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Do Muslim Village Girls Need Saving? Critical Reflections on Gender and Childhood Suffering in International Aid

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The Global Status of Women and Girls

A Multidisciplinary Approach

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Chapter 9

Do Muslim Village Girls Need Saving? Critical Reflections on Gender and Childhood Suffering in International Aid

Rania Kassab Sweis

THE BEST VICTIMS

As I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork on the effects of global humanitarian aid for vulnerable children in Egypt, I observed the significant role “village girls” played in the moral economies and political discourses of western-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Here is how Philippe, a French aid worker, articulated this point to me one day in an interview about his work on a major village girl project in Egypt: “The girl child, especially the African or Muslim girl child, is the ultimate victim, the best victim.”¹ For Philippe, the Muslim village girl constitutes a *special* kind of humanitarian subject. He emphatically pointed out in our conversation that day that her racialized and gendered status frames her as the quintessential aid subject, the “*best*” victim from the perspective of international NGOs and powerful donors. Her pure, unquestioned innocence and absolute suffering as a distant yet recognizable “child” no doubt has important functions for NGO fundraising and grant reproduction.

Without contesting the idea that many Muslim girls around the world do constitute victims in very real ways. In this chapter, I want to raise a different set of questions. What does it mean when powerful actors in western-based international NGOs recognize the *Muslim village girl* as the ultimate savable victim? What gendered and racialized logics are at play in this category’s strategic deployment, and what are their tangible effects for both NGOs and village girls who receive aid? These questions form part of a book manuscript I am currently preparing on the gendered politics of international aid with children and youth in Egypt. As a cultural anthropologist and transnational feminist scholar, I am interested in the grounded everyday

consequences of international aid for vulnerable groups in the Middle East, but particularly in Egypt—a major global hub for global health and international development aid projects since the 1980s.² I conducted over two consecutive years (2007–2009) of ethnographic fieldwork with four prominent European and American-based NGOs in Cairo in order to examine the making and implementation of international aid projects for village girls across Egypt. Moving from NGO offices to village field sites, I observed and interviewed local and foreign aid workers as well as village girls and their friends and families. In addition, I participated in the production of global NGO reports and grant applications, helped gather and analyze statistics and even assisted in delivering aid to out-of-school and at-risk girls the southern Egyptian village *Beni Suef*.

Drawing on this multisited ethnographic field research methodology,³ I argue that large-scale international aid projects that aim to speak for, uplift and save Muslim village girls in Egypt and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa produce complex paradoxical effects, which can ultimately conflict with and even undermine NGO project goals. The girls I knew participated in classes designed to teach them individual liberation, women's rights, and self-empowerment, but they also negotiated aid interventions in unanticipated ways while retaining strong aspirations for marriage and family duty. Thus, they neither rejected nor wholly embraced the aid interventions that were designed to redefine their gendered subjectivities and speak on their behalf as “savable” victims.⁴ Moreover, I suggest that this burgeoning contemporary interest in the exclusive suffering of the Muslim village girl—as reflected in international aid and popular discourse—speaks to broader Imperial legacies of Western intervention into the Middle East and North Africa and what anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod calls a *gendered Orientalism* that ultimately serves to “other” and discipline local communities while depoliticizing the structural violence and systemic poverty shaping girls' lives. Echoing Abu-Lughod's influential work to which the title of this chapter owes, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*,⁵ I therefore pose an equally evocative and related question. Do Muslim village girls need saving? At least in which ways international aid experts and powerful donors imagine?

I will clarify these points by first analyzing the discursive figure of the Muslim village girl in international aid policy and literature, particularly with respect to cultural representations of her passive victimhood and supposed lack of personal agency. Next, I will trace the on-the-ground effects of Egypt's largest international aid project for village girls in one community within *Beni Suef*. I will end this chapter by discussing some possible implications these findings pose for the critical study of international aid and gendered childhoods in the global south.

TIMELESS REGISTERS: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MUSLIM VILLAGE GIRL AS SAVABLE

In western NGO policy, the vulnerabilities of the Muslim village girl are constructed as natural and unchallenged, unlike those of her counterpart the Muslim village boy. Her suffering is defined through her body, as immeasurable, constant, and, in extreme cases, the result of incomprehensible forms of patriarchal and religious violence. These naturalized discourses of gendered bodily vulnerability are not new. Muslim women have been inextricably bound to Orientalist ideas about local patriarchal oppression and violence in Western literature, art, popular culture and governmental institutions for nearly a century now as Edward Said demonstrated and as transnational feminists such as Lata Mani emphasize in the case of the British colonization of South Asia.⁶ The Muslim village girl's vulnerability is imagined through timeless registers undergirded by her age status and rural economic otherness. Her subjectivity is understood through a set of repetitive tropes in NGO policy that eclipse her agency: confinement in the home, lack of education, exposure to child marriage and other harmful traditional practices, perpetual poverty and underdevelopment.

A recently published memoir poignantly illustrates this durable Muslim village girl archetype and the complex desires held by Western authorities to both save *and* modernize her. *I am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced* is a popular book about a ten-year-old divorcee and village girl from Yemen.⁷ This dramatic, heart-wrenching story of extreme violence, religious oppression, and, later, emancipation at the hands of urban (modernized) professionals fits neatly within a well-established legacy of discursive production about the suffering of Muslim women and girls. In the media, we have seen Nujood and other young Muslim women—most recently 2014 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai—defined as pure and innocent in their quest for western liberation and normative (modern) childhood. After her story broke, Nujood quickly became Hillary Clinton's "hero" and *Glamour Magazine's* 2008 Woman of the Year, a testament to the emotive efficacy and universal appeal the Muslim village girl narrative engenders on a global scale. While harrowing stories of oppression and eventual liberation like *I am Nujood* reflect what Partha Chatterjee terms an "effervescent sympathy for the oppressed," they also, I contend, reinforce a set of powerfully racialized and gendered discourses pinning Islam/tradition and the West/modernization against each other.⁸ In another article, I suggested that these discourses are not only confined to the realm of popular culture, but also, perhaps unsurprisingly, figure into the logics of global aid and development projects that are designed in the offices of western-based international NGOs and implemented across the Middle East and Muslim world.⁹

Decades ago, the feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty argued in a now famous essay entitled *Under Western Eyes* that the “Third World Woman” is a dehistoricized and universalized figure in development politics. Development aid is structured and gains legitimacy around notions of her naturalized subordination.¹⁰ Mohanty carefully dismantled the colonial underpinnings of this development logic and the grounded work it enables, showing how under Western eyes Third World women are always perceived as agentless victims who, try as they may, can never really, “rise above the debilitating generality of their ‘object’ status.”¹¹ But it is not only this kind of gender vulnerability that distinguishes village girls as pure victims of local patriarchal traditions and economic impoverishment, but also, equally importantly, what Liisa Malkki calls the “tranquilizing conventions” attached to humanitarian images of young suffering populations.¹² These include a perceived child-like innocence, a basic human goodness, a developing a-political body, and how young people are believed to embody the future. As Malkki outlined for the case of children in dominant Christian images of “the human,” such charismatic figurations of the suffering young serve to promote global aid in undeveloped countries not only for the ultimate aim of fundraising, but also to civilize and humanize entire local populations.¹³

By placing an analytic focus on village girls in this work, I extend the scholarly literature on Western representations of gender in international development aid. I do so by moving beyond Muslim womanhood as the site of foreign intervention and into a critical exploration of Muslim girlhood. Village girls in the global south evoke a specific set of sentiments in Western NGO policy centered on adolescent bodily vulnerability. As youth, their newly established reproductive power distinguishes them from prepubescent children and also sets them apart from adult or married women. Puberty in Egyptian villages engenders greater gender restrictions on girls’ bodily movement and mobility. Moreover, it renders girls vulnerable to particular child rights abuses, like early marriage and domestic labor. Thus, village girls, as reproductive yet unmarried subjects, are perceived in aid discourse as the country’s most vulnerable population because they experience a unique mixture of extreme economic impoverishment and these kinds of gender violence and inequalities. As one prominent international NGO publication explained it, puberty in Egyptian villages rather than open doors to new opportunities consolidates girls disadvantages.¹⁴

THE INTERNATIONAL VILLAGE GIRL PROJECT IN EGYPT

I now turn to the case study of the international aid project for village girls implemented in *Beni Suef* during my research. I will hereafter refer

to this project as the *International Village Girl Project* (IVGP). As one of the largest and most popular global aid initiatives designed exclusively for adolescent village girls in Africa and the Middle East, IVGP remains one of Egypt's fastest growing international aid development projects. In 2001, a consortium of international NGOs, European funding institutions and the Egyptian state launched the project in Egypt in an effort to empower out-of-school village girls who were suffering extreme impoverishment *and* were vulnerable to what was described in NGO policy as harmful traditional and conservative religious practices. In a country where nearly 40 percent of the population is considering formally poor and living on less than \$2 a day, the IVGP garnered an incredibly substantial amount of grant funding, with major benefactors like EXXON Mobile and the Dutch Embassy. One follow-up grant installment fell just short of a million USD during my fieldwork. Immediately after its implementation, the project was lauded as extraordinarily successful. Its objectives included reinforcing girls' rights by increasing their respect for their bodies and instantiating in them the right to learn, play, engage in sports and be physically mobile. Helping girls find "pleasure in the body" through movement and exercise—thereby addressing their confinement in the home—was a key project goal. Crucially, the project aimed to eradicate early marriage, a practice defined as a child rights abuse. These objectives were met through a series of classes supervised by NGO workers at a local village youth center. Girls between the ages of ten and sixteen met in groups of twenty to twenty-five, four times a week for three hour sessions to study literacy, life skills, physical health, recreation and civic engagement under the guidance of trained promoters, or older local girls trained by adult NGO workers.

INTERNATIONAL EXPECTATIONS VERSUS LOCAL DESIRES: EXAMINING THE IVGP IN BENI SUEF

In 2009, I interviewed four girls in *Beni Suef* (aged twelve to sixteen) who graduated from an earlier installment of the IVGP project. I met them at their local youth center—a run-down, empty-shell of a building that, at the time of its erection in the 1960s during Egypt's Nasser era, served a more functional role in the village. Water and sanitation remain major concerns in *Beni Suef*, along with unemployment and a lack of basic services such as health care and public education. Poverty and the lack of job opportunities for young people were dominant themes in all my discussions with community members in *Beni Suef*. Yet over the past two decades, the area has seen a steady rise in foreign aid intervention, defining the region as a major development zone. The official number of registered NGOs in the governorate was 4,000 at the

time of my fieldwork, a figure that has since likely increased. As a favored site for aid experiments like the IVGP because of its exceptional status as a development crisis zone, *Beni Suef* continues to be steeped in international development aid.

Eradicating early marriage was a major goal of the IVGP, yet my interviews painted a more complicated picture of how girls understood and placed social value upon ideas of marriage. As I spoke with the girls one afternoon in the youth center, I noticed Heba, aged fifteen, pass her older sister's one-year-old baby around the circle where we were seated. Her shoulder and arms seemed to have gotten tired during the interview. As each girl picked up the baby for a short while to relieve Heba's tired arms, I quickly realized my interview questions were overshadowed by excitement generated by the active baby—all the girls knew her well and collectively contributed to her care. Our interview about the IVGP's effects suddenly shifted into a (from the vantage point of the girls) far more interesting conversation about the baby. This banter eventually evolved into talk about relationships within the village, and eventually the lively subject of marriage. Marriage, an aid worker shared with me earlier that day as we were headed to the youth center, is a subject that is always on the minds of youth in *Beni Suef*. I was reminded of this when the girls deflected discussion of the aid project and returned to the talk of marriage: Who was getting married in the village? To whom? When? And how were families going to secure necessary wedding costs?

Marriage marks entry into proper moral and ethical adulthood in Egypt, and three of the four girls in the group were, or had been at some point in their lives, engaged to be married but the plans had been canceled. Heba, especially, spoke about collective anxieties surrounding marriages in the village. One young couple, she explained, had to delay their wedding due to high economic demands that could not be met. Mona, aged sixteen and the most outspoken of the group, also discussed how she broke off her previous engagement to a suitor who was three years her senior because, in her words, he wasn't acting jealous enough for her. Jealousy (*al-gheir*) she asserted is an expression of attraction and interest from young men toward their *fiancés*, and she viewed his lack of interest in her as a problem. When I shared with her that *al-gheir* could be perceived as a negative characteristic where I lived, she forcefully responded, "If a guy (*rāgil*) doesn't express some amount of jealousy for a girl (*bint*), he simply doesn't like her enough! That's why I broke up with him." Mona was engaged to another suitor when I interviewed her. I asked her some general questions about this new *fiancé*, and she shared with pride, before inviting me to her upcoming wedding, "Yes, he's jealous." Rather than express extreme aversion toward marriage as a form of child abuse, the girls I spoke with looked forward to their wedding dates,

contributed a sense of agency to the process, and even expressed fear of their wedding's potential delay due to economic insecurity.

Domestic labor and marriage, two "traditional practices" targeted for eradication by the IVGP and international NGOs still figured strongly in girls' everyday village lives. However, instead of disappearing, girls' household obligations and aspirations for marriage coexisted alongside new social arrangements and relationships introduced by the IVGP. As she was participating in the project, Mona described how she had to wake up much earlier than usual in order to complete her household chores *and* attend the village girl classes at the local youth center. Although she admitted this was extremely physically taxing for her, she willingly complied because, as she put it, she enjoyed project activities. They offered her a break from her usual routine, an opportunity to make new girlfriends, and, as she stressed, they created in her new experiences of "freedom" (*hurriya*). She commented in our interview, "I had to wake up at 5:00 or 5:30 in the morning instead of later on. I had to finish all my house chores before I could leave for the lessons at 9:00 am. Yes I was tired but I liked it." For Mona, therefore, new avenues of mobility and feelings of independence became layered with preexisting domestic obligations to her family rather than supplant them.

It is crucial to note that Heba and Mona's narratives illustrate how the IVGP did not eliminate the conditions structuring domestic labor or young women's desires for marriage and entry into moral adulthood. Instead, girls drew upon and enjoyed new forms of sociality and mobility created by the project while negotiating new responsibilities overlapped with preexisting ones. I want to emphasize that these new arrangements did not produce adverse effects for the girls over time. In fact, many of the participants claimed they felt "special" and "free" precisely because of the project. However, among the young women I spoke with, the IVGP did not produce its key stated aims, which were to eradicate harmful traditional practices such as marriage and domestic labor. When we last spoke, Mona shared excitement about her new *fiancé*, an act that seemed to directly challenge the project's ultimate goals and unsettled the discursive figure of the passive Muslim village girl in aid policy—that pure victim of patriarchal violence, the *quintessential* perfect sufferer. Instead, Mona and Heba saw themselves as decision makers with agency. Their concerns seemed to focus on the everyday realities of poverty in their village, and the ways in which those realities affected their families and their own hopes for formal education as well as marriage. They did not, as IVGP discourse articulated in its policy, perceive of their vulnerabilities as separate from or even greater than those of other family members or friends.

CONCLUSIONS

In a recent article on gender-based violence in Iraq, Middle East scholar and transnational feminist Nadjé Al-Ali makes an important distinction between the “culturalization” of women’s oppression and a view that claims imperialist policies are the root cause of all women’s suffering in the Middle East. This academic dichotomy—between local patriarchal culture versus imperial power—is unproductive for critical theorists who strive to understand the everyday, multilayered conditions affecting vulnerable populations throughout the region. In addition, this dichotomous approach to suffering has proven especially unhelpful in our coming to grips, as scholars and activists, with the contradictory empirical realities shaping women’s and girl’s lives.¹⁵

Similarly, I have attempted in this work to go beyond dichotomous positions that describe international aid in terms of its good or bad effects. I have instead aimed to tell a more complex story based on intersectionality and aid’s sometimes precarious social effects. The struggle against gender oppression in Egyptian villages, the girls in my study remind us, must also intersect and fold onto struggles against poverty and discourses of collective social welfare. Using IVGP as a case study, I have revealed how girls in the Southern Egyptian village of *Beni Suef*—a region defined in NGO policy as a development crisis zone—carefully negotiated and reconstituted opportunities provided by international aid on the one hand as a productive force in their lives while, on the other, they problematized the project’s ultimate goals by continuing to desire marriage and engage in domestic labor. While the small group of girls interviewed and observed in this work are not representative of all girls serviced by IVGP, nor all Muslim village girls in general, and while the cases I discussed are only partial representations of the project itself, the narratives and social experiences captured here nonetheless highlight an important paradox, or contradiction, in international aid projects designed exclusively for behalf of Muslim village girls. Crucially, Mona and Heba unsettled conventional NGO constructions of the Muslim village girl as passive, agentless, naturalized sufferer, as what Philippe at the start of this chapter described as “the *best* victim.” In doing so, they encourage us to broaden our understandings of what girlhood suffering constitutes while questioning why the image of the Muslim village girl increasingly surfaces in aid institutions as a durable “tranquilizing convention,” a salient category that *needs* saving in very particular ways. Like the Muslim woman, she is a figure that emerges as more deserving of foreign aid and compassion than her counterpart, the Muslim village boy. What is at work in this gendered distinction of international compassion and care? While early marriage constitutes, in international development aid lexicon, a recognized and severe form of “child abuse,” the slow and ongoing systemic poverty many young

people in *Beni Suef* and across Egypt experience every day remains beyond the discourse of children's rights. Without contesting the very tangible and, in some cases, extreme ways in which Muslim village girls *are* oppressed and suffering, a wider conceptual space for further analysis into these questions must be paved if we are to grasp the various uses and paradoxes of vulnerable girlhood in international aid policy today.

NOTES

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