

Development Workers, Transcultural Interactions and Imperial Relations in Northern Pakistan

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My research focuses on a transnational community of Western women development workers who lived in Gilgit, northern Pakistan in 1999 and 2000 while they worked through Volunteer Services Overseas. My goal was to delineate several contradictory facets of the dialectical relationship between cultural globalization and community autonomy in this local transcultural setting. Drawing on ethnographic research, I concentrate on how Western women exercise globally circulating discourses in the terrain of development, as well as exploit the travel and work opportunities that accompany this form of globalization, to construct fulfilling identities, work relations, and personal interactions that will also serve them well at home. Western women exercise the discourse of autonomy, along with discourses of race, gender, Orientalism, and imperialism, to constitute identities as free, independent, unique, and authoritative individuals who can influence their own way of life. In so doing, they harness a range of global pressures and opportunities that are used to refashion their circumstances of living and understanding into a situation that promises greater personal control, self-esteem, and self-determination in both the present and the future.

Specifically, my research shows that a strong sense of personal and community autonomy organizes Western women's thoughts and actions in Gilgit. It motivates their global travel agendas, development work, philanthropic practices, and constructions of self, as well as their understandings of Muslim Gilgiti women. For example, development workers' understandings of themselves as liberated, worldly, and benevolent are largely forged in opposition to supposedly oppressed, needy, home-bound Muslim women, with whom they seldom interact. And their perceptions and practices of philanthropy, which often imply that Gilgitis are inherently incapable of improving themselves, are often predicated on constructs of racial and cultural supremacy. Consequently, Western women in contemporary Gilgit — like their colonial-era predecessors who travelled to South Asia as missionaries, teachers, nurses, and wives of colonial administrators and military personnel — generally endeavour to "enlighten" local women through development initiatives that impose Western standards of hygiene, nutrition, work, education, clothing, love, and domestic life. In all of these ways, if to different extents, Western women use this sense of autonomy to construct identities as free, independent, unique, and authoritative individuals who can influence their own way of life, both abroad and at home. But while these locally-situated processes usually enhance the individual and community autonomy of Western women development workers at the global and local scale, inadvertently they also reverberate negatively at both of those scales, compromising the autonomy of the Gilgiti women who are constituted as Othered inferiors.

My research, thus, clarifies the ways in which contemporary globalization processes are simultaneously detrimental and enabling. It also shows how the social justice and resiliency pressures that are placed on the Gilgiti women in turn reconstitute processes of globalization, as imperial power relations, which are a legacy from the colonial period in South Asia, penetrate with increasing depth, breadth, speed, and range into the ostensibly post-colonial present. For this reason I emphasize that community matters in globalization studies, especially in research that seeks to create more equitable

global systems. The effects of local community action in a global world cannot always be accurately predicted. Rather, the ambivalent and unintended consequences of this action make globalization risky for other communities and autonomies.

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