

The Modern Feminist Humanitarian: History and Practice

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Abstract:

The story of the modern feminist and humanitarian is a relatively short one, at least according to popular knowledge. The timeline tends to begin in 1948, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Then come moments in the 1960s and 1970s, like the adoption of CEDAW in 1979. From more recent years, we cite the UN Sustainable Development Goals of 2015, or #MeToo's viral moment in 2017.

My research expands this narrative by tracing the history of the "modern feminist humanitarian" to the late nineteenth century. I question the idea that feminism and humanitarianism were modern inventions of the post-World War Two era by turning to an exceptional historical case study: policy, research, and advocacy on female prostitution in Cambodia during the period of the French protectorate (1863-1954). I pose the following questions about past history and present practice: first, how do ideas about oppressed/emancipated female gender and sexuality shape the humanitarian mandates of states and institutions? And second, how can women's, gender, and sexuality studies, framed by histories of imperial and colonial processes, move scholarship and activism to think about the ethics of being a feminist humanitarian?

As historians of gender and empire have demonstrated, the lives of women can often be traced by following what were the protectionist enterprises of imperial and colonial processes, and such projects often had nebulous or dangerous consequences for women. My research on projects that the French implemented in Cambodia corroborates this. This notion echoes scholarship pointing out that humanitarianism and human rights are not mutually dependent, leaving us with an unsettling thought: humanitarian interventions, even those designed to be gender-responsive, can be disempowering in its attempt to empower. Awareness of a historical tradition of gender-based interventions should alert development scholars and practitioners to critical examination of their own feminist research and gender mainstreaming programs. By interrogating the modern feminist and humanitarian claims made in the context of protecting women in colonial Cambodia, I challenge present policymakers and activists who claim to practice gender-sensitive and human-centered approaches in humanitarian and development programs across the Global South.

About the Speaker:

Tara Tran is a Ph.D. Candidate in History at Johns Hopkins University. Her research uses theories of hospitality and feminist critique to question the ethics of human rights, humanitarianism, and development in the colonial and post-colonial Global South. To examine this, her doctoral dissertation turns to a historical case study: the policy, research, and advocacy of the French colonial state and international organizations related to prostitution, birth, and rape in Cambodia during the early twentieth century. This project has been shaped by fieldwork as a Fulbright scholar in Cambodia and experience as an aid worker in East Africa.