

## I've seen first-hand the toxic racism in international women's rights groups

*White European and American practitioners have not taken charges of discrimination seriously. It's time to do our homework and learn to change*

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*Women Deliver has recently launched an investigation into allegations of racism. Photograph: Courtesy of Women Deliver*

We are long overdue a reckoning around race in gender and development work. The number of women who have recently issued public claims of racism or discrimination against global women's rights organisations is testament to that.

The Nobel Women's Initiative is the latest to come under fire with allegations of toxic workplace practices, joining *the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC)* and *Women Deliver*, among others. (I've previously been employed by *IWHC* and *Women Deliver*.)

After working with international feminist organisations for more than a decade, I can attest that racism is prevalent in the sector. White women occupy the majority of leadership and decision-making roles. Black and brown colleagues are subjected to microaggressions and toxicities, ranging from awkward to harmful. This should be unacceptable in any workplace, let alone one whose aim is to end poverty, misogyny, and discrimination. These claims should be taken seriously – with legal action where appropriate.



*Lori Adelman Photograph: Lori Adelman*

Workplace racism contributes to the devaluation and exploitation of black and brown communities globally. We need a fundamental shift in how we conceive of our work and whose expertise we value.

Recent calls for reform in the sector may be viewed as part of the growing Movement for Black Lives, reignited by the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and many more by US police. But charges of racism are not new to the feminist movement or the development sector.

Critics point to development as a colonial hangover, noting a sector that fails to acknowledge the historic exploitation which created “vulnerable populations” to begin with. Additionally, feminists have long critiqued the race blindness of global gender empowerment efforts.

Yet global north practitioners have not taken such criticism seriously enough. Racism continues to show up in not only the workplaces, but in the work itself.

One common manifestation of this is the dismissal of local expertise in favour of the weaker knowledge of a pricey consultant or a US headquartered staff member . I’ve seen ineffectual public health or advocacy campaigns designed exclusively by people in New York for rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa, which they could not find on a map, resulting in failure to reach targets, and even drawing backlash.

The power that donors, the majority of them from the global north, hold to shape development agendas over input from the communities themselves is another manifestation of racism. Because of a perceived scarcity of resources, NGOs have been known to adopt an “optics over substance” agenda that’s designed to impress donors with stories and photo-ops rather than enact change. This leads to wasted time, tokenisation and harm for those supposed to benefit. Plus, there are significant wage gaps between western NGO workers and their “in-country” counterparts. This is often justified by a cost of living difference that isn’t applied in the same ways across cities in the US.

Ultimately, as a black woman, I have maintained a privileged position in the sector compared with my global south counterparts. Given my own problematic experiences as a young woman of colour working in the sector, it was a surprise for me the first time I landed in Nairobi, Kenya, to work on a development issue and I was treated almost like a visiting dignitary. That forced me to ask deeper questions about how race intersects with issues of development. What positions I'm eligible for, how my ideas are treated, even where I can travel, is all shaped by the country on my passport.

Race is clearly on the table in our sector. So, what *should* we do about it? We need to replace top-down do-gooderism with a system centred on solidarity, dignity and repair. In addition to increasing diversity at all levels, global feminist organisations need to seriously consider what added value they bring to the communities they aim to serve, and whether there is a way to achieve the same or better results through severely scaled-back global north operations and equitable partnerships with global south actors. We must reshape boards to have greater global south representation, and set clear, sector-wide expectations and boundaries with donors about their role in this work. Women's funds offer an exemplary model for providing flexible funding for communities to allocate as they see fit. And we must examine pay structures to eradicate identity-based wage gaps.

"Feminism is homework," posits Sara Ahmed in *Living a Feminist Life*, noting that "a feminist movement that proceeds with too much confidence has cost us too much already". Homework isn't glorified. It's done quietly, behind the scenes: learning that may bear fruit down the line when knowledge is truly tested. Gender and development practitioners must similarly embrace such a student mindset.

In this spirit, I'm committing to using this "race moment" for ongoing learning. Population Works' Decolonizing Development curriculum and Global Health Council's upcoming digital summit are two good resources. Let's study together, shall we?

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