

Taking off International Development's Straightjacket of Gender

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EMMA WATSON'S SPEECH AT THE United Nations in September 2014 captured a rising wave of recognition that gender inequality can no longer be regarded as a women's issue. Watson's call for men's engagement in ending gender inequality echoed core tenets of the gender agenda in development: gender is about the socially constituted relations between women and men, and addressing discrimination against women means addressing men's enjoyment of privilege, as well as creating a more equitable basis for social relations. In this article, I analyze the emergence of current agendas of women and girls' empowerment and of what has come to be called engaging men and boys in the field of international development. I examine some of the contours of this field and explore feminist critiques and reservations. I end by looking at what might be gained in freeing ourselves of the strictures of a binary understanding of gender and finding common cause in creating a world that is more just, fair, and equal for us all.

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GENDER IN DEVELOPMENT

Against a backdrop of studies that shows that male bias in international development marginalized women and excluded them from development projects, policies, and programmes, the women in development (WID) approach emerged

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in the 1970s.¹ Its proponents sought the means to enhance women's access to economic opportunities and the benefits of development.² What WID failed to address, however, was the deeply-rooted nature of the structural and societal processes through which sexual difference becomes hierarchy, inequality, and injustice. Simply integrating women into existing gender regimes may offer little prospect for the transformation of these new regimes. For this, a new approach was needed: a vigorous critique of WID led to the articulation of an alternative approach, Gender and Development (GAD).

GAD was concerned with the material dimensions of women's subordination and saw gender relations as power relations. In one of the most influential contributions to the emergence of GAD, published in 1979, Ann Whitehead draws attention to the relational nature of women's subordination. She notes that it is rare to find any social situation in which women do not experience some of the limiting or downright oppressive dimensions of gender—whether in the workplace, the street, or the home.³ These insights were taken up in international development in the 1980s. Gender analysis focused on making visible the socially constituted nature of relations of gender in which women were rendered subordinate to men. GAD sought to transform these relations and the unfair and unequal societal structures that perpetuated women's oppression.

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As a relation of power, gender was understood in the form of a binary opposition between men and women in which women-in-general were subordinate to men-in-general. Gender relations came to be seen in GAD as essentially oppositional: women and men were not presumed to have interests in common. Relations among men, or among women, were not understood as gender relations. Gender diversity—different expressions of gender identity—and the differential discriminations that are experienced by women and men who fail to conform to normative prescriptions of man or woman were also not considered within this frame. This limited the potential use of the concept of gender to talk about the ways in which particular expressions of being a man or a woman come to be culturally and socially valued and how others come to be marginalized or even punished. There were further consequences. A preoccupation with marital relationships characterized the way gender relations came to be defined in international development policy and practice, as if these specific kinds of relations constituted the totality of gender relations. As Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie points out, in relation to Africa, Western feminist preoccupations with “coital and conjugal sites” led to the failure to recognize other dimensions of women's identities.⁴ It also made invisible the impact of other forms of discrimination—especially race and class—on women's experiences of oppressive social relations.⁵

This also came at the cost of other aspects of women's relationships with men, not just as lovers, fathers, and sons, but also as employees or employers, colleagues, and constituencies.

One reason for this preoccupation with women's position in the household and in intimate heterosexual relations was the significance that the domestic arena had for the predominantly white, middle-class, second-wave feminists who were an influential intellectual presence in international development debates about gender. But the preoccupation also reflected the extent to which the limiting presuppositions of neoclassical development economics dominated development thinking. For the feminists of the 1970s and 1980s, contending with economic models that assumed that households could simply be taken as units, a pressing issue was the oppression and inequality women experienced in domestic settings.⁶ Their concern was that the dominating influence of development economics led to development programs and projects informed by the notion that the male head of household was a benevolent dictator who ensured the welfare of his family.⁷ Feminist critiques of economists' assumptions about households thus came to be central to the articulation of GAD. Feminist scholarship showed that the household was a site of contestation and conflict.⁸ This produced a version of gender relations in which men and their masculinities became one of the primary problems faced by women living in poverty. This of course is true enough for some women. But it is a version of social relations that eclipses other dynamics that may be no less gendered than the particular kinds of relationships women and men have as heterosexual partners that came to stand for the whole of gender relations.

A series of axioms followed. These axioms were generated by the transformation of insights from particular pieces of feminist research into generalities that could be mobilized to secure the attention of development policymakers—who had little interest in taking seriously the inequalities and discrimination produced by inequitable gender orders. These generalities became gender myths, stories about women that had wider purchase in providing a narrative that situated women as more deserving of assistance and as more useful to the development enterprise than men. These included: women are the poorest of the poor; women care for others while men care only for themselves; women are less corrupt than men; women are closer to nature and care more for the environment.⁹ Gender relations came to be seen, in this way, as culturally, historically, and socially diverse but always consisting of a predictable set of inequalities arising from the naturalization of women's role in biological and social reproduction.¹⁰ This framing offered little space for gender non-conformity, whether in terms of

female masculinities or other queer and trans* identities.¹¹ Nor did it provide scope for recognizing substantive commonalities among women and men, or other dimensions of difference such as race.¹² It also left men depicted only in terms of negative attributes and their exercise of power over women.

FROM GENDER EQUALITY TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The term “gender equality” enjoyed a flush of popularity in international development in the 1990s, the period leading up to and following the Fourth World Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995. Governments created policies and action plans, and funded initiatives, projects, and programs. But the term “gender equality” proved contentious, especially among the representatives of right-wing religious interest groups. It was also contentious among feminists who worried about the potential dilution of another concern, transforming women’s prospects and position in the labor market and public life.¹³ At the same time that gender equality was being vaunted by a largely Western collection of activists, NGOs, and governmental organizations, and integrated into international development agencies via gender mainstreaming, a parallel discourse was taking shape. This was the discourse of women’s empowerment—a term originally mobilized by feminist activists from the Global South to speak about women’s exclusion from economic and political life—that became in the 1990s a clarion call for an approach focused on building women’s capacity to mobilize collectively and demand rights and recognition. In the words of scholar-activist Srilatha Batliwala in an influential text from the early 1990s, this vision of women’s empowerment described “a foundational process that enables marginalized women to construct their own political agendas and form movements and struggles for achieving fundamental and lasting transformation in gender and social power structures.”¹⁴

In a move away from gender and back to women in the 2000s, women’s empowerment appeared under the rubric of Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment, sometimes appearing as the acronym GEWE. But it rapidly came to displace gender equality altogether. Furthermore, the meaning of empowerment had changed. The association of empowerment with critical consciousness and collective action was eclipsed by the interest in investing in women and girls, which came with international development’s growing appeal to the corporate sector.¹⁵ As a corollary, work on men and masculinities gained growing visibility, championed by increasingly prominent advocates of what has come to be called engaging men and boys. Here we find a curious set of reversals.

Like WID, empowering and investing in women and girls are about enhancing their economic prospects. Making use of research that shows that when women have more money, they tend to spend it on their children and families; this discourse posits investing in women as smart economics (World Bank 2005). Women are portrayed as responsible and reliable, a safer bet for investment that yields more predictable returns. Investing in women is presented to policymakers not as a way to address their obligations to gender equality and women's rights but as a way to spur economic growth and meet other developmental ends, such as improving child nutrition. This approach—dubbed “instrumental” for its use of women as instruments for other purposes—has been met with success in persuading international development's banks, bilaterals, and corporate donors that paying attention to women pays dividends.¹⁶

The world of multinational corporations and philanthrocapitalist foundations is enthralled by the business prospects that girls offer as objects for investment. Such investments are presented as straightforward transactions, a matter of putting money directly into the hands of women and girls, training them in the arts of the market, and watching them flourish as they lift their families, communities, and national economies. Meanwhile, they generate a profit for those corporations able to cannily capture their share of the market in that small-scale consumer goods that this legion of businesswomen are empowered to peddle. And there are rewards to be had. Empowering women through the expansion of small-scale microenterprise has led to a rise of corporate profits in emerging markets. Unilever, for example, is lauded in the Ernst and Young's 2014 report *The Beauty of Success: Going for Growth in the Household and Personal Care Sector* for Project Shakti.¹⁷ Through a self-employed workforce of small-scale distribution agents, Project Shakti extends the reach for Unilever's products into ever more distant rural markets, generating profits of 20 percent.¹⁸ In another example, at the launch of Walmart's Global Women's Economic Empowerment Initiative in September 2011, CEO Mike Duke is quoted as saying:

Helping more women live better is a defining issue for our business and our world.... We're stepping up our efforts to help educate, source from and open markets for women around the world. We want women to view us as a retailer that is relevant to them and cares about them. We want them to be leading suppliers, managers and loyal customers.¹⁹

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What began as a feminist concern with gender equality has been transformed into an expanding enterprise, a revamped version of the colonial uplift and rescue project, with a focus on producing decent, hard-working women who can contribute to building the fortunes of their communities and national economies. Equality has been displaced by empowerment. Poverty is a matter

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for the individual to lift themselves up and out of by their own bootstraps, rather than a result of intolerable social inequalities that might bring with it some responsi-

bility from the state. The relational dimensions of gender are of less interest to corporations and philanthrop capitalists than are the economic potential of girls and their capacity to consume, as well as produce and act as a vast untapped motor of economic growth. The narrative of investing in girls and women portrays girls and women as if they are unencumbered by the very aspects of gender relations that so preoccupied the founders of GAD.

The Nike Foundation's Girl Effect animation puts this narrative very directly. We are invited into a fast-paced parable told through stylized capitalized words and dramatic music. It begins with the dilemma of GIRL, surrounded by flies, facing two futures: a life of domestic oppression, poverty, and HIV risk if she saddles herself with HUSBAND, or one of world-changing success if she takes up instead with COW and joins the local COUNCIL. Invest in a girl, it tells us, and change the entire course of human history. What this investment actually involves is a little hazy, as is quite how these empowered girls are going to shift deep-rooted structural obstacles to equality that are so pervasive a feature of the everyday lives of actually existing girls the world over. The Nike Foundation's website does not give much away. We are given three reasons for investing in girls. The first is that girls are agents of change. What does this mean? The Nike Foundation explains: "By investing in their economic potential through education and by delaying child marriage and teen pregnancy, issues such as HIV and AIDS can be resolved and the cycle of poverty can be broken." There is something quite extraordinary in how much is eclipsed here. Not least men—and not just the men for whom sex with other men is the greatest source of HIV risk. The second reason brings a reassuring sense that girls might not have to carry the whole burden themselves. It is all about designing programs with girls in mind. It is not clear whose programs these belong to or what happens to the boys with whom girls share their classrooms. Finally, the third reason puts all this into context. We are told, "the cost of excluding girls is high." The conjuring trick of producing alluringly large estimates of lost earnings and benefits

to the national economy is used to rest the case. We are led with this logic to a narrative focused on the enterprising individual who takes tiny amounts of money and spins them into a profitable business, the storyline taken from that of the American Dream: for girls.

ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS

The investing in girls and women narrative has nothing much to say about or to men and boys. Indeed, men and boys are virtually invisible in the feel-good narratives and the evocative visuals, appearing only as a pair of red, grasping hands in Nike's Girl Effect or as an innocuous looking small boy-child levitating along with his mother in Oxfam's "Lift" campaign video. At best, men and boys are an obstacle to girls and women's empowerment. At worst, they are a violent threat. Whereas girls and women are presented as promising investments, men and boys appear in today's development narratives as the obstacles that might get in their way. An example is the following statement on the website of the international NGO ActionAid:

Men's power over women often costs women their lives. Women are more vulnerable to HIV infection because they are not able to insist on protected sex, even when they know their partner is infected. Men often use physical violence to reinforce their power over women and girls. Yet despite all this, women are powerful forces for change, amazingly determined and resourceful in their fight to achieve a better future. Every time a family has good food to eat and clear water to drink, every day that a child arrives at school or a sick person makes it to the clinic, it's usually a woman who has fought for this small, daily victory over adversity.²⁰

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If empowering women and girls is all about unleashing their economic potential and enhancing their capacity to transform the lives of their families and communities, engaging men and boys becomes the means to reduce the hazard and harm associated with men's behavior: reforming violent men and encouraging men to have safer sex, use birth control, and be better fathers and partners. Engaging men and boys thus comes to be all about the personal and interpersonal dimensions of men and boys' lives. The emphasis is on men's destructiveness, on adverse socialization, and an inability to manage social and intimate relationships. And it is clear that the concern is not with men and boys' wellbeing, but with limiting their negative effects on women and girls. The international NGO Plan International, for example, states in their 2011 *The*

State of the World's Girls flagship publication, entitled “So What About Boys?”:

Meaningfully engaging boys and young men in reframing healthy and non-violence definitions of masculinity is critical in promoting the rights of girls and young women—and ensuring that the goal of gender equality is reached.²¹

Engaging men and boys has given rise to a burgeoning field of NGO practice. One of the most inspiring examples is that of the Brazilian NGO Promundo, whose Program H works in low-income communities in Rio to engage young men in developing alternative non-violent, non-abusive models of masculinity.²² Equally inspiring is the work of South African NGO SONKE, which mobilizes men to contest models of masculinity that condone the abuse of women and that has fostered a plurality of engagements from grassroots organizing to national media campaigns.²³ These initiatives are underpinned by the recognition of the costs of conventional models of manhood for everyone—men as well as women. Here we encounter the relational approach missing from today's talk of investing in women and girls.²⁴ Their focus is working to improve the quality and equality of men's relationships: as fathers, as lovers, as husbands, and as partners.

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As much as many feminist and women's rights activists affirm the need for men to get more involved in the work of achieving gender equality, a number of concerns have been raised about the focus of work on men and boys. The first is that the emphasis on the personal and interpersonal does not go deep enough; as Nancy Lindisfarne and I observed 20 years ago in relation to the burgeoning field of men's studies, “in appropriating the personal, there has been a tendency to forget the political and ignore the vested interest many men have in resisting change.”²⁵ This is no less true for some of today's male champions of gender equality. Few would seem concerned with addressing male privilege in all its manifestations. Much of the work in this field focuses more on men living in poverty and less on the men who occupy positions of power in the institutions that produce and sustain poverty and inequality. The second is a concern about the diversion of an already small and ever-shrinking pot of funding for women's rights. There is a perception among feminist activists that organizations run by and working with men are competing with feminist and women's rights organizations that work with women survivors of violence, depriving them of resources in an environment where funding is ever more difficult to come by.²⁶ Third, feminists note a lack of interest, engagement, and solidarity among those working on and with men for broader struggles for gender justice. Men claiming to advocate gender equality are noticeably silent on the injustice

of unfair gender pay gaps, other inequities in highly gendered labor markets, inheritance laws that unjustly disadvantage women, and unequal representation in parliament—in short, on reform of the panoply of institutions that constitute patriarchal social orders the world over.²⁷

And there are further issues. Much of the framing for work on men and masculinities is saturated with heteronormative assumptions about men, sexuality, and the body. Female and gay masculinities fall out of the frame. Trans men are completely invisible while trans

women are offered a small role in work with “men who have sex with men,” an accommodating acronym that embraces the non-conforming men that tend to be completely eclipsed by international development. There is also a racialized dimension to development stereotypes that are deployed in the representation of heterosexual, male masculinities. The way in which black men come to feature in these narratives, for example, can become as problematic as the colonial discourse of the “black peril”—the threat to women posed by the purportedly hypersexual African man.²⁸ Further consequences include the ready association of the words “men” and “masculinity” with brute force, brash competitiveness, and brazen prerogative. Paradoxically, it is common to see the historically contingent and culturally specific notion of the male breadwinner—itself a relatively recent Western invention that was exported to the Global South as a perverse effect of colonialism and Christian missionary outreach, and was naturalized in appeals to men as protector and provider.²⁹ Yet, the damaging effects of patriarchy, sexual violence, and gender-based discrimination, which enforce normative expectations and exact gender conformity on men's lives, are barely possible to countenance within the available discursive frames.³⁰

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BEYOND GENDER?

So what is to be done? The first step is to refuse old, tired, and limiting essentialisms that pin us to two immutable gender categories while brushing away important differences among women and men—differences, for example, of race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and gender expression. It is time to acknowledge, and make more visible, the diversity of possible ways of being a man or a woman, including those who identify with neither or both genders. There also needs to be more recognition of the damaging effects that patriarchal power can have on

the men who are subordinated by virtue of their race, class, or social location. To do this means acknowledging that it is patriarchal social arrangements rather than individual men that are at issue. After all, as Gayle Rubin pointed out almost 40 years ago:

Gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes....Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities. It requires repression: in men, of whatever is the local version of “feminine” traits; in women, of the local definition of “masculine” traits. The division of the sexes has the effect of repressing some of the personality characteristics of virtually everyone, men and women. The same social system which oppresses women in its relations of exchange, oppresses everyone.³¹

What we need, as Rubin urged, is to “liberate human personality from the straight jacket of gender.”³²

Ultimately, reducing men’s role in the struggle for gender justice to mere accompaniment of what is still conceived as a woman’s issue—“He for She,” the UN Women campaign announced by Emma Watson—does not advance a broader sense of accountability among men for addressing the privilege they experience in their daily lives. Nor does it lead to them holding other men accountable for the acts that sustain unjust regimes of gender and sexuality. Reforming individual men’s behavior offers a short-term measure to stem the more egregious effects of patriarchy. It is not in itself enough to undermine underpinning structures of constraint. And just as labeling men as the problem is hardly a call to come together in common cause, inviting men to care about gender equality because they have female kin—wives, mothers, sisters, or daughters—is not enough to motivate men to become part of a movement for change.

What we need, instead, is to look beyond gender for the basis of a more substantive normative agreement than that which the current bifurcated gender discourse makes possible. We might find this in the passionate concern that brings many of us together when we contemplate the searing injuries of inequality, in raging indignation about injustice, in horror at the forms of discrimination that make some of us less human than others. Shared outrage can offer a powerful basis for connection and solidarity that can reach across the differences that might otherwise divide us—the “inter-est” in Hannah Arendt’s terms, that “which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together.”³³ And this, in turn, can offer a powerful rallying point around which women, men, trans* and inter-sex people can come together and act in unison to wage common struggles.

Here feminist practices can guide us. The term “consciousness-raising” carries with it connotations of bra burning and second-wave feminists sitting in circles sharing tales of domestic oppression. But it is just as relevant as a basis for generating critical understandings of the social worlds we live in today as it ever was. And it is associated with some of international development’s most visionary thinkers, from Paulo Freire to Robert Chambers.³⁴ Practices that foster critical consciousness make us aware of the ways in which we have been taught to read and interpret the world, what we see and feel, and what remains hidden to us—whether in our own behavior, assumptions, and actions, or in those of others. When this awareness is coupled with a process of identification that allows us to connect across our differences and find a common concern with issues of injustice, we shift those issues from being the property of a particular group to being the responsibility of humankind. These shifts are vital if we are to build a broader constituency for equality and non-discrimination. Education, agitation, and mobilization—the traditional tools of progressive social movements—can deliver that change.³⁵

Discrimination on the basis of gender causes harm. We do not all have to be female to witness or experience that harm or to feel angry and act towards addressing it. And it is not only women who experience the oppressive effects of the gender regimes of the societies we live in. Reconnecting with our shared humanity takes us out of the boxes into which the gender binary sustained by the “empowering women and girls” and “engaging men and boys” discourse places us. It allows us to imagine and to create a world in which the strictures of gender dissolve, releasing us from their grip. As Emma Watson put it in her UN speech:

It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum, instead of two sets of opposing ideals. If we stop defining each other by what we are not, and start defining ourselves by who we are, we can all be freer.³⁶ 

NOTES

1. See, especially: Esther Boserup, *Woman's role in economic development* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970).

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3. Ann Whitehead, “Some Preliminary Notes on The Subordination of Women,” *IDS Bulletin* 10, no. 3 (1979): 11.

4. Molaru Ogun-dipe-Leslie, *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994), 251.

5. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (London: Routledge, 1990); Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA:

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6. Whitehead, "Some Preliminary Notes."

7. For a critique of these 'benevolent dictator' models of the male household head, see: Susanne Bergeron, *Fragments of Development: Nation, Gender, and the Space of Modernity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2006).

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11. Judith Halbestam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC : Duke University Press, 1998).

12. Kalpana Wilson, *Race, Racism and Development* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

13. Sally Baden and Anne Marie Goetz, "Who Needs [Sex] When You Can Have [Gender]? Conflicting Discourses on Gender at Beijing," *Feminist Review* 56 (1997): 3–25.

14. Srilatha Batliwala, "The meaning of women's empowerment: new concepts from action," in *Population Policies Reconsidered*, ed. G. Sen, A. Germain, and L. C. Chen (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1994).

15. Srilatha Batliwala, "Taking the power out of empowerment," *Development in Practice* 17 (2007): 557–65.

16. The term "instrumental" is not always used pejoratively by feminists who recognize that instrumentalism has led to a greater focus on women—and more resources—than might have been possible if these kinds of arguments were not being made.

17. Ajita Shashidhar, "Empowering Women—and Men," *Business Today*, July 7, 2013.

18. Mark Twine et al., *The beauty of success: Going for growth in the household and personal care sector* (London: Ernst & Young Global, 2014); Interview with Indian marketing guru, Pradeep Kashyap, "India's low-cost path to rural masses offers rich rewards."

19. "Walmart launches Global Women's Economic Empowerment Initiative," Walmart, September 14, 2011.

20. "Women's Rights," Action Aid website.

21. "Because I am a Girl," Plan UK website.

22. Gary Barker et al., "Masculinities, Social Exclusion and Prospects for Change: Reflections from Promundo's Work in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil," in *Men and Development: Politicizing Masculinities*, ed. Andrea Cornwall, Jerker Edström, and Alan Greig (London: Zed Books, 2011).

23. "The Gift of Fatherhood," Sonke Gender Justice website.

24. Sylvia Chant and Matthew Gutmann, "Mainstreaming Men into Gender and Development: Debates, Reflections and Experiences" (London: Oxfam Working Papers, 2000); Andrea Cornwall and Sarah White "Men, Masculinities and Development: Policies, Politics and Practice" *IDS Bulletin* 31, no. 2 (2000).

25. Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne, "Dislocating Masculinity: Gender, Power and Anthropology," in *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*, ed. A. Cornwall and N. Lindisfarne (London: Routledge, 1994), 34.

26. For example, see: Everjoice Win, "Men are not my project: a view from Zimbabwe," *Development* 44.3 (2001): 114–6.

27. For example, see: the debate in the e-journal *Contestations*.

28. John Pape, "Black and white: the 'perils of sex' in colonial Zimbabwe," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16 (1990): 699–720.

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31. Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex,” in *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Rap (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 179.

32. *Ibid.*, 52.

33. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 182.

34. For key works, see: Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972); Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (Essex: Longman, 1983).

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36. Emma Watson, “Gender Equality is Your Issue Too,” UN Women, September 20, 2014.

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