

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Left Behind or Pushed Behind? *Redistributing Power Over the Sustainable Development Goals*

Paul O'Brien

*“People are not ‘left behind,’ they are ‘pushed behind.’
It’s not like we all went on a nice picnic and someone
went to sleep and got forgotten.”¹*

In late 2017, I went back to Korogocho, in Nairobi, where I got my start in international social justice work in the nineties.² The word *korogocho* means “shoulder to shoulder” in Kiswahili. There were few permanent structures, and most buildings were made of mud and sticks. The better huts had corrugated iron roofs, and the stench of open sewers was everywhere. Two hundred thousand people were crammed into a square mile of land beside Dandora, a mountain of trash.

In the middle of this slum, I saw a bright new building, one with clean floors

1. See <https://twitter.com/fp2p/status/1071069799491518466?lang=en>.

2. My first “rights and development” job was in 1993, working with a Kenyan human rights education group that was applying the work of Brazilian educators Paulo Friere (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), and Augusto Boal (*Theatre of the Oppressed*) to use participatory pedagogy and theatre to challenge norms around sexual and gender-based violence in Korogocho.

In looking to feminist leadership to find a way forward in navigating the language of power (a core theme in this chapter), I received constructive critique and support from Oxfam colleagues; so much so that I risk breaking a key feminist principle “nothing about us without us.” I would like to think I meet this principle simply by being on my own feminist journey, but that’s not enough. I can only say this would have been a significantly worse piece without guidance, debate, and discussion with the following Oxfam colleagues, all of whom I think of as feminists: Barbara Durr, Aria Grabowski, Duncan Green, Gawain Kripke, Abby Maxman, Steve Price-Thomas, Rebecca Rewald, Jo Rowlands, and Sarah Tuckey. I am deeply grateful to each of them, particularly for their challenges to my thinking. I doubt any of them agree with this entire piece. Beyond Oxfam, I am grateful to Emily Bove, Kath Campbell, Raj Desai, and Shanta Devarajan, who read segments or earlier drafts of this chapter and helped me clarify my thinking. The misstatements and weaker ideas in this piece are my own. Nothing in this piece reflects Oxfam policy.

and painted walls. It was a health clinic, the only two-story building I could see. It had a room for pregnant mothers, and one for kids with typhoid or HIV. They did not have much modern medical equipment—the records were all on news-sheet on the walls—but what they had was clean and useful.

I was sitting in that clinic with two women, Rose Ngatia and Beatrice Okoth, from the National Taxpayers Association, a local group in Kenya. I told them, “I never thought I would see a building like this in Korogocho. How did it happen?”

Okoth looked at me with her steely eyes and said:

You know there is a Bwana Mkubwa in Korogocho [“a big man”]. The government gives him money for our place. It is tax money so it’s our money. But it was not coming here. So, we decided to teach this man the right way to lead. We went to the Nairobi council and found out all the projects that were supposed to happen in Korogocho with this tax money. Then we went to this big man, and we showed him the list and we asked, “Where are our projects?”

A few nights later, the Bwana Mkubwa’s thugs came to Okoth’s house and knocked on her door. They told her to stop agitating. They said the next time there would not just be a threat.

Beatrice Okoth and Rose Ngatia had grown up with this. They knew these men. They knew the threat was real. One of the men threatening them was a local policeman. And the two women talked to each other that morning and decided that, this time, they would not back off.

In the days that followed, they put on their T-shirts from the National Taxpayers Association, and their badges, and they went out to more people and told them they had been threatened, but that these were the basic rights of the community and now they needed people to demand that their money be spent on schools, on health clinics, and on sewage. They went back to the Nairobi City Council, and they wrote to their MP.

A few days later, they went to the Bwana Mkubwa and showed him the petitions and told him all this, and they said they knew he was a good man, and they said they wanted to work with him to get these projects built. He looked at the petitions and told them to go away. That night, they waited for the thugs to come again. But they never came.

A few days later, bulldozers show up at the site for one of those projects to begin the work. And the Bwana Mkubwa started to release funding for each of the projects listed.³

3. Some of the funding for this health clinic came from international donors. It is a good example of aid and domestic resource mobilization coming together well.

At the end of her story, Okoth pointed her finger at me and said, “You didn’t think Korogocho could have this clinic. Let me tell you: All I need is a uniform and a badge and I can get many more things built here.”

Okoth’s tale is not just another development story about a courageous activist. It is a story about power.

This chapter suggests that development professionals might need a different way to think about power if we are to be useful to the Okoths of this world. It starts with a brief history of thinking about power, both in philosophy and development literature. It then proposes that we need some different language and ideas to talk about power if we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and then it applies that frame to two of the largest barriers to SDG realization: growing authoritarianism and extreme economic inequality. It closes by suggesting that the way forward in thinking about power may come from feminist leadership.

My aims in writing this chapter are two-fold: that the reader will join me in asking, first, whether people are being left behind or pushed behind and, second, who is doing the pushing. I also hope the reader finds it useful to test assumptions about how we need to think about power if we are to be useful to the Okoths of this world and achieve the SDGs.

A Brief History and Typology of Power

Through the latter part of the last millennium, influential thinkers debated the importance, exercise, and typologies of power, but they essentially agreed on one core characteristic of power: that it was like a currency—if power was held by some, it could not be held by others.

A largely male, largely Northern cast of philosophers sought unifying theories of power to explain the world. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) brought us “state power,” embodied in the *Leviathan*. Max Weber (1864–1920) believed state power consisted in a “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force.” Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) took the debate beyond the state to include “the will to power” that lies in each of us and explains our every action. Stephen Lukes (born in 1941)⁴ agreed that power can be held personally, but

4. Decisionmaking power occurs when A makes a decision that exercises power over B against B’s interests; nondecisionmaking power allows A to use agenda-setting to bias what can get decided by B, and ideological power exists when A uses persuasion or false consciousness, rather than coercion or conflict, to change what B actually wants. In a sense, I wrote this chapter because I believe that Agenda 2030 exercises a form of nondecisionmaking power to shape how the development community engages on the SDGs and determines which issues are acceptable for discussion in “legitimate” public forums. My argument is that a certain species of power—zero sum redistributable and choice driven power—has become the ugly duckling of the SDGs and that Agenda 2030 regards it as illegitimate to debate.

distinguished between three dimensions of power: decisional, nondecisional, and ideological.⁵

All these thinkers agreed on one thing: They conceived of power as a zero-sum currency—essentially the ability to control or influence the resources, actions, and even the innermost thoughts of oneself or others. They debated who had power, who should have it, and how to distribute it, but they assumed (and, therefore, did not debate) that power is a currency that, if held by some, cannot be owned by others.

Then, along came Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Together with other postmodernists, Foucault sought new ways of thinking about language, ideas, identity, and ourselves. Foucault had watched the work of the philosophers of language of his time (including his own *Words and Things*) lose relevance and energy in the search for grand, unifying ideas to explain everything by limiting our thinking to “their” lens on life. He witnessed in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* how the oppression of nations, prisoners, colonized peoples, and even our bodies can be better understood by opening up our thinking to different theories, types, and definitions of power realized in action.⁶

Of course, it was not just Foucault who helped shape modern thinking about power. Postmodernism did not just reveal the Northern white male heterosexual hegemony over intellectual life. For the last thirty years, the identities and voices that shape the power debate have changed. Feminists from both the North⁷ and South,⁸ advocates for

5. Lukes realized late in life that the zero-sum power he talked about in *Power: A Radical View* was only one “species” of power, and that power as an ability that is non-zero sum is equally important. In a sense, he presaged the argument made in this chapter—that the people in poverty need to harness both types of power (generative and zero sum) if the SDGs are to succeed.

6. That said, Foucault always “presupposes that power is a kind of power-over.” See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-power/#DefPow>. He puts it this way: “if we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others” in the afterword of “The Subject and Power,” in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 779.

7. The best overview I’ve found of feminist theory on development is by Elaine Hartwick in *Theories of Development* 3rd ed. (2015). See chapter seven, which interrogates five strands of feminist theory (Women in Development, Women and Development, Gender and Development, Women, Environment and Development, and Postmodernism and Development).

8. Writing in 1984, the year of Foucault’s death, Chandra Mohanty used Foucault’s work on power to deconstruct how Western white-led voices were beginning to assert their own colonial hegemony over feminist approaches to “humanism”—the forebearer of the SDGs. She was one of the early thinkers exploring how Southern women of color were defined as “Others” or peripheral to these debates. See Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism* 12, no. 3: 333–58.

racial justice,⁹ class justice,¹⁰ sexual and reproductive rights,¹¹ movement builders,¹² and those insisting on a better global balance of voices have transformed our understanding of power. The last section of this paper argues that these leaders, and particularly feminists, offer a way forward for a more honest and profound conversation about power and about who gets left behind by whom.

Power Diversion?

The word *power* has two core meanings in English, French, and German: one is an ability (I feel “powerful” today), and the other is a relationship (when you exercise your power over me). Until the late twentieth century and the postmodernist era, most discussions of power concerned relational power, of the state over citizens, the rich over the poor, men over women, and between identity groups, classes, races, and nations. It was the language of the privileged.¹³

In the late twentieth century, the intellectual and development communities rejected the language of privilege and embraced power as “ability.” Particularly influential in that space were philosophers like Peter Morriss, feminist philosophers (e.g., Raewyn Connell, Nancy Hartsock), and development thinkers like Jo Rowlands,¹⁴ Duncan Green,¹⁵ and John Gaventa.¹⁶

9. One of the most interesting groups thinking about power and racial justice in the United States is Change Elemental, whose tag line demonstrates that they have taken power debates beyond zero-sum thinking: “Co-creating Power for Love, Dignity and Justice.” See www.changeelemental.org.

10. One of the most influential voices for the development community is John Gaventa, whose work *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (1980) applied Lukes’ three dimensions to examine why those on the wrong end of economic and political power equations do not rise in rebellion.

11. Reproductive rights groups have been at the forefront of challenging attempts by states to assert power over the sexual health and reproductive rights of women. Two of the groups leading those efforts in the United States are the Center for Health and Gender Equity (www.genderhealth.org) and Planned Parenthood Federation of America (www.plannedparenthood.com).

12. Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms wrote a fascinating book called *New Power*. I would argue, however, that it is less the “power” that is new in their book than the ways in which power moves through the world—less like a currency held by a few elites and more like a current that is “open, participatory, and peer driven.”

13. In defining power in this way, men essentially were exercising a form of what Stephen Lukes called “nondecisional power,” the power to determine what gets on the agenda to be decided. As Lukes said, “how we think about power may serve to reproduce and reinforce power structures and relations, or alternatively it may challenge and subvert them” (Lukes [2005] at p. 35).

14. See Jo Rowlands, “Empowerment Examined,” *Development in Practice* 5, no. 2, 1995.

15. His two books on power, *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World* (2008) and *How Change Happens* (2016), have been deeply influential in Oxfam and the development community in embracing power as a legitimate currency for development activism.

16. See John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (1980). He also provided the intellectual energy behind the Powercube, which differentiated

In *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, Morriss first distinguished power as “ability” and “relational,” and then argued that power as ability is all we need. He concludes that we actually do not need to debate “power over” to understand the conflictual dimensions of power. He wrote, “we can easily look at someone’s power to kick others around, or their power to win conflicts. Everything that needs to be said about power can be said in terms of the capacity to effect outcomes.”¹⁷

At around the same time, feminist thinkers in the third wave, both Northern and Southern, were exposing how zero-sum relational “power over” had been exercised largely by “hegemonic masculinity”¹⁸ to subjugate others through history. A crucial element of rebalancing power was to rethink how we thought about power itself. Nancy Hartsock, for example, contrasted an “obedience” definition of power with what she called an “energy and competence” understanding of power, which does not involve domination but is generative: “the power some people have of stimulating activity and raising their morale.”¹⁹

Rowlands, an Oxfam colleague and gender justice leader, unpacked power as ability when she mapped out four forms of power.²⁰ First, she demarcated “power over” and observed the following:

If power is defined as “power over,” a gender analysis shows that power is wielded predominantly by men over other men, and by men over women. Extending this analysis to other forms of social differentiation, power is exercised by dominant social, political, economic, or cultural groups over those who are marginalized. Power, in this sense, is in finite supply; if some people have more, others have less. This is a crucial issue. When

three types of power (visible, hidden, and invisible) on two other planes—places and spaces. See his presentation: www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/Powercube-powerpoint-2007.ppt.

17. Peter Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis* (Manchester University Press, 1987).

18. “Hegemonic masculinity” is a term created by the feminist R. W. Connell to describe practices that legitimize men’s dominant position in society and justify the subordination of the common male population and women, and other marginalized ways of being a man. See R. W. Connell, James Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.” See <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.

19. Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power: Towards a Feminist Historical Materialism* (North-eastern University Press, 1983): 244. See also *Feminist Perspectives on Power* at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-power/>. In taking on this non-redistributive and expansive understanding of power, Hartsock was essentially offering another view of feminism than was being offered by thinkers like Gita Sen, who saw the struggle as fundamentally redistributive and based on “class exploitation and gender subordination.” See Lourdes Benaria and Gita Sen, 1982, “Class and Gender Inequalities and Women’s Role in Economic Development—Theoretical and Practical Implications,” *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 157–76.

20. Jo Rowlands, “Questioning Empowerment, Working with Women in Honduras” (UK and Ireland: Oxfam, 1997).

power is defined as “power over,” then if women gain power it will be at men’s expense. It is easy to see why the notion of women becoming empowered is seen as inherently threatening, the assumption being that there will be some kind of reversal of relationships, and men will not only lose power but also face the possibility of having power wielded over them by women. Men’s fear of losing control is an obstacle to women’s empowerment. *But is it necessarily an outcome of women’s empowerment that men should lose power; and, further, should a loss of power be something to fear?*²¹ [emphasis is mine]

Rowlands does not answer her last question in that book, but her searing analysis of “power over” contributed, along with the work of Connell, Hartsock, Just Associates,²² and other feminists and post-modernists, to changing the way development thinkers and activists talked about power. Not only was “power over” identified as exclusively patriarchal and problematic, but finite zero-sum power generally was set aside as the domain of oppressive action.

What the development community did take up from Rowlands were the three other types of power that were not so patriarchal in their roots, zero sum, or fraught with tension: “Power within,” which can grow in a person as they gain self-belief and an understanding of their rights; “power with”—when collectives come together to exercise joint action and solidarity; and “power to”—the ability to decide actions and carry them out.

Armed with these three new power currencies,²³ the development and social justice community now had a new language of empowerment that did not require losers or conflict; power “within,” “with,” and “to” could be grown without men, the state, or corporate powerholders losing out, at least explicitly. And so we organized communities and movements and called it “power with.” We deepened individuals’ understanding and belief in rights and called it “power within.” We mobilized groups to take action and celebrated their “power to.”

21. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

22. Just Associates is one of the leading groups in the United States helping social justice organizations use this four-power typology. See www.justassociates.org. Their book, *A New Weave of People, Power and Politics*, by Lisa VeneKlasan and Valerie Miller, has become a much-sourced resource for how to apply the four powers. See the chapter titled Power and Empowerment: https://justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/07chap3_power_final.pdf.

23. Some would argue that this is exactly what Foucault intended—to expand how we imagine and define power. I would argue that Foucault never meant to go this far. Even though his two great works on power examined how power works to control our innermost thoughts, behaviors, and actions, I see nothing in his work to suggest that he sees power as something that is not relative—something that can be grown inside one person without diminishing “power over” being exercised by another person or institution.

Power as ability became a central theme of one of Oxfam's most influential thought leadership books, *From Poverty to Power*, by Green. His subtitle is telling in itself: *How Active Citizens and Effective States can Change the World*. Essentially, Green argues that the best framed task of development is to increase the power (understood as ability) of both citizens (to exercise agency) and states (to govern effectively). He has little interest in zero-sum thinking or taking away the power of states as the task of development. In his subsequent book, *How Change Happens*, he dived even deeper into the three forms of non-patriarchal power as critical to "how change happens." Like Rowlands, he situated "power over" as a toxic form of power that belongs exclusively to elites and to powerful institutions like the police and courts.²⁴

John Gaventa authored a remarkable study of power in one of the poorest parts of the United States, embracing both power as ability—he documented the sense of powerlessness of miners in a remote mining valley—and relational power—their inability to take back political and economic power from the government or a London-based corporate mine owner. Gaventa explains why most thinkers now view "power over" as negative and the powers with, within, and to as more positive.²⁵

I have come to believe that my Oxfam colleagues Rowlands, Green, and Gaventa, and some feminist thinkers have engaged in an overcorrection. While they were right to identify "power over" as the traditional domain of patriarchal societies generally, they were wrong to suggest that those fighting the injustice of poverty have no business explicitly trying to seek "power over" others as a legitimate objective of development. My instinct is that three particular types of "power over" can be usefully differentiated by the motivation behind them (visible or hidden) and their development outcomes (positive or harmful):

First, of course, Rowlands, Green, Gaventa, and others are right to name a toxic form of "power over" that has characterized colonialism, authoritarianism, racism, sexism, and most other harmful forms of exercising power.

I believe there is second, more developmentally ambiguous form of "power over" worth naming, motivated by benign intentions but often with malignant consequences. This is a problem clearly apparent in philanthropy generally ("power over" resources intended to do good but that actually do harm)²⁶ and even in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

Finally, I believe there is a developmentally positive form of "power over,"

24. See *How Change Happens*, p. 36.

25. See www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/expressions-of-power/.

26. Anand Giridharadas in *Winners Take All* (2018) offers an unflinching analysis of how the "win-win" tropes of economic and political elites and the philanthropic mindset starves development conversation of the honesty and reflection required to ask the tougher questions.

where people who do not have enough power take specific actions that redistribute zero-sum power away from those who have too much, by using their power within, with, and to. They take back the control of resources, thoughts, and actions from others. This kind of “power over” is distinctive from power as ability (with, to, and within), because it is zero sum, relational, and choice driven. It can be understood only in terms of winners and losers.²⁷ I do not know what to call this form of power over, but I believe it will be the secret sauce for achieving Agenda 2030.²⁸

Let us return to our story from Korogocho to explain this. Beatrice Okoth certainly had “power within” by Jo’s Rowland’s definition. When the National Taxpayers Association gave her a badge and a T-shirt and some training, they helped Okoth believe she could stand up to the Bwana Mkubwa. In joining with Ruth and other mothers in Korogocho, she built “power with,” and by confronting the Bwana Mkubwa, she clearly had the “power to” act. By most development standards, Okoth was “powerful.”

Usually, the development conversation stops here, because frankly, it is rare that the people we aim to serve actually take power away from the Bwana Mkubwa’s of this world. But that is exactly what happened in this story. She did not just assert a right to influence those expenditures; she took power over those expenditures and away from the Bwana Mkubwa. He no longer could spend or withhold spending with impunity. He had to listen to her.²⁹

Something happened in that moment where Okoth went from asserting to exercising power, which was not just generative but finite and redistributive. In that moment, the Bwana Mkubwa had less power. As Foucault might have said, it was action power because there was a moment of action where power was redistributed, and that’s what turned potency or ability into actual power.

27. This kind of power is what Steve Biko cared about when he wrote “the essence of politics is to direct oneself to the group which wields power,” in *White Racism and Black Consciousness* (1972), an edited volume of his writings, *Steve Biko, I Write What I Like* (1978), p. 68.

28. The closest thing I’ve found, in a deeply moving book called *Power Under* by Steven Wine-man, is “constructive rage” which is, essentially powerless rage translated into a personal force for liberation. It is not exactly what I am talking about, however, because it is essentially a way of thinking about power as ability, not about taking control from others. It is not revolutionary enough.

29. Rowlands recognized how power within and to can lead to power over when she wrote: “From a feminist perspective, interpreting ‘power over’ entails understanding the dynamics of oppression and internalised oppression. Since these affect the ability of less powerful groups to participate in formal and informal decisionmaking, and to exert influence, they also affect the way that individuals or groups perceive themselves and their ability to act and influence the world around them. Empowerment is thus more than simply opening up access to decisionmaking; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy that decisionmaking space, and so overlaps with the other categories of ‘power to’ and ‘power from within.’” (Rowlands [1997] at p. 87).

That kind of power is what Abraham Lincoln envisioned with “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” and what Thomas Jefferson understood when he told John Adams “the first principle of a good government is certainly a distribution of its powers into executive, judiciary, and legislative. . . .”

It is worth asking whether the redistribution of economic power and opportunity from those who have too much to those who do not have enough is essential to the delivery of the SDGs. My instinct is that the development community is not in agreement about whether any forms of power are finite and need to be redistributed. When a colleague of mine (who has influenced me deeply on this issue) wrote a blog in 2015 describing himself as a “power hawk” because he sees real power as finite, almost every comment on his blog post took issue with his definition of power.³⁰ I’ve had the same experience myself in conversation and found myself wondering why zero-sum relational power meets with such resistance among development thinkers and leaders. I concluded that power hawks are an endangered species in development because of history, relevance, and utility. Let me briefly explain each.

The most obvious form of zero-sum relational power—“power over”—has a toxic history. It sits comfortably with the old-fashioned patriarchal, misogynist, racist, and colonial mindset. It is brutish and exclusive. It is the language of the “haves,” not the have nots. Who wants to use a currency so closely hoarded by elites when there is a new way of talking about power in which we can all see ourselves every day? Why not find a new language that is less the product and servant of the very power structures we want to change? The legacy of postmodernism is in part to seek more inclusive, less binary and zero-sum concepts.³¹

Second, more inclusive definitions of non-finite power, like power with, within, and to, are far more relevant for the vast majority of work to be done to advance the SDGs. Enhancing these types of power is something that can be done measurably and consistently within reasonable timeframes. Even more important, they matter to people facing injustice and poverty. After all, redistributing power is not the stated purpose of the SDGs—improving “well-being” or human “development” is the purpose, and it is at least arguable that well-being can be increased for the greater common good without taking anyone’s power away. To put it in the language of power as ability, the world is a better place when more people have greater agency and power within, with, and to.

Third, using a more inclusive definition of power is strategically and pragmatically smart. Zero-sum realities are by their nature confrontational, and

30. Gawain Kripke, “Is Power a Zero Sum Game? Does Women’s Empowerment Lead to Increased Domestic Violence?” (August 27, 2015), <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/is-power-a-zero-sum-game-does-womens-empowerment-lead-to-increased-domestic-violence/>.

31. See Gaventa, *Power and Empowerment*, p. 44, www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/newweave_chapter3.pdf.

confrontation usually works out in favor of those with more power to start with—not the people we serve with the SDGs. Confrontation as a strategic approach, when one starts with less power, has little utility when one wants to get things done. It is no wonder development programs that work on “empowerment” are loathe to admit that, for their programs to succeed, some powerful actor has to lose out.³² If our goal is take power away from elites, it is rarely smart to declare that up front. My concern, however, is this: If we do not even know that taking away their power and redistributing it to people facing poverty and injustice is sometimes both necessary and right, then are we not at risk of fooling ourselves, too?

Here is my point: These concerns around history, relevance, and utility have so dominated development discourse on power that we are no longer having conversations about finite power redistribution, and that is becoming a real challenge for achieving the SDGs.³³

Redistributable Power

To leave no one behind by 2030 will require a different development approach. We may need a new way of thinking about power that has less historic baggage than power over. I’m not sure what it should be called. For now, let us simply refer to it as “redistributable power.”

Here’s the point: To deliver on the SDGs, we need to broaden our focus beyond those who do not have enough power—which is the focus of “empowerment” work—to focus on those who have too much power. And we need to engage in ideas that redistribute power from the haves to the have nots. To do that, we need to think about redistributable power as more than a misfit that sits exclusively with states, with men who dominate women, or with powerful groups who use their power to dominate and exclude others. For too long, we have treated redistributable power as the ugly duckling of development—marginalizing it as unattractive and unnecessary to the “win-win” we must find to improve our world.³⁴ But there is real beauty in power that is finite and can be redistributed. If we want the SDGs to take flight, we should consider that.

Beatrice Okoth and Rose Ngatia redistributed power when, through courage

32. That’s why Green argues, in *How Change Happens*, that usually “good change strategies pursue something more subtle than outright confrontation (which often plays into the hands of the powerful),” p. 37.

33. To borrow Stephen Lukes’ language in *Power: A Radical View*, this chapter is an exploration of “nondecisionmaking power”—which sets the agenda in debates and makes certain issues unacceptable for discussion in “legitimate” public forums. This chapter argues that “power over” has become the ugly duckling of development—cast out as illegitimate.

34. Giridharadas, in *Winners Take All*, offers an unflinching analysis of how the “win-win” tropes of economic and political elites starves development conversation of the honesty and reflection required to ask the tougher questions.

and strategy, they held a Big Man in Korogocho to account.³⁵ In doing so, they exercised a form of power that may not have a good name but clearly has three discrete characteristics.

First, redistributable power is finite. It applies only to currencies of economic, political, or cultural exchange that are zero sum. A currency that is infinite, like love, hate, or dignity, cannot be controlled in this way. It is what distinguishes it from power with, within, and to. In that sense, it is like power over: either one person controls it or another does.

Second, it is exercised through human choice. Redistributable power may feel like it is a force beyond choice or control and that it can sit only in institutions or with elites, but that is not true. When we situate immense power in state institutions, corporations, or market forces, that power may seem beyond any collectivity of intention, but it is not so. We give institutions power and, collectively, we can choose to remove or redistribute that power. This is important; if power is not redistributable through human choice then there is no point asking who has been left behind in terms of power because not much can be done about it. The essence of social justice movement building is to aggregate enough power to take some back from unaccountable elites.

Third, it is relational. The measurement of redistributable power is only significant in relation to others. If on the proverbial desert island with two people, one holds a \$100, which is 100 percent of the currency on the island, then she holds all the economic power. If, however, on that island, she has \$100 but the other person has \$9,900, then the first person does not have much economic power. This relational dimension may be the single most important contribution of rethinking the SDG challenge in terms of power.

Why does it make a difference to talk about the SDGs through the lens of redistributable power? Because we can better understand how and why people are left behind and then do something about it. As the South Korean Economist Ha Joon recently said: "People are not 'left behind,' they are 'pushed behind.' It's not like we all went on a nice picnic and someone went to sleep and got forgotten."³⁶

35. It is important to note that this does not mean Korogocho's big man was worse off as a consequence. Power is not the same as well-being. He may actually have gained more respect and a different kind of more legitimate power from providing services, but his impunity and ability to control the resources, actions, and innermost thoughts of Okoth and Rose Ngatia was profoundly redistributed.

36. See <https://twitter.com/fp2p/status/1071069799491518466?lang=en>.

Those Leaving and Those Left Behind

It is time to apply redistributable power to concrete challenges facing our community. In the remainder of this chapter, I draw three conclusions: First, we should honor the spirit of “leave no one behind” by not abandoning our courageous comrades on the frontlines of political power battles against authoritarians; second, we should embrace a more honest conversation about the winners and losers of global economics and the development sector, and finally, we need a new vocabulary to speak about how power works, and we should look to feminist leaders to help us in that journey.

Those Who Defend the Political Power of Others

The SDGs cannot be met through charitable wealth transfers or official development assistance. As a rights based international activist, I believe they will be realized because public (state) and private institutions create the conditions for people to work together to meet the SDGs collectively. Why will those powerful institutions choose to create those conditions? Because it will be in their political and economic interest to do so. In short, the destiny of the SDGs depends profoundly on powerful institutions living by a set of rules and incentives that make them accountable to the citizens and consumers they serve, mediated often by domestic and international civic life.

In other words, the fulfillment of the SDGs depends on a massive power transfer, both economically (hence Goal 10, the inequality goal) and politically (hence Goal 16, the governance goal), to the people who will ensure their realization.

Why would all governments agree to this deeply liberal internationalist project? Why would authoritarian governments in China, Russia, and Hungary adopt the SDGs if success depends on a redistribution of power to their own citizens? I can envision three possible motivations for doing so.

First, they may be playing the win-win game of “philanthrocapitalism”³⁷: they believe they can achieve the material benefits in most of the SDG targets and indicators without actually redistributing economic or power away from current beneficiaries in their own societies. Second, they may believe that no one is going to challenge them on power redistribution in the SDG process, despite the SDG targets: They have no intention of “developing effective accountable and transparent institutions” or ensuring “inclusive participatory and representative

37. Matthew Bishop and Michael Green, *Philanthrocapitalism: How the Rich Can Save the World* (2008), cited at length in Anand Giridharadas’ book *Winners Take All*: 46.

decisionmaking at all levels.”³⁸ Or third, they are effectively using nondecisional power (agenda setting power) to ensure that Agenda 2030 will permit them to stifle any hints of rights-based internationalism or political power redistribution through the SDG process.

Through the MDG years, autocrats and civil society embraced an awkward power game. Autocrats permitted organized civic life, both domestic and international, if it did not threaten their key interests. Civic institutions mostly played by autocrats' rules, filling service delivery gaps, “empowering” marginalized communities, giving “voice” to civilians and “building capacity” of communities. This dance lasted as long as the autocrats allowed development institutions to fulfill their missions and development actors remembered their place—which was not to be too explicit about “redistributing,” “democratizing,” or “politicizing” power.

As civic institutions began to recognize this game for what it was, they began to be more assertive and explicit about the need for a real power shift, and by some accounts they were succeeding. In 1997, Jessica Mathews documented in her article “Power Shift” that nation states and corporations were losing power to international institutions and civic organizations,³⁹ and as late at 2013, Moises Naim argued in *The End of Power*⁴⁰ that corporations and states now face so much scrutiny and engagement that they have lost their old fashioned power over customers and citizens.

My own view is that, around 2007 the rise in democratic freedoms abruptly halted, and political rights and freedoms started to decline.⁴¹ Around the same time (and not coincidentally), more civic organizations realized they needed to stop putting Band-Aids on the symptoms of poverty and get more serious about addressing root causes, which took them into the terrain of redistributing power over.⁴²

For many rights-based activists, the SDGs were meant to be the last chapter in a story that distributed power to citizens in economic and political forms through

38. See <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg16>.

39. Jessica Mathews, “Power Shift,” *Foreign Affairs* (January-February, 1997): 50–66.

40. In a brilliant but terribly titled book (he does not actually argue that power *ended* but that it was distributed away from traditional sources), Moises Naim, *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn't What It Used To Be*, (New York, Basic Books, Perseus Books Group, 2014).

41. When Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban celebrated the “illiberal state” a few years ago, he claimed he was responding only to the “great redistribution of global financial, economic, commercial, political and military power that became obvious in 2008.” See www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp. Robert Kagan argues that liberal democrats never really understood this power shift to autocracy and away from ordinary people, and still have no idea how to fight it in a *Washington Post* article, March 2019.

42. Most embraced the SDGs because they married development outcomes with more clear-eyed commitments to address relative discrepancies of economic power (Goal 10), political power (Goal 16), and gender justice (Goal 5).

ever more transparent and accountable state and private institutions.⁴³ They were conceived and born during a seismic power shift from 2007 to 2015.⁴⁴ That period witnessed technology, new data and social media democratizing institutions, politics, business, and, ultimately, life for the better, but also saw power being captured in public and private spaces by data acquisitive corporations, a new class of extremely wealthy plutocrats, and political autocrats, nationalists, populists, and other anti-liberal democratic forces around the world.⁴⁵ As the conflict over political power redistribution became more overt in both developing countries and developed countries, it created an existential crisis for domestic civic life and their international supporters and partners.

If we accept that the SDG realization depends on powerful institutions (both private and public) being held accountable, then what must we do to defend those who are now on the front lines of a hostile battle field? The destiny of the SDGs may depend on those frontline defenders:⁴⁶ the individuals and activists like Okoth and Ngatia who directly confront powerful institutions and “big men.” As a development community, too often we distance ourselves from their struggles as a battle for power “over” and beyond our remit.

It is not an easy choice to make. If we defend civic life in increasingly political conflicts, we may lose the space ourselves to work in authoritarian regimes. But if we do not, we may leave the most courageous and necessary advocates for the SDGs stranded without support and ultimately sell out the communities who need us most, just to seek our own survival. If our only understanding of power

43. Champions of the liberal internationalism at the heart of the SDGs have begun to doubt their own theory of change. They still believe people want more political and economic power, realized through accountable institutions and redistributive economies. But they now recognize that people may want other things even more than these liberal ideals. As Kagan argued in *The Strongmen Are Back*, (Washington Post March 2019) “Humans do not yearn only for freedom. They also seek security; not only physical security against attack but also the security that comes from family, tribe, race and culture. Often, people welcome a strong, charismatic leader who can provide that kind of protection.” Similarly, Jonathan Haidt argued in *The Righteous Mind* that liberalism is losing ground because it only appeals to three triggers of political energy—compassion, fairness and inequality, and freedom from power abuse—and does not appreciate the more conservative values of sanctity, loyalty, and respect for authority.

44. Some saw this shift earlier than others. Jessica Mathews documented in “Power Shift” in 1997 that nation states and corporations were losing power to international institutions and civic organizations. See www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1997-01-01/power-shift.

45. These two trends were well captured in Naim’s “*The End of Power*.” Naim looks at how corporations and states now face levels of scrutiny and engagement that essentially diminishes their old fashioned “power over” customers and citizens.

46. See www.frontlinedefenders.org, who note in their strategic plan that “SDG indicator 16.10 (protection of fundamental freedoms) offers the opportunity to generate stronger global empirical evidence to highlight the extreme abuses against human rights advocates, journalists, and others, such as killings and enforced disappearance.” See www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/2019-2022_strategic_plan.pdf, p. 9.

refuses to acknowledge the finite, relational, and choice-driven nature of redistributable power, we risk leaving behind those who are courageously confronting the powerful. Borrowing from the historical and military roots of “leave no one behind,”⁴⁷ I would argue that they should be first in our thoughts when it comes time to leave no one behind. If real commitment means the choices we make when options are inconvenient, then the test of our commitment to the SDGs lies in how we protect the frontline defenders of the SDGs when their political voice is threatened.

What does this mean in terms of specific ways forward? Surely it will mean putting backbone into SDG 16’s commitment to “provide justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.” In a remarkable act of nondecisional power, the SDG 16 targets and indicators fail to offer any protection for those who openly challenge governments on their SDG 16 progress. Technically, a government can restrict debate on SDG accountability and inclusion and lock up anyone who challenges that power over and still meet every target and indicator in SDG 16. How did this happen? Because the SDGs fail to acknowledge that the redistribution of political power over government is essential to sustainable development.

Biting the Hand That Feeds Us

On Saturday, March 9, 2019, the day after International Women’s Day, I found myself in Paris in the middle of a peaceful march by the Yellow Jackets. French police blocked their access to government buildings, but the march was peaceful and powerful, and women led the march. This gathering in the wealthiest part of Paris was no accident. They were there to protest an economic system that was leaving them behind. The signs called for decent jobs, fair wages, and better healthcare; they were fighting against unfair taxes on them and not enough taxes on the rich. It was a march about growing inequality.

Since 2015, from the Brexit voters to the Yellow Jackets to America’s increasingly polarized supporters for Trump and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, the call is clear: ordinary people in wealthy nations question whether today’s institutions are working for them. They do not want just resource redistribution. They are calling for power redistribution away from institutions that no longer serve their interests. Populist politicians, both progressive and right-wing, who understand

47. Homi Kharas, who first articulated the SDG phrase “leave no one behind,” does not claim to have borrowed from military history, but in the United States at least, the term “leave no man behind” is well known as a military value, first formally captured in the Rangers Creed: “I will never leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy.” See www.army.mil/values/ranger.html.

this currency are gaining traction by pointing to relational disparities. No technocratic solution that ignores the underlying concerns around power has captured these groups' imagination.

These dynamics are not happening just in rich nations. While extreme poverty continues to fall globally from 1.9 billion people in 1920 to 736 million in 2015, this is too slow a rate and trends are not going well for the poorest half of humanity, (3.8 billion people), who lost 11 percent of their wealth last year.⁴⁸

Determining who has too much redistributable power over economic resources is potentially uncomfortable for Agenda 2030. Some think it is irrelevant:⁴⁹ Why is extreme wealth a problem if new forms of finance, charitable aid, and economic growth can lift people from poverty? If Bill Gates and George Soros give most of their wealth away, then surely they are not the reason people are being left behind, so do not focus on the wealthy—focus on the poor. The rising tide will lift all boats, no matter how opulent those boats are.

In 2011, Oxfam challenged that assumption. We researched not just the “facts” of growing inequality but the causal “relationship” between extreme wealth and poverty.⁵⁰ By asking each year at the annual Davos gathering how many of the world's richest people had the same wealth as the poorest half of the planet, Oxfam hit a nerve (in 2018, it was twenty-six billionaires).^{51 52}

Oxfam's research and advocacy resonated, but not primarily because people are offended by wasteful opulence—although that helps us tell our story. It struck home because people recognized that money is power, and our world grows unhealthier when power over resources resides in fewer and fewer hands. As the number of billionaires doubled globally in the last ten years, power has become ever more concentrated. It is not just morally problematic that 1 percent of Jeff Bezos' wealth is more than the whole annual health budget for Ethiopia; it is actually dangerous for our world, because it skews the playing field for all the SDGs. The reason global wealth is taxed only at 4 percent and that average

48. See <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620599/tb-public-good-or-private-wealth-methodology-note-210119-en.pdf?sequence=15&isAllowed=y>.

49. See this exchange between the former CFO of Yahoo and Winnie Byanyima in Davos is a good representation of the debate: <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/watch-winnie-byanyima-take-down-a-former-yahoo-cfo-at-davos/>. There are many who believe it does not serve the fight against poverty to focus on limiting the economic power of the super wealthy through more progressive taxation.

50. For a good thread on Oxfam's inequality work since 2013, with accompanying links, see <https://twitter.com/BenGroCo/status/1088559078333444098>.

51. See www.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/bp-public-good-or-private-wealth-210119-en.pdf.

52. This “superfact” and the research behind it has been Oxfam's most famous global moment each year for almost a decade now, and has, we like to think, helped to shift the terms of global debate on extreme inequality.

top income tax rates, globally, fell from 62 percent in 1970 to 38 percent in 2013 is not about popular support for trickle-down economics but because extreme wealth buys extreme power and political capture.⁵³ As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis famously said, “We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of the few, but we cannot have both.”⁵⁴

One could argue that Goal 10 (the inequality goal) of the SDGs confronts the problem of inequality. But Goal 10 is weak, in large part because it does not engage inequality as a redistributable power problem and, instead, verges on redefining “the poor” as the “unequal poor.” Consider Target 10.1: “Progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 percent of the population at a rate higher than the national average.”

If redistributable power is finite, relational, and choice driven, then confronting inequality is not just about re-describing the poor as those on the wrong end of inequality. It must lead to us explicitly holding accountable those who have too much power and money, and on this front Goal 10 and the SDGs do not do well. Not once do they name the extreme wealthy, those who have too much economic power, or even refer to “taxes,” the oldest and arguably best form of economic power redistribution.⁵⁵ As one UN paper observed:

Leave No One Behind [LNOB] frames the inequality agenda as a problem of inclusion to be addressed by relief to the poor. As such it was a successful exercise of framing on the part of those who opposed the inequality agenda. As implementation gets underway, LNOB can be seen as a coup *against* equality.⁵⁶

Perhaps this is because the SDGs themselves embody the major economic truth of their era: they rely too heavily on a neo-liberal growth driven model of capitalism that shuns zero-sum choice making and redistributive economics over a misplaced confidence that we can continue to smash through planetary boundaries indefinitely. New economic models increasingly interrogate that assumption by recognizing the finite truth of resource depletion,⁵⁷ and by unpacking the zero-sum power dynamics behind the SDGs.

53. See <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/311312/bp-working-for-few-political-capture-economic-inequality-200114-en.pdf;jsessionid=656587EF12BFA95C45B70F2DA2CC91B2?sequence=19>.

54. As quoted by Raymond Lonergan in *Mr. Justice Brandeis, Great American* (1941), p. 42.

55. For a cogent argument on the way to make our world better, “stop talking about philanthropy and start talking about “taxes” and how to stop tax avoidance.” See Rutgar Bregman and Winnie Byanyima at Davos: www.youtube.com/watch?v=goFzOBk9-sY.

56. Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Thea Smaavik Hegstad, “Leaving No One Behind’ as a Site of Contestation and Reinterpretation,” CDP Background Paper 47, ST/ESA/2018/CDP/47.

57. Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics* (2017) makes this case in a cogent and engaging way.

One feminist thinker, lamenting the failure of the SDGs to really tackle power, suggests this was not an accident:

The SDGs/2030 Agenda] understands power as a given, not as social relations at both the macro and micro level that “leverage specific actors, policies and practices and ultimately privilege a particular rationality in the governance of social order” over others . . . Powerful actors shaping the course of world development—including big countries, inter-government institutions (particularly those dealing with trade and finances), transnational corporations, and even some huge foundations and international non-government organizations with budgets of billions of dollars—could not have failed to mould Agenda 2030, contributing to emphasize certain aspects and marginalize others.⁵⁸

To engage this problem more robustly, development thinkers and anti-poverty movements are going to have to confront the elite individuals and institutions who have an outsized role in determining who gets left behind.

To put it more bluntly, we may have to take some of the attention we have been putting toward better understanding those being “left behind,” and marshal our efforts to ask “being left behind by whom?” Recognizing their power over economic resources may help us know the hand that feeds us and ask whether, one day, we may have to bite it.

The Leaving and Those Left Behind: Can a Feminist Journey Bring Us Back Together?

This chapter argues that the greatest threat to those being left behind is a growing hostility toward power redistribution from economic elites and populists, authoritarians, nationalists, and extremists on gender, race, and religion. Those toxic protagonists are working from a zero-sum power lens and see little benefit in giving up their own economic or political power to citizens who can then hold them accountable. If the SDGs are going to help reverse the growing political and economic power of those who have too much, new tools are needed that allow us to name redistributable power where it increasingly sits and wrest it back into the hands of ordinary people.

The language and frames of feminism may be a powerful—perhaps the most powerful—lens for development thinkers and practitioners to help redistribute

58. Esquivel, “Power and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Feminist Analysis,” p. 12.

power from those leaving to those being left behind. I come to this conclusion after being part of a difficult journey in the organization for which I work.⁵⁹

Last year, the Oxfam Confederation found itself in a crisis of our own making. In February 2018, investigative journalists from British newspapers published that, seven years prior, Oxfam leadership in Haiti, there to help earthquake victims rebuild their lives, had hosted sex parties and engaged sex workers from local communities. Oxfam Great Britain had done an investigation at that time, fired some staff, and allowed others to resign. In the following years, while changing our safeguarding policies, Oxfam did not do enough to expose what had happened in Haiti in 2011. The press and public condemnation were unequivocal.⁶⁰

Those events in Haiti not only hurt Haitians and Oxfam; they harmed all those organizations working in places like Haiti and claiming to fight for justice and rights. Humanitarians come into the worst of contexts with all the power that precious resources bring. In Haiti, some Oxfam staff abused that power.⁶¹

Perhaps it was inevitable that, after Haiti, Oxfam would seek a deeper understanding and more honesty around how power works to impact the most vulnerable. In recommitting to embrace feminist principles in everything we do, both inside and outside the organization, we are seeking to become the change we want to see in the world in terms of holding the powerful accountable.⁶²

The embrace of feminist principles⁶³ has helped us examine the currency of power more deeply, and revealed some fascinating pathways forward that should help make Oxfam stronger as an organization and provide crucial insights toward

59. I would like to think my feminist journey has been underway most of my professional life. I got my professional start working on domestic violence in Nairobi's slums in the 1990s and continue on that journey. Today, I am proud to work in an organization alongside and for strong feminist leaders from whom I am still learning every day.

60. The Haiti scandal was covered on the front pages of major British newspapers for thirteen consecutive days. A few stories of Oxfam staff misconduct from other contexts fueled concerns that the crisis was not a once-off.

61. Since then, Oxfam has taken significant steps to atone for what happened in Haiti and to rebuild the trust of communities, staff, donors, and partners. We formed an independent commission and committed to root out every instance of past sexual harassment abuse, assault, and misconduct and hold the perpetrators accountable. We developed safeguarding principles and protocols that every Oxfam office and staff member must adhere to, and are committed across the confederation to embracing feminist principles in everything we do.

62. Oxfam has been committed to gender justice work and feminism for decades. Since 1993, Oxfam has published the only journal focused on gender and development. See www.genderand-development.org/.

63. Oxfam has worked from feminist principles for a long time. We are currently looking to publish an updated set, which will be public by the time this chapter is published. If you cannot find them online, please feel free to reach out to me for a copy. Among the likely final set of principles are (1) the personal is political, (2) nothing about us without us, (3) intersectionality, (4) men are welcomed, (5) feminism is a worldwide movement, (6) power sharing, (7) safety, (8) we care—to address unpaid care work, (9) collective care and self-care, and (10) there is no economic, social and environmental justice without gender justice.

how working on the SDGs can help redistribute power from those leaving people behind to those who are left behind.

First, feminism gives us a useful language for analyzing power in both its meanings—as ability (the power with, within, and to) and as a relationship (when one person or institution has power over another). Feminist thinkers, for example, helped us understand women’s economic empowerment as generative,⁶⁴ heterogeneous,⁶⁵ non-binary, and creative,⁶⁶ not zero sum.⁶⁷ By challenging power-over and zero-sum power⁶⁸ as the only way to think about power, they opened up our thinking to challenge power other than that used by dominant patriarchy and oppressive institutions.

At the same time, other feminist thinkers, particularly in the fields of economics,⁶⁹ democracy,⁷⁰ gender justice,⁷¹ and reproductive rights⁷² have deepened

64. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago University Press, 1958) saw power as “the human ability not just to act but to act in concert,” p. 44.

65. More than thirty years ago, southern feminists like Chandra Mohanty and black feminists like bell hooks argued that too much feminist thinking addressed “the issues that divide women.” bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

66. In a seminal piece in 1984, (the year of Foucault’s death), Chandra Mohanty in “*Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*,” argued that Western feminists were too comfortable with a binary frame that sees only a “source of power and a cumulative reaction to power,” usually with men as power holders and women as powerless. She went further in challenging this kind of humanist hegemony by exposing arguments that tend to homogenize southern women as “oppressed,” leaving Western feminists as the “subjects” of this counter-history. *boundary 2*, 12, no. 3, *On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism* (Spring-Autumn 1984): 333–58.

67. I concede this with trepidation. The development sector is too quick to coopt terms that legitimate our engagement with power without actually tackling it. As one feminist thinker has argued: “Although genuine empowerment always involves changing unequal power relations, donors and investors tend to favour an apolitical use of the term, in which power relations may actually remain wholly or virtually untouched. When used in this way, the notion of empowerment ‘risks becoming a signifier of righteousness – part of the process of mystification of dominant group interests.’ In other words, it becomes ‘empowerment without power.’” Esquivel, “Power and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Feminist Analysis,” p. 14.

68. See Just Associates, “Making Change Happen,” https://justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/mch3_2011_final.pdf.

69. For example, Benaria and Sen, *Class and Gender Inequalities and Women’s Role in Economic Development—Theoretical and Practical Implications*, *Feminist Studies* 8, no 1 (Spring 1982): 157–76.

70. Jane Mansbridge, *Feminism and Democracy*, *The American Prospect* (Spring 1990).

71. For example, in *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, Susan Moller Okin argues that the contemporary gender-structured family unjustly distributes the benefits and burdens of familial life among husbands and wives. “Here, Okin seems to presuppose that power is a resource that is unequally and unjustly distributed between men and women; hence, one of the goals of feminism would be to redistribute this resource in more equitable ways.” <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-power/#DefPow>

72. For an interesting study of how a woman’s legal power over her reproductive rights and body can lead to measurable increases in other forms of political and economic power, see Roger Clark, 2006, “Three Faces of Women’s Power and their Reproductive Health: A Cross National Study,” *International Review of Modern Sociology* 32, no. 1 (2006): 35–52, www.jstor.org/stable/41421224.

our understanding of power as a zero-sum relationship—when should the state have power over our bodies or our gender identity? Today, feminist voices are once again pushing new power debates, essentially asking whether it is time for a more radical discussion around power distribution that translates empowerment as ability into redistributed power over institutions, laws, bodies, and lives.

In *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*, written in the aftermath of the Trump election, Rebecca Traister is unapologetic that women's anger is going to be essential to take back power from institutions and individuals whose sexist, racist, and misogynist efforts to hold on to power cannot be diminished without confronting it head on and taking it away. A feminist approach can take us beyond the false choice between these two understandings of power and make us more fluent in moving between them, according to the opportunity and challenge.⁷³

Second, feminism helps us unpack intersectionality—the interlocking systems of power that impact those left behind in terms of gender, race, economic class, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and age. When Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* thirty years ago,⁷⁴ she was focused on a U.S. court system that was too quick to view women and people of color as facing mutually exclusive harms and too slow to realize that black women, particularly, faced unique challenges that the law needed to acknowledge. Her analyses, and that by the feminist leaders who took up intersectionality, have changed social activism not just for gender and race politics but for other intersectional realities as well. Over time, the SDGs will benefit greatly from deeper intersectional approaches, not only to better understand groups that sit at the nexus of vulnerabilities because they face multiple forms of power marginalization but also to recognize which groups sit at the nexus of power over, with all the accountability that position demands.

Third, feminism asks us to consider how power works in the most private and intimate relationships and spaces. Because it sees the body and sexuality as sites of power, it demands that deeply personal transformation and social transformation go hand-in-hand. To recognize that the “personal is political” is not just a slogan. A feminist lens on the SDGs demands that we show up in a very different way, not just in terms of our analysis of who is left behind and why but also in our personal engagement to support power redistribution from those

See also www.genderhealth.org for U.S. civil society efforts to protect women's power over their sexual health and reproductive rights around the world.

73. For a useful overview of development debates by feminists, see Hartwick's “Feminist Theories of Development,” in Richard Peet and Elaine Hartwick, *Theories of Development: Contentions, Arguments Alternatives*, 3rd ed. (Guildford Press, 2015).

74. See <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1052&context=uclf>.

who have too much to those who do not have enough power. To recognize that as a white, Northern, middle class, heterosexual, Christian male I start from a different place vis-à-vis the vast majority of intended beneficiaries, allies, and social justice peers is not self-flagellation or some form of post-patriarchy stress disorder. It is simply to recognize that the legacies that accompany my identity inform (but, hopefully, do not dictate) my relevance to power redistribution in a fast-changing world.

Perhaps because they've been thinking harder about intersectionality than most, feminist thinkers have, in my opinion, done more in the last thirty years to advance a discussion around using power differently to achieve solidarity across class, race, geography, religion, and gender to redistribute power from the haves to the have nots. Sixteen years after publishing *Under Western Eyes*, which challenged white Northern feminists to be more thoughtful in speaking for all women, Chandra Mohanty argued in 2003 that it was time for "feminist solidarity" to work together take power back from neo-liberal capitalists. She now views feminism as far more better balanced with women from "two thirds" of the world working together with one-third feminists to decolonize discussions of power and work in solidarity to rescue our planet from the direction in which it is heading.⁷⁵ Similarly, Hartwick, after surveying feminist leadership in development over the last few decades, concludes that a truly globally balanced feminism needs to overcome its "failure of nerve" to step up and "speak on behalf of poor women everywhere." Drawing from her own socialist leanings, Elaine Hartwick calls for feminists to lead a more "transformative politics" that challenges systems of economic and political power in the world.⁷⁶ I believe they will.

I've come to believe that becoming a feminist is like committing to redistributing power. For me, there are journeys, not destinations, both personal and in the world. There will never be a point where I or, for that matter, Oxfam or any development professional or organization will be free of the risk of power abuse in our organizations or in the communities where we work. What I want to strive for is humility, vigilance, honesty, and the energy to keep redistributing power in the right direction. When Oxfam called for an independent inquiry following the Haiti crisis, and that inquiry found power abuse to be a pattern in some offices, I was proud that we embraced the commission's challenge and recommitted to the journey. I am proud that we are also asking other organizations to join us on the journey to make safer our workplaces and the communities where we have the privilege to work.

75. Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles," in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Duke University Press, 2003).

76. Peet and Hartwick, *Theories of Development*, p. 305.

In the same way, I believe that if the SDGs are to be realized, each of us must champion the redistribution of power as a journey and look to Agenda 2030 as simply a milestone along the way.

Concluding Thoughts

I started this chapter frustrated that too much SDG attention was going toward those being left behind, as if fixing their behavior and capacity was the new development challenge. I wanted the reader to ask the question: Who is pushing them behind? To answer that question, I needed to interrogate power and how it really works. But then as I went back to the philosophical and feminist roots of power analysis, I came up against a paradox. By seeking to name those who have too much power (either political or economic) as the villains of development, I risked making the story all about them and trotting out a very stale development story that puts hegemonic masculinity and old style power over at the center of the discussion (just when postmodernist social justice thinking was condemning the old, dominant narratives to a more suitable place on the periphery of development thinking).

My way to unravel that paradox was to explore the different ways feminists have talked about power. The contribution I hope this chapter makes is to go back to the question that Jo Rowlands asked more than twenty years ago: "Should a loss of power be something to fear?"

I do not believe so if people like Beatrice Okoth and Rose Ngatia can translate power with, within, and to into relational power over resources and politics. In other words, the world will be a much better place and the SDGs will have a chance of succeeding only when relational power is redistributed away from those who have too much and into the hands of those who do not have enough.

This will mean redistributing political power from the unaccountable to citizens and activists. Whether the SDGs themselves (hamstrung by the dubious ideological agnosticism of the United Nations) proclaim a political philosophy or not, the very act of asking states to publicly declare and document progress against coherent transnationally relevant long-term development goals for public accountability is profoundly political. It threatens the short-term transactional mindset of the current U.S. administration and the secretive pathologies of authoritarian states like Russia, Hungary, and China. It asks citizens and civic institutions all around the world to pay attention, to hold powerful institutions accountable, and, in so doing, to redistribute power to themselves, even in the face of increasing threats.

My hope is that some of those reading this chapter not only agree that the redistribution of political power is essential to the SDGs success but become

more motivated to protect the bravest fighters in this political battlefield: those frontline defenders who risk their lives to hold governments and powerful corporations accountable. Above all, we must not leave them behind.

We also need a different economic conversation about inequality than the SDGs have offered us so far. To date, the United Nations and those participating in formulating the goals have used nondecisional (agenda setting) power to ensure the SDGs do not threaten those who have too much economic power. The most basic form of redistributing power over resources—progressive taxation—does not get a mention. Nor is there a body to which citizens can turn to seek redress for corporate tax avoidance, regressive public fiscal policies, or threats to our global fiscal system like the 7+ trillion dollars in wealth that sits in tax havens doing nothing for anyone. We need the UN to be a different kind of protagonist that is more explicit about redistributing economic power.

Finally, we need to get beyond the false choices in power debates between generative and zero-sum power. Both have their place in development practice and strategy. Feminism has given us a powerful language for generative power—the powers with, within, and to—and has helped us better understand the dangers of ignoring zero sum power when it is used as power over, either by others or by ourselves, as Oxfam did in Haiti.

In the end of the day, Oxfam's main task, and perhaps the task of other organizations too, is to stop fearing the loss of zero-sum power, to think more about helping those left behind take actual power over their futures and away from those who have too much, and finally, to embrace a journey where others have ever more control over their own destiny, identity, and future, as we challenge others to take that journey with us.

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