PETER BALINT,
ESZTER KOLLAR,
PATTI TAMARA LENARD
AND TIZIANA TORRESI

# Women's Bodies and Global Poverty Eradication

For many advocates of global justice, one important strategy in fostering development is to address women's specific development needs. One of the principal aims of this strategy is to improve the status of maternal and infant health, and thereby to improve the status of women more generally. For many scholars and practitioners working to eradicate poverty, this focus is unambiguously a good thing, since women (and their children) are among the most vulnerable members of their own communities, and are therefore most likely to suffer from the devastating effects of poverty more generally. Such improvements are considered central to the achievement of development goals, since improvements in women's conditions are believed to translate into development gains for the whole community.

Yet the devastating effects of poverty can be compounded by the ways in which gender bias is so often focused on women's bodies; the ways in which policy makers' attempts to control women's bodies, politically and culturally, serve to preserve their highly vulnerable positions in society. This focus often produces policies that unfairly burden women. Examples of these policies include mandatory breastfeeding laws, population control measures, and so on.

This special issue of *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric* focuses on the ways in which women, and their bodies, are the target of deliberate attempts to sustain women's inferior position and attempts to improve their status, which may nevertheless have unintended negative consequences, be unfairly burdensome or contribute to understandings and discourses that reinforce the inequalities they purport to remedy.

Two of our contributors concentrate on one of the areas in which the dynamics we are interested in investigating are most obvious and problematic: motherhood and maternal and infant health. In her paper, Jacqueline Marie Potvin examines maternal myths in popular development literature. Working within a feminist postcolonial framework, Potvin identifies how maternal myths are constructed in this literature and examines their ideological significance within the development sector. She concludes that in their construction of maternal myths, these texts reinforce exploitative gender roles and relations.

In a similar vein, Rebecca Tiessen discusses the Canadian Muskoka Initiative – or the Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Project (MNCH), which aims to contribute in significant ways to improving the health of women and children in developing countries. She underlines the problematic discourse in the information for the project, which refers for example to women's bodies as 'walking wombs'. This language, she argues, leads to the objectification and 'othering' of women as simply mothers and child bearers, and has the consequence of obscuring discussions of gender equality.

Susan Murphy's contribution also pursues a similar line of argument, evaluating the differences between concentrating on 'women' as opposed to gender. In discussions of poverty eradication, a focus exclusively on 'women' rather than on gender is problematic. In particular, she argues, the eradication of structural poverty, where groups are excluded from the workforce on a permanent basis as a consequence of discrimination demands an examination of gender roles and relations.

Together, these pieces highlight that a focus on women is at the forefront of attempts to eradicate global poverty, and that is to the good. But as the authors argue, the strategies by which states have aimed at improving the status of women and children continues to emphasize their inequality, their vulnerability and their helplessness. Understanding women as genuine agents – as agents who are capable of more than caring for children, as agents whose bodies do not need to be controlled or protected – remains a key step in fighting poverty and inequality around the world.

*Peter Balint*
*Senior Lecturer in International & Political Studies,*
*UNSW Canberra*
*email: p.balint@adfa.edu.au*

*Patti Tamara Lenard*
*Associate Professor of Applied Ethics*
*Graduate School of Public and International Affairs,*
*University of Ottawa*
*email: plenard@uottawa.ca*

*Eszter Kollar*
*Research fellow and lecturer at the Chair of International Political Theory, Normative Orders Excellence Cluster,*
*Goethe University Frankfurt*
*email: eszter.kollar@normativeorders.net*

*Tiziana Torresi*
*Lecturer in International Politics,*
*University of Adelaide*
*email: tiziana.torresi@adelaide.edu.au*

the global justice network