

**Images of Neoliberal Patriarchy: Youth Voluntourism and the Depoliticization of African
Development**

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Introduction

Volunteer tourism has become the public face of the sustainable tourism movement. Its ‘success stories’ of newly altruistic volunteers represents poverty reduction as a personally transformative process that hinges on participation in an alternative tourist economy. Organizations argue that care and sensitivity set volunteer tourism apart from an ostensibly self-oriented traditional industry. Whereas volunteer tourism agencies employ an appealing image of cosmopolitan unity, this promotional veneer conceals the darker contours of neoliberal capitalism. All things considered, the depoliticization of development, rather than eradicating global inequalities, obscures western culpability in postcolonial gender oppression and repositions the Global South as a symbolic training space for western youth.

Methodology and Framework

This research project critiques the efficacy of volunteer tourism, examining its reproduction of extractivist neocolonial structures and strategic obfuscation of the processes of gendering, racialization, and resistance. To do so, this project has combined the historical materialist analysis of Harvey (2004), Lazzarato (2010) with the postcolonial analyses of Abu-Lughod (2002), Loomba (1993), and Mohanty (2003). In my primary research, I have analyzed the public-facing materials of two leading volunteer tourism organizations that work with Canadian youth: International Volunteer HQ and GVI Trips. Content was associated with trips to Africa departing in the summer of 2024 and directed at volunteers between ages 16-24.

Analysis

Volunteer tourism occupies a distinct position within a commercial industry, political apparatus, and cultural hegemonic structure. According to Conran (2011), commercial volunteer tourism emerges in neoliberalizing economies in which the state is decoupled with social issues. Therefore, structural inequalities are extracted from the political sphere and abstracted. These abstractions are subsequently commodified, both through the experience itself and the cultural capital derived from “branded activism” (Hearn, 2012). Mostafanezhad (2014) emphasizes the construction of a unidirectional cosmopolitanism in volunteer tourism’s advertisement: a uniquely “culturally conscious” subject. Volunteer tourism’s dominant discourses, thus, draw on colonial tropes of ahistorical peoples unburdened by technology and, thus, serving both as sources of spiritual wisdom and exploitable subjects of extractive tourism. Comparing themselves to local women, participants’ testimonials disregarded political analysis in favour of a “lotto logic” described by Freidus (2017), making privilege a consequence of luck. Their descriptions, thus, depoliticized not just the conditions of so-called “disempowered third world women” but also the participant’s own positioning within international patriarchal capitalism, presenting western feminism as a more advanced or completed project.

Some participants alluded to an innate set of skills that they could offer the women, describing their volunteer work as essential. This implies that a lack of empowered action is the source of women’s poor conditions in the homogeneous “Africa” ephemeral in western discourse (Wainaina, 2019). African women are infantilized and stripped of agency in these images and words, objectified as things without independent motivations. This sentiment mirrors official materials from organizations who also use the stories in their advertising, describing a “gender gaps” and “inequality without naming structures, historical processes, or resistance movements

implicated in gendering processes. Patriarchy, colonialism, and imperialism are decoupled from the “inequalities” which can ostensibly be fixed only through the influence of supposedly objective westerners.

Imperialist discourses of this kind have detached colonialism, and thus the colonial construction of patriarchal power, from the many lived conditions of the third world (Abu-Lughod, 2002). The construction of a universal “third world woman” itself flattens the conditions that differentiate women from one another (Mohanty, 2003) and further erases nonwestern women’s political agency (Loomba, 1993). Building a helpless, distant woman and her western saviour counterpart, volunteer tourism agencies reignite orientalist tropes and consequently contribute to the political and economic oppression of a third world woman who is removed from her geopolitical circumstances only in a western imaginary. Federici (2012) argued that the administration of ‘women’s empowerment’ programs through channels established by neoliberal economic actors, namely entry into capitalist enterprise, serves to destabilize the local economic structures in which women work. Volunteer tourism, too, appropriates the Global South as a space for the economic and ideological growth of the west.

Conclusion

Imperialism renders the Global South a malleable, homogeneous “rest” through which a politically constructed west can configure itself (Hall, 2018); Africa is both a picturesque, idyllic postcard brought to life and a damned non-place into which we must invest charity but never analysis; third world women are merely lifeless, thoughtless things to be transformed into people by first world teenagers. It is, thus, pertinent that the colonial mythologies on which volunteer tourism is constructed are ruthlessly criticized as mechanisms of an exploitative power structure.

So long as we imagine the conditions of colonialism as timeless and apolitical, we are unable to dream of – let alone build – alternatives to imperialist exploitation.

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