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Empowerment or alienation? Teaching gender and development in postcolonial contexts

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how culture, religion, gender, and the politics of knowledge production were entangled in the mission, policies, and practices of the Asian University for Women (AUW) in Bangladesh. The article contributes to documenting how decolonisation efforts in women's education and empowerment play out in an institution located in the periphery and established with an explicit mission for women's empowerment. The article critically looks at the (sometimes) contradictory discourses, desires, and agencies at the student, community, staff, and institutional levels, along with the power dynamics and reproduction of colonial and postcolonial practices and legacies in the context of operationalising gender and development (GAD), highlighting the paradoxes and challenges that arise from such endeavours. Finally, this case study highlights how pedagogies of community building at the institutional level become integral in responding to such tensions and conflicts and in countering the alienation from culture and religion that global practices of GAD often create.

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Introduction

In the context of calls for the decolonisation of knowledge production processes and a global turn towards higher education institutions as major actors for development goals (Chankseliani and McCowan 2021), the teaching of gender and development (GAD) occurs not only in the usual confines of development and gender studies courses but also at a larger university/institutional level. Many of the debates that have characterised GAD and feminist pedagogical spaces are now “spilling over” into academic institutions. Much of the research and literature on this remains focused on Northern academic institutions (Shahjahan and Morgan 2016) or centres/institutions in postcolonial contexts with a specific gender focus (Crawford and Jackson-Best 2017; Pereira 2017). In these different dynamics, universities are co-opting/being imposed on to take on GAD roles. How do the material relations, pedagogical and epistemological approaches, and debates that have shaped GAD play out? How should GAD be taught, and what are the impacts on students and their communities in postcolonial contexts, especially when the coloniality of GAD produces *apparent* conflicts with tradition, culture, and religion? This paper explores how culture, religion, gender, and the politics of knowledge production were entangled in a newly established postcolonial all-women university's mission, policies, and practices, often producing tensions and conflicts that countered the mission of empowerment. It also reflects on how pedagogies of community

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building become integral in responding to such tensions and conflicts and in countering the alienation from culture and religion that global practices of GAD often create.

This article directly speaks to the operationalisation of teaching GAD in the first-hand context of the Asian University for Women (AUW), which was explicitly established to contribute to gender empowerment and produce women leaders for Asia. As such, the article contributes to documenting how decolonisation efforts in women's education and empowerment play out in an institution located in the periphery. Furthermore, the article critically looks at the (sometimes) contradictory discourses, desires, and agencies at the student, community, staff, and institutional levels, along with the power dynamics and reproduction of colonial and postcolonial practices and legacies in the context of operationalising GAD, highlighting paradoxes and challenges that arise from such endeavours. Finally, and filling another gap in terms of operationalising the teaching of GAD, the article identifies practical ways that these can be mitigated, drawing on the institutional experience of AUW, as well as on the initiatives, struggles, and contestations of students themselves in negotiating these dynamics for their own empowerment.

Gender, development, and tertiary institutions

The mainstreaming of gender into development policymaking has often resulted in a depoliticisation of gender at international and national levels (Batliwala 2010; Parpart, Rai, and Staudt 2002; Porter and Sweetman 2005). In this mainstreaming, empowerment – understood as a multidimensional, relational, and political process (Kabeer 1999) – often seems to be co-opted by neoliberal processes in development, which, instead of shifting the relationships of unequal power, reduces empowerment to individual women advancing in the present society by gaining new skills, resources, and opportunities (Longwe 1998). However, if education is to serve as a means of empowerment for women, it must involve transformation of *both* the individual woman and the gender, economic, political, and socio-cultural relationships in which they are embedded (Kabeer 2008; Cornwall, 2016; Murphy-Graham 2008). Without this wider shift, a depoliticised and neoliberal empowerment can be accompanied by alienation from self and community, exclusion, and marginalisation that become counter to empowering processes (Abu-Rabia-Queder and Weiner-Levy 2008; Amin 2018; Robinson-Pant 2004).

Critiques of neoliberal empowerment and mainstreaming of GAD, however, have neglected post-colonial and decolonial interventions which point to the need to (a) examine the secular and Western assumptions of the concepts of GAD, gender inequality, and empowerment (Istratii 2017; Salem and Icaza 2023), and (b) examine the institutional processes in development interventions that reproduce colonial relations of power (Bawa 2016; Roy 2018). Rosalba Icaza has argued the need to:

interrogate critically the category of gender as deeply colonial and therefore as limiting the potential of many struggles that we are trying to revisit and include in our teaching materials. At times, a focus on gender might reproduce logics of domination by not questioning the colonial origins of the category of gender. (Salem and Icaza 2023, 217)

In the contemporary development context, Roy (2018) shows how many interventions aiming to empower women (e.g. microfinance, completion of formal education, banning of child marriage) are entangled in processes that work to further “discipline” women (and their communities) into “the modern” and into the market economy and in the process “create as many spaces of unfreedom for women as they [purportedly] enable their freedom” (286), including through increased surveillance and control by state and other governmental regimes, as well as through dismissal, erosion, and removal of non-economic forms of agency (e.g. in community through religious and cultural institutions).

One persistent consequence of this in contemporary GAD practices has been a pitting of religio-cultural institutions as the site of patriarchy against work for women's empowerment and gender

equality (Istratii 2017; Roy 2018; Singh 2015). This has often placed women (and men) in a position where they are asked to choose between their struggles and aspirations for change in the unequal power relations (of gender) and their cultural/religious selves and communities. Such a framing can amplify the effect of empowerment in relation to expanding opportunities, choices, agency, and options (Malhotra et al. 2002), being simultaneously alienating in relation to loss of/separation from/exile from other identities/communities of significance – especially religio-cultural communities – and an internalisation of the idea of the “inferiority” of the non-“modern”/“Western” “tradition” (Abu-Rabia-Queder and Weiner-Levy 2008; Fanon 1986; Istratii 2017). This type of alienation is not only psychological in impact, but also material – since belonging in and knowledge of religio-cultural communities are important means through which one can exercise one’s influence and access resources (Bawa 2016). As such, the consequences of a lack of explicit interrogation of these dynamics at institutional and pedagogical levels in “doing” GAD in universities can be that learning and practitioner work produces alienation between student and “knowledge”, as well as between student-turned-practitioner and community, and that the GAD institution (the university, in this case) can reproduce colonial forms of power.

Broader university curricular and institutional practices/policies in relation to gender and higher education may remain “untouched” by these discipline-specific postcolonial and decolonial insights and challenges – in part, because the institution is embedded in power relations that reproduce colonial logics of gender, gender relations, and empowerment through processes of accreditation, rankings, and funding that privilege Northern modes of knowledge production, pedagogies, and institutional policies (Connell 2007). Pereira (2017) argues that for institutions located outside of the colonial metropole, the unequal distribution of epistemic status of non-Western peoples, countries, and continents places tertiary educational institutions (and their students and scholars) in these places in tension with the “gains, openings and opportunities” that relationships and practices with Western scholars/institutions/scholarship can produce, and the “constraints and losses” this hegemony also brings (148–149). Careful and critical interrogation of these tensions in the wider tertiary education spaces and epistemological assumptions and differences is urgent as development institutions and discourses are entering universities globally and formally through the push for universities to align learning, teaching, research, and organisational policies to the frameworks of the Sustainable Development Goals, which themselves have specific and cross-cutting gender goals (Chankseliani and McCowan 2021). Universities are thus often doing GAD work, both through training people who take on GAD work, locally, regionally, and internationally, and through the production of knowledge and tools that GAD practitioners utilise to develop and evaluate policies and projects.

In this paper, we reflect on our experiences in a Global South postcolonial university to explore these various tensions, exclusions, and marginalisations, as well as institutional-level pedagogies that may reduce alienation in GAD practices and practitioners from cultural and religious communities.

Methodology and situating ourselves

This paper focuses on AUW in Bangladesh, a unique regional university established with an explicit GAD mission. We draw on our observations and experiences working at AUW for 6 years and draw on 35 student in-depth interviews, four participatory workshops, and three focus groups conducted over 2013–2015 to reflect on how GAD theories and practice are bridged (or remain disconnected), especially in relation to persistent questions that emerge about the perceived opposition between gender equality and culture/religion. During the period of data collection, Students came from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Palestine, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam with 90 per cent of the students receiving full scholarships (based on financial need). While the majority of students were of Muslim background, students also came from Buddhist, Hindu,¹ and Christian backgrounds, given the diversity of religions in Asia. Feminist

pedagogies have emphasised the importance of reflective practice in allowing for learning and community building (Chow et al. 2003). This approach also allows us to critically understand how we, as teachers, researchers, and staff in academic institutions, “do” GAD, including how we are entangled in the coloniality of knowledge production, gender, and development (Manion and Shah 2019), as well as what practices and pedagogies may contribute to doing GAD differently, especially in post-colonial contexts. The analysis in this paper primarily draws on institutional and staff practices (as opposed to student voices/experiences – which have been documented extensively in Amin 2018) in the context of responding to different stakeholders (including students) and “doing” GAD through the university.

We were both part of AUW’s founding faculty and taught there from 2009 to 2015 (Sara) and 2011–2015 (Christian). At AUW, we were involved in teaching, curricular development, and in various aspects of policymaking work linked to GAD with university stakeholders, students, and the university itself. Our own work in participatory research and social action related to gender-based violence and ethnic conflict in South Asia (Sara) and poverty reduction and women’s empowerment (Christian) shaped our pedagogies and responses at AUW. Since leaving AUW in 2015, we have remained closely connected to AUW students and staff through research and acting in solidarity with the women graduate network of AUW, including, most recently, during the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.

Sara is of Bangladeshi–Muslim heritage, grew up in Thailand, and has worked as a researcher of identity and belonging. Christian is of Québécois–Catholic–Francophone heritage, grew up in Montréal, and has been both a development practitioner and academic in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. We have been shaped by formal education and knowledge systems of the Global North with strong secular, Western, and modernist assumptions. While our commitments to social justice issues have shaped our pedagogical approaches at AUW, unlearning modernist and secular assumptions have been important in our pedagogical journeys and academic work.

GAD as university mission and policy: assumptions, disconnects, and contestations

AUW was established in direct response to the World Bank/UN Task Force on Higher Education and Society Report on Higher Education in Developing Countries, noting that the gender gap in higher education was even more acute in relation to women from lower socioeconomic groups and other socially marginalised groups. This double gap meant that leadership across different sectors was characterised by both gender and socioeconomic inequalities. As such, AUW was founded with an explicit mission to empower women for leadership through a residential liberal arts education with a needs-blind admission process paired with a scholarship program to reach women from underrepresented groups in Asia, including ethnic/religious minority women, and women from rural and other marginalised socioeconomic areas/communities. Starting with 150 students from six countries in Asia in 2008, AUW currently has close to 1,200 students from 18 countries, and has added specific pathway programs for women garment workers, as well as Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Culture, religion, gender, and the politics of knowledge production were entangled in the university’s mission and policies in multiple ways and often produced tensions and conflicts, which seemed to counter the mission of empowerment. In this section, we document some of these entanglements and how staff, students, and the communities worked through building relationships of care, responsibility, and transformation.

Alienating forms of academic governance and curriculum

AUW was founded by a Bangladeshi man (practising as a lawyer in the USA) in collaboration with (mostly Western) liberal feminists and principal donors located in the Global North. The university received a unique Charter from the Bangladeshi Government that facilitated academic freedom

through an exemption of regulation by the National Government Education Board. This Charter was widely publicised, highlighting both the Bangladesh Government's commitment to gender equality in "allowing" for such a university, while at the same time positioning the university as an exceptional space of gender progressiveness in the local community, and establishing a protective measure specially against conservative Islamic movements in the country.

While most administrative staff were hired locally, academic and senior administrative staff, as well as the pro-chancellor, were ethnically diverse and almost all were educated in Northern institutions. The goal of being accredited by the US-based New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) was noted in the need to hire at least 60 per cent of faculty with PhDs from North America. The decision to orient accreditation towards the West (understood as giving prestige to AUW graduates) was accompanied by a lack of conversation with how recognition of the AUW degrees would work in the Asian countries students came from. This placed these women in a precarious position as they finished their studies since, in many Asian countries, government, civil society, and even private-sector employment requires proof that degrees are from universities recognised by the government. This was particularly problematic since the issue was raised by the students and some regional staff early on and concerns were dismissed. For example, one Indian student from Kerala shared in a focus group:

We have been saying to the administration, our transcripts and degree need to be recognised by our government. We will not be able to sit for public jobs and civil service exams. What will we do? What good is American accreditation if my friends who studied at home can get better jobs than me?

At the same time, students often expressed concerns during open forums when the number of white faculty declined. They were worried that a decline in white faculty (perceived as more prestigious/better academics) would signal a decline in quality, status, and economic currency of their education among parents, future employers, and communities back home. In the context of "women's empowerment", students also often raised concerns about how regional staff (perceived as coming from more conservative cultures) may be less open to gender "progressive" values than non-regional/white staff (perceived to be more gender progressive). In an apparent paradox, this concern was often articulated simultaneously with a (seemingly contradictory) desire to have regional staff as role models with shared cultural and religious backgrounds (and who would arguably better understand the religio-cultural negotiations students needed to work with).

These tensions at both the institutional level (special Charter, accreditation by the North) and at the curricular level (staffing background) recall Pereira's (2017) argument that in contexts outside of the colonial metropole, the unequal distribution of epistemic status leads to seeking "authorising bodies" (independent Charter, NEASC, white faculty), which are both opportunities to gain ground and enact change, and also to a reinforcement of the coloniality of knowledge production and a racialisation of academic labour (white faculty privileged over regional faculty; neglect of Asian country governance and institutions). However, the material reality of the governing rules of university accreditations in the students' countries (no jobs for graduates without their accreditation), as well as the symbolic value of non-white staff (in terms of belonging for students and of representation for the university) illustrate that these dynamics of power are not just unidirectional or simply reinforcing of Western hegemony.

Another example of this duality of power, was how the West and the East were placed in relation to each other in both fundraising and curricular development practices. While the university's fundraising material often involved catchphrases about getting the best of both worlds, the East was frequently relegated to showcasing culture in donor events and celebrations, while the West (liberal arts women colleges in the USA) underpinned curricular development and content and was perceived as the ideal model to emulate. In early donor events, students were dictated to perform cultural dances for Northern (mainly white men) donors, with little space and recognition of the academic and community achievements of these women, a form of gendered and colonial objectification that students and many academic staff found highly problematic.

Students quickly questioned the meaning of empowerment and leadership in such contexts and also challenged the tendency to represent them as underprivileged, oppressed, and victims in donor contexts and university publication material. For example, during one interview, a Sri Lankan student articulated her discomfort:

I have had to dance and dance and dance at AUW for so many events. I used to love dancing. But having to dance for all these people who support AUW, I don't know ... it made my dance feel cheap.

Another student from Cambodia shared: "My story is always put in all these documents about how sad I was, how I had nothing and now look at me. But that is not all my story". Another student from Afghanistan said during the participatory graduate workshop: "I go back home and they say, oh you went to the poor girls' university. It is not right – it reduces what we are doing". These dynamics speak to Mohanty's (1984) discussion of the exoticisation and marginalisation of women of colour in development practices. This was compounded by complaints that many university practices involved silencing criticism of curriculum and university governance by students. For example, a Bangladeshi student reflected on a moment in 2011 when students raised concerns about the relevance of the curriculum and were met with the possibility of suspension: "If we can't say things here and raise questions here, then what does empowerment mean?" This progressively changed through student and academic staff advocacy, but not before students noted the paradox of presenting them as deprived/lacking to donors while celebrating and promoting their outstanding capacities and achievements in classrooms and placements. Students started using the very discourse on empowerment to which they were constantly subjected to question these practices and narratives and further their agency.

Gender assumptions in teaching/doing GAD: women, men, marriage, sex

Many students also questioned the gender assumptions that had led to the creation of a university for women on multiple fronts. First, debates in GAD practices about the place of gender-specific spaces in supporting change/empowerment came up regularly through different questions. One recurring question related to the place of men and boys in women's empowerment (White 1997). Students often asked, what are the consequences of empowering (young/marginalised) women without also empowering (young/marginalised) men? In particular, those coming from areas with political violence (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Palestine) pointed out that their brothers/partners also needed a similar space of academic growth, gender-consciousness raising, and empowerment. Without equivalent spaces for men, the women students were being further alienated from their communities and charged with additional responsibilities of advocating for change on their own (Amin 2018; Amin et al. 2015). This played into the relationship many of these women (and their families) had with feminism as an ideology/theory/political movement as opposed to their commitment to deal with socio-political-economic marginalisation/insecurities/struggles. Some also pointed out that while a women-only university with "international" (read: Western) standards in a regional context did open up opportunities for those students that otherwise would have faced obstacles going to university in the first place, other women were made to go to AUW by their families instead of attending co-educational institutions precisely because of the sense that it allowed their families to "protect" their girls. This brings up how GAD practices and opportunities can be experienced in contradictory ways, as enabling of freedom for some and unfreedom for others (Roy 2018).

Second, students choosing (arranged) marriages and having children became part of policymaking and (beyond) classroom debates in the university. Administrative staff raised concerns about how the university's reputation would be affected if students became married or pregnant. Students getting married seemed to be a public-relations problem for the donor community, as these women "should" be focusing on their studies and "not give in" to social pressures to marry. Some faculty members also agreed with this and felt that students accepting to enter into an arranged marriage

would show the failure of AUW's educational empowerment aims. These reactions were often linked to Western secular assumptions about arranged marriage (or marriage in "the religious and culturally strong" context of the East) being absent of choice (or that choice should be the determining factor). There was also a concern that if students were to get married, they would then have children and that this would again be an example of the failure of AUW's aim to "save" these women from their "oppressive cultures" that demanded children. It was even suggested, at one point, that married women and/or women with children should no longer be accepted,² which contributed to students avoiding going to the university health centre to discuss sexual and reproductive health due to concerns about possible future policies. Students getting pregnant (outside of marriage) also often posed a public-relations problem for the "conservative" regional and local community and further created tensions in how the health centre staff, who seemed to understand premarital sex as a problem, responded. As such, students often chose to consult academic staff instead for such matters. A consequence of all of this was that students often experienced marriage and sex in the context of empowerment as a source of anxiety.

These dynamics speak to the failures of many GAD interventions due to a privileging of a liberal form of empowerment and a neglect of the local meanings and relationships that enable empowerment (i.e. have influence, critique power, exercise culturally/religiously informed agency; Bawa 2016; Roy 2018). Through these processes, some staff and students were then situated as "translators" in trying to facilitate the unlearning of these assumptions for colleagues/peers; they were also placed as advocates to understand empowerment differently: that the mission of enabling empowerment was to help the students build the tools and confidence to critically and contextually evaluate their options and their related implications and to then make a decision of their own.

Paradoxes of empowerment and pedagogies countering alienation

While the above dynamics point to what could be seen as alienating and disempowering processes, during graduation exit interviews conducted across the university, most students felt that they were better prepared and equipped to take on new roles, initiatives, responsibilities, and jobs and they were able to analyse their own situations and contexts with diverse critical lenses and perspectives (see Amin 2018; Phillott 2019). Students highlighted that they considered new opportunities that would have previously been dismissed as not for them given their background and also the cultural (and family) expectations they often perceived themselves to be the subject of. Students felt that their AUW experience helped them to have the confidence to face the challenges implicated by these choices. Sometimes the reactions to these choices were met with less resistance from their communities than anticipated or even with support and enthusiasm due to a perceived changed social status (having received a "Western" education or succeeding professionally, becoming leaders in their new contexts).

At the same time, many still had to face considerable challenges and resistance to pursue their decisions/choices and realised the vision they had for themselves was seen as alien, changed, or foreign – especially when they advocated for what was understood by many in their communities to be (foreign/secular/Western) gender and cultural change. Questions about the consequences of the change one experienced through "empowerment" quickly became central. The women (and their families) and many of us, as academic staff, expressed concerns about the meaning of empowerment and its paradoxical nature: aside from education and knowledge, empowerment can also be accompanied by alienation and exile (Abu-Rabia-Queder and Weiner-Levy 2008; Amin 2018; Fanon 1986). Alienation was sometimes expressed and experienced through the idea of loss – loss of belonging for many students from the communities they had come from, loss of these women from their communities to "development" and "developed" spaces. These questions emerged as students came to us talking about changes in their relationship to families, partners, faith, religious practices, and culture. They recognised that these changes were in part a product of the education they were participating in, but they were also concerned about the implications

of such an education, not only in relation to the precarity of livelihoods (as noted earlier), but also the fragility and isolation they increasingly experienced in their own identities and in the relationships that mattered to them. While these experiences were orienting many students to look for employment and further education outside of their countries, the university was caught in a double bind, linked back to the unequal epistemic status in higher education institutions: being able to showcase its graduates succeeding in “prestigious” Northern academic institutions and international development spaces made AUW attractive for further funding and recruitment. However, if the graduates were part of a brain drain in their communities, then were we actually succeeding in the larger vision of GAD, especially in that AUW was founded with an explicit mission to create women leaders for Asia (and not just from Asia)?

Amin (2018) has documented in detail these experiences of alienation, displacement, and exile that “empowering” education produced at AUW. These varied dynamics, however, also became important sites of unlearning for academic staff, administration, and students about GAD, as processes and goals, as well as the meanings of expertise, mastery, and empowerment. Amin, Girard, and Calabro (2022) have highlighted that key to both the unlearning and countering of alienation were the processes that built community – between students, staff, and administration; between students and their communities “back home”; and between students and communities “beyond home”. Several initiatives became key in this dynamic. First, developing a summer research program that required students to work in their communities (back home) on concerns of their choice, guided by academic supervision. These projects had important action research components that enabled students to engage with their communities as sites of learning (instead of “simply” opposition or alienation; Amin et al. 2015). Most of these projects were designed to be participatory and in dialogue with “oppositional” actors as key – especially religious actors, men-dominated spaces, and cultural practices that were understood as exclusive of (young) women’s voices. These projects also opened up these relationships and practices for dialogue and critique within, and made visible their complex, contradictory, and creative realities, which Roy (2018) argues is essential to reclaiming full agency against the binary opposition of modern vs. tradition.

Second, a bi-yearly series of workshops on “returning” and “now what?” became established in collaboration with graduates in the community. Each graduating cohort in the final year would participate in a series of open-discussion workshops, examining reflectively how they understood the educational journey they had taken and the concerns and anxieties they were dealing with. These first workshops would then be used to identify AUW alumnae and other community leaders across the different countries who would share their own journeys of “re-entry” and the processes through which they have addressed these types of concerns, anxieties, and challenges. These workshops became essential in providing strategies and building networks to navigate both economic precarity and relational displacement. It also became a major means for supporting university academic and administrative staff to (un)learn what (else) is needed to enable empowerment and counter alienation.

Finally, a bi-weekly storytelling series was established that focused on personal journeys of academic staff, different community leaders from Asia, visiting professionals and experts, and students themselves. These storytelling sessions became a fluid and open space to hold diverse views on ways of doing and being, gender and self, struggle and change. These different initiatives were important in building the conditions for what Salem and Icaza (2023, 219) describes as creating “a world in which many worlds can fit”, where “coalitional work engendering multiplicity, co-contemporaneity and the overlapping of our multiple selves are allowed to exist”.

Conclusion

The AUW experience speaks to challenges of exploring GAD through higher education in a postcolonial context. In particular, AUW occupied multiple marginalising epistemic statuses in the postcolonial context: (a) as a “liberal arts” university in a neoliberal economic development-oriented model

that equates university education with employment markets; (b) as a women-only university seeking to produce women leaders in societies where women's political and economic leadership remain constrained and are often perceived as threats; (c) as a university privileging women from socio-economically underrepresented communities through a donor-based development model that depicts these women as needy and oppressed; and (d) as a university at the periphery, trying to centre women's agency and enable change in power relations that are global, colonial, and multiple. These multiple forms of marginalisation worked to perpetuate Western-dominated views and curricula, including funding, recognition/certification, models, and expectations (from donors, academic staff, and the students themselves) in relation to GAD in practice. However, these also enabled opportunities to challenge and renegotiate the Western roots of GAD, while attempting to decolonise the curriculum and allow/promote local/regional perspectives to (co)exist and inform GAD in practice, and encourage both students, as GAD practitioners-to-be, and (academic) staff, as GAD practitioners, to make it their own. Through questioning, dialogues of translation, and new institutional-level pedagogical and policy interventions, the coloniality of GAD was directly exposed and questioned in multiple areas, from the perspectives and reactions of the students to the ones of the home and host communities they are part of, as well as the academic staff and donors, with related attempts to mediate this complex epistemological relationship.

As such, the case of AUW offers a direct example of teaching GAD in practice and the inherent challenges and paradoxes that come with such endeavours, especially as idealistic visions and goals meet operational applications and challenges rooted in both epistemological and material inequalities. In addition to describing and analysing the tensions and debates that took place as a result, the paper highlighted some initiatives and approaches that helped negotiate and mediate them. Key in these initiatives were how change could occur through and in relationships, and how communities and spaces could be made "for a world in which many worlds can fit" where "coalitional work engendering multiplicity, co-contemporaneity and the overlapping of our multiple selves are allowed to exist" (Salem and Icaza 2023, 219). In particular, the following enabled the kind of resistances and community building that became possible: (a) the location of the institution in the periphery (as opposed to the metropole), (b) centring multiple diversities (of culture, class, religion, and disciplines) in how student and staff communities were recruited, and (c) having an explicit mission of empowerment and leadership (i.e. political voice as opposed to simply economic) at a local-regional level. These takeaways can help mitigate the alienation that often accompanies empowerment in relation to GAD in postcolonial Southern contexts and better adapt the curriculum and overall learning environment and experience to reduce the potential negative consequences and risks of alienation, so that the dialectic/paradox of empowerment/alienation can be tackled in a constructive manner in the context of doing and teaching GAD in the Global South.

Notes

1. Caste data were not collected.
2. This debate was also entangled with explicit operational and financial concerns about AUW's ability to cater to the needs of such women and their children.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics statement

Ethics approval for the data presented in this project was approved through the Asian University for Women (AUW) Institutional Review Board, Case number 2013FC16.

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