

The Other Half of the Sky or The Other Half of the West A Study of Women's Dilemma in the Third World Based on Western Centrism Theory

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Abstract

This study explores the multiple dilemmas faced by women in the Third World within the framework of Western centrism theory. Western centrism, as a cultural, political, and economic system, has been continuously strengthened in the process of globalization, exerting a profound impact on the survival and development of Third World women. Through various methods such as literature review, questionnaire survey, and in-depth interviews, this study reveals the negative effects of Western centrism on Third World women in education, employment, health, family, and social status. The study finds that Western centrism not only exacerbates gender inequality but also restricts Third World women's pursuit of their cultural identity and self-worth. This study aims to provide a new theoretical perspective and practical guidance for understanding and addressing the plight of Third World women, promoting global gender equality and sustainable development.

Keywords

Western centrism, Third World, Women's Dilemmas, Self-worth.

1. Introduction

With the in-depth development of globalization, Western centrism theory still holds a significant position in international relations and global governance. However, the issue of women's survival has rarely garnered attention from the Third World and major capitalist developed countries (Western countries). As Nicholas Kristof pointed out in his book "Half the Sky": "We write a front-page story when an important dissident is arrested in a foreign country, but when 100,000 girls are kidnapped and illegally sold to brothels, we don't even consider it news." Less than 1% of U.S. foreign aid is specifically targeted at women. Currently, there are 107 million women missing globally, and at least 2 million more women have disappeared due to gender discrimination. In the past 50 years, more women have been killed because of their gender than all the men who died in the wars of the 20th century. In any decade of the 20th century, the number of girls who died in "gendercide" far exceeded the number of people killed in all the massacres of the 20th century. In the 19th century, the central moral challenge was slavery; in the 20th century, it was the fight against totalitarianism; and as we enter the 21st century, the most important moral challenge will be the global pursuit of gender equality.

Females in the Third World face severe challenges in education, employment, health, and other aspects. Therefore, it is necessary for us to deeply interpret the theory of Western centrism and explore its profound impact on the plight of women in the Third World.

2. Interpretation of Western Centrism Theory

In the early stages of Western centrism, it was mainly manifested during the period of European colonial expansion, when European powers imposed their own culture, religion, and values on colonized regions, believing that their civilization was progressive and superior. With the advancement of globalization, Western centrism has gradually evolved into a more subtle form, promoting other countries to adopt Western development models and values through means such as cultural export, economic assistance, and political intervention. Western centrism has profound philosophical implications theoretically and manifests itself in different forms practically. In modern society, as situations change, Western centrism will take on various manifestations, but its core remains unchanged, which is to safeguard the interests and hegemony of Western countries. Specifically, the modern manifestations of Western centrism mainly include hegemonism, unilateralism, the theory of civilizational conflict, and the theory of universal values.[1]

Western centrism, as a historical and cultural phenomenon, is a global perspective centered on Western culture, values, and development models. It is also an ideological concept that believes Western culture, values, historical experiences, and development models are universally applicable, superior to other non-Western cultures, and considers them as benchmarks for development. This theory has undergone multiple stages of evolution in history. Under the influence of Western centrism, Western countries are often viewed as models of development, while other cultures and societies are marginalized or assimilated. This theory is manifested in various levels such as economy, politics, and culture, leading to imbalances in global resource allocation and unequal power structures.

In the cultural aspect, Western centrism manifests as the neglect, deprecation, and even discrimination of other cultures, believing that Western culture is the only advanced and desirable culture. This mindset leads to misunderstandings and prejudices against non-Western cultures, hindering the development of cultural diversity and mutual understanding. Western centrism has promoted the global dissemination of Western culture, putting other cultures at risk of assimilation or marginalization. This cultural homogenization phenomenon not only deprives the Third World of cultural diversity, but also weakens the sense of identity and pride that women in the Third World have for their own cultures.

In the economic sphere, Western centrism manifests as considering Western economic models as universally applicable standards, promoting market economy and privatization, and ignoring the advantages and adaptability of other economic models. Western centrism has driven the establishment of an international economic order dominated by Western countries, making the resources and markets of the Third World become vassals of Western countries. This economic model not only deprives developing countries in the Third World of development opportunities, but also leads to economic imbalances, social injustice, and other issues in some developing countries in pursuit of Westernization, which also intensifies gender inequality.

At the political level, Western centrism has had profound impacts on international relations and the global development landscape. It has promoted the leading role of Western countries in international affairs, regarding Western political systems and values as universally applicable standards and believing that other countries' political systems need to align with the West, which often places non-Western countries in a passive and subordinate position. This perspective ignores the historical, cultural, and social backgrounds of different countries, leading to chaos and instability in some countries' political transitions and resulting in inequality and injustice in the international political system, depriving Third World countries of political voice. This political landscape limits the opportunities for women in the Third World to participate in political decision-making, exacerbating their plight.

On the social level, Western centrism promotes values such as individualism, liberalism, and consumerism. This has led to cultural conflicts and value confusion in some non-Western countries during their social transformation.

3. Overview of the plight of women in the Third World

3.1. Current status of education, employment, and health

The plight of women in the Third World is complex and multidimensional, involving aspects such as education, employment, and health.

In terms of education, women in many Third World countries have limited educational opportunities, especially in rural areas. Gender discrimination and poverty prevent a large number of women from accessing education or receiving only limited education. The uneven distribution of educational resources makes it more difficult for women to obtain high-quality education compared to men.

In terms of employment, women in the Third World often face discrimination, making it difficult for them to obtain equal employment opportunities compared to men. Even when they do have jobs, women are typically concentrated in low-paying, low-skilled positions. Gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace are also common issues faced by women.

In terms of health, women in the Third World face multiple challenges, including a lack of basic medical services, high fertility rates, and related health issues. Poverty and lack of education make it difficult for them to access necessary healthcare and nutritional support.

3.2. Social, cultural, and economic factors

The plight of women in the Third World is also attributable to broader social, cultural, and economic factors.

From a social perspective, gender discrimination and traditional patriarchal values are deeply rooted in many Third World countries. Familial and societal expectations that women shoulder more family responsibilities limit their career development and educational opportunities.

From a cultural perspective, some cultural practices and traditions exacerbate women's plight, such as early marriage and the bride price system. These practices limit women's freedom and choices, making it more difficult for them to pursue education and career development. Moreover, Western feminists believe that modernization based on the Western model is a symbol of social progress and the inevitable path for countries in the Third World to transform their traditional societies, especially the fundamental way for women to change from backwardness to liberation.[2]

From an economic perspective, poverty is a major challenge facing women in the Third World, limiting their ability to access resources and development opportunities. Imbalanced economic development and uneven resource distribution also exacerbate women's plight.

Therefore, the plight faced by women in the Third World is a result of the combined effects of various factors. To improve their situation, comprehensive measures need to be taken, considering social, cultural, and economic factors. At the same time, attention should also be paid to the impact of Western centrism on global women's issues, promoting more just and equal international development cooperation.

4. The Impact of Western Centrism on the Plight of Women in the Third World

4.1. The Impact at the Cultural and Ideological Level

Value penetration: Western centrism tends to promote and infiltrate Western culture and values. This dissemination often accompanies the spread of Western goods, media, and education, leading to challenges to traditional values in Third World countries and intensifying gender discrimination. After the Second World War, former colonies transformed into developing countries, and the entire developing world was objectified in terms of development. Western feminist thought began to enter developing countries and converge with developmentism. [3] Through media, education, and other channels, Western gender roles and expectations may be imposed on non-Western countries, leading to the impact on local cultures and values. For example, Western individualism, consumerism, and gender role expectations may be imposed on women in these countries, causing them to face greater cultural and psychological pressures. Western centrism reinforces the universality and superiority of Western culture, leading women in the Third World to often fall into cultural inferiority and identity crises. This cultural oppression not only deprives them of pride and belonging to their own culture, but also makes them feel confused and bewildered when facing Western values.

Stereotypes and discrimination: Western centrism exacerbates stereotypes and discrimination against women in the Third World. Western media often portrays women in the Third World as poor, ignorant, and helpless, which not only aggravates their marginalization but also makes it difficult for them to obtain equal opportunities and respect on the international stage.

Limitations in Educational Resources: The impact of Western centrism in the field of education also leads to limited educational opportunities for women in the Third World. Due to the uneven distribution of educational resources and the existence of gender discrimination, many women are unable to access high-quality education. This not only restricts their career development but also puts them in a more marginalized position in families and society.

4.2. Deprivation of Economic Rights and Interests

Trade Inequality: The economic model of Western centrism often leads to trade inequality. Women in Third World countries often engage in low-paid, low-skilled jobs such as agriculture and textile, which are often disadvantaged in global trade. This makes it difficult for them to obtain fair economic returns, exacerbating their poverty and inequality.

Unequal Resource Allocation: The economic model of Western centrism often centers on the interests of Western countries, leading to unequal global resource allocation, which exacerbates poverty and inequality among women in the Third World. Developed countries often have more resources and power of speech, while women in developing countries often face resource scarcity and unequal opportunities. This economic oppression makes it difficult for these women to obtain basic living security and development opportunities, putting them in a more disadvantageous position in economic development and further aggravating their plight.

4.3. Restrictions on Political Participation

Exclusion in Political Systems: The political system shaped by Western centrism often influences the political regimes of Third World countries, limiting the political participation of women in these countries. In some countries, women still face restrictions in terms of electoral rights and the right to be elected, preventing them from fully participating in political decision-making. Alternatively, gender and women's issues have become prominent in Western democratic politics, where party politicians skillfully manipulate gender issues to win elections. Gender issues have become catalysts for political performances, becoming crucial factors in

determining the success or failure of elections.[4] These policies and measures may overlook women's needs and interests, further exacerbating their difficulties.

Conditionality in International Cooperation: Western centrism dominates the international political landscape, often attaching various conditions to international cooperation, including political reforms, economic liberalization, and so on. This leads to the policy-making of non-Western countries being influenced by Western interests, resulting in women's issues in third-world countries receiving insufficient attention and support on the international agenda. It neglects women's needs and interests, marginalizing them in international cooperation. Additionally, some international aid projects may also lack gender sensitivity, failing to fully consider the needs of female beneficiaries.

In summary, Western centrism has had profound impacts on women in the third-world countries at the cultural and ideological levels, economic models, and political systems. To improve the plight of these women, it is necessary to promote cultural diversity, economic diversification, and political democratization, while strengthening international cooperation to ensure that women's rights and interests are fully protected and respected.

5. The Female Perspective in Nicholas Kristof's "Half the Sky"

Half the Sky, co-authored by Nicholas D. Kristof and his wife Sheryl WuDunn, focuses on the living conditions of women in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Through extensive field investigations and case studies, it showcases the various challenges these women encounter in their daily lives, such as poverty, lack of education, health issues, domestic violence, and more. The book reveals the plights and hopes of women in these regions, offering a deeper understanding and recognition of these individuals from a life perspective. Additionally, it emphasizes the courage and perseverance displayed by these women in adversity, as well as their aspirations and pursuits for a better life.

In the book, Nicholas not only criticizes Western centrism but also proposes some solutions. He believes that Western centrism often ignores the needs and voices of women in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, leading to their marginalization in the international community. To improve this situation, Nicholas calls on the international community to pay more attention to the rights and interests of these women and provide them with more support and assistance. Simultaneously, he emphasizes the importance of strengthening international cooperation, arguing that only through global efforts can we truly help these women escape their plights and realize their dreams and aspirations.

6. Conclusion

Western centrism has had profound impacts on women worldwide, especially in the third-world countries. These impacts are not only reflected in cultural, economic, and social aspects, but also deeply ingrained in women's psychological structures and daily lives. Therefore, it is crucial to disseminate research findings to relevant international organizations, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations to promote awareness and action towards women's issues in the third-world countries. We should enhance public understanding and attention to this issue through academic exchanges, seminars, and media coverage. The international community needs to adopt more equitable and inclusive development strategies, deepen the public's understanding of women's plights, ensure the rational allocation of resources globally, and promote more comprehensive academic thinking on globalization and multiculturalism. This will create a better development environment for women in the third-world countries. At the same time, we need to strengthen cross-cultural communication and cooperation, promote mutual understanding and respect between different cultures. We should advocate the concept of harmonious coexistence in diversity, seeking the development and

inheritance of a harmonious culture. By considering the specific realities of different regions and ethnic groups, we should comprehensively consider the relationship between women, nature, and the environment, promote care for women, and extend this care to the cultural and ecological aspects. [5]

Only through joint efforts and cooperation worldwide to disseminate research findings can women in the third-world countries find their own development paths, realize their own values and dreams, and create a more equitable, inclusive, and prosperous future for these women.

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