

REFRAMING RESILIENCE: VISUAL NARRATIVES OF WOMEN'S POVERTY AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Abstract

Historical and current realities of women's poverty in the Global South are based on structural inequalities, colonial past, and socio-economic exclusions. Poor women have been framed by mainstream media narratives, humanitarian appeals, and international policy debate for far too long as passive victims, reproducing stereotypes that disempower and deny agency. For this paper, the author critically examines the visual framing of women's poverty, tracing historical discourses and deconstructing new trends of change in media representation. It examines photographs used in journalism, poverty reduction initiatives, and digital storytelling to illustrate that the visual narrative of poverty changed from victimization to empowerment. The study also delves into the roles of feminist activism, grassroots mobilization, and the new media in reframing the representation of women's poverty. Participatory media has been able to give women the voice to re-tell their narrative, which challenged hegemonic representation and prompted policy reforms addressing system blockages. Ethical concerns of representation are also discussed, drawing on dignity, self-representation, and not using exploitative images. The longer more stereotypical representations of poverty linger, the more emphasis on women's agencies in visual messages is necessary to challenge systematic inequalities and create positive socio-economic change. In chronicling the change in representation, this study adds to the gender, media, and development literature, and highlights the power of visual representation in public opinion and policy intervention.

Keywords: Women's poverty, Global South, visual representation, gender inequality, digital storytelling, feminist movements

Perangkaan Semula Daya Tahan: Naratif Visual Kemiskinan dan Pemerdayaan Wanita di Selatan Global

Abstrak

Realiti sejarah dan semasa mengenai kemiskinan wanita di negara-negara Selatan berpunca daripada ketidaksetaraan struktur, warisan penjajahan, dan pengecualian sosio-ekonomi. Wanita miskin telah lama digambarkan oleh naratif media arus perdana, rayuan kemanusiaan, dan perbincangan dasar antarabangsa sebagai mangsa pasif, yang mengulangi stereotaip yang melemahkan dan menafikan agensi mereka. Dalam kertas ini, penulis meneliti secara kritikal cara visual kemiskinan wanita ditingkatkan, menjejaki wacana sejarah dan menguraikan trend baharu dalam representasi media. Ia meneliti penggunaan fotografi dalam kewartawanan, inisiatif pengurangan kemiskinan, dan penceritaan digital untuk menunjukkan bahawa naratif visual tentang kemiskinan telah berubah daripada pemangsaan kepada pemerdayaan. Kajian ini turut menyentuh peranan aktivisme feminis, mobilisasi akar umbi, dan media baharu dalam merangka semula gambaran kemiskinan wanita. Media partisipatif telah memberi peluang kepada wanita untuk menyuarakan semula naratif mereka, yang mencabar representasi hegemonik dan mendorong reformasi dasar yang menangani halangan sistemik. Isu etika dalam representasi turut dibincangkan, termasuk nilai maruah, hak untuk mewakili diri sendiri, dan penolakan terhadap imej yang bersifat eksploitasi. Selagi representasi stereotaip tentang kemiskinan terus wujud, penekanan terhadap agensi wanita dalam mesej visual menjadi semakin penting untuk mencabar ketidaksetaraan sistemik dan mencipta perubahan sosio-ekonomi yang positif. Dengan mendokumentasikan perubahan dalam representasi ini, kajian ini menyumbang kepada literatur berkaitan jantina, media, dan pembangunan, serta menonjolkan kuasa representasi visual dalam mempengaruhi pendapat umum dan intervensi dasar. Kata kunci: Kemiskinan wanita, Selatan Global, representasi visual, ketidaksetaraan jantina, penceritaan digital, gerakan feminis, wacana media, kempen pembangunan, pemerdayaan ekonomi, naratif sejarah

Kata Kunci: Kemiskinan, Pemerdayaan wanita, Selatan Global, representasi visual, ketidaksetaraan gender, penceritaan digital, gerakan feminis

Introduction

Despite many decades of aid efforts and broad-based awareness, photographic representation of poor women in the Global South continues to conform relentlessly to simplistic and exploitative stereotypes. Such images continue to be trapped within a colonial and humanitarian frame that reduces women as passive victims bereft of context and agency. Such descriptions not only skew public opinion but also circulate damaging stereotypes that shape aid policy and planetary relations of power. These visual narratives therefore require immediate critical re-evaluation and re-framing in terms of ethical, feminist, and participatory approaches that affirm dignity, agency, and self-representation.

In the face of considerable scholarship that argues against the representation of women's poverty in humanitarian campaigns and the media (Dogra, 2012; Mohanty, 2003; Chouliraki, 2013), many of the works are largely textually oriented, favoring the analysis of discourse over the systematic exploration of empirical visual material. The current study offers an important addition by examining how feminist and participatory media approaches challenge as well as actively reconstitute dominant visual narratives around women's poverty, an area that remains underdeveloped within prior scholarship. The current work moves beyond prior research in that it combines the application of a theorized framework that draws on feminist, postcolonial, and media ethical scholarship with an empirical analysis of some images culled from journalism, NGOs, and digital story platforms. Conducted through close readings and contextual analysis, it explores how contemporary participatory practices interrupt exploitative tropes and cultivate counter-narratives based on empowerment and resilience. The study in this way highlights the material effects of representational practices, exemplifying the ways in which visual representation impacts both public opinion but also shapes development policy and planetary dynamics of power.

In this research, original contributions are provided in the fields of gender study, media ethics, post-colonialism, and development communication in explaining the ways in which visual culture constructs global visions of poverty. Unlike previous scholarship that conventionally dwelled on the views of the colonized and the humanitarian, little scholarship centers on counter-narratives of agency and empowerment through participatory and feminist media frameworks. The current study is an effort at bridging this gap. Through the centering of theoretical understanding with empirical examination of visual evidence, the study reaches an

interdisciplinary methodology that informs conceptual critique with practical representation. Beginning from classic texts of Mohanty (2003), Sontag (2003), and Chouliaraki (2013), and recent scholarship in the context of ethical representation and participatory media (e.g., Povey et al., 2019; Kovacs & Stolić, 2023), this paper finds its place among the pioneers of visual communication and development study. The study sheds light on the emancipatory potential of participatory media and feminist critique in the redefining of public debate and policy transformation. Through the promotion of the voices and views of marginalized women, the study propounds an equitable and participatory paradigm of global engagement.

This study applies a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach rooted in visual analysis, feminist critique, and postcolonial thought. The empirical material consists of photographs depicting women's poverty in the Global South, drawn from three primary domains: international journalism, NGO and humanitarian campaigns, and participatory media platforms such as Photovoice and Lensational. The selection process was systematic, guided by three criteria: relevance to the research focus (women and poverty), circulation and visibility within public discourse, and representational mode, distinguishing between hegemonic portrayals and counter-narratives of empowerment.

Once selected, the images were situated within their broader production and circulation contexts. This contextual mapping considered who produced the image, for what purpose, under what institutional or cultural framework, and for which audience. Particular attention was given to issues of funding, donor expectations, and circulation channels whether print journalism, global NGO appeals, or grassroots storytelling platforms. This step ensured that the images were not treated as isolated artefacts, but as cultural texts embedded within networks of power, ideology, and communication.

The core of the analysis employed close visual reading strategies informed by Wells (2015). Each image was examined for compositional features such as framing, gaze, use of light, color, and body positioning, alongside symbolic and affective elements. These visual details were interpreted in relation to representational binaries frequently invoked in poverty discourse—victim versus savior, passivity versus agency, helplessness versus resilience. This process illuminated how visual form itself contributes to the construction of meaning.

To add systematic rigor, the visual readings were complemented by a thematic coding process. Codes were developed both deductively, from

feminist and postcolonial scholarship (e.g., Orientalist tropes, the logics of “poverty porn”), and inductively, from recurring patterns that emerged across the image corpus. Key coding categories included the presence or absence of agency and voice, the degree of contextual information provided or withheld, the affective appeals embedded in the imagery, and the ethical framing of the subjects, especially in relation to consent, dignity, and anonymity.

A comparative dimension further strengthened the analysis. Images from the three domains were examined in relation to one another to identify both continuities and divergences in visual discourse. This stage revealed how dominant humanitarian, and journalistic representations tend to reinforce passivity and dependency, while participatory and feminist practices increasingly disrupt these tropes by foregrounding resilience, leadership, and everyday dignity.

Finally, the empirical findings were integrated with secondary scholarship on media ethics, feminist theory, and postcolonial critique. This ensured that the study's conclusions were not only grounded in evidence but also situated within the broader theoretical debates surrounding representation, power, and justice.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations remained central. Issues of consent, positionality, and representational justice were treated not as peripheral concerns but as guiding principles in both analysis and interpretation. By combining systematic selection, contextual mapping, close visual analysis, thematic coding, comparative interpretation, and theoretical integration, this methodology moves beyond descriptive critique. It provides a replicable framework for examining how visual practices construct, contest, and reframe the narratives of women's poverty in the Global South.

This article attempts to investigate the historical and contemporary visual images of women's poverty in the Global South, how colonial, Orientalist, and humanitarian visual discourses have shaped the hegemonic narratives of poverty, and how feminist activism and participatory media have contested exploitative images and the consequent ethical dilemmas of visual narration, especially regarding consent, dignity, and self-representation. It identifies new counter-narratives that emphasize women's agency and advocate for more equitable and just narratives of development.

Representations of poor women have dominated humanitarian and development communication campaigns within the Global South for many decades. The image, from colonial-era photography to contemporary NGO campaigns, has been not only a source of information but also a site of persuasion, often setting terms for how global publics come to know poverty and respond to it. Visual representations have relied on aesthetic conventions of need, helplessness, and vulnerability—that, in mobilizing aid, risk confirming racialized and gendered stereotypes (Dogra, 2012; Chouliaraki, 2013). These images have, in turn, tended to speak to Western donors and policymakers and have placed women in the Global South as voiceless, requiring external intervention (Mohanty, 2003).

Since Ariella Azoulay (2008) argues in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, the person photographed has not just representational worth but civic rights—the right to be respected, to narrate her own story, and to withhold or give consent. [...] Moving visual representation away from a civic and ethical alignment repositions the conversation from pity to justice and solidarity. This article questions the visual economy of women's poverty, examining how such images have throughout time served the interests of powerful forces and are increasingly being remoulded and re-defined by participatory and feminist efforts

Literature Review

Scholarship across the Global South on representation, gender, and impoverishment identifies central alignments between visual narrative and structural injustice. Most scholars such as Chouliaraki (2013) and Dogra (2012) argue that humanitarian images typically prioritize affective response over contextual reality, rather than savior/victim binaries. These framings are also based on and reproduced through colonial and Orientalist epistemologies that continue to influence today's media practice, specifically through so-called "poverty porn"—aesthetic framings that commodify misery as a means of eliciting aid (Moeller, 1999; Ticktin, 2011).

Feminist theorists have extended these critiques to examine how poor women are gendered in visual images in a way that erases agency and confirms passivity. Orgad (2012) and Griffin (2010) argue that such images are not representations but ideological constructions that make up global imaginary and public policy.

Feminist visual research and participatory media have been attempts to address such criticisms. Initiatives such as PhotoVoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) and Lensational (2020) allow marginalized women to self-represent through photography and visual art. These initiatives turn the visual hegemony of institutional actors on their head and offer epistemologies of alternative forms based on lived experience, relationality, and ethical representation (Azoulay, 2008; Butler, 2009). The literature also maintains the significance of representational justice—where consent, dignity, and voice are at the center of the visual economy (Sontag, 2003; Wells, 2015).

Teju Cole's (2012) "White Savior Industrial Complex" is a denunciation of how visual campaigns are more in the business of satisfying Western emotion than the material realities of those represented. As these visions intersect, they demonstrate how visual representations of women's poverty have the power to support colonial inheritances of oppression under the guise of empathy, thereby continuing instead of erasing global inequalities.

Together, this literature constitutes the theoretical foundation for critiquing the mediation of women's poverty discourse in visual culture and creating space for more transformative, feminist-oriented practices of seeing and showing. The research takes an interdisciplinary and qualitative approach rooted in visual analysis, postcolonial theory, and feminist critique. Critical visual analysis of selected photographs from journalistic, NGO advocacy, and digital reporting sources representing women's poverty in the Global South are involved. Analysis follows close reading methods in examining composition, framing, and socio-political context where images are produced and shared. The research applies secondary sources—media critique, scholarship, and activist discourses—to place visual practices within broader power dynamics. Ethical issues, including the use of consent, positionality, and representational justice, are included within the methodology.

Historical Context: Colonial Legacies and Humanitarian Visuals

Photography was central during the colonial era in creating and disseminating ideologies of imperial power. In systematic fashion, images of poor native women helped justify colonial adventurism by positioning themselves and the poor native women as vulnerable, passive, and needing rescue by the self-proclaimed mission of modernity. These images did more than symbolically represent poverty; they constructed it with racialized and gendered vision along Orientalist

logic. In such vision, women from the nations that were being colonized were exoticized, frozen, and repressed subjects, objects of fascination, pity, or moral salvation, needing rescue by Western powers (Alloula, 1986; Said, 1978).

Orientalist gaze, codified by Edward Said, was disciplinary power that created knowledge of the 'Other' and legitimated domination over them at the same time. Photographic practice during colonial rule supplemented it by making the women of the colonies hyper-visible and yet silent. Their visibility was conditioned by their silence; they were disseminated everywhere through their image, but their agency was nowhere. French colonial postcards of Algeria by Malek Alloula reveal how such images commercialized women into objects for male Western fantasies—cultural objects and not human subjects (Alloula, 1986). Such images made hierarchies of civilization, gender, and race appear normal and hence inscribed imperial ideologies into aesthetics.

These visual tropes did not end with the departure of colonial powers. In the post-independence era, international development agencies and humanitarian organizations, frequently headquartered in or funded by the Global North—continued to borrow from the same visual formulae. It was out of this continuity, according to researchers, that the "poverty porn" aesthetic emerged. This kind of imagery routinely shows women and children existing in states of extreme hardship—malnourished, wretchedly dressed, and seemingly helpless—presented in ways that aim to appeal to the emotions of a donor public rather than the dignity of the people being represented (Moeller, 1999; Dogra, 2012). These images are seldom accompanied by contextualizing information or direct voices of the people being represented, isolating often complex socio-political and economic processes into simple, consumable narratives.

Poverty pornography acts along with an affective logic. It operates by manipulating guilt, sympathy, and the need to help, but at the same time, it reproduces imbalanced power relations between the Global North (savers, altruists, narrators) and the Global South (subjects, victims, recipients). These women are symbolically written in that visual economy that speaks to them, for them, but not with them (Ticktin, 2011). Their silence is not their own; it is one that benefits from their suffering at the cost of their voices in the public sphere. Here, humanitarian images have inherited the colonial gaze and renewed similar dynamics of objectification and paternalism under the veil of empathy and philanthropy.

Dominant Representations in Contemporary Media

Modern humanitarian appeals, particularly those initiated by large NGOs and international agencies, increasingly draw on emotive imagery—primarily close-ups of women and children in distress—to elicit sympathy and prompt giving. These images, stripped of history and socio-political context, affect over fact. They aim to produce gut feeling responses, but the effect is too often the simplification and reduction of complexity and agency into monolithic discourses of powerlessness and victimhood (Chouliaraki, 2013; Dogra, 2012).

This pain aesthetic has deep roots in war and humanitarian photography history. An example is Vietnamese American Associated Press photographer Nick Ut's 1972 image of a naked nine-year-old girl, Phan Thị Kim Phúc, running from a napalm bombing during the Vietnam War. The photo became an icon of the horrors of war but also challenged ethical boundaries concerning the visibility of the suffering of children and the commodification of their trauma as signs of broader geopolitical struggle (Sontag, 2003). While the photo certainly contributed to shifting public opinion toward the war, the photo also demonstrates the way children, and girls in particular, are traditionally positioned as innocent victims in need of rescue from elsewhere, reenacting earlier colonial scripts of vulnerability and dependency.

Similarly, Kevin Carter's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph during the famine in Sudan in 1993 depicts a thin, starving child lying on the ground while a vulture awaited him in the background. The photo, published by The New York Times, was an international symbol for African suffering, causing shock and an outpouring of donations. Carter was, however, widely criticized for having photographed instead of intervened, and the photo has since emerged as a flashpoint for debates concerning the ethics of humanitarian photography, voyeurism and the profitable commodification of suffering among Black people (Campbell, 2012). These criticisms are indicative of how the Global South—and African contexts more especially—have been visually scripted as always-crisis spaces, where women and children are above all figures of despair, needing salvation by the outside world.

Another equally powerful and disturbing example is that of Sharbat Gula, the "Afghan Girl," whose photograph by Steve McCurry was used on the cover of National Geographic in June 1985. Her striking green eyes and defiant gaze made Gula an international symbol of the Afghan refugee crisis. But she was left unnamed and unidentified for 17 years, and her

picture was distributed around the world without consent. This portrait is typical of how humanitarian and media institutions commodify suffering. Suffering, in particular, that is women's transmuting personal trauma into spectacle for Western voyeuristic consumption (Griffin, 2010). Gula's case is the beginning of the ethical failure in representing women from conflict zones as anonymous bodies, silenced icons rather than active agents with agency. Her photograph, as powerful as it was, became part of a prevailing strategy of Orientalist visual politics representing women of the Global South as both exotic and sorrow-laden, deserving charity but not the right to speak (Sontag, 2003).

These tropes persist in the Darfur conflict, the 2023 Sudan conflict, refugee crises in Chad and South Sudan, and the depictions of Sudanese women and children in the international media portrayal of these events. Media sources such as BBC and CNN, and humanitarian appeals such as those by UNICEF, World Vision, and Save the Children, repeatedly reuse visual tropes: the emaciated mother cradling her dying child, the hijab-wearing girl tearful amidst the rubble. Insofar as these evocations of pity serve to recycle or revive such tropes, they also reinforce racialized and essentialized suppositions according to which womanhood in the Global South is constructed as passivity, victimhood, and silence (Ticktin, 2014).

As Teju Cole (2012) argued in his criticism of the "White Savior Industrial Complex," these representations are less concerned with solidarity than with affirming the moral high ground of the Global North. They deflect attention away from determinants of a systemic kind—imperialism, war, economic exploitation, and failed international interventions—and onto individuated suffering that can be "alleviated" through charitable giving. These accounts reinscribe a humanitarian imaginary that prioritizes feeling over justice and simplifies the complexity of the represented population.

Moreover, these visual economies serve to undermine narratives of leadership, of protest, and of resilience. Sudanese, Vietnamese, and Afghani women have long been agents of transformation—protesting, maintaining social connections intact, and working toward peace. That risk is one that is not misrepresentation, but one of erasure—erasure of multiplicity, of voice, and of agency. To move toward more empowering and ethical visual practices, humanitarian and media organizations must deliberately forsake the reductionist representation and instead deliberately strive to center the agency, the resilience, and the nuance of the people and groups that are being represented. This requires

movement away from the fixed portrait and toward representation that empowers the subjects themselves to communicate freely, challenge prevailing structures, and reclaim their own humanity.

Shifts Toward Empowerment: Feminist and Participatory Media Recent Years – Dominant Representations in Contemporary Media

Today's humanitarian appeals, particularly by large NGOs and international agencies, have increasingly relied on emotive visual strategies for capturing donor attention and the sympathy of the public. One of the most prevalent strategies is the use of close-up shots of women and children's victims. These are crafted specifically to evoke feelings of urgency, pity, and moral obligation among audiences situated predominantly in the Global North. These images are typically bereft of historic, cultural, and geopolitical context, reducing nuanced human struggles and lives into simplistic narratives of powerlessness, suffering, and passive victimhood (Chouliaraki, 2013; Dogra, 2012).

These images privilege affective truth over subtle understanding—and all too often reproduce dangerous visual hierarchies locating Western spectators in the position of hero and the photographed as objects of charity. Not only is this eroding the subjectivity and agency of the photographed population but reiterating a colonial visual economy that reinforces global injustices. As critics like Chouliaraki (2013) argue, these images construct a "post-humanitarian" imagery that commodifies suffering and distances spectators from the structural causes of poverty and violence. Likewise, Dogra (2012) laments NGO campaigns continued use of "poverty porn," highlighting how such images mask the structural and economic determinants of global injustice.

Dramatic images such as Sharbat Gula the Afghan Girl photographed by Steve McCurry for National Geographic magazine in 1984 illustrate how the experience of their own subject may be overwhelmed by beauty. Gula's glaring look was an emblem for Afghani suffering during the Russian occupation, but she stayed hidden for years, her own story playing second fiddle to the symbol potential of the photograph (Jarecki, 2008). And Kevin Carter's Pulitzer Prize-winning picture of a starving Sudanese child pursued by a vulture (1993) shook the world but triggered questions concerning voyeurism, exploitation, and whose role was played by the photographer (Campbell, 2012). And Nick Ut's 1972 picture showing Kim Phuc fleeing from the napalm bombing during the Vietnam conflict—naked, frightened, and scarred—became one of the

most iconic peace photographs the 20th century ever saw. And yet Phuc was for years defined by the symbol of victimhood rather than by an agent for peace.

These images are traveling through ecologies of media that are capable of reproducing colonial and masculine voyeuristic gazes, whereby harm—most notably, that inflicted upon women and children of the Global South—is commodified for the purposes of Western salvation and moral rectitude stories. These dominating tropes are contested by feminist scholars of media, who have instead encouraged participatory and empowering presentations that place the voices, agency, and resilience of the harmed at center (Orgad, 2012; Mohanty, 2003). Ethical visual narratives that avoid the desire to beautify harm and instead place it within broader structural inequalities are ever more imperative.

Whereas hegemonic representations of this sort long dominated the global imagination of suffering, through the passive and decontextualized representation of women and children in need, these are increasingly being challenged by alternative media practices based on feminist ethics and participatory principles. Rather than reducing subjectivities to symbols of victimhood, feminist and participatory media attempt to restore agency, voice, and context to those historically disenfranchised in visual representation. Such practices prioritize collaboration over extraction, co-authorship over voyeurism, and dignity over pity. By engaging the subject as narrator and not spectacle, feminist and participatory practices promise the possibility of a radical transformation—from imagining women as powerless recipients of aid to recognizing them as agents of resistance, survival, and knowledge production (Cammaerts et al., 2013; Sontag, 2003).

Feminist scholars and practitioners have equally long criticized the exploitative potential of traditional humanitarian photography and called for more reflexive and ethical practices. In response, more projects now incorporate participatory photography, community filming, and co-curated shows that amplify marginalized groups' and individuals' daily lives and voices. Projects like Photovoice and Lensational, for instance, educate refugee or poor women to represent their own lives and therefore subvert the outsider's top-down gaze and encourage self-representation (Wang & Burris, 1997; Lensational, 2020). Such practices abandon the spectacle of suffering to mobilize audiences to witness stories of resilience, work, memory, and daily dignity.

They are not merely visual, but political changes disrupt the power relationship between "viewer" and "viewed," replacing objectification with solidarity. Participatory media is a site of empowerment when it allows women not just to be represented in media, but to have agency over how and in what manner they are seen and understood.

"Cantering Consent, Context, and Dignity: Ethical Pathways to Transformative Representation"

The ethics of visual representation, especially in humanitarian and media contexts, demand a rigorous and responsible framework that prioritizes consent, dignity, and context. Historically, representations of marginalized communities—particularly women—have often been produced through a voyeuristic lens that reinforces power imbalances between the subject and the viewer. This practice is deeply embedded in colonial and patriarchal visual cultures, where the suffering of women is exploited to evoke empathy, generate donations, or validate interventionist narratives (Sontag, 2003; Azoulay, 2008). Contemporary ethical visual storytelling, however, calls for a shift—one that centers agency, challenges objectification, and promotes self-determined narratives.

A pervasive issue in humanitarian and media representation is the commodification of suffering. Iconic images such as Kevin Carter's Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of a starving Sudanese child watched by a vulture exemplify how powerful visuals can simultaneously evoke empathy and reinforce helplessness (Moeller, 1999). While such images may galvanize public response, they often strip subjects of their individuality and historical context, reducing them to symbols of despair. Susan Sontag (2003) critiques this approach in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, arguing that images of suffering risk becoming pornographic if they are consumed passively or divorced from critical context.

This problem is particularly acute in the representation of women. Media depictions frequently lean on tropes of the passive, suffering woman in need of saving. This is not only reductive but reinforces colonial and patriarchal logics that deny women agency. Even iconic photos like that of Phan Thị Kim Phúc—the naked Vietnamese girl fleeing a napalm attack—while powerful, have been critiqued for centering Western guilt more than Vietnamese voices (Kennedy, 2009). These visual tropes risk reinscribing historical power imbalances under the guise of humanitarianism.

Ethical representation demands more than visual shock; it requires meaningful engagement with the communities being represented. Consent must be informed and contextual—not a checkbox but an ongoing process that respects the subject's autonomy and narrative control (Azoulay, 2008). Without proper context, images run the risk of essentializing people's pain, stripping them off the broader sociopolitical realities that shape their lives.

Furthermore, dignity must be foundational to any representational practice. Rather than only showing women at their most vulnerable, media should also highlight their strength, leadership, and resilience. This does not mean sanitizing reality but rather resisting the lazy binary of either victim or hero. Women can be both vulnerable and powerful, victims and agents. Ethical storytelling allows for these complex portrayals.

Representations that emerge from within communities are often more nuanced, ethical, and impactful. They are less likely to reproduce voyeuristic gazes or savior narratives, and more likely to reflect the lived experiences and aspirations of those depicted. Participatory photography projects, for instance, have enabled women in conflict zones or impoverished areas to document their own lives and share their stories on their own terms (Wells, 2015). These initiatives empower individuals not only as subjects but as storytellers, which is a form of representational justice.

A poignant example is the work of *Everyday Africa*, a photography project by African photographers that counters Western media portrayals by documenting the ordinary, complex realities of African life. The emphasis is on balance and dignity rather than dramatized despair. This form of representation aligns with the ethics of care, relationality, and solidarity rather than domination and spectacle (Butler, 2009).

Incorporating agency and ethics into visual representation is not merely a moral imperative—it is essential for fostering transformative justice. When media and humanitarian organizations shift from exploitative imagery to visuals rooted in self-determination, they challenge the status quo and offer new possibilities for solidarity. This change is part of a broader decolonial and feminist critique that advocates for visibility without violence, empathy without objectification, and representation without erasure.

Ultimately, ethical visual representation requires a commitment to justice, not just storytelling. It must interrogate who is behind the camera, who is seen and how, and who benefits from the image. Centering women's agency visual narratives through consent, community involvement, and representational dignity—moves us closer to a media landscape that is not only more truthful but more just.

Conclusion

The visual representation of women's poverty in the Global South is neither neutral nor incidental; it is a powerful ideological tool that shapes global understandings of poverty, development, and gender. For too long, dominant humanitarian and media discourses have relied on reductive portrayals that frame poor women as passive, voiceless victims. These visual tropes, rooted in colonial and Orientalist legacies, continue to circulate under the guise of aid and empathy, reinforcing global hierarchies and obscuring the structural roots of inequality.

However, this narrative is increasingly contested. Feminist scholarship, grassroots activism, and participatory media practices have introduced new visual languages—ones that emphasize agency, resilience, and self-representation. By centering women as subjects rather than objects, these counter-narratives challenge the status quo and push toward more ethical and justice-oriented forms of communication. They highlight the need to move beyond charity-driven storytelling to approaches grounded in solidarity, contextual complexity, and mutual respect.

Ultimately, reimagining how women's poverty is represented is not only an aesthetic or ethical concern—it is a political imperative. Representation informs perception, and perception shapes policy. When women are shown as agents of change rather than as symbols of despair, it becomes possible to craft development strategies that are inclusive, participatory, and transformative. This paper underscores that shifting visual practices are not merely about correcting misperceptions; they are about building new possibilities for recognition, equity, and global justice.

Such visual construction of women's poverty in the Global South is neither random nor objective; it is an ideational power site that mediates global meanings of poverty, development, and gender. Hegemonic humanitarian and media discourses for decades relied on reductionist portrayals that constructed poor women as passive, voiceless victims. These pictorial tropes, rooted in Orientalist and colonial traditions, continue to circulate in the form of aid and benevolence, perpetuating global hierarchies and concealing the structural roots of inequality.

However, this narrative is increasingly challenged. Feminist scholarship, grassroots activism, and participatory visualities have brought new visual lexicons—lexicons with agency, resilience, and self-representation at their core. In keeping women as subjects, not objects, these counter-narratives transform the dominant narrative and shift towards ethics- and justice-informed communication. They demand a move away from charity-stained narration toward solidarity-based, situated, and respectfully dialogical practices.

Lastly, recasting how women's poverty is framed is not only an aesthetic or ethical necessity, but also a political one. Perceptions are influenced by representation, and policy is shaped by perception. If women are framed as changemakers and not as tokens of despair, one can create development plans that are inclusive, participatory, and transformative. This essay reiterates that reorienting visual practices is not an issue of refining misconceptions but one of building new possibilities for recognition, equity, and international justice.

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