as vulnerable victims: the role of science

We know the world tends to rest on quantitative, scientific 'facts', and this positivistic privileging of scientific objectivity means expert knowledge is understood as Western, science-based, and technocratic (Tran and Kim 2024). However, objectivity can be understood as 'a generalization from the subjectivity of quite a small group', and since this small group often consists of educated and privileged white men, they have disproportionate power, with their experiences and normative ideals becoming generalised across the social order, meaning what they know becomes known (Code 1993: 22). Those imposing their truths often seek to disqualify alternative views by presenting them as unscientific and subjective (Cadag 2024). As McKittrick (2021: 34) notes, as Black ways of knowing stem from a knowledge system that 'cannot be proved', there is a related 'un-knowing' as a 'way of being'.

The positivistic elimination of 'culture, contexts, and the subjects of knowledge' permits the use of evidence as a 'political instrument where power interests can be obscured by seemingly neutral technical resolve' (Goldenberg 2006: 2622). For example, 2°C came to express the acceptable planetary rise in temperature from pre-industrial levels. Although presented as having been arrived at *via* scientific reasoning, Seager (2009: 14) notes that the target is in fact underpinned by a 'framework of values based on power'. Inherent in such measures is the notion of risk and what is an acceptable climatic risk for future generations. While often presented as an objective fact, risk is a subjective construction, as demonstrated

by the events of the intervening years and the re-evaluation and revision of the 2°C target to 1.5°C (Cointe and Guillemot, 2023).

Climate change has been conventionally addressed primarily as a 'scientific problem requiring technological and scientific solutions', meaning that, at policy levels, it is seldom discussed as a problem of 'ideologies and economies of domination, exploitation and colonialism' (Gaard 2015: 24). Other ways of knowing do exist in the form of 'literally thousands' of case studies and field reports on the socially differentiated and gender disaggregated impacts of environmental change; however, the often descriptive and 'passive narratives' mean the gendered power dynamics in environmental relations are often left unexamined and, once again, all women are constructed as always being most impacted (Seager 2019: 5). While a gender-climate nexus literature is now growing, it 'often disregards feminist epistemology, detrimentally integrating harmful gendered assumptions within its analyses, and therefore policy recommendations' (Rainard et al. 2023). It has been suggested that there has been 'considerable resistance, some overt, mostly covert, to bringing gender fully into the domains of environmental analysis and assessment' (Seager 2019: 4).

Interestingly, while the climate change discourse is very masculinised and framed in scientific language, it often constructs women as both the main victims of climate change and the main actors in slowing that change. Since the 1990s, ecofeminism has tended to promote a 'women as closer to nature' discourse, prioritising biology as the explanatory factor for women's supposed natural affinity with nature, with women in the Global South constructed as even closer to their biology than other women (Koffman and Gill 2013). Critiqued as not only presenting women as a homogenous group but also as essentialising women (Leach 2007), this discourse promotes an 'ecomaternalism' (Arora-Jonsson 2011) that sees women constructed as 'chief-victim-and-caretaker' (Resurreccion 2012). It sees women as most vulnerable to climate change and climatic hazards because they are poor and because they are women (and because they are in the Global South). This justifies (Western) interventions to help them – interventions, which ultimately use women's assumed natural altruism and natural affinity to nature to further wider environmental and economic aims.

Thirty years ago, Jackson (1996) suggested a need to 'rescue gender from the poverty trap'. She noted how the success of the World Bank's anti-poverty policies depended on socially constructed gender roles of women as altruistic carers of others. The nature of women's involvement and related success means such policies effectively reinforce the notion of women's 'natural' altruism. A naturalistic discourse, here of 'women as closer to nature', also allowed the World Bank to appropriate women's unpaid labour in activities to protect the environment (Jackson 1993).

Thirty years on and we see these same practices and principles that rely on the extraction of women's resources of time and energy for the good of the capitalist economic system, played out within the wider practice and principles of depletion without reciprocity which underpins an extractivist modality of capital accumulation (Bradshaw 2024: 200). The feminised nature of care-related volunteering work in disaster contexts, as highlighted in a recent report (UNV and ILO 2025), serves as yet another example of the systemic exploitation of women's socialised 'altruism' as an enabler of the wider system of DRC under neoliberal capitalism. The notion of extractivism and how it underpins the current global system is now further considered in relation to gender and the engendering of development and disasters.

Engendering as extractivism: development as problem, not solution

While the term neo-liberalism is often used as shorthand for describing existing exploitative global structures and systems, the notion of extractivism highlights how commodification and consumption are presented and understood, individually and collectively, as the key to prosperity – a prosperity that depends on the extraction of the earth's resources or an anthropocentric appropriation, leaving behind changed landscapes, pollution, and impoverished and often displaced populations (Bradshaw 2024).

Described as the 'core logic of the 21st-century global experience' (McNeish and Shapiro 2021: 2), extractivism needs to be understood as more than just a way of using the land, but rather as 'a way of being in the world' (Willow 2018: 2) – one that is 'diametrically opposed to the concept and practices of sustainability' (Chagnon et al. 2022: 762). Understanding extractivism as the taking of resource without reciprocity and as a praxis that is insensitive to the harm it inflicts on both people and the environment (Dunlap and Jakobsen 2020), extractivist logic can be seen as driving not just directly extractivist industries, such as mining, gas and oil, large-scale agro-agriculture and deep-sea fishing, but other industries, such as the financial sector, digital economies, and the academe.

The corporates driving extractivist practices often seek to nullify their impact through highlighting how their investment fuels economic growth in the (other) countries in which they operate and through Corporate Social Responsibility Programmes. They also seek to highlight how they 'do good' in other ways, e.g. *via* projects to address the environment and climate change, initiatives which have been met with charges of 'green washing' from critics (Cherry and Sneirson 2012; Dunlap et al. 2024). Gender has also been part of the 'doing good' corporate agenda. A good example is the Girl Hub, an initiative of a partnership between the UK's DfID and Nike. Through financing projects for adolescent girls, the Girl Hub stated it aimed to 'unleash the Girl Effect' and 'smooth the path for the revolution'. In addition to promoting a naturalised and essentialised view of poor women in need of saving by Westerners, Roberts (2012) highlights that the Girl Hub naturalises and depoliticises the power of Nike and other corporations to define what constitutes development. The adoption of a 'transnational business feminist' approach (Roberts 2015: 222) has seen moves by corporates to create new notions, such as 'gender impact investing', which, as with environmental initiatives, have been heavily critiqued, not least since such initiatives do not recognise the role of corporates in creating the harms they are seeking to redress (Clark et al. 2023).

Promoting women's equality within the current model of development may then merely accommodate present practice and reinforce current conditions. It has been suggested that those championing gender in what is an inherently inequitable and exploitative global system may have 'gone to bed with capitalism' (Prügl 2015: 614). Persistent gender inequalities, like persistent disaster risk creation, highlight that something is wrong with the current global system and that there is a need for profound societal change. This begs the question – if we want to promote gender equality and reduce disaster risk, what can we do, where can we do it, and how?

Knowledge, knowns, and un-knowns

One theme of this article has been the existence, or lack of, data and the notion of evidence as a basis for policy and practice. One common call as a means to better address gender

equality in a development context has been for more and better data. The UN Statistical Commission states that ‘if we want to effectively tackle gender inequalities, we must first measure them’, while concluding that ‘better data makes our lives better in countless ways’ (UN Statistical Commission, 2015n.d.). If we seek to create more and better data, we need to consider a number of questions: What is ‘good knowledge’? Who creates knowledge? And more fundamentally, who gatekeeps and uses that knowledge, and for what ends?

Just as the World Bank has developed gender expertise since the turn of the century, so too have Nike and other corporations become ‘experts’, constructing knowledge about development and about gender (Prügl 2017). This has also taken place among more traditional actors, such as universities, who are also deeply embedded in the neo-liberal capitalist model of development. In universities, research that is produced around development and disasters, is constrained by funding. Academic research is largely funded *via* government agencies and government-sponsored research councils. Through funding global research, governments become both a producer of knowledge and a consumer of that knowledge, using it to evidence their policy initiatives. The danger is that an instrumentalist policy approach informs institutional gender norms, and this may shape (and constrain) institutional ideas – within governments and corporations, research councils and universities – of what gender research should look like. This is what Bradshaw et al. (2019a) have called a Laura Ashley or ‘gender-but-non-gendered approach’. Often focussed on disaggregating existing large data sets by sex, it produces instrumentalist gendered knowledge that further reinforces instrumentalist gender policy. They conclude that it is easy to see how ‘the mainstream gender discourse is produced and reproduced, evidenced and institutionalised in this closed circuit where gender is trapped’ (Bradshaw et al. 2019a: 137). That is, the evidence we do have is often produced, or at least funded, by those with a vested interest in finding evidence to support the status quo, e.g. justifying the continued overexploitation of planetary resources, or new evidence to support further overexploitation, e.g. the Girl Effect. This knowledge is then mainstreamed by those with power and becomes ‘known’; conversely, knowledge less useful to those with power remains hidden, buried, discredited and, thus, actively ‘un-known’.

The question is, then: how do we break out of this closed circuit? One way forward may be to ‘de-colonise’ gender and development and the related research that provides the evidence base for policy initiatives.

The challenges of decolonising the known

As institutionalised research practices may hinder the ability to engage with diverse knowledge systems (Daszkiewicz et al. 2022), to decolonise necessitates we ‘de-link from rules of the game managed by modern imperial languages and institutions’ (Mignolo 2012: 29). Moves to decolonise the academe have highlighted the need to shift research practice, with co-production and action-oriented research promoted as a potential mechanism that can lead to the liberation of academic studies from their extractive, exploitative and colonial roots, bringing about transformative change, through foregrounding individual and social learning over technocratic solutions (Caniglia et al. 2020). As part of this, unpacking the power inequalities between actors involved in knowledge production is seen as a crucial step to enabling the process of knowledge plurality (Kerr, 2014). Feminist researchers have also long questioned the ‘rules of the game’, as they have sought alternative epistemological and ontological positionings which foreground inequalities of power as both research focus

and research practice, seeking to provide opportunities for marginalised and silenced voices to be heard (Gough 2025).

Given the potential synergies, decoloniality and feminist frames are often presented as largely complementary critical approaches to challenging traditional knowledge production and development practice. Yet, while they share a critical lens and both aim to rethink and dismantle traditional power structures and systems, the concepts of decoloniality and feminism may be as much conflictive as complementary, as a recent UKRI-funded project highlights (see GRRIPP). Based on a partnership between four UK universities and universities in three Global South regions, the Gender Responsive Resilience and Intersectionality in Policy and Practice (GRRIPP) project stated from the outset its decolonial and feminist principles. In practice, this meant decentralising resources for generating new knowledge away from the UK to the three regional lead universities in the project, who in turn decentralised their practice by commissioning research across numerous countries of the regions led by a diverse range of actors – from university think tanks to community groups. This led to the construction of rich and diverse new knowledges and networks. However, tensions also emerged between the feminist and the decolonial approaches, at the nexus of ‘power over’ and ‘power to’. Colonial practice is ingrained in, but not limited to, the West, and power inequalities within some regional teams raised issues around workloads and voice, which in turn led to tensions between a feminist duty of care approach and a decolonial non-interference stance. Where unequal power dynamics exist, feminism, even when interpreted in its broadest sense, requires a calling out of the inequalities and work to address them. However, a decolonial approach might question if those leading the project from a prestigious Western university should intervene, as power dynamics would mean their position would become ‘the’ position and once again threaten to impose Western values on the Global South.

Despite the best efforts of the lead university, the imposition of some Western values was difficult to avoid. For the commissioned research projects, financial reporting requirements – part and parcel of a UKRI-funded and university-led project – placed what were seen to be excessive demands on those who had little experience of Western practice and who had their own systems of accountability, once again leading to tensions. The experience revealed the underpinning fundamental contradiction of attempting to adopt a decolonial and feminist approach within a funding and university system that operates under the neo-liberal and neo-colonial principles and dynamics that create and perpetuate the very inequalities decoloniality and feminism seek to dismantle.

Concluding thoughts

While feminist, decolonial, co-produced knowledge may present a way forward, that it does not claim to be objective nor scientific means those with power can then ignore this knowledge. What does not fit their worldviews can be discounted as not fitting the specific conception of what constitutes evidence, with the known effectively becoming ‘un-known’. As such, suggesting the need for more and better data might be somewhat missing the point. It assumes policymakers and practitioners do *not* know because we do not have the evidence, but even where data is limited, we *do* know, because we can see inequalities, discrimination and oppression as lived realities and can feel social injustices. Moreover, an evidence base of qualitative studies that casts light on gendered subjectivities and lived realities already

exists. It is not, then, the not knowing that is the issue – it is the un-knowing, i.e. the deliberate ignoring of the existing and everyday evidence of lived realities. If this is the case, more and better data will not bring change if it is produced within current notions of what constitutes evidence, because the related methodologies cannot reveal and cannot know lived realities. If it is produced outside these dominant methodologies, this knowledge that ‘cannot be proved’ (McKittrick 2021) can be discounted as evidence and ignored, becoming un-known. Much gendered knowledge lies within this un-known.

While the focus of the article has been on gender, it perhaps paradoxically suggests the need to move away from a focus on the G in GAD and focus instead on problematising the D. A disaster lens shines a clear light on how current development policy and practice leads to Disaster Risk Creation – both the creation of climate-related hazard and creation and continuation of the inequalities that produce vulnerability to that hazard – not by accident, but by design. The original notion of GAD stressed that development should not be seen as a benign process to add women to, but something to problematise – something we have argued in this article. Yet, privileging development as a concept may also be misplaced, since refining the concept may lead only to changes in language and approach, not a fundamental change to structures and systems of power. Rather, there is perhaps a need to redirect our gaze to core principles, such as social injustice – and to reflect and challenge current thinking about such injustice as something that simply happens to individuals, shifting the gaze away from the lived experience of inequalities and injustices to the extractivist structural factors that create them. While targeted policies and projects that reach those who are most oppressed are essential, there is a simultaneous need to create structures of solidarity and universal systems that work for all, putting an end to seeing ‘the problem’ as being a problem of/for/about unknown others. Those ‘unknown others’ are, of course, not unknown – they know their own realities, yet their knowledge remains un-known if it does not fit the dominant paradigm; or, when useful to the powerful, it is exploited by those with power to aid their own goals. Shining a light on diverse ways of knowing and diverse knowledges allows reflection not just on what we do or do not know, but how to make un-knowns known and silenced voices heard.

To make the un-known known suggests a fundamental change in how we know the world, what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts. We, the authors, do not suggest that we have the answer to how to bring about such fundamental change. Rather, we suggest the need for collective reflection among fellow travellers of the development pathway on how we – the non-mainstream – make what we know known. In these spaces of reflection, there is also a need to reflect on ourselves, and who ‘we’ are. Even as we may feel powerless, we need to accept, as academics, researchers, and practitioners, the power we have, recognising that the knowledge we create can underpin and embody structures of oppression. In this role, we must know ourselves as potentially both oppressors and the oppressed. By doing so, we can seek to find common and level ground with unknown others, act to promote gender equality as a global – not just a Global South – issue, and challenge existing extractivist practice as development, finding other ways of knowing ourselves and the world.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The authors would like to acknowledge the Gender Responsive Resilience and Intersectionality in Policy and Practice (GRRIPP) Networking Plus Partnering for Resilience grant - award ES/T002700/1 under the UKRI Collective Fund/ Global Challenges Research Fund.

Acknowledgements

This article draws on thinking developed over the years, including previously published collaborative work. Many, many thanks to the co-authors of those earlier publications for your insights and friendships - Brian Linneker, Helen Hawthorne, Lisa Overton, Erin Sanders-McDonagh, and the late, great Professor Sylvia Chant. Many thanks also to all GRRIPPers for daring to do things differently.

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Note

1. While we refer to women/men in this article, we do not understand women to be a homogeneous group, nor do we see the world through binaries. We understand gender as fluid and work from an intersectional perspective. However, as the article will demonstrate, the dominant discourse is still one of binaries.

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