Gender, Race, and Class in International Development: Exploring the Counternarratives of Women of Colour

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Abstract: This paper examines the power dynamics and hierarchies in international development that systematically exclude and minoritise women of colour (WOC) in the workplace, particularly as these dynamics relate to gender, race, and class. Narrative interviews were conducted with 24 women of colour who work in the energy and health sub-sectors in US donor and implementing agencies to generate 'counternarratives' or stories of minoritised individuals that challenge master narratives. Master narratives are dominant cultural, political, or historical stories used by the majority to legitimate their power and position and normalise oppression. The interviews were analysed using intersectionality and critical race theory as theoretical lenses. The counternarratives were classified according to the four domains of power – structural, disciplinary, homogeneous, and interpersonal – to show how oppression and privilege manifest and interact in different settings. Prior work in this space has highlighted the experiences of WOC in the workplace in sectors like education, but there is limited scholarly work in international development. The present research contributes to knowledge by examining an industry with colonial roots. By articulating the counternarratives of women of colour who work in international development, this study lessens their invisibility as a minority and aids others who experience similar obstacles. The study provides evidence-based support for the critical role of intersectional leadership and a comparative lens between two sub-sectors in development – energy and health – which contrast in many ways. More broadly, by exploring the lived experiences and social contexts of individuals, it also contributes to qualitative gender research.

Keywords: Development, Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, Women of colour, Counternarratives, Decolonisation

1. Introduction

In this article, I present a collection of voices and experiences of women of colour (WOC) who work in various capacities in the US international development industry. The international development industry refers to the network of organisations and individuals who work to improve the quality of life of low-income countries by eliminating poverty, improving health and well-being, and addressing issues of discrimination and injustice (Interaction, 2019). Despite its colonial roots (Goldsmith, 2002), the development industry's expressed mission includes dismantling inequalities and addressing power dynamics and hierarchies that divide people and perpetuate oppression and poverty. However, recent empirical (Social Impact, 2023; Racial Equity Index, 2021; Quantum Impact, 2018) and anecdotal evidence ('Racism in the Aid,' 2020) suggest that the industry is not living up to its own expressed standards of inclusion and equity. For example, a recent survey of US-based development and humanitarian organisations found that while females are over-represented at the staff level, participation rates drop in leadership positions. At the gender-race nexus, only four per cent of organisational leaders represented female Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour or BIPOC (Social Impact, 2023). The Racial Equity Index, a volunteer-led group of BIPOC development practitioners, surveyed a sample of 800, and of the 65% of respondents who reported experiencing racism, 98% also reported witnessing racism. Under workplace culture, 'racial abuse' and 'prioritizing white voices' were the most frequently cited (Racial Equity Index, 2021, p. 7). At the United States Agency of International Development (USAID), while the percentage of racial or ethnic minorities climbed from 33 to 37 per cent between 2002 and 2018, the proportions decreased in higher ranks, according to a 2020 study by the US Government Accountability Office. Promotion rates were also lower among early to mid-career racial and ethnic minority staff vis-à-vis white staff (GAO, 2020, p.18).

Master narratives are the dominant cultural, political, or historical stories used by the majority to legitimate their power and position and normalise oppression. Counternarratives on the other hand are the stories of minoritised individuals which expose and challenge the stories of the majority (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Applying these concepts of master and counternarratives within the context of international development, the question guiding this paper is as follows: What do the narratives of WOC working as international development practitioners, particularly as they relate to their gender, race, and class, reveal about current systems of power and oppression in the US international development industry and how can these narratives challenge the stories of the majority and bring about positive change in the industry?

The use of counternarratives or counter storytelling is one of the core tenets of critical race theory (CRT), a theoretical framework that explores race, racism, and power structures and how these are connected to broader issues of "economics, history, context, group- and self-interest" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p.2). CRT provides

perspectives on how race and power maintain racial inequality (Gillborn, 2015). While its origins are legal in nature, CRT has also been applied as a theoretical framework in several other fields, including education (Garcia, Lopez, & Velez, 2017; Sablan, 2019), sociology (Bonilla-Silva, 2015), public health (Gilbert & Ray, 2016), and social psychology (Correll et al., 2007). CRT provides a powerful lens for understanding various race-related issues that WOC experience, such as underlying biases in workplace policies and practices and racial stereotypes. This paper also uses intersectionality as another theoretical lens, given the multifaceted nature of oppression that WOC experience. Like racism, various forms of discrimination, like sexism, ageism, etc., are also pervasive in the workplace. Using intersectionality provided a valuable lens to unpack how multiple axes of oppression interact and how these are connected to more significant issues of power, privilege, and oppression.

2. Master Narratives and the Experiences of Women of Colour in International Development

Although the international development industry was born out of US national security and commercial interests after World War 2, its focus has expanded to include moral and humanitarian priorities (van der Veen, 2011). Though security and self-interest continue to influence aid policy, current goals include improving the quality of life and expanding economic opportunity in communities worldwide (Engberg-Pedersen & Degnbol-Martinussen, 2003) and doing it in an inclusive, participatory way. Much of the language and framing in international development today continues to be tied to its colonial past, which categorises half of the world (i.e. the 'Global South') as 'underdeveloped,' uncivilised, and lacking in agency and voice, and the other half (i.e., the 'Global North') as 'developed' and superior in every facet - culturally, technologically, economically, and politically (Odeh, 2010; Shrestha, 2005). Countries and people in the Global South are framed as problematic and needing saving while those in the North represent the ideal and as the bearer of solutions. Decision-making in development remains in the domain of the rich, industrialised countries (most of whom are former colonial powers). In contrast 'beneficiary' countries, most of whom are former colonies, must reform themselves by adopting global 'best practices' and conforming to international norms. This 'us versus them' dichotomy permeates international development, and these prevalent narratives often influence how BIPOC in the industry – either practitioners or stakeholders - are perceived and regarded. BIPOC development practitioners, and WOC in particular, have historically encountered (and continue to encounter) many challenges in the industry, including underrepresentation and discrimination. Yet master narratives continue to be perpetuated, i.e. that the industry has already 'come a long way' in terms of the localisation/decolonisation agenda as many organisations have set up country or project offices with locally employed staff and those organisations are diverse (Peace Direct, 2021); and that the industry operates 'neutrally' and is neither racialised, gendered, or 'classed' and that White development practitioners are not just 'experts' but neutral actors in all contexts (Maxwell, 2004).

3. Methodology

I adopted a purposeful sampling approach for this study, informed by critical race theory and intersectionality. I began with an initial target of 30 WOC but ended with 24 upon reaching data saturation. I reached saturation when I started hearing the same themes several times, no new codes were occurring in the data, and I had enough demographic diversity in my sample. I selected women working in the energy and health sub-sectors, employed by either of the two central US donor agencies (USAID or the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) or implementing partners. I chose the energy and health sub-sectors because energy is white and male-dominated (Casey, 2023; IEA, 2023; Penrod, 2021), while health tends to be more racially diverse and female-dominated (WHO, 2023; Snyder et al, 2018). The rationale for this dual focus is to examine whether and how a less diverse environment adds a layer of obstacles due to harmful stereotypes and barriers common to such industries (Catalyst, 2021).

I selected WOC with at least three years of experience as they will more likely have experienced one advancement cycle (i.e., promotion, pay raise). I also recruited WOC who have worked in the field and the 'home office' or headquarters and those who have worked in technical and operations (e.g., finance, administration, business development) roles in the two sub-sectors to reflect a diversity of experiences. As I am an industry 'insider' with a long career in the energy sub-sector, I approached participants directly (verbally or via email) but discreetly, given the sensitive nature of the paper topic. I also found some subjects through a LinkedIn search and through snowballing. Guided by a feminist approach, I interviewed my participants, combining a narrative and semi-structured interview approach.

Paperer Positionality. In the spirit of self-reflexivity, I acknowledge my standpoint as an immigrant, Asian-American woman of indigenous Filipino ethnicity. I have an upper-middle-class upbringing and attended a premier university in my home country. I have a master's degree and have worked in international development since 1998, primarily in the energy sub-sector. I have worked at the nexus of gender and energy for over 15 years and, in my current role, I focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion issues. I have reached a senior position as a development practitioner. I identify as a feminist and a women's rights activist. My interest in this paper topic evolved from my direct experiences with gender and racial discrimination, which led to some career setbacks, as well as observations of the experiences of colleagues who are also WOC. I acknowledge that I have had experiences with marginalisation in the industry as a result of my race, gender, immigration status, and lack of a US degree – making me an outsider - but that I also have a privileged status in my own Asian-American/Filipino-American community since I have advanced and attained professional success in an industry (international development) and a sector (energy) where few in my community have – making me an insider. This insider-outsider status, referred to by Collins as 'the outsider within' (1986, p. S14) has influenced the framing of the paper design and how it has been conducted.

Relationship with Subjects. A key aspect of feminist paper is developing rapport with your subjects…Oakley (1981) believed that investing her identity in the paper relationship by sharing her experiences as a woman and answering respondents' questions was critical. Some of my subjects are past and current colleagues. Some are friends. While having this relationship facilitated access and made rapport easier to establish and more organic, it also came with additional ethical responsibilities. Tillman-Healy (2003), coined the phrase 'friendship as method,' in which the ethics of friendship precede the ethics of paper. She argued that instead of relying on international review board approval to pre-determine the ethical bounds of a study, the paper must continually assess the ethical implications of the friendships built over the course of the study' (p. 740).

In my interviews with all my subjects, I aimed to maintain a power balance with my subjects. I gave subjects the option of how to conduct the interview (in person or virtual). While I set the agenda and asked the questions, I gave my participants control over what extent they would discuss some topics. I aimed to make it a reciprocal exchange by sharing some of my experiences when appropriate and revealing some aspects of my identity. I also asked subjects to review transcripts post-interview to ensure accuracy and in the spirit of reciprocity. My position as a WOC working in international development aided me in forming relationships with my participants and facilitated data collection. It also allowed me to interpret my data with empathy. However, I acknowledge many differences between my experiences and those of my participants on many dimensions of identity. Mindful of these differences, I constantly interrogated my own experiences and positionality through reflexive journaling.

4. Results and Discussion: WOC Counternarratives

After an extensive interview and data analysis process, I generated multiple themes from the women's counternarratives, which I classified into the four domains of power formulated by Patricia-Hill Collins (1990), a leading conceptual thinker on intersectionality. She originally used these to examine racism against African American women in an educational setting. I expanded her approach to include other aspects of identity such as immigration status, ability, age, and class, and to examine the experiences not just of Black women, but a broader group that falls outside the Black-white binary and includes women of Asian, African, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern descent.

Through counternarratives, many of the WOC linked their life and work experiences to their identities and described how racism, sexism, classism, ableism, religious discrimination, and ageism (to name a few) are embedded in social institutions and organisational structures, policies, and practices. The counternarratives revealed how cultural expectations, stereotypes, and dominant cultural ideas, as well as day-to-day encounters, put them in subjugated positions. These counternarratives contradicted many dominant narratives that suggest advancement is purely meritocratic (Hochschild, 1995; McNamee & Miller, 2004) by showing it is largely shaped by institutions, power relations, and social backgrounds/identities. The counternarratives also directly contradict the narrative that the industry is 'neutral' and that the industry has made significant progress in its localisation and decolonisation agenda.

The matrix of domination (Figure 1) examines the overall organisation of power in society (Collins, 1990). It encompasses four interconnected domains that serve different purposes in maintaining the status quo. The matrix provides a multidimensional framework for examining the racialised, gendered, and other minoritised experiences of WOC and, in particular, the mechanisms of domination. Large-scale social institutions that are organized to reproduce subordination over time comprise the structural domain. While they may have evolved,

these social institutions are rooted in America's profoundly racist history. When they were established, they relied on multiple forms of segregation, such as by race, ethnicity, class, and gender, to result in oppression. Examples include the US legal system, labour markets, schools, housing industry, banking, insurance, news media, and social institutions. The disciplinary domain manages power relations. It does so not through overtly discriminatory policies but through how organisations are run. Ideology, culture, and awareness are all part of the hegemonic domain, which is a set of 'commonsense ideas' that dominant groups have constructed and upheld to justify their right to dominate. Finally, the interpersonal domain refers to how individuals subordinate others through routinised daily interactions. An example would be microaggressions that people from non-dominant groups experience.

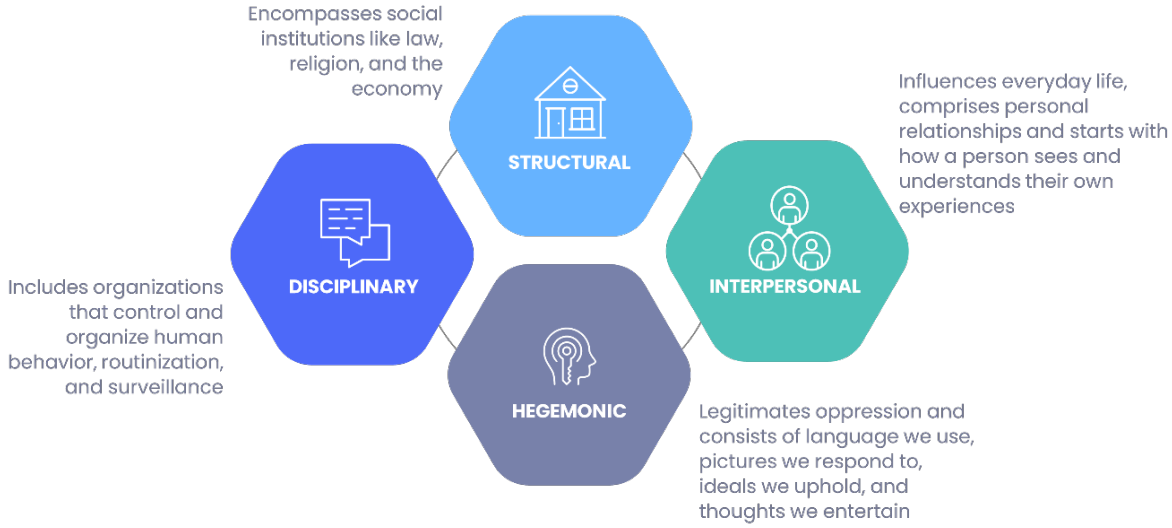

Figure 1: Matrix of Domination

In this paper, I share the most prominent theme I found under each domain and the counternarratives within each of those themes.

4.1 Structural Domain: Lack of the 'Right' Credentials

It is a widely-held dictum in the US that your class background ought not hinder your ultimate station in life. The idea behind the 'American Dream' is that if one works hard and plays by the rules, class mobility is possible for the individual and their descendants (Anderson & Collins, 2020). The reality is that the path is harder for minoritised classes (Branch & Hanley, 2022; Parramore, 2020). Several WOC expressed frustration about being held back by organisations' lack of what is perceived as the 'right' credentials to do international development work, such as an Ivy League diploma, an advanced degree, foreign language skills, and Peace Corps experience. Audre, an African-American with an international affairs degree and some administrative experience when she joined Company A, was told that she needed foreign language skills, an advanced degree, and overseas experience to advance. 'There were people who had similar education, but who either had overseas experience or a second language – that allowed them to move ahead of me (more quickly).' She had to do her learning by doing, pursue an MBA while working, and actively advocate to do more 'technical' work. Promotions came later than she expected.

For some of the WOC I interviewed, social class and its intersection with gender and race limited their initial employment options and ability to position themselves for advancement later in their careers. Several described how they had to immediately find employment to pay off student loans and handle other financial obligations after completing their bachelor's degree. They specifically indicated not having the 'luxury' of joining the US Peace Corps, a common path for white, middle-class college graduates hoping to work in international development (Amin, 1999). The Peace Corps has historically attracted mostly white, middle-class Americans, with more than two-thirds comprised of 'non-minorities' (Wilcox, 2021). Ella notes, 'Many classmates were going into the Peace Corps, but I didn't want to go down that route as the pay was very low, and I had student loans and family obligations.' Audre worked her way through school and felt she did not have 'the option to do something like Peace Corps.' After graduating, she took on an administrative job with a USAID contractor to get her foot in the door. It took her years before she could transition into more technical roles. To her dismay, white

colleagues who joined her organisation the same time she did and had Peace Corps experience were promoted at a faster rate.

Access to the 'right' qualifications is often restricted to the privileged. For much of the country's history, access to prestigious universities has been largely reserved for upper-class, white Americans. Affirmative action policies, which consider race and ethnicity as part of the evaluation process, were adopted by institutions in the 1960s and 1970s to actively prioritise diversity and expand access (Maxwell & Garcia, 2019). Statistics show that while these resulted in more students of colour, they remained under-represented in elite schools in the aggregate (Rios, 2023). Joining the Peace Corps, which is how many young, white middle-class international development professionals check the overseas experience box, is not usually an option for those coming from working-class backgrounds.

4.2 Disciplinary Domain: Existence of Elite Networks

Several WOC lamented the existence of formal and informal elite networks within organisations, as a barrier that prevented or delayed them from advancing within organisations. Despite organisations' (and America's) professed commitment to 'equal opportunity,' many career trajectories are influenced by networks or connections that provide 'intel,' facilitate introductions, and extend opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable or difficult to access. Surveys suggest that many hiring decisions result from in-network referrals (Howard, n.d.). Unfortunately, organisations that rely on elite networks end up excluding candidates who did not go to certain schools or do not belong to certain social strata, ultimately contributing to racial, gendered, and economic homogeneity in their organisation and industry.

Several women cited the Peace Corps as a specific example of an elite network they encountered. Ella, who migrated to the US from Nigeria, noted 'White women get so much, more quickly. They work in the Peace Corps for a year and then advance quickly.' Barbara referred to the Peace Corps network as 'almost like a family business.' Sandra likened it to a must-have in the development field. 'It was almost like checking a box like you're a veteran and this was a criterion to get into international development. It gave people a leg up.'

When Kanter (1977) analysed the 'shadow structure' within corporations, she discovered that women and racial minorities were frequently left out of social gatherings. This effectively kept them from exploiting opportunities and hampered their advancement. This aligns with what is more commonly referred to as 'old boys' networks – or informal systems of support where men use their positions or influence to help others with similar educational or social backgrounds to advance. Membership in these networks significantly increases a person's opportunities for advancement in the labour market (McDonald, 2011). Toni, who works at a management consulting firm, noted, 'At the junior level, many women look like me, but among senior staff, it is mostly white men.' Angela says this occurrence is more pronounced in the energy sector. '(The energy space) is significantly more white and male versus other (sectors).' Marian, who is Jordanian-American and Muslim, worked at the UN for several years with many 'expats' who regularly went out for drinks after work.

> 'They all go out after hours to the bar, and then they talk about work, and they make decisions about work. I don't drink I don't go to bars. So they would all come back the next day, and decisions are already made that nobody talked to me about because they all went out together. There's that local versus expat kind of dynamic.'

Toni, the daughter of Haitian working-class immigrants, felt like she lacked a network altogether while in college. She was enrolled in an international affairs degree at a predominantly white institution in Washington, DC. 'Ninety per cent were kids of diplomats. They would casually say 'My dad was the international lawyer who helped restructure African nations. It seemed like everyone had a story like that…I always felt out of place in school.' Kimberle', who spent several years working on an energy project in Kosovo as the lone female 'expat,' also had no professional or social network to turn to during her time there. 'All the other 'expats' were male. And I worked in a building where I was the only Black person. You'd get on the elevator and the local employees of the electricity company would snigger. I think it was just ignorance… lack of exposure.'

Most of the elite networks that WOC encounter in the workplace and find themselves excluded from are rooted in either social class, race, gender, or some combination of these. The marginalisation experienced by Kimberle' who was in a senior, field-based role was overtly race-based. For Toni, who felt marginalised in her university, it was a combination of race and social class. Marian's experiences highlight unequal relations and power imbalances between local and foreign development workers, rooted in the industry's colonial legacy.

4.3 Hegemonic Domain: Stereotypes

Despite many advances, gender stereotyping, or the 'practice of ascribing to an individual woman or man specific attributes, characteristics or roles by reason only of her or his membership in the social group of women or men' (UNHCR, n.d., para. 4), remains entrenched in the American workplace. Women are portrayed as non-assertive, emotional, lacking in drive and commitment, and having a weak communication style (Webber & Giuffre, 2017, p.2). Racial stereotypes affect the workplace success of WOC. For instance, studies show that the 'angry Black woman' stereotype persists, with Black women often described as 'hostile, aggressive, overbearing, illogical, ill-tempered and bitter' (Motro et al., 2022, para. 1). The 'model minority' stereotype is attached to Asians. They are perceived as being 'smart, hardworking, and easy to manage… but not great leaders' (Liu, 2021, para. 23). Gender- and racial stereotypes and stereotypes based on other aspects of identity, such as religion and ability were cited by the WOC I interviewed.

Racial Stereotypes. Ella, an African American, reflected, 'People expect certain reactions from you; they have certain perceptions (of Black people).' Carmen, an immigrant from Kenya, echoed this sentiment: 'You have to prove yourself constantly. I'm like, 'What do I have to prove? Can you look at my resume? It's just stereotypes and unconscious bias or conscious bias that people just have...And we just find ways to survive which is unfair, because my other white colleagues don't have to do that.' Bell, who is Japanese-American, noted that Asians tend to be treated as a monolith. She also observes, '(The model minority stereotype) paints us out as being obedient and being rule followers.'

These counternarratives highlight how WOC experience scrutiny and control in the workplace by being expected to speak and behave in certain ways – ways that are associated with group identities. Black women are viewed and expected to behave more aggressively, while Asian women are expected to be more submissive and passive. While the 'model minority' label may sound like a compliment, it is damaging, not just because of the pressure it puts on Asians to conform, but because it disparages other people of colour as 'problem minorities.' Chou and Feagin (2015) note that this particular stereotype also reinforces the myth that all Americans of colour 'can achieve the American dream just like the model minorities, who work hard and do not challenge the status quo of racial hierarchies that has whites on top but are eager to assimilate into it' (p. 858).

Gender Stereotypes. For some of the WOC, gender stereotypes resulted in being pigeonholed into certain types of jobs. Ersa, a Mexican engineer, said she was relegated to doing training-related work in the early years of her energy career even if she was qualified to do more technical work. 'It was not until the end of the fifth year when I started to do some technical evaluations but (still) not the same *as* the other guys did.' Later, she was invited to work on an energy project in Afghanistan, but only after the first candidate – a white male – failed in the role.

Religious Stereotypes. Some of the WOC cited having to deal with religious stereotypes in the workplace. Marian, who is Muslim, feels that this is the part of her identity that many people 'have the most trouble with.' She lamented:

> '…Our religion does have some identifying factors, which make us more of a target, I think… It's shaped my attitude, the way I do everything, everything that we engage with people, the way I come across…my work ethic, because people will always come back and be like, oh, you know, well, those Muslims.'

4.4 Interpersonal Domain: Communication Style

The underlying differences in communication styles between women and men have been widely papered. Generally, men use language to strengthen social dominance, while women communicate in ways that strengthen relationships and social connections (Leaper, 1991; Mulac, et al., 2001). On the other hand, much of the literature says that women speak more expressively and politely than males do, particularly when there is disagreement (Basow & Rubenfield, 2003). Dolores noted, 'I don't have the communication style of an overly confident white man (but that) doesn't make me any less valuable.' Sylvia notes her personality tends to be 'very nurturing, very kind, very quiet…It took me a lot of time and practice to start using my voice to help combat the injustices that I was seeing all around.' Coretta, who is of Lebanese descent, feels women don't tend to be vocal or aggressive in advocating for things in the workplace like promotions, training, salary increases, or better conditions. 'I think women tend to be more reactive rather than proactive, unlike men…and are uncomfortable advocating for themselves….In hindsight, I wish five or seven years ago, I had the courage to demand something more.' The experiences of Sylvia, Dolores, and Coretta highlight the perception that women are too quiet and not assertive enough, which is interpreted as a sign of weakness. This often compounds the barriers they face in the industry and perpetuates discriminatory outcomes, e.g., delayed promotions and lower salary increases.

5. Conclusions and Implications

In this paper, I explored counter-narratives which highlighted sexism, racism, classism, and other forms of oppression that WOC experience as development practitioners. The linkages of these barriers to their intersecting identities and social situations were evident in many narratives where WOC directly attributed setbacks to multiple power systems. Some oppressions also seemed to cut across macro and micro dimensions. Their narratives counteract long-standing or prevailing narratives about the industry, in particular: (1) that it operates 'neutrally'; and (2) that it has advanced the localisation and decolonisation agenda.

Their narratives have multiple implications for the international development industry and those working in it, especially in advancing discourse, policy, and practice. To combat the master narrative of the industry being neither racialised, classed, nor gendered, those working in international development must critically examine how they view the world and how this influences their decision-making. Formal self-assessments to examine internal culture, policies, and practices and mandatory staff training are also worth pursuing. Operationalising inclusive workplace policies, ensuring implementation and follow-through, offering opportunities for active employee engagement, providing continuous training and mentoring across the organisation, championing diversity and accessibility, and tracking progress are also essential. All these require committed leadership, a strategy, a budget, dedicated staffing, and safe spaces for employees. Organisations must also take more concrete steps to shift traditional power structures and collaborate with those they aim to 'serve.' Decolonising aid can be accomplished by intentionally breaking down the traditional binaries/power structures that govern the sector (North vs. South; headquarters vs. field; 'expat' vs. 'field' staff) which prioritise specific individuals or groups over others and elevate Western values and knowledge systems as the standard (while devaluing local knowledge). This can be done through hiring and procurement policy reform. To challenge the master narrative that the industry has advanced localisation and decolonised, organisations should avoid reframing these concepts to preserve the status quo. Examples of what many organisations have done to 'game' the system include defining a country office as 'local' based on the number of locally employed staff it has, registering the organisation as a 'national' organisation and the percentage of funds that it raises nationally, rather than from its international 'parent'. Authentic localisation and decolonisation mean channelling funding to national organisations and relinquishing power to nationals.

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