

EXAMINING THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN
IN UN WOMEN'S BEIJING+20 CAMPAIGN

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The undersigned, appointed by dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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For Mum and Dad, and for Drew.

it does not do

to dwell on dreams

and forget to live...

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
LIST OF FIGURES	iv
ABSTRACT	v
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. UNITED NATIONS & WOMEN’S RIGHTS	8
3. LITERATURE REVIEW	13
Technology and Development	
Power Relationships Between the North and South	
Constructing and Communicating the “Other”	
Communication Colonialism and Western Messages	
Transnational Feminism	
4. METHODOLOGY	32
5. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS	38
Conceptions of Private/Public Dichotomies	
Communicating Health and Violence Through Culture	
6. CONCLUSION.....	65
REFERENCES	72

List of Figures

Figure	Page
1. Sanchaita Gajapati Raju, founder of Social Awareness Newer Alternatives (SANA). (© UN Women, 2014)	40
2. Monica Paulus, human rights worker in Papua New Guinea. Image © Monica Paulus, 2014	59

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ABSTRACT

The Beijing+20 campaign was conceived by UN Women as a way to celebrate the advancements in the realm of women's rights and equality. Despite the decades of work by feminists and NGO's, some critics suggest that the voices advocating for women are not representing a diverse group of women and, therefore, not representing a diverse range of concerns.

Using the theoretical framework of transnational feminism, this research employed textual analysis of 235 articles to discover how women, and women's issues, are represented in a global context. This research particularly focussed on the areas of health, violence, and gender equality.

Results, while not as polarizing as previous studies, found that there are still strong undercurrents of thought and assumptions that frame the way women are thought about in an international context. These assumptions are particularly evident when framing women in relation to culture, tradition, and the private and public spheres. Results suggest that large organizations advocating for women should diversify the voices speaking for them and highlight the complexities of the issues under discussion.

Keywords: Transnational Feminism, Public Relations, Non Profit, Intersectionality, Communication, Gender Representation

I. Introduction

For the last 40 years organizations like the United Nations have struggled to better the conditions of women worldwide. To try and address the many complex issues surrounding women's rights and gender equality, the United Nations hosted four global conferences between 1975 and 1995. The aim? To elevate gender equality into global discussions and political agendas.

The Mexico conference, held in 1975, opened international dialogue to meet the needs of women in three ways: 1) gender equality, 2) involvement of women in development issues, and 3) women's involvement in initiatives for world peace. The World Plan of Action was adopted, with 133 member-state delegations aiming to meet governmental targets (5th Women's World Conference, n.d.). Since then, the United Nations has held three more conferences: Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985, and Beijing 1995. While all four conferences were important for global women's rights, the Beijing conference was particularly influential. Not only did it have an unprecedented turnout of 17,000 participants, to this day it provided the most comprehensive global policy framework to address gender equality and human rights issues relating to girls and women (UN Women, 2014r). To highlight how the Beijing conference influenced global women's rights, UN Women celebrated the 20 years that have passed since the conference with the Beijing+20 campaign, which is the focus of this study.

The Beijing conference, and the current Beijing+20 campaign, promotes hope for women in the realm of gender equality. But many critics since 1995 have stated that the conference has not produced the sustained change people

hoped for. Spivak (1996) was one such attendee who argued that while the conference outwardly represented an ideal of global unity, it became an opportunity for the global North and Western feminists to try to represent the needs of the global South. Likewise, delegate Wanda Nowicka commented that while there has been progress since the Beijing conference, there was still much work to be done (Nowicka, 2014). In fact, transnational feminist literature argues that many women, particularly those within marginalized groups, are not being represented in ways that truly reflect their needs. Instead, marginalized women are represented by people and groups in positions of power (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1996; Thussu, 2002; Chow, 1991; Hemment, 2004; Mohanty, 2003). Representation of marginalized groups by people in power is problematic because it means organizations like UN Women, which aim to create gender equality for all, may be communicating in a way that only promotes gender equality for some women – namely groups of women in privileged spaces.

A main critique of the 1995 Beijing conference is that there were inherent issues of power that hindered organizations trying to promote the rights of women (Snyder, 2006). Transnational feminist literature suggests that women's issues vary greatly between nations, yet gender equality is often only discussed in a way that promotes women as a homogenous group. These power inequalities were evidenced through the domination of Western discourse, such as pay equality, and the assumption that Western concerns applied to all (Spivak, 1996). During the conference Spivak (1996) noted that delegations from countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka were represented by the Southern diaspora who were influenced by their own class alliances and experiences as migrants. Women from the poorest areas of the South were excluded, despite the

fact they could have spoken most accurately for the people the conference was targeting (Spivak, 1996).

It is important to note the significant role women play in wanting to better the lives of women around the world. Issues like sanitation, or modern medicine, are basic human rights to which every person deserves access. The author of this thesis believes that personal autonomy is a key aspect of gender equality, but that an emphasis on an ideal autonomy runs the risk of devaluing the conceptions of equality, fairness, or freedom, held by other individuals or groups of people. With this in mind, it is important to note that controversial women's issues can be denounced, but discourse must address the complexities of those issues. Examples of these complexities can be, but are not limited to, local and regional contexts, polarity of thought within those same contexts, and larger power structures at play such as patriarchy, neoliberalism, and the relationship between the global North and South.

Because of the polarizing experiences from delegates at critics of the original Beijing conference, this research will have both practical and theoretical implications. Practically, organizations like UN Women have significant power over political dialogue. By examining how UN Women represents women in the Beijing+20 campaign, we can open doors to new, effective ways of communicating women's issues. Through this, UN Women can more accurately represent women on a global platform, including stances on international policy. This is important because Beijing 1995 did not produce the sustained change people hoped for (Spivak, 1996), which suggests that the messages and methods of communication were not appropriate for the end goal of global gender equality.

While many feminist scholars were critical of the Beijing conference, the UN and members of the general public celebrated the event as a success. The 1995 Beijing conference was the largest to-date, with 17,000 participants and representatives from 189 governments. It was also celebrated for its new Platform for Action, which representatives said would spark new “global commitment to the empowerment of women everywhere” (UN Women, 2000). While scholarly conversations have addressed UN Women, the Beijing conference, and gender equality, much of this research was done prior to the year 2000. In addition, much of the theoretical feminist critiques focused on the conference itself, not the campaign. This research will further that critique by looking at the current Beijing campaign to discover if, and how, those critiques are still applicable 20 years later. The research on the Beijing+20 campaign is sparse; thus, much more research can be done in this area.

Furthering this theoretical area of study is important, as organizations like the UN are often seen as leaders. They inform the public and journalists, highlighting salient information, and can serve as a tipping point in leveraging or promoting international policies. Originally, the United Nations was created as a way to intervene in international disputes that could lead to conflict. It has since developed other programs and agencies to address inequalities in the world – such as UN Women and the World Health Organization (Ferree, 2006; United Nations System, n.d.). Feminist critiques currently state that the methods and ways people are represented through NGOs only reinforce current inequalities (Accad, 1991; Arat-Koc, 2002; Brenner, 2007). By critically engaging in this communication, researchers and practitioners can develop discourse that accurately represents the needs of groups of women.

To help facilitate this research, I employed textual analysis to examine the campaign content of UN Women's Beijing+20 website. Using the framework of transnational feminism, this research aims to critically examine the discourse of the Beijing+20 campaign website, particularly those issues related to health, violence, and gender equality. This study defines gender equality as it is defined by the United Nations:

“[The] equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys... The interests of, needs, and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men.” – United Nations (n.d.).

The Beijing+20 website features gender equality in regard to a number of topics – from economy and politics through to the environment and education – but the overarching theme that connects all of these topics is the advancement of women in their respective fields (UN Women, 2000). Health, violence, and gender equality are significant topics related to women, because the media often use these issues to highlight oppression (Mohanty, 1988). For example, there is an assumption by some that the sexual health of a woman is indicative of a woman's oppressed status (Mohanty, 1988; Njambi, 2004; Shome, 2011).

In addition, analyzing websites is an important area to study because the use of websites as a communication tool is vital for NGOs, particularly from a public relations standpoint (Ferree & Pudrovska, 2006). The use of websites by NGOs is important because the website serves as a way for organizations to represent the views, mission, and goals of itself in a way that is unmediated by mainstream news media. To textually analyze the website's discourse, the following research questions were asked:

- **RQ1:** How are women portrayed on the Beijing+20 website regarding the campaign's discourse on health and violence?
- **RQ2:** To what extent is Beijing+20's discussion of "gender equality" represented through traditional Western feminist definitions or perceptions of womanhood?
- **RQ3:** How does UN Women reinforce or challenge images of women as "the other" on the Beijing+20 campaign website?

To further provide context for examining the highlighted research questions, this study also highlights relevant literature on the role of technology regarding NGOs and development, north and south discourse, othering, colonialism and transnational feminism. Following these bodies of literature is this study's methodological approach, which highlights how this study conducted a textual analysis guided by a transnational feminist theoretical framework.

It is also important to note my own personal biases. As a white woman raised in a Western nation, it is important to realize that this may influence my interpretation of texts. As a result, I will be using the literature of transnational feminism as a guide while coding and interpreting. I do not wish to speak for women. Rather, I seek to bring attention to the ways women are being represented and highlighting the visibility, or invisibility, of groups of women.

This research highlighted two important themes. While analysis found that discourse is not as exclusionary of marginalized groups as in the past, problematic discourses still emerge. This study found two primary themes that answer this study's research questions. The first theme illustrates how some conceptions of public and private dichotomies shape discussions about gender equality. The second theme highlights the way UN Women use culture to frame

discussions on the topics of health and violence. While not as problematic as previous research, the findings of this research demonstrate that organizations like UN Women still produce some content that can reinforce certain western representations of marginalized women.

II. United Nations and Women's Rights

The United Nations has aimed to promote and secure the rights of women globally since its inception in 1946. However the last 70 years has seen a change in the focus of women's issues and the people and institutions speaking on behalf of women. This change has come by due to a number of factors including more global awareness of women's issues and a diversification of experts and organizations included in the establishment of policies.

UN Women, was only officially founded in 2010 by the United Nations General Assembly (UN Women, n.d.). Prior to 2010, the United Nations promoted women's issues through a number of branches: the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), and UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). While the United Nations promoted women's issues through many of its branches the most influential body for women's rights, prior to UN Women, was the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). CSW was formally founded on June 21 1946, a result of the inaugural meetings of the UN General Assembly (UN Women, n.d.b). CSW was created to solely focus on the status of women in regards of human rights, as designated by the UN General Assembly, though its focus soon began to evolve and diversify.

Between 1947 and 1962, CSW focused almost entirely on the legal ramifications associated with gender equality. The organization's founding principle stated that they aimed to:

“Raise the status of women, irrespective of nationality, race, language, or religion, to equality with men in all fields of human enterprise, and to eliminate all discrimination against women in the provisions of statutory law, in legal maxims or rules, or in interpretation of customary law.” (UN Women, n.d.b. p. 3).

The focus on raising the status of women was primarily achieved through CSW’s involvement in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, ensuring and promoting inclusive language in the document, and via the organization of international conventions aimed at ending discriminatory legislation. This included the Convention on the Political Rights of Women in December 1952, the first international law instrument aimed at protecting the political rights of women – particularly in the realm of voting equality (UN Women, n.d.b.). Despite the efforts to improve women’s rights legally, social rights were still often violated (Brenner, 2007).

The 1960s and 1970s saw the focus change with women in areas of development becoming a priority (Fraser, n.d.; UN Women, n.d.b.). This change was primarily influenced by the increase, and diversification of UN member states alongside a burgeoning international women’s movement (UN Women, n.d.b.). The 1970s also saw the first world conference – setting the scene for The World Plan of Action. While many women and NGOs welcomed CSW and its attempts to establish conferences dedicated to women’s issues: they were met with scepticism from the United Nations (Tinker & Jaquette, 1987). It was not until the 25th anniversary of CSW that the UN agreed to sanction a woman’s world conference – as long as funding came from voluntary contributions (Tinker & Jaquette, 1987). The reaction to the first world conference was, for the

most part, positive. The conference allowed delegates to discuss a range of issues while bringing these topics to an international platform (Ferree, 2006).

The next decade saw a significant shift in thought in women's issues. The common emphasis on women's equality shifted to an emphasis on development and peace initiatives, with the definition of "third world" moving beyond colonization (Ferree, 2006; Tinker & Jaquette, 1987). This shift in thought also meant other issues were also brought to the forefront. During the Mexico conference in 1980 one such issue was zionism, which was added to the list as a cause of underdevelopment – alongside colonialism, imperialism, and racism. Debate surrounding the inclusion of zionism was so fierce that some updates to the Plan of Action were unable to be discussed (Tinker & Jaquette, 1987).

By the third world conference, held in Nairobi in 1985, CSW was making deliberate steps to promote diversity in thought, and action. The third world conference saw the first World Survey on the Role of Women in Development while attendance was at an all-time high. The Nairobi conference had delegations from 157 countries, 8 agencies, 17 intergovernment organizations, 4 liberation movements, and 163 NGOs (Commission on the Status of Women, n.d.; Fraser, n.d.; UN Women, n.d.b). It was noted for the strong presence of delegations from African nations, something that had not been noted in the first two world conferences. The third world conference also saw CSW and other organizations looking toward the new millenium. Plans for the new millenium were primarily discussed through a blueprint for governments that focussed on promoting gender equality at national levels, particularly through the promotion of women's participation in peace efforts (UN Women, n.d.b).

By 1985, however, some criticisms began to emerge. The most common one was that transnational organizations could not easily represent the views of a diverse body of people (Hemment, 2004; Snyder, 2006). With Hemment (2004) stating that women from the global North often ignored geopolitical inequalities, and created and fought for women's "rights" that were Western-specific. Likewise, during the creation of the term Women in Development some criticized its meaning, stating that the term was defined in a way that unwittingly placed stereotypes on women from developing countries (Snyder, 2006).

The 1990s saw yet another transition in thought as CSW began to expand and the United Nations played a more proactive part in supporting women's rights. During CSW's fifth decade the organization not only hosted the 1995 Beijing conference, but many other conferences all with a strong focus on women. This was particularly evident at the UN Human Rights Conference in Vienna which saw attendees from all corners of the world joining together to address the issue of violence against women (Hemment, 2004; United Nations Economic and Security Council, 1995).

Prior to the Vienna conference, violence against women had been seen as a feminist issue, and one that was not considered a serious threat internationally (Hemment, 2004). Because delegates from a broad range of backgrounds and experience could unite over the shared concern of violence against women, the Vienna conference became the first instance in which global support was galvanized for one topic (Hemment, 2004). This trend continued during the Beijing conference.

Post-Beijing, gender mainstreaming also became an area of focus, partly due to the increase in diverse thought and discussion created by Beijing's record-

breaking attendance. While the United Nations has seen an increase in diversity – particularly in membership and representation – some have critiqued that even with a seemingly diverse number of members, the members representing those nations may be privileged in some way. This privilege may be particularly apparent if representatives are immigrants, as their class alliances and political concerns often differ from the small-scale struggles and structures of the women in the countries they represent (Hemment, 2004; Spivak, 1996).

“Poor women in the North are being denied access to an existing welfare structure that is being dismantled; the poorest in the South are at the bottom of a society where a welfare structure cannot emerge because of globalized exploitation... Southern diasporics, in their nostalgia to be identified with their nations of origin, come forth to stand in for the South. They are not the South, they are not the South-in-the-North either. Their class alliances are often verticle, their political concerns modelled, at best, on migrant suffering.” (Spivak, 1996, p. 3).

The history of women’s rights in relation to the United Nations system shows that, while there is a desire to better the lives of women, there are still issues in representation and diversity of thought. Because countries and cultures often place importance on different issues in regards to women’s rights, it is difficult to create widespread support for an issue. Additionally, the voices representing women from diverse nations may be impacted by their own class alliances or experiences which may influence their own beliefs and experiences with women’s issues.

III. Literature Review

Technology and Development

The role of communication technology in NGOs and development is vital, because it provides linkages between organizations, the media, and the general public. The use of global technology makes it easier for communities and groups of people to exchange ideas over vast distances (Thussu, 2002). It also allows new viewpoints and experiences to be shared with a wider group of people. Since the early 20th century, the use of technology has transformed the ability to communicate internationally quickly and to vast audiences. Communication technology in development has been particularly praised, because it encourages the establishment of new linkages. These linkages not only encourage wide dissemination of information, but can also provide opportunities for socio-economic development (Thussu, 2002). Ferree (2006) argues transnational organizations are beneficial, because they encourage every day citizens to take part in social movements like feminism: "Comparing 2005 to 1955 and 1905 suggests that feminist mobilization has always been increased by greater globalization." (p. 4). The establishment of the United Nations, for example, allowed women to create Women in Development (WID), which created an international platform for discourse on women's issues.

There are, however, some setbacks. A significant critique addresses the power structures technology can create and reinforce (Thussu, 2002; Ebrahim, 2001; Ferree & Pudrovska, 2006). Understanding how power structures influence communication is important for this research, as UN Women is positioned as an organization that possesses expertise on women's issues. The

use of a website, which is the predominant form of communication for the Beijing+20 campaign, allows UN Women to establish these structures of power over vast distances (Thussu, 2002). Organizations, like the UN, have the resources to create and control discourse through a channel like a website that only has a one-way flow of information. Thus, communication through these information channels can be distorted to fit the view of the organization that controls the technology (Thussu, 2002).

A major critique within feminist thought is that power inequalities are strengthened through ownership of technology. This in turn perpetuates less diversity in communication and the dissemination of discourse (Ebrahim, 2001; Ferree & Pudrovska, 2006). Ebrahim (2001) explains that the modernization of communication has meant that the global South is constantly trying to catch up to the global North, which has more control on the development and infrastructure of technology. Not only does this result in a lack of diversity in the messages being disseminated (Ferree & Pudrovska, 2006), it also affects the types of messages being discussed (Darmon, 2014).

The implications of message control are serious for NGOs. Many NGOs use forms of communication like the internet, because it is seen as a more unmediated form of communication (Ferree, 2006). However the reality is inequalities in power can move quite easily into the online sphere. Western-based NGO's are especially impacted by these power inequalities online. The creators of these messages assume that their lived experiences and needs apply to all, regardless of culture or historical context (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1996; Thussu, 2002; Chow, 1991; Hemment, 2004; Mohanty, 2003). By making this assumption, an organization may communicate in a way that denies and

excludes differences in society (Thussu, 2006). This is particularly problematic for organizations like UN Women, whose main goal is to promote gender equality within all UN member states, not just Western UN member states.

Another feminist critique addresses how organizations that control technology also influence development discourse, perpetuating inequalities between countries (Ebrahim, 2001; Snyder, 2006; Tripp, 2006). Within this context, development discourse refers to the discussion of issues and factors affecting developing, or non-first world, nations (Thussu, 2002). There is an assumption in Western feminism that the term development is synonymous with economic factors – a problematic assumption as it takes for granted the idea that all women have the same needs (Mohanty, 1988). These inequalities of thought and discourse are apparent in organizations like the United Nations, which may impose Western gendered stereotypes onto nations that may hold different beliefs (Snyder, 2006). For example, womens' movements within some African nations may have a particular philosophy or goal that differs from Western ideologies; yet, Western goals are often privileged (Tripp, 2006; Mama, 1997).

Power Relationships Between the North and South

A major implication of technological inequalities is that these power structures perpetuate difference. This difference is highlighted in the discourse that is communicated by powerful organizations and the realities of experience felt by the communities being discussed. The concept of difference has been highlighted by many scholars through the idea of the global North and the global South. The global North and the global South is a non-geographic global divide constructed by factors like race, class, economics, and politics. Traditionally, the global North includes North America, Western Europe, and developed countries

in East Asia (Mimiko, 2012). The global South refers to “third world” nations: traditionally in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East (Mimiko, 2012). There is constant tension between the global North and South as scholarship illustrates a tendency of people from the global North to assume the experiences most prevalent to them are most prevalent to all (Spivak, 1996; Mohanty, 1988; Accad, 1991).

Broadly speaking, these differences are usually highlighted through economic progress, with Western feminists and Western-based organizations assuming that economic policies will promote the most change in society (Mohanty, 1988; Accad, 1991). Within scholarship on the North and South, there is an overriding assumption from the global North that all women, regardless of race, culture, and age, have the same needs (Mohanty, 1988). The concept of economic progress improving society was prevalent in Accad’s (1991) study on women’s rights in the Middle East. The study highlighting that Western and Middle Eastern women had very different experiences and thoughts on what would promote gender equality. Middle Eastern women wanted to tackle issues such as sexuality, patriarchy and imperialism, while Western feminists believed tackling economic factors would be more helpful (Accad, 1991). Likewise, this discourse was mirrored in Essen & Johnsdotter’s (2015) study on reproductive rights in India, which found that Indian surrogates felt empowered by the experience as they were freed from the cycle of patriarchy. This feeling of empowerment was in complete contrast to the Western NGO’s view of the issue, which saw it as exploitation at the highest level (Essen & Johnsdotter, 2015).

The assumptions within northern discourse are also highlighted through scholarly work and conferences (Tripp, 2006; Johnson-Odin, 1991; Hemment,

2004). In 1975 at UN Women's Mexico conference, Southern delegates accused Northern delegates of ignoring the needs of the South (Tripp, 2006). It was only in the early 1990s that Southern delegates of such conferences were able to broaden the agenda beyond economic policies (Johnson-Odin, 1991) with Hemment (2004) describing the topic of violence against women as one that began to galvanize support from both sides, because it covered a broad range of issues and practices.

While Western-based NGOs are starting to grasp the fact that there are differences in experience, opinion and needs among women, the disconnect between North and South is particularly problematic alongside the evolution of technology because the control of technology is skewed, which influences discourse (Thussu, 2002). Western NGOs may be more willing to address the issues deemed important by the South, but organizations and elites from Western nations still have better access and resources in regards to technology (Snyder, 2006). The control of resources raises questions about control over what is being communicated, and how. This is an important idea to raise during analysis of the Beijing+20 website, because it highlights that the experiences of those contributing to discourse on the Beijing+20 website will be heavily influenced by the society they grew up in, which has also been heavily influenced by technology.

Constructing and Communicating the "Other"

Control over what is communicated and how it is communicated has serious implications. Views within society are being molded according to similar viewpoints (Chow, 1991; Essen & Johnsdotter, 2015; Hyde, 2000). The norms of those in power become entrenched over time and assumed as normal and ideal,

despite the multiple views and experiences of those minority groups (Chow, 1991; Ebrahim, 2001; Hyde, 2001). This concept, the assimilation of entrenched norms by those in power, is known as othering.

Othering is closely related to North and South discourses in that Western thought is prevalent, and considered the societal norm, regardless of the experiences faced by those from non-Western countries or cultures. Edward Said describes othering as the act of making disparaging distinctions between societies (Mazrui, 2005). Using the relationship between the West and the East as an example, Said (1979) describes othering as creating ideological and derogatory distinctions between societies. Within academia, Said (1979) proposes that the study of the other is used as a means to reinforce domination of Western thought. Othering, therefore, is deeply rooted in colonialism. The process reinforces the position of those in power (often the West), while excluding all people or groups who do not fit into particular social groups (Said, 1985).

A key indicator of othering is the way third world nations are compared to Western nations. In this instance, particularly within the media, Western nations are described as the ideal, while third world nations are described as “poor” or “monstrous” (Chow, 1991; Ong, 1988; Mohanty, 1988). Chow (1991) described this as “King Kong Syndrome” – a cross-cultural phenomenon in which the events or issues in a third world or developing nation are seen as monstrous in comparison to Western nations. When non-Western women try to add their experiences to global dialogues, particularly on feminist issues, their thoughts are often excluded from mainstream discussion. This exclusion often happens because they do not fit with what is considered normal by the media. This was

also observed by Ong (1988) who states: “When feminists look overseas, they frequently seek to establish their authority on the backs of non-Western women, determining for them the meanings and goals of their lives.” (p. 80).

This exclusion often happens because historical and cultural context is not considered. Additionally very little is done to represent a hollistic picture of women’s issues internationally (Gajjala, Zhang & Dako-Gyeke, 2010; Njambi, 2004; Kwaak, 1992). This is particularly prevalent in health issues like Female Genital Mutilation which is portrayed as an issue in which the third world woman is the oppressed “victim” and the Western interventionist is the liberator (Gajjala et al., 2010; Njambi, 2004). The way media and NGOs frame FGM is starkly different from the experience Njambi (2004) had, stating that not only was her circumcision practiced by a medically trained nurse, the broader cultural context was a celebration of womanhood, not a degradation. The cultural context of issues is important because without it negative stereotypes are encouraged. Events and cultural practices do not happen in isolation, yet the process of othering does just this – it looks at issues without considering the factors that have historically shaped it. This was highlighted by Kwaak (1992) whose study on FGM highlighted how differently people viewed the issue depending on culture:

“A Dutch friend with whom I disussed this paper said what struck her most about the practice of infibulation was the fact it was so unnatural. But a friend in Somalia thought it was Western women who were unnatural: unpleasant to see and touch. First, they had hair on their arms and legs; second they did not cover their hair and thirdly she showed

great disbelief concerning the fact that Western women still had their ugly genitalia and public hair.” (p. 781).

The concept of othering, however, is not relegated to individuals or even organizations like United Nations. It is also prominent in the media and in academia. With some scholars stating there is a tendency to study the “other”, shifting the attention away from problems or issues within Western society (Shome, 2006; Arat-Koc, 2002). American media portrayals of the war on terror shifted attention away from national issues and reaffirmed Western superiority (Arat-Koc, 2002) creating an atmosphere of ignorance. This was particularly felt in terms of race-based attacks and threats of civil liberties, which were justified in the name of national security and ignored by media who continued to focus on the “other” – the women of Afghanistan. Focusing on the other is incredibly problematic as it means the norm of society (often whiteness) is left unquestioned and free from scrutiny (Shome, 2006). Such socially constructed norms are then reemphasized, maintained, and left unquestioned. It is only by questioning these norms and modes of power that the way people communicate can begin to change.

The concept of othering is important in this study because it highlights how important context and culture is when communicating ideas. These common sense norms, which are often entrenched in Western ideals, are not necessarily created or articulated intentionally. But the fact these ideas are being communicated highlights the ways those in power continue to perpetuate harmful, inaccurate, ideas.

Communicating Colonialism and Western Messages

Socially constructed norms between Western and non-Western groups are often grounded in colonialism. Historically, colonialism refers to people from non-Western and non-European countries that were forcibly settled (Said, 1989). It has since come to refer to the constructions of power, which the world is made up of. In this instance some people are assumed as better and some people assumed as lesser or underdeveloped (Mohanty, 2003; Said, 1989). A significant issue with colonialism is that it is often not spoken about (Said, 1985; Tripp, 2006). This unwillingness to address colonialism is apparent in the social and academic worlds (Said, 1985) and sits alongside an assumption that the emancipation of women started in the west and moved outward (Tripp, 2006). This may be reflected in the practices and communication of Western-based NGOs which assume that it is their job to influence and free those within non-Western nations. The reality is influence is multidirectional, particularly in transnational organizations, and feminists and NGOs can learn from other cultures despite having different goals or agendas (Tripp, 2006).

More often than not, colonialism is highlighted by difference (Said, 1989; Mohanty, 2003), with Said (1989) describing colonized people as “a great many different, but inferior, things, in many different places, at many different times.” (p. 207). Historically, this is reflected in British colonization. Those in power emphasized authority through differences which, over time, entrenched the idea that white men were superior to others (Mohanty, 2003).

Within feminist movements, the use of difference to separate groups of people sits alongside the tendency to appropriate the experiences of non-Western women, particularly by white feminist movements (Mohanty, 2003; Bacchetta,

Campt, Grewal, Kaplan, Moallem & Terry, 2002). For example, in mainstream Western media Afghan women are represented as victims of a violent Taliban regime, without identifying the violence faced by the same women due to European colonization (Bacchetta et al., 2002). This is an issue because the aim of Western-based NGOs is often to represent women from a range of countries and cultures. Reducing women to one homogenous group means the ability of these organizations to actually provide adequate services is also reduced.

A major critique within colonialism is that Western media often reduces non-Western groups of women, identifying them only by their “victim” or “oppressed” status (Bacchetta et al., 2002; Mishra, 2007; Gajjala et al, 2010; Mama, 1997). When discussing FGM, African women who have undergone the practice are framed according to their oppressed status (Gajjala et al., 2010; Mama, 1997). Similarly, following 9/11 Saudi women in Western press were commonly portrayed as oppressed victims who needed to be rescued by the liberal West. This representation was in direct contradiction to the way they were portrayed in Arab newspapers, which depicted Saudi women as models of morality (Mishra, 2007). The issue with reducing women to one-dimensional characters like the “victim” or the “oppressed” assumes not only that the issues faced by women globally are the same, but that the solutions to these issues are also the same. For example, Western feminists’ solutions to violence against women in Africa are the same as they are in the West for white, middle class women (Mishra, 2007). These assumptions do not take into account the fact that countries have different diverse political and structural systems. Some countries don’t have adequate welfare systems for housing, or structural systems that provide the same level of protection or legal support needed (Mishra, 2007).

Through the discourses of colonialism, north and south and othering, it is clear there are issues in the way women and women's issues are being represented. Within international NGOs, this discourse is what Mohanty (2003) describes as a global sisterhood. Global sisterhood assumes all women are a homogenous group with the same ideas and experiences (Mohanty, 2003). This homogenous group is often based on Western feminist ideals, without taking into account the historical context of culture.

Transnational Feminism

Because it is clear that the way women are being represented is inaccurate and exclusionary, particularly across culture and geography, the use of transnational feminism plays a vital role. According to Alexander & Mohanty (1997), transnational feminism is a way to advocate and communicate the needs of women in a global context, understanding that relationships are unequal. In this context, women are not a homogenized group. Complicating women's experiences and issues creates productive social relationships between women, borders, and cultures (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997).

The way women are represented is important, because as it stands there are large groups of women whose cultural and historical identities are being ignored and excluded. Drawing from transnational feminism, this current study examines how discourse uncovers the complex forces that make up representation (Said, 1989) like culture, class, gender, and race. Transnational feminist critiques challenge the problematic assumption that all women share the same experiences (Mama, 1997; Mohanty, 2003). Homogenous representations assume that women all share similar experiences, outlooks and have access to the same resources (Mama, 1997). While transnational feminism

often focuses on the use of language that homogenizes or reduces experience, some scholars state that this is becoming less evident in language with the introduction of intersectionality (Patil, 2013).

Mohanty (2003) says in Western feminist groups and NGOs homogeneity is often indicated through quality of life indicators. These indicators may provide information on a woman's fertility or life expectancy but neglects to provide context to a woman's life. Rather than providing cultural context or meaning, these indicators privilege white Western expectations of experience. Privileging certain experiences then makes representation of femininity homogenous. How people are represented may actually hinder or completely exclude a particular group (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997; Shome, 2011). For organizations like UN Women, which have a significant audience and influence on global policy, it is vital that they create messages that represent various experiences of women.

Often when ideas are homogenized, particularly in health issues, there is an image of a "global motherhood" in which white women are positioned as the global mothers of popular culture and feminism (Shome, 2011). This global motherhood is represented in a number of ways, from celebrities adopting children based in developing nations to the introduction of UN goodwill ambassadors. The image of a global motherhood is predominant in NGO communication. Illness in children from "other nations" often breeds the assumption that these children are unhealthy, because they are not exposed to modern medicine, which translates to a non-modern nation (Shome, 2011). Because the homogenization of thought, culture, and history of women is so predominant in the media and in communication, having a transnational feminist framework is a vital way to highlight not only what is being said, but what is not

being said (Bacchetta et al., 2002; Arat-Koc, 2002). The homogenization of thought and exclusion of experience is apparent not only in mainstream media, but also in NGO's communication strategies.

Transnational feminism provides insight when studying organizations like UN Women because women's issues are not issues that only concern the third world (Snyder, 2006). Development, for example, is no longer a "third world" issue, but a women's issue (Snyder, 2006). Despite the success of the 1995 Beijing conference, Tripp (2006) says there has been "uninterest" in continuing with the goals made during the conference, with countries like the United States stopping the endorsement of the Platform of Action. This complacency is primarily due to the fact that organizations like the United Nations only need to serve developing countries, when the reality is all nations can benefit as many societies share similar problems (Tripp, 2006). In a practical sense, the use of transnational organizations like the United Nations provides a useful way to bring women together within a common platform. The current issue is that the discourse coming from those common platforms is not always representative of the people and issues being discussed. In saying that, transnational organizations have significant potential as it provides the ability to network and frame policy and social concerns globally (Ferree & Pudrovska, 2006).

Since the late 1980s there has been a shift in feminist thought. Some feminist scholars have shifted from a second-wave feminist thought that focused on women's roles in the public sphere, reproductive rights, and legal inequalities. The rise of the third wave of feminism focused on the diversity of womanhood ushered, in part, through the emergence of intersectionality. The concept of

intersectionality also serves as a way to challenge and add to transnational feminist understandings. Scholars have defined intersectionality through the identification of individual binaries. These binaries are present within social life and influence the way individuals experience the world. Binaries are not isolated, rather they will intersect and influence the way individuals create and maintain meaning (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005). It is these social binaries, in conjunction with lived experience and culture, that shapes the way a person understands and lives in the world.

When these binaries intertwine with social systems, or structures of power, processes of oppression and privilege are shaped (Hankivsky, 2014). These factors ultimately have a significant impact on people. Particularly if differences within groups of people are ignored, as it promotes ignorance and effectively renders people and their needs invisible (Crenshaw, 1991; Havinsky, 2014). These intersections can be structural, political or representational in nature, and will affect all people differently based on their own lived experiences (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Additionally, it is important to note that binaries such as race, ethnicity, class, and culture not only intersect, but are formed within transnational power processes – like globalization and imperialism (Patil, 2013).

For example, violence against women is not an issue solely affected by gender, it is also influenced by race and class (Crenshaw, 1991; Gajjala et al., 2010; Hemment, 2004; Mama, 1997). When Crenshaw (1991) visited a woman's shelter to study violence against women, she found that the shelter was solely addressing the issue of violence, not taking into consideration the other factors that encouraged routinized domination – such as poverty, job prospects, and

child care responsibilities. The result being that shelter strategies developed to intervene in these women's lives were not as effective as they could have been, because they did not holistically address the source of violence and reasons for staying in a violent relationship (Crenshaw, 1991). By understanding the complexities and potential burdens of these intersections, we can better understand the feminist critiques of the United Nations' attempts' to raise awareness of women's issues.

Intersectionality provides further insight into feminist theory by addressing the need to acknowledge that lived experience is diverse and complicated. Many Black feminists critique Western feminisms, because they ultimately exclude or misinterpret these intersections in society (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1996; Crenshaw, 1989; Hurtado, 1989; King, 1988). These critiques state that Western feminist theory is often created by white, educated women and is based on those experiences – meaning the experiences of women who do not fit into this category are often absent from feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Hurtado, 1989). Because of the lack of diversity in some mainstream feminist theory, Black feminist critique focuses on the necessity in addressing all oppressions, not just gender or race (Crenshaw, 1989; King, 1988; Richie, 2000). According to King (1988), freedom for women will only happen when all intersections are addressed:

“I work for liberation of all people because when I liberate myself, I'm liberating other people... her [the white woman's] freedom is shackled in chains to mine, and she realizes for the first time that she's not free until I am free.” (p. 1988).

In addressing intersectionality, liberal feminism has shifted to include a radical critique. Black feminists have highlighted how the experiences of Black women are assumed to be synonymous with Black males or white females (King, 1988). While Black women do share common concerns with other women of color and white women, the assumption that all women share the same concerns denies cultural complexities and structural inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989; King, 1988). Because of these cultural complexities and structural inequalities, an understanding of intersectionality is important in transnational feminism because it highlights the intricacies of lived experience. Some critics state that historically there has been an assumption that all women are white, and all Black people are men (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Because of these gender and race binaries some groups of marginalized people not only face multiple oppressions, but are ignored in the process (Crenshaw, 1989). Yuval-Davis (2006) states that in Britain, Black women often face triple oppression – along the binaries of race, gender, and class. Each of those factors have a different objective, social, and philosophical basis. Importantly, these social categories do not always transcend culture, with Yuval Davis (2006) stressing that some binaries maybe be emphasized more than others according to the culture and society in question.

Intersectionality is particularly important when looking at the context of political and social structures – both nationally and internationally. According to transnational feminists, there is a tendency within the media and transnational organizations to overlook national issues – instead focussing on the other, often third-world, woman (Arat Koc, 2002; Brah & Phoenix, 2004). This tendency to focus on the “other” is particularly seen in conflict and war discourse. With communicators turning the gaze away from the self in an attempt to affirm self-

superiority and remove attention from national issues (Arat Koc, 2002). This is often highlighted by the plight of immigrant women during times of war. According to Bacchetta et al (2002), immigrants during times of conflict often face increased domestic violence, public scrutiny and social isolation. The situation worsens for undocumented immigrant women who may not garner sympathy from those in authority “unless her assailant fits the profile of an ‘Islamic fundamentalist’” (Bacchetta et al., p. 304). Likewise, after 9/11, while the gaze was focussed on the Iraq war, a lot of policies in the United States were justified in the name of national security despite the fact they put many people at risk. These policies, which were mostly ignored by the media, prompted race-based attacks and threats on civil liberties (Arat Koc, 2002).

Informed by these bodies of scholarship on technology and development, north and south discourses, othering, colonialism and transnational feminism, I have developed three research questions. These questions will help further knowledge of the way international women’s issues are presented through UN Women’s Beijing+20 campaign.

- **RQ1:** How are women portrayed on the Beijing+20 website regarding the campaign’s discourse on health and violence?
- **RQ2:** How may Beijing+20’s discussion of “gender equality” be represented through traditional Western feminist definitions or perceptions of womanhood?
- **RQ3:** How does UN Women reinforce or challenge images of women as “the other” on the Beijing+20 campaign website?

The original Beijing conference was seen in polarizing ways – on the one hand a landmark moment for international women’s rights, on the other hand as

a further enforcement of Western ideas and values. Because of this polarization it is important to discover whether the criticisms found within literature are still apparent in discourse from UN Women.

The first research question aims to discover how women are represented within the areas of health and violence in relation to transnational feminism. This question is important as it identifies how, and if, women are still being represented in a way that may not necessarily apply to all women. My second research question discusses the representation of the idea of “gender equality.” Literature shows that women from the global North and global South have very different interpretations of what constitutes gender equality. Women of the global north tend to focus on pay and job equity, while women in the global south focus more on social issues like race and class. Because UN Women is an international organization that aims to meet the needs of women internationally, it is important to discover how gender equality is being represented, so transnational organizations can actively work towards definitions that are inclusive.

As evidenced in the above literature there is an extensive history that shows a tendency to “other” people or nations when Western feminists and organizations do not agree with or understand the issues affecting them. My third research question, therefore, focuses on discovering whether this process of othering is still prevalent. These questions will highlight whether women’s complexities are still being stripped, and how we may better represent women and their needs. Because organizations like UN Women have such a significant influence on global politics and agenda, it is important to examine whether it

represents women in a diverse way or whether they continue to rely on stereotypes or common sense norms.

IV. Methodology

Transnational feminism suggests that the voices attempting to speak for women on an international scale do not have a grasp on the cultural and societal complexities within those issues. By critically examining the texts distributed by UN Women for the Beijing+20 campaign I have uncovered the ways in which women, and women's issues, are being represented. I have also uncovered whether these portrayals contribute to, or challenge, the current stereotypes of women within certain cultures. It is important to understand that homogenizing women's rights and issues across cultures can be more problematic than helpful. Homogenization is problematic because the policy changes and general understanding that result from those generalizations are not always truly representative of the people these organizations are attempting to personify. By understanding the strengths and weaknesses in an organization's discourse, we can create methods for better representing groups of women, helping people in the long term through action and policy that is representative of their needs.

The aim of this research was to discover how campaign discourse represents women, particularly in regards to the issues of health, violence and gender equality. The study uses textual analysis to critically analyze text and visual elements – including video and photography. This analysis focuses on the above mentioned topics on the Beijing+20 website: beijing20.unwomen.org. It is important to note that the text created by UN Women not only refers to consciously-created representations, but also messages created and accepted as a cultural norm, a part of the cultural fabric of society (Fairclough, 2003). The benefit of such analysis is that it offers the opportunity to look beyond explicit

meanings and to read and interpret deeply, hopefully achieving moments of “deep play” (Fairclough, 2003). Furisch (2009) states interpretation moves analysis beyond surface level discovery to crucial insight: “It is in these moments which text takes on a life of its own, often in ambiguities, unresolved dichotomies, or contradictions, where the textual critic finds crucial insights,” (p. 245). There is a uniqueness to textual analysis, as any cultural practice or product can be analyzed as a text (Furisch, 2009). This form of analysis is important as it allows the researcher to look beyond the intentions of the author to look at the underlying cultural assumptions of society. This research evaluated not only the explicit meanings of texts, but also the underlying implicit meanings, which highlight the assumptions within social life or culture.

Because this research analyzed various forms of representation, the use of textual analysis also offers new insight into the way NGO public relations practitioners develop websites to represent the issues of their organizations. According to Phillipov (2013), while the relationship between social structures and texts is complex, textual analysis can inform and contribute to our understanding of a phenomenon. This is because it highlights relationships between the genres and the agents that create those texts. Using textual analysis ultimately led to a deeper insight in how the relationships within the texts influenced meaning.

Research methods that provide the opportunity to discover meaning are particularly important in research using transnational feminism. The Western ideal is often communicated through the implicit assumptions of Western women being “normal” and the othering of non-Western countries and cultures. Whether media producers are aware of the influence they have or not, media

texts are a form of representation that identify popular beliefs and ideologies at that moment in time (Fursich, 2009). Sometimes representation is highlighted through cultural ideologies; sometimes it is by bringing trends to the forefront. What is key here is to understand whether common language and themes within Western feminism are being used to represent all women and groups of people, and whether these dominant cultural ideologies are still prominent within media text.

There are three ways in which discourse is apparent: 1) in ways of acting, 2) in ways of representing, and 3) in ways of being (Fairclough, 2003). Because discourse is apparent in multiple ways, text is multi-functional and simultaneously represents different parts of the world. It can represent the physical world (how we act), the social world (representation that is part of social practices), and the mental world (how people think and make meaning). For example, within the text of Beijing+20's discourse articles often articulated various levels of meaning. On the one hand a text was able to represent physical ways of being, or actions, but those actions also highlighted the social practices or meaning that shaped those physical actions. According to Fairclough (2003) it is only by looking at all of these factors that researchers can understand the meaning of each text, its relation to other texts, and the greater phenomenon being studied. By looking at discourse in these three ways I was able to analyze and discover how Beijing+20 discourse contributed to, and maintained, larger structural phenomenon.

Data

Because this study is focusing on the campaign website as a source of information for journalists and the public, I directed my research to areas of the

website that serve audiences by providing information. These are sections of the website which provide information on the Beijing platform and its goals to UN Women's various publics. This includes sections of the website that provide information on the Beijing+20 campaign, advocates for the campaign, and UN-related initiatives being promoted. Within the website there are three main sections that cover these areas that this study will focus on: In Focus, Voices and Profiles, and News.

According to Cresswell (2014) it is important to be purposeful in the identification of texts to analyze. For this reason, I have decided to study only a selection of topics available on the Beijing+20 campaign website, rather than all topics available. Within the sections of In Focus, Voices and Profiles, and News, I looked at texts related to health, violence and gender equality. These topics are identified through UN Women's filing system on the website.

The campaign website for Beijing+20 officially launched in April 2014 and the campaign itself ran for the entire year of 2015. For the purposes of this study, I will be analyzing texts from June 6, 2013 – the date the first news article about Beijing+20 was published – to December 31, 2015, the last day of the 20th year since the 1995 Beijing conference. A total of 235 pieces of text were analyzed: a range of videos, news articles, images and image captions. Divided into categories, 39 pieces of text were related to gender equality, 78 pieces of text were related to health, and 118 pieces of text were related to violence and conflict.

All text was downloaded, catalogued, and saved to an external hard drive. The text was then analyzed according to the themes informed by my literature review, using a constant comparative method of inductive coding. Inductive

coding is the best method as it allows relationships and themes between the text and the research questions to emerge according to the literature, without being restricted by pre-set codes (Thomas, 2003). According to Glaser (1965), the constant comparative method of textual analysis is not necessarily designed to ensure that people working independently with the same data will achieve the same results. Rather it is designed to allow for flexibility within the process of analysis, while still maintaining rigor and discipline (Glaser, 1965).

Once text was downloaded and catalogued I began my analysis, using Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg & Coleman's (2000) description of constant comparative method of textual analysis in mind. As I analyzed texts I highlighted patterns and themes, which were relevant to my research questions and my literature. As themes began to emerge I began to constantly compare these codes with previously coded texts, eventually creating broader categories of information. Once all 235 pieces of text had been coded I repeated this process two more times to ensure validity. Coding and then categorizing these groups allowed me to conceptualize my data (Dye et al., 2000). This step is important particularly for research that is based in feminist theory because it is dynamic – this type of coding allowed me to uncover social and structural processes at multiple levels (Wuest, 1995). Much like textual analysis, transnational feminist theory understands that there are many explanations of reality. Because of this my goal while coding and analyzing was to account for the core variables, or meanings, within the text. At the same time I am aware that my own interpretation of these texts is highly influenced by my own lived experience and the literature in this research. Throughout this process I documented my work with an audit trail –

recording all decisions and actions made before and during my research. This was to ensure credibility and rigor.

V. Findings and Analysis

After analyzing 235 pieces of text from the Beijing+20 website – in the form of news articles, short videos, images, and image captions two major themes were identified: 1) conceptions of private and public dichotomies within the discourse of culture and tradition, and 2) communicating health and violence through culture. The first theme looks at the way women are positioned within culture and tradition, particularly in terms of their roles in the public and private spheres. The second theme looks at the way discourse homogenizes experience in regards to health and violence topics – emphasizing the Western viewpoint as ideal and “normal” compared to other views. While the discourse is not as polarizing as previous studies of a similar nature, it shows that there are still undercurrents of thought that shape the way we think about women.

After analyzing discourse on the website, it is clear that UN Women takes a liberal feminist stance in Beijing+20 discourse. Liberal feminism is identified based on the idea that freedom is attained through personal and political autonomy (Patil, 2013). This branch of feminism is based on the idea that everyone is created equal, therefore all deserve equal rights. This stance can be problematic at times because assuming everyone is equal may imply that women, and people in general, have the same needs. Minority feminisms state that men and women cannot be equal, and by assuming so you ignore the unique needs women have, such as reproductive rights. Additionally, a liberal feminist stance tends to focus on women’s roles in the public sphere – as is seen in Beijing+20’s discourse. A minority feminist stance suggests that any issues women face must be changed at the core – which often means making changes in

the private sphere before attempting to make larger social or legislative changes (Patil, 2013).

Using the framework of transnational feminism while discussing these findings further reveals the dichotomies between the West and non-West. As literature suggests, the reality is that many diverse societies share similar problems (Tripp, 2006; Snyder, 2006). Hand in hand with this understanding is the fact that while women can share similar problems or concerns, they are also shaped by other contextual elements such as culture, race, and class (Crenshaw, 1989; King, 1988). The importance of context needs to be noted because there is a tendency in this discourse to overlook the structural factors that shape the lives of women. Text is never innocent, rather it is shaped according to cultural norms (Aiello, 2006). Because of this it is important to identify and isolate ideologies which have been normalized over time and have the potential to be problematic.

Conceptions of Private/Public Dichotomies

The use of tradition as a backdrop for discussions on gender equality, health, and violence is used widely throughout the text of Beijing+20. The discussion of culture and tradition is particularly evident when discussing the public and private dichotomies of women. The findings below, therefore, highlight how conceptions of the private and public sphere shape the campaign's discourse of "tradition". According to the United Nations, tradition refers to the historical culture, religion, and practices of a country (United Nations Population Information Network, n.d.). As scholarship has indicated, the implication of the word tradition often suggests "non-modern" (Thussu, 2002; Jamal, 2005). As a

result, the assumption is that tradition and modernity are somehow at odds (Jamal, 2005).

These findings suggest that women are portrayed as empowered figures breaking traditional notions attached to public life. Specifically, the campaign employed particular examples of women breaking “traditional” gendered norms through their professions. Thus, for the campaign, gender equality functions in the form of challenging patriarchy through the promotion of the public sphere, which is represented by labor. This is particularly important because a campaign like Beijing+20 is a reflection and representation of UN Women’s goals, and assumptions, about the plight and experiences of women (Ferree & Pudrovska, 2006).

The push to break tradition in a career often is represented as being fraught with difficulty (UN Women 2014a; UN Women, 2014f; UN Women, 2014i). A lawyer from Mali, Saran’s choice of career was portrayed by UN Women as difficult because her “career path in a traditional society was not an easy one” (UN Women, 2014f). In describing a society as traditional, there is an implication that a society is opposite of modern, and in turn inferior to “modern” developed and Western nations. In this example, therefore, breaking tradition does not just refer to the public sphere but to the assumptions the campaign communicates regarding a particular culture.

Much of the discourse in the Beijing+20 campaign emphasized the duty or obligation women have to better the lives of women in their respective countries (UN women, 2015a; UN Women, 2014a; UN Women, 2013). Women who are fighting tradition by entering the workforce are resisting a community expectation that their labor belongs at home (UN Women, 2014f; UN Women,

2014i; UN Women, 2014j; UN Women, 2014k). Thus, these public figures are presented as empowered subjects who also empower and serve other women. For example, Dr. Habiba Sarabi describes her experience as a doctor as mainly positive despite the people who “undermine” her work and “utter baseless statements such as women should have nothing to do with politics” (UN Women, 2014k). For Lieutenant Colonel Wafa Khaleel Ayyad Muammar, entering the workforce in a non-traditional way has also meant sacrifice:

“Society still believes in traditional jobs for women, like teaching, while the Police Service is perceived as a community of males, which represents power and strength, where a woman will have to give up some of her femininity in order to fit into such a force. When I started going to the street in uniform it brought remarks, comments, or even accusations. In the office, men tended to look down on us. They kept us in the office, doing clerical work, archiving. They did not trust or believe in our capacities to take action and responsibility. The Police Service is a sample of the bigger society, with its traditions, its understandings.” (UN Women, 2014i).

Lieutenant Colonel Wafa Muammar is identified as the highest-ranking female officer in the Palestinian police force. UN Women writes that Muammar became a police officer “in spite of societal pressure to give up on her dream to serve the country through her work” (UN Women, 2014i). Muammar’s experience highlights the role that public and private dichotomies play in the life of a woman. While a woman might never be completely excluded from public life, the role of women in that sphere is often relegated to “women’s work” – particularly jobs that involve childcare and clerical work (Pateman, 1983). The role of

Palestinian women in the workforce is highlighted in a 2013 Labor Force Survey released by PCBS. According to the report, 17.3 percent of women in Palestine are in paid employment yet they make up 59.3 percent of the services sector (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

When a woman takes a job that may traditionally be seen as a male profession, she is assumed to be breaking tradition. Here, Beijing+20 challenges normalized gendered norms in the public sphere. By encouraging women to enter non-traditional professions, UN Women is communicating its stance on women in the workforce. What this discourse ignores is the neoliberal policies that have permeated Palestine and surrounding areas since the 1990s. The implementation of neoliberal reforms, particularly since the United States' occupation of Iraq, has been seen as a way for the Palestinian Authority to control international economic interests and encourage foreign investments (Khalidi & Samour, 2011). United States, Israeli, and European governments have supported these reforms. While neoliberalism does positively impact many groups of people in power, it often negatively affects women because it impacts sectors of the public sphere women are predominantly present (Cornwall, Gideon, & Wilson, 2008). Areas like the services sector, when faced with privatization, can result in informalization of work and low wages (Cornwall et al., 2008).

Another example of a woman breaking traditionally gendered norms is Commanding Officer of the Jamaican Coast Guard, Antonette Wemyss-Gorman. She says that when she first joined the coast guard all women were relegated to supporting office and clerical work. It was this realization that drove her away from traditional women's work: "when I realized women were only serving in

support roles it kind of drove me to say no, I do not want to do that. If I am going to be in the military I am going to be a soldier.” (UN Women, 2014p). Likewise, Captain Bontou Soumah of the Guinean Navy highlights the way women’s work is changing in her community, stating “women have to work inside and outside the home these days to make ends meet. I have been lucky to have the support of my husband in my endeavors, but some women are not so lucky.” (UN Women, 2015e). As seen in Figure 1, Sanchaita Gajapati Raju, founder of the NGO, Social Awareness Newer Alternatives (SANA), is depicted as a woman who has chosen to break traditional norms. The depiction of Raju, moving into the public sphere in spite of her culture, is evident when she says “irrespective of gender, I can follow the path I choose”.



Figure 1: Sanchaita Gajapati Raju, founder of Social Awareness Newer Alternatives (SANA).

The idea of choice is important to highlight, because it implies that women have the “choice” (and responsibility) to break gendered norms and follow their own path. The idea of choice also suggests that it may be easy for a woman to enter the workforce if she wishes to do so. A survey of the workforce

in India found that while the economy is growing as a whole, increasing seven percent in 2011, participation of women in the public sphere fell by seven percent (Pande & Troyer Moore, 2015). This drop in economic participation rate is in spite of rising rates of education and a desire of women to enter the workforce. According to the same survey, over a third of women not in paid employment in India state they would like a job – this rises to nearly 50 percent of women in rural areas (Pande & Troyer Moore, 2015). This shows that even when women are educated, and willing to enter the workforce, their choice may be hindered by other structural factors.

Another example that illustrates the important language of choice is Captain Soumah who says she experienced “push back” when she wanted to become a soldier in the Navy. This push-back was primarily due to cultural expectations, which only encouraged her to achieve her goals:

“Initially there was some push back, [they said] no, women cannot go to sea, you cannot serve on boats. Looking back at it, no, I do not think I really saw it as an obstacle, I saw it as a challenge. What do you mean I cannot serve at [sic] Coast Guard, why not?” (UN Women, 2015e).

The Beijing+20 campaign describes Soumah as a successful woman, despite being hindered by her culture: “Overcoming cultural restraints and living as she chooses to do, she has been nicknamed the ‘Mother of the Guinean Navy’” (UN Women, 2015e). In this context, the word choice implies that the woman is liberated through her choices. This individualistic language focuses on the individual as the center of a society, perhaps dismissing alternative ideologies that focus more on a collective greater good (Yin, 2006). Like much liberalistic

discourse, the focus here is on individual change within the public sphere. This narrow focus does not take into account the patriarchal roots of inequality and will not necessarily change society at its core.

Josephine Namboze describes an obligation she feels in making sure women “were not discouraged from taking up professions exclusively held by men” (UN Women, 2015a). Likewise, police officer Sergeant Amelia de Jesus describes the sense of duty she feels through her occupation – particularly towards survivors of sexual violence (UN Women, 2014a). Citing personal duty, Dr. Krisana Kraisintu described her work, in developing and manufacturing AIDS medication, as something that was motivated by a sense of fairness to uphold basic human rights for all (UN Women, 2014b). Jatu Kaneh, a volunteer helping during the Ebola crisis, described her sense of duty as one that was motivated by love: “I am doing this [volunteering] for the love of my country, because no amount of money can be compared to the risk involved.” (UN Women, 2014d).

Some women describe personal anecdotes that illustrate how they have challenged patriarchal ideologies in male-dominated professions. Captain Soumah describes one of the first times she was deployed, when male soldiers tried to make her hand over the large signaling radio she was in charge of because they thought she was too small to carry it:

“I am joining the aircraft with my weapon and my radio and I am told no, I must hand over the weapon and radio to a male... I have been walking around with this radio for many weeks and now they are telling me to hand over this radio to a male soldier. I said ‘No, I am going’ and we were deployed.” (UN Women, 2015e).

These personal anecdotes are used by Beijing+20 to show how women

are empowered by challenging patriarchy. Highlighting the ways women challenge patriarchy was also evident in the experience of Liv Arneson. There were many men who did not believe Arneson had the physical capabilities to cross Antarctica solo — despite her years of experience — and Arneson found she had to challenge the derision that was expressed by men.

“I felt that I was moving into the men’s arena. Norway has had two women Prime Ministers and many women politicians. But even here, I felt like I should leave the ski poles to the men. I didn’t get one Norwegian sponsor... I was asked by men all of these questions: ‘Have you served in the military?’ ‘Have you pulled a sled?’” (UN Women, 2014q).

To challenge a more active role in the public sphere, Beijing+20 campaign discourse states a need for women’s active involvement in the public sphere and in policy to help further women’s issues on national and international platforms (Kachingwe, 2014; UN Women, 2014e). Thammy S.H. Chong, a youth leader from Malaysia, states that equality and women’s rights issues can be brought to the foreground “we just have to start working toward it” (UN Women, 2014g). This statement somewhat simplifies the plight of women fighting for gender equality and suggests that all women need to do is “work” to have women’s issues addressed. The importance of women leadership is particularly highlighted in terms of policy changes and political representation. Speaking at a UN Women conference, Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka states the importance of women working in the arenas: “political parties were asked to create more spaces, and women were encouraged to increasingly take on their role as forerunners of change” (UN Women, 2015d). The inclusion of women in leadership demonstrates how women can then “fix” any policy issues regarding gender equality. The reality is

even women in positions of power may face structural barriers or be influenced by contexts that men do not face (Brenner, 2007; Ebrahim, 2001). Saran Keita Diakite's experiences in international law have solidified the importance of including women and pushing for the active involvement in all spheres of policy:

“Women are at the heart of the matter,” Diakite says. “Their active involvement is absolutely obligatory, and I mean active. In all phases of crisis management women must be involved. A crisis managed without women is going to fail.” (UN Women, 2014r).

While it is important to recognize the changes happening in the public sphere, particularly in terms of politics and legislation, it is important to note that the woman's role in the private sphere should be equally recognized. It is the author's belief that women should be valued for the unique role they play in society, while understanding that there are inequalities between genders, and therefore, unique needs of both genders that should be addressed. Because of this, active involvement in policy is important, but a woman's role in the private sphere should not only be valued, but structurally changed to address inequalities in the public sphere.

Some women in the policy and legislative issues are influenced by their own life experiences. Fatou Bensouda says her experiences with survivors of sexual violence highlighted how important it was women had a voice in the public judicial system:

“As a young girl I recall witnessing countless courageous women – survivors of sexual and domestic violence – relive their ordeals through the court system... I knew from that moment that, through the force of the law, vulnerable groups in society and those whose rights have been

trampled upon must be protected and afforded a measure of justice”
(Bensouda, 2015).

Sanchaita Gahapati Raju describes the active involvement of women in the public sphere, particularly in law and policy, as a phenomenon that has a “multiplier effect” (UN Women, 2014e). That is, the involvement of women in positions of power advocating for other women will leverage areas of concern specific to women. From there laws and legislation can begin to change in a way that will better serve marginalized groups of people (Osman, 2014; UN Women, 2014e; UN Women, 2014f). At the heart of this is an understanding that women need to mobilize to produce change on a legislative level:

“It is clear that women will never again shy away from demanding their rights,” says Hibaaq Osman. “More than ever, they are mobilizing, working together in coalitions and across boundaries to lobby governments and institutions to change laws or better implement existing legislation.”
(Osman, 2014).

Going hand in hand with Beijing+20’s discourse on women in the public sphere is the understanding of the way larger structures – like the legal system – can influence women’s issues. Much of Beijing+20’s discourse on gender equality references the legal structures that influence, and can sometimes hinder, women. Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka states that this is because current legislation worldwide is unbalanced and in favor of men, saying that “discrimination in the law persists in many countries, particularly in the area of family law. This includes tolerance of harmful practices to women and girls” (UN Women, 2015c). This idea is backed up by an article on 20 November, 2014, which points to Palestinian laws being outdated and unable to be addressed because of the political uncertainty in the

region. This has resulted in “laws [that] are outdated or do not address current issues” particularly in regards to issues in domestic violence (UN Women, 2014m). While laws may be outdated in Palestine, another important factor is the structure of the family. The Hamula (extended family) is a common family unit in Palestine and highly influenced by a patriarchal structure that privileges male children over female children (Manasra, 1993). This patriarchal structure, which also influences legal policies, has started to change over the years producing an interesting dichotomy. The last 40 years has seen an emergence of women, and parents, placing an emphasis on education. Parents are beginning to encourage education as a way promote independence and self-sufficiency of women. At the same time, women have long involved themselves in politics. Not only do women make up 47 percent of voters, but they are also heavily involved in resistance movements within occupied territories (Hasso, 2006). This image of a modern Palestine is at direct odds with the “traditional” Palestine depicted in Beijing+20 discourse. A discourse that focuses on the stranglehold of Hamas in which women are banned from smoking hookah, and must adhere to strict standards of dress (Blomfield, 2010).

Though problems in the legal system are also present in areas where legal frameworks are in place, but are not effectively carried out or practiced. An update on Beijing in the last five years discussed the importance of ensuring that legal structures and policies are not only in place, but working effectively saying:

“It was noted that significant challenges remain in all countries, notably with respect to the effective implementation of existing legislation.

Constitutions, agreements, and policies that support women’s inclusion, participation, and equality make up only one piece of the puzzle; their

successful enforcement is a completely different animal, without which all other progress in this area is effectively rendered meaningless.” (Osman, 2014).

One way Beijing+20 identified improving the implementation of laws and policy is through the training of people who specialize in areas of the law that may particularly affect women. In the United Kingdom, this was done through a project with the UK Department of International Development where they undertook a three-year project to create and train a group of people within the justice system to help women survivors of violence obtain access to resources (UN Women, 2014m). This implies that all women experience the same issues in similar ways. What it does not recognize is how culture, class, race or religion may also influence the way women experience the world. These intersections are influential because they shape the way individuals and groups of people shape meaning. In the United Kingdom, for example, there is a large immigrant population. According to the latest UK census there were 7.5 million immigrants – the majority coming from the Irish Republic, India, Pakistan, Germany, Bangladesh, Poland, and Kenya (UK Statistics Authority, 2012). While immigrants acclimate to their new home, they are also heavily influenced by the cultures, practices, and religions they were raised in. The increase in globalization makes it very difficult for government bodies to create comprehensive policies that adequately address the needs of multiple groups of women. While there needs to be legislation in place to advocate for women, particularly with issues like domestic violence, it is important to understand that the issue is complex, and made more complex by these competing intersections. Simply training people to work with women may not be enough.

The above examples highlight the ways in which women are represented, showing that a significant amount of Beijing+20's discourse bases the concept of gender equality on opportunities in the public sphere. Rather than delving into the multitude of ways women are seeking gender equality, Beijing+20 chooses to focus on employment in the public sphere as a key indicator of gender equality. This narrow focus could potentially miss other important factors that also influence gender equality

Communicating Health and Violence through Culture

The concept of culture hindering women, or putting women at a disadvantage is closely related with the topic of health – particularly in the Beijing+20 campaign. In Beijing+20's opening statement on health, it is identified that while biology does play a role in health, other factors like social norms, politics, and economics also are significant. According to the campaign website, these health deterrents may come “in the form of the man in the family who sleeps alone under the household's only mosquito net. Or refuses to use condoms despite a high risk of transmitting HIV.” (UN Women, n.d).

According to feminist thought, the consistent comparison of developing or third world nations to Western nations can result in a discourse of othering. Western nations are held as the ideal while third world nations are described negatively, totalizing the experiences of people within a country or culture (Chow, 1991; Ong, 1988; Mohanty, 1988). The othering of women is apparent in the representation of health stories in which the campaign's discourse emphasizes the ways lack of education or “modern” medical equipment will hinder communities and countries. It is important at this point to note that requiring, or fighting for, things like modern medical equipment and facilities is

not necessarily an invalid request or goal. But UN Women discourse must attempt to address the complexities of these issues, rather than discussing incidents in isolation.

Health and culture. A major focus within Beijing+20 discourse in regards to health issue is India. In one such example, UN Women describes India as a country where the majority of people are “forced to defecate in public due to lack of much-needed sanitation facilities” (UN Women, 2014e). This blanket statement does not discuss why locals are forced to defecate in public – rather; the discourse implies this is happening because of a lack of logistical organization. Meanwhile a recent study found that even in areas of India where toilets are common, people still defecate outside because they preferred to do that than use a public or household toilet (Biswas, 2014). This suggests that even if toilets are available, organizations like UN Women also need to focus on the attitudes and beliefs of people in the communities.

Speaking on HIV and AIDS in Cambodia, Beijing+20 states that “discrimination against women living with HIV and AIDS is compounded by the lack of education and knowledge of the epidemic” in the country (UN Women, 2013b). While this may be true to some extent, this discourse also ignores the fact that many campaigns, including one by the Royal Government of Cambodia, have been put in place. These educational campaigns for Cambodian’s focus on HIV prevention methods and have been so successful that HIV prevalence in adults has been steadily decreasing since 2003 (US State Department, n.d.).

Meanwhile India’s Life Line Express train is described as a “Hospital on wheels with cutting edge medical facilities and top class doctors.” The aim of the Life Line Express train is to bring “medical relief to thousands who otherwise

would not have had hope ever of receiving modern medical treatment.” (UN Women, 2014e). Speaking on birth practices in developing nations, Melinda Gates states that skilled assistance during labor is often the “difference between life and death” yet “many women, especially in poor and rural places, still give birth without skilled assistance” (Gates, 2015). Ugandan Josphine Namboze, East and Central Africa’s first female medical doctor, is described as growing up:

“[in] a farming village in a country where girls were often viewed as a means to fetch a good bride price for marriage to wealthier men. Though her particular village was progressive, health care for women in other areas was seen as an afterthought.” (UN Women, 2015a).

In the above instances “modern” medical practices and health initiatives are constructed as the ideal in comparison to “other” cultures which lack necessary skills. According to Ebrahim (2001), the struggle of developing nations to “catch up” to first world nations is common in development discourse. Shome (2011) refers to the construction of modernization in health discourse as “global biopolitics” in which the white or powerful nation is positioned in direct relation to the deprived nation. In this instance, an assumption is constructed in which a modern body is represented as healthy and ideal, which means an unhealthy person signifies a non-modern nation or culture (Shome, 2011).

Sitting alongside UN Women’s focus on “modern” medical practices in developing nations is the idea that health issues are being compounded by cultural beliefs. Within the campaign’s discourse, a significant number of health issues are directly related to the local “flouting” of international conventions or agreements (Kachingwe, 2014; Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2015; UN Women, 2014; UN Women, 2015b). An article on 31 August 2014 discusses the rates of female

feticide in India “in spite of strong legislation to prevent the practice” (UN Women, 2014l). According to Beijing+20 discourse, in the Arab world, conservatives are actively seeking to narrow current, more progressive resolutions and declarations by reintroducing discriminatory laws (Osman, 2014). In a speech by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngucka, she discusses the ways women’s health initiatives are being hindered by cultural norms:

“Unfortunately international conventions and agreements can be flouted if local practice contradicts them. For example, children are legally protected against early marriage by the Rights of the Child. Yet worldwide, about one in four women were married before age 18, with the highest rates of child marriage in South Asia.” (Mlambo-Ngucka, 2015).

According to Mohanty (2003), locating women primarily with Western-based indicators does not highlight the various experiences of women around the world. Because of these indicators, those who do not fit according to liberal Western norms are assumed to be underdeveloped and oppressed by tradition, and, therefore, perceived as “backward” (Mohanty, 2003). It may be argued that, by focusing on non-Western nations as areas of concern, Beijing+20 discourse is implying that Western nations are more advanced. Additionally, by locating the failure of issues through the local flouting of laws, Beijing+20 is ignoring the broader power structures that have influenced the creation of those laws.

According to Patil (2013) one of the most overlooked power structures is the relationship between the global North and South. This relationship is particularly evident in regards to use and control of technology. More often than not, it is countries within the North that control and disseminate technology to

areas that might not otherwise have access to the same resources. This control of technology perpetuates inequality between the North and South and becomes more problematic the more globalized the world becomes.

According to Fairclough (2003) text is multi-functional and can represent meaning in multiple ways. This multifunctionality is evidenced in Beijing+20 discourse. On the one hand, modernity is represented through the physical acts of people – such as UN-led initiatives to “help” communities. On the other hand Beijing+20 discourse also attempts to represent the social world of selected communities. These representations highlight social practices that “harm” the community without providing context to those practices. Instead of discussing the reasons health issues may be prevalent in particular areas, the discourse focuses on “simple” interventions that could improve the health of women in developing nations.

For example, when discussing the maternal mortality rate in developing nations, Beijing+20 states “most of their [expectant mother’s] lives could have been saved with simple, well-known, preventative interventions, even as basic as a bar of soap.” (UN Women, n.d.). Melinda Gates likewise encourages the use of “simple, proven health interventions” for women who die during childbirth, stating that one of the key factors of maternal death in developing nations is a lack of access to resources, saying “many women, especially women in poor and rural places, still give birth without skilled assistance. That is a gap we must close.” (Gates, 2015). While the author believes that issues like maternal death can, and should, be addressed, the disproportionate focus on the use of simple interventions overlooks the many other factors that play into these issues. Gates’ emphasis on the lack of “simple” measures and “skilled” assistance assumes

these areas have medical practices that are unskilled and, therefore, do not conform to expected health norms. According to Airhihenbuwa (1995), the focus on lack of “skills” is common in health promotion discourse, particularly in Africa. The creation of disease prevention programs in Africa and non-Western countries often sees local codes misinterpreted, misrepresented and ultimately devalued (Airhihenbuwa, 1995).

Alongside the emphasis on skills and resources in health initiatives, Beijing+20 also discusses the way education can improve a woman’s life. The importance of education is particularly highlighted through the way women are working to educate other women and girls – especially through UN-led health initiatives. As identified on the Beijing+20 website while health is, in part, based on biology, that is not the focus of health issues and health initiatives in this discourse. Instead the focus is on what Mohanty (1988) describes as anthropological universals: Women who are categorized according to similar shared oppressions. The grouping and representation of these women, for example as victims of sexual violence, assumes all women within that community are similarly labeled (Mohanty, 1988).

The majority of texts in the Beijing+20 campaign point to developing nations as areas where women suffer from modern healthcare. This is evidenced through the disproportionate focus on developing nations as spaces that need to be “fixed.” Of the articles analyzed – only four focused on nations that would be described as “first world” or developed. Two of those articles were press releases promoting events, and the remaining two addressed women’s issues affecting those specific countries. How developing areas are depicted can reflect the underlying assumptions society has about these areas (Ebrahim, 2001).

These assumptions, in turn, are taken for granted as normal or common sense. The concept of “common sense” is rampant in development discourse – particularly in terms of health issues (Ebrahim, 2001; Gajjala et al, 2010; Weedon, 1997). Discourse often privileges western experience over non-western experience and privileges dominant beliefs (Gajjala et al, 2010).

Violence and culture. When describing violence against women, one article states, “the shame and marginalization can shut [women] away from public life.” Before going on to state that the threat of violence “is always there and most often, violence against women and girls occurs where we should be safest.” (Kidman, 2014). The assumption that domestic violence is the biggest single threat to women is prevalent in the following example: “it is not an exaggeration, but a fact, that the overall greatest threat to women’s lives is men, and often the men they love” (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2014b). Speaking of women’s issues in Tajikistan, the campaign states that the issue of violence against women is one that is broadly accepted in the community: “As is the case in many countries, violence behind closed doors within families is common in the country, and often accepted as the norm.” (UN Women, 2014c). While violence against women is a very real threat, what is not addressed in Beijing+20 discourse is the lack of structural support for women who are abused – particularly women who are abused by partners. While there are laws against rape, the first law prohibiting violence against women only came into force in 2013 and authorities are more likely to promote reconciliation between partners than pursuing charges (Amnesty International, 2009).

Beyond cultural norms, UN Women states that the issue of violence against women is the single largest mechanism that denies gender equality.

Some of the long-term effects of violence against women include the social, health and economic costs it can place on a woman (UN Women, n.d.c). According to Weedon (1997) these societal assumptions are a key way to highlight power structures, because common sense is based on social meanings and favors the interests of groups of people in power. This is then accepted as true, or the norm, while everything else is assumed to be backward (Weedon, 1997). While violence against women is a genuine area of concern for many women, and one that is a key part of discussions in the UN system; the discourse often implies that this violence is the cause of other issues, like health. The implication being once violence against women is successfully addressed, the barriers that face women, and other run-on issues, could also be “fixed.”

An issue with the way UN Women address complex and broad health issues is that they are shaped by Eurocentric practices and assumptions. According to Airhihenbuwa (1995) Western discourse on health issues tends to victim-blame and be individualistic. The reality is that even when individual acts of violence against women are addressed, there are still other structural inequalities that may impact gender equality and the barriers women may face. This issue is particularly highlighted in a Beijing+20 story on child marriage:

“I heard a story about a 15-year-old girl in one of the villages who was forcefully married to a 55-year-old man. She needs to visit the doctor one day and leaves her village for the first time. The doctor says ‘Why did you let something like this happen?’ The girl replied ‘I would have rejected [the offer] had I known that the world was so big.’ That’s why we’re trying to explain to everyone that the world is big, and every girl child deserves the opportunity to see how big it is.” (UN Women, 2014j).

The above example shows how there is a tendency within discourse to discuss an issue without taking broader contexts into consideration. The response of the doctor to blame the girl suggests that Beijing+20 is again placing the responsibility on women to “better” their own situations without acknowledging that larger structural barriers and contexts also influence this. The role of women in society is controversial in Turkey, where this piece of discourse originates. Many people blame Turkey’s government for promoting a patriarchal society. People in power have often made controversial comments, such as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who recently stated: “Our religion [Islam] has defined a position for women: Motherhood. Some people can understand this, while others can’t. You cannot explain this to feminists because they don’t accept the concept of motherhood.” (No author, 2014). Comments like this are becoming less common among legislators, who are starting to confront violence against women, and patriarchal practices in Turkey. Advocates for women are still pushing for the criminalization of marital rape, but the increased discussion of these issues suggests that more people are willing to address issues may have been ignored ten or 20 years ago.

The issue of domestic violence also emerged as a signifier of culture. For instance, many women state that culture prevents victims from reporting (Bensouda, 2015; UN Women, 2014c; UN Women, 2014i; UN Women, 2014m; UN Women, 2014n). For example, an article on 20 November 2014 states “a societal culture of shame, the patriarchal nature of Palestinian society, and pressure from family and the community in cases of gender based violence make it difficult to reveal their plight” (UN Women, 2014m). In some cases, inadequate laws for high rates of domestic violence are highlighted. Many, however, blame a

culture that promotes fear among women and encourages isolation if the woman reports domestic violence:

“One of the major challenges that anyone who works in the field of domestic violence will face is culture,” says Maha Almuneef. “Domestic violence is a sensitive subject, and more so in a conservative society that is not used to women voicing their opinions so loudly.” (UN Women, 2014n).

The issue of violence against women in Palestine is particularly complicated as patriarchy, and Zionism and the Israeli occupation influence the structural barriers women face in the area. While the term “culture” may be a useful catchall phrase that can be used to blame particular practices, it poses an interesting dichotomy – because women all around the world can face violence, regardless of their culture.

It is important to highlight how “conservative” societies are positioned as cultures that normalize domestic violence. For instance, ESCWA Executive Secretary Rima Khalaf described violence against women in the Arab region as a “bitter reality” and an issue that “hinders development” (UN Women, 2015c).

Malian lawyer Saran Keita Diakite, who has been involved in peace talks, is plagued by “the stories of gang-rape, forced marriage, and fathers being forced to rape their own daughters at gunpoint” (UN Women, 2014f).

In other examples, Beijing+20 discourse associates urban and developing nations with violence: “UN-Habitat studies show that women in urban areas are twice as likely as men to suffer some form of violence, especially in developing countries. Violence is a daily reality that disproportionately affects women and girls in the poorest districts.” (UN Women, 2013). These particular statements

have larger implications about the ways in which the West and non-West are dichotomized. As feminist scholarship demonstrates, Western nations address similar problems and share similar concerns about violence against women (Bacchetta et al., 2002; Chow, 1991; Gajjala et al., 2010; Hemment, 2004). In the United States, for example, one-third of women are physically abused by an intimate partner and 20 percent of women are raped (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, n.d.). The focus on the “non-West” is important as it highlights how Beijing+20 continues to reinforce the dichotomy of developed and underdeveloped. Such discourse can help mold the opinions of diverse groups of people – entrenching those norms over time, despite views and experiences of marginalized groups that may be overlooked (Chow, 1991; Ebrahim, 2001; Hyde, 2001).

The use of topics, such as violence against women, can be used as a point of solidarity for diverse groups of women, but it can also deny the lived experiences of those same groups of women (King 1988; Hemment, 2004). According to Ebrahim (2001), discourse is produced and interpreted based on historical assumptions of reality. In the instance of a transnational campaign like Beijing+20, discourse may be created according to historical assumptions of the most dominant structures of power. That means, in terms of policy at least, large numbers of people may be left ignored. For marginalized groups of women, this assumption of commonality among all women may mean other structural inequalities may be ignored – like race, ethnicity or class (King, 1988; Hemment, 2004). According to Hemment (2004) this lack of diverse representation in thought is common in transnational campaigns, as Western-based rights may be dominant and contextual elements surrounding issues like violence against

women are ignored.

UN Women is not only basing its expectations on western-specific rights, it is also ignoring geopolitical inequalities, and local contexts and values that may also be influencing these scenarios. The influence of colonialism also plays a part in this discussion. Issues like colonization and racial hierarchy affect all aspects of life but mainstream liberal feminist discussions do not always address these issues. For example, in post-colonial Africa, mainstream Western discourse may situate gender as the most influential social division when there are many other forces that shape the experience of women (Mama, 1997).

Related to the culture of violence ideology is the notion that women are responsible for challenging such barriers. For example, Amelia de Jesus Amaral, a police officer in the Vulnerable Person's Unit in Timor-Leste, is described as someone who became a police officer in the hopes of addressing "crimes that are often accepted culturally within society." (UN Women, 2014a). According to de Jesus Amaral, the lack of resources for survivors of domestic violence and the cultural barriers women face inspired her to become a police officer: "I help them take their cases through the Prosecutor's office. This is why I became a police officer." (UN Women, 2014a). While much of the discourse cited culture as a cause of violence, it ignored larger factors, particularly structural patriarchy. Such discourse implies that the only barriers to women's equality are women themselves.

Violence rates are high in Timor-Leste, where de Jesus Amaral is based. While Beijing+20 notes the lack of resources available to survivors of domestic violence, it is important to note this is largely due to the complex transition the country has been making to become a sovereign state – which was officially

recognized in 2002. Prior to becoming a sovereign state Timor-Leste saw decades of violent occupation by Indonesia as part of the Cold War. Statistics released estimate that around 70 percent of 100,000+ violent deaths during this period were due to Indonesian military (CAVR, 2008) with violence against women including rape, physical abuse and torture, sterilization, and forced marriage (Winters, 1999).

Women empowering and saving other women also is prevalent in the example of a Beijing+20 regional review. As seen in Figure 2, Monica Paulus is described as a women who “rescues women and girls” in her country, Papua New Guinea, “before they can be subjected to violence.”



Figure 2: Monica Paulus, human rights worker in Papua New Guinea.
Image © Monica Paulus, 2014.

In another example, a Palestinian woman, named Zahara, was locked up by her second husband’s family for four years when she tried to divorce him:

“The [Palestinian Civil Police Family Protection Unit] advised me to press charges against my family, but I did not want to increase shame. My

brother signed a pledge not to harm me. I trusted them and thought the situation would change. It did not.” (UN Women, 2014m).

The examples highlighted above illustrate how the Beijing+20 campaign associates health and violence to culture, dismissing structural factors that may play equally significant roles. Much of the campaign communicates to readers and viewers that women are empowering and saving other women. Such examples illustrate how the campaign positioned a discourse about gender equality. By focusing only on the individual’s personal circumstances, Beijing+20 discourse ignores the myriad of other larger factors that may be influential, including patriarchy as a system that influences culture, politics, and social norms. According to Pateman (1983) these personal circumstances are often influenced by structural factors such as reproductive laws, childcare policies and the sexual division of labor. By not acknowledging these structural factors, UN Women disproportionately blames “culture,” ignoring a multitude of factors – from colonialism and patriarchy through violence and conflict – which may not be “fixed” by an individual. This insight is important to note because it is highlights underlying assumptions that may be held of some cultures, rather than the intentions of the author or organization (Fursich, 2009)

VI. Conclusion

When discussing the use of textual analysis Aiello (2006) discusses that a text is never innocent. Rather it has been naturalized over time, shaped according to cultural norms (Aiello, 2006). Using this concept in a broader sense, it is easy to see the ways discourse is shaped and normalized, slowly becoming a part of the cultural fabric of each society. The normalization of ideologies is particularly important when looking at the literature covering the historical portrayal of women's rights on a global scale. The study of campaign websites like Beijing+20 is important, because they can serve as platforms to communicate an organization's goals, ideals, and assumptions about its audience (Ferree & Pudrovska, 2006). International organizations like the United Nations can serve as a major source of information for the media and the public; likewise, they are a credible source of information.

The purpose of the Beijing+20 campaign is to celebrate the changes made in the women's rights movement since the 1995 Beijing conference. At the time Beijing 1995 was described as one of the most influential movements for women's equality. Since then, some critics have stated that Beijing 1995 did not produce the sustained change people had hoped for (Spivak, 1996).

Organizations like UN Women are in an interesting position – it is the goal of these organizations to represent multiple views of multiple groups of people, while producing change in key areas of concern. Despite the lofty goals of these organizations, marginalized groups are often not represented in a way that truly reflects their needs. According to the literature, women are represented by people in positions of power who are assuming what groups of people need

based on their own experience and assumptions (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1996; Thussu, 2002; Chow, 1991; Hemment, 2004; Mohanty, 2003).

My first research question asked how women are portrayed on the Beijing+20 website – particularly in regards to discourse relating to health and violence issues. The findings of this study have highlighted that discourse can still be problematic in large transnational organizations. This is primarily because discourse is still created in isolation. In terms of women’s issues – particularly issues of health and violence – local and regional contexts are ignored. For instance, topics like violence against women are emphasized without addressing other factors that may influence this issue – such as ethnicity, religion, class, culture, and upbringing.

Additionally, Beijing+20 discourse uses western development discourse through the recurring concept of modern medicine, interventions and assistance. This discourse implies that western, modern practices provide a better quality of life and more opportunities for women in developing nations. In this case, the western discourse of “modern” is privileged, reinforcing the west/non-western dichotomy. Despite attempts to include diverse groups of women in the discussion of women’s rights, some dominant ideologies are still apparent. While requests for modern equipment or medicine are legitimate, Beijing+20 frames the conversation in such a way that it reduces the complexities of the issues under discussion.

My second research question asked how gender equality was discussed in terms of Western feminist definitions or perceptions of womanhood. In this instance, gender equality is strongly linked with opportunities in the public sphere. Beijing+20 discourse takes what can be described as a liberal feminist

perspective, emphasizing the notion that the woman's role in the public sphere is a key indicator of women's emancipation. Despite attempts to include diverse groups of women in the discussion of women's rights, some dominant ideologies are still apparent. Focusing on such a narrow part of the experience of womanhood ignores the structural issues that also influence the experience of women – such as patriarchy, globalization, and neoliberalism.

My final research question asked if, and how, the idea of “the other” was dominant in Beijing+20 discourse. While the discourse revealed a disproportionate emphasis on culture as a negative factor that impacts women, it did not always “other” women or cultures specifically. It is important to note, however, that while the voices speaking on behalf of this campaign were geographically and racially diverse, the areas they focused on were almost entirely focused on the global South. The emphasis on developing nations, particularly in the area of health, reinforces the underlying assumption that many developing nations are oppressed due to normalized cultural traditions.

Transnational feminism suggests that the voices attempting to speak for women on an international scale may ignore cultural and societal complexities. The critical examination of texts on the Beijing+20 website has uncovered that, to a certain extent, this continues to be an issue. To further improve the representation of diverse groups of women, large organizations like UN Women need to diversify the voices that speak for them, and the people they attempt to speak for.

There are three key areas that need to be addressed in relation to this research: 1) information structures in the UN system, 2) women's issues in terms

of relativism and absolutism, 3) the complexities and observations of the author during this research.

The discourse created by UN Women for the Beijing+20 is created from information sent in from regional UN offices. This may be problematic, as in some cases, these offices do not always have the resources to collect and collate extensive sets of data on the area. Because of this, information received by UN headquarters may be incomplete in areas. While this impacts individuals and offices at a regional level, it is often due to global contexts – such as neoliberal policies and the relationship between the global North and South – that people are unable to complete research on the ground and then communicate it to the larger powers that control and disseminate information throughout the UN system. Because the global North still control the majority of technology, and have a better ability to disseminate information, it can be difficult for people and groups in the global South to share relevant research beyond their own region.

Additionally, it's important to recognize that the issues discussed in the Beijing+20 campaign are complex and likely to be interpreted differently based on a person's moral and ethical leanings. For people who lean towards absolutism some of the issues discussed, like FGM/C, will be fixed as inherently right or wrong. Absolutists will interpret them according to those moral codes. For others who lean more towards relativism (like the author) there will be more areas of gray and less issues that are inherently right or wrong. Using the perspective of relativism, the author realizes that it is difficult to gauge whether issues women face are necessarily right or wrong because countries, cultures and individuals hold different moral and ethical values. The community they grew up in shapes some of those values, some are shaped through lived

experience, and some are based on education and personal beliefs. Because of this it can be problematic when UN Women take an absolutist stance on issues, because it may not reflect or represent the beliefs of the women they are advocating for.

Finally, it is important to identify the complexities and observations the author grappled with during this research. One of the most challenging aspects, as a former journalist, was ignoring journalistic tendencies of objectivity and voicing my own opinions. As a journalist whose specialty was international women's health issues, I have been trained to communicate multiple views of controversial issues without projecting my own opinions. Identifying, developing, and communicating my own views on some of the issues discussed was incredibly challenging.

Another challenging aspect of this research was using language to communicate issues of othering, without othering the groups of people I was discussing in examples. Othering occurs when you communicate the issues of a person or community and compare them in a disparaging way, without revealing the complexities of the issues and relationships. To counter this I attempted to bring in not only the global influences and contexts, but also the regional and individual complexities – such as differing opinions, beliefs, and local contexts.

Previous transnational feminist critiques had been very critical of the role in othering, those these critiques have been evolving since the introduction of radical critiques, and intersectionality. The othering found in this research was not as polarizing as expected. In part I believe this is due to the evolution of feminist thought, which is perhaps accepting or addressing radical critiques. Entering this research I was very much focused on the relationships and

dichotomies between nations – partially because of UN Women’s status as a transnational organization. What I discovered was that the relationships and dichotomies within nations, communities, and even families, were just as complex as those external powers. This is important to address as it highlights how difficult it is for organizations like UN Women to address issues of concern for women because there are so many intersecting, sometimes conflicting, beliefs and social binaries.

Based on the literature of transnational feminism, and my own research, I believe progress in how we address and discuss women’s issues is evident. However, there are still improvements that could be made. For an organization like UN Women, it is vital to not only diversify the voices that speak for them, but to complicate the issues they are discussing. By this I mean, UN Women needs to identify the complexities of the issues, the contexts these women may be in, and the larger power structures that influence the issues under discussion.

Future Research

There are two aspects of this research that could provide opportunities for future research in this area. It is important to note that other online platforms such as Facebook or Twitter were not studied. Future research may widen analysis of transnational feminist campaigns to social media constructions about women’s issues. Additionally, this thesis primarily covered three main topics within the Beijing+20 campaign – health, violence and gender equality. Other topics discussed on the Beijing+20 website included education, the environment, and the economy. Future research could analyze these topics to explore the modes of representation regarding women’s issues. It is also important to note that the author did not analyze previous discourse on the Beijing+20 campaign.

It may be useful for future research to compare the original Beijing conference material with current representations of women to explore similarities and differences across a twenty-year span.

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