

## Chapter 5

# Geographies of Gender and Embodiment in Sport for Development Work

Over the past 15 years, the body and embodiment have become a key focus in the broader fields of physical education, sport sociology and physical cultural studies (i.e., Allen-Collinson, 2009; Ford & Brown, 2006; Humberstone, 2011; Thorpe, 2011). Engaging an array of theoretical and methodological approaches, such work has revealed the deeply affective and emotional experiences evoked through sporting participation (i.e., joy, pleasure, pain). It has also offered new insights into the multitude of ways that power operates on and through moving bodies and sporting institutions – enabling and empowering some, discriminating, marginalizing and exploiting others. Alongside the focus of the moving body, sporting geographers have revealed how power works to shape sporting and leisure spaces and places, privileging some bodies (particularly white, male bodies), while marginalizing others (e.g., women, disabled, persons of color) (Green & Singleton, 2007; Johnston, 1996, 1998; Koch, 2017; Marfell, 2019; McEwan, 2002; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013; van Ingen, 2003). Somewhat surprisingly, the embodiment and spatialities of sport for development and peace (SDP) have garnered considerably less scholarly attention.

In this chapter we build upon and extend our previous work to explore the value of feminist theories of space and embodiment for examining the gendered experiences of women working in the field (see Thorpe & Chawansky, 2020). In the later part we draw upon interviews with eight international women who have spent extended periods of time working for a sport and education NGO in Afghanistan. This case reveals the various ways these women experienced and managed their Western female bodies within and across work- and nonwork-related public spaces. In so doing, this chapter builds upon and extends current literature in SDP by bringing feminist theories of space, culture and embodiment into conversation with empirical material relating to Western women's experiences of working and living in high-risk development contexts. By focusing on the gendered embodied, lived experiences of international women staff within and across organizational and public spaces, valuable insights can be obtained into

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“the operation of gender within the everyday praxis and experience” (Partis-Jennings, 2019, p. 180) of SDP work.

## **Feminist Theories of Embodiment in Development**

While there has been a strong tendency to “study humanitarianism as a disembodied organizational practice” (Read, 2018, p. 304), feminist scholars have long advocated the importance of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) and the body is increasingly seen as a legitimate unit of analysis in international relations (Wilcox, 2015) and war (Sylvester, 2013). Building upon such work, some peace and development scholars are drawing on feminist theorizing of “the body, relatedness, vulnerability and the everyday” to “grasp the richness and fluidity of everyday techniques of interaction” and practices that are relevant to such work (Väyrynen, 2019, p. 146). Under the same umbrella, some feminists are also prioritizing the bodies and embodied experiences of Western women working in the fields of development and humanitarianism to understand how global–local power dynamics press upon women’s bodies, subjectivities, and their everyday practices and relationships (e.g., Partis-Jennings, 2019, 2017; Read, 2018). As Cook (2005) explains, focusing on experiences of embodiment can help draw our attention “to the multifaceted character of the subjectivities western women bring to their conflicted involvement in projects of imperialism” (p. 354). Extending such work, others have sought to understand how international women workers “are marked by and articulate for themselves, specific kinds of difference” (Partis-Jennings, 2019, p. 179), and how this difference is “always embodied” and “imbued with meanings” (Read, 2018, p. 301). As this literature highlights, the body can be a powerful source of knowledge in development work. Furthermore, focusing on the embodied experiences of international women doing development work can offer valuable insights into the everyday relations of power within highly politicized and racially and culturally specific contexts, and how such forces press upon women’s bodies in diverse ways.

Despite a growing body of literature on gender and the body in development, few have explored how bodies are experienced within and across spaces and places. Thus, in this chapter we consider the value of two key bodies of literature for centralizing gendered experiences of embodiment in SDP. First, we provide a brief overview of research on the gendered and embodied experiences of women in “Aidland.” Second, we map the rise of feminist geographies of development. In so doing, we argue that working at the intersection of these two literatures allows new feminist geographical understandings of women’s moving bodies within and across different spaces in the SDP sector and development work more broadly.

### ***The Gendered Body in “Aidland”***

In recent years, the study of the social world of development and conflict resolution specialists has grown exponentially with the ideas of “Aidland” (Apthorpe,

2011) and “Peaceland” (Auteserre, 2014) being commonly used, and much debated, in the field. Importantly, the “land” in each of these terms is not a geographical reference, but rather is used as “a metaphorical concept” to make the point that “the lives and worlds of both those who are ‘doing development’ and those ‘being developed’ play a role in the process of programme implementation” (Franklin, 2012, p. 272). Building upon and extending Raymond Apthorpe’s (2005) concept of “Aidland,” an emerging genre of writing is focusing attention on “the lives, motivations, and personalities” of development professionals, treating them as “an object of inquiry in their own right, rather than primarily the vehicles for the creation and implementation of policy” (Fechter & Hindman, 2011; Harrison, 2013, p. 263; Mosse, 2011; Roth, 2015).

While Aidland studies do provide an important corrective to “more depersonalized accounts of aid-as-machine” (Harrison, 2013, p. 267), concerns have been raised that too many accounts of “doing development” on the ground continue to ignore the embodied experiences of individuals, unwilling or unable to “explore the extent to which desire, fear, hope and awe are produced by, and are producers of, humanitarian space and objects” (Heathershaw, 2016). Of course, both recipients of aid as well as aid and development workers are caught up in these dynamics (Heathershaw, 2016; Smirl, 2012) with radically divergent effects on bodies, subjectivities, and livelihoods within different spaces and places of development.

While the *bodies* of development professionals as they work, socialize and play within and across development geographies have garnered less attention within Aidland literature, feminist development scholars are increasingly exploring the gendered embodied experiences of women in the sector. Herein embodiment is understood within the feminist framework that informs this work, broadly referring to “the centrality of the body as a site of identification and experience” (Partis-Jennings, 2019, p. 181; also see; Väyrynen, 2019). Below we provide an overview of three key approaches that feminist scholars have drawn upon to advance understandings of women’s embodied experiences of development work; memoirs, autobiography, and interviews.

Feminist scholars have drawn upon memoirs as valuable sites for exploring the gendered body and experiences of embodiment within contexts of conflict and development (e.g., Dyvik, 2016; Read, 2018; Watson, 2016). For example, in an examination of *Chasing Misery* (Hoppe, 2014) – a collection of essays by female aid workers – Read (2018) aptly explores “embodied difference” in humanitarianism and peacebuilding. Read (2018) recognizes the challenges of understanding and representing embodiment, but argues that humanitarian memoirs “can help us to explore the embodied racialized and gendered experiences of aid in conflict” (p. 302). Critically reading the memoirs with a focus on the body and embodiment, she reveals the women’s feelings of “passing” as aid workers, and how they embodied gender in ways that were always relational to imagined “real” aid workers (Read, 2018, p. 300). In reading the stories through a double lens of “flesh witnessing” and “passing,” Read (2018, p. 301) presents difference as relational and embodied. Understanding difference “as a gendered relation of power,” she identifies the female aid worker as “always Other, even in her own

account”: “different, and separated, both from those populations she is attempting to assist and from her life ‘back home’, searching for the authenticity of experience’ in a field where it is still commonly (and mistakenly) assumed that most aid workers are male” (Read, 2018, p. 311).

Others are making important contributions to feminist scholarship on the body and embodiment in humanitarian, conflict and development work through autobiographical writings and reflections. For example, in her book *Intimate Colonialism*, Charlés (2007) offers a candid autoethnographic account of her experiences as a Peace Corps volunteer in the East African nation of Togo. A Hispanic-American woman in her mid-30s at the time, Charlés’ (2007) reflections highlight some of the many embodied tensions she experienced between her Western worldviews of feminism and sexuality with culturally specific forms of sensuality in Togo. Another example is in Martini and Jauhola’s (2014) collaborative exploration of their personal experiences in two postdisaster contexts. In presenting a dialogue between two autobiographical stories from their development aid work in Aceh, Indonesia, and Haiti, the authors “explore themes of mobility, temporality, intersections of class, gender and ‘whiteness’” within the materiality and spatiality of aid work (Martini & Jauhola, 2014, p. 76).

Another key approach being used to gain rich understandings of the embodied experiences of women “doing development” is through interviews, often contextualized within periods of fieldwork. For example, in her ethnographic study of a group of Western women development workers living in Gilgit, northern Pakistan, Cook (2007) combines interviews with her own lived experience in this community to reveal the international women’s efforts to construct comfortable lives and identities for themselves, and the political consequences of their actions. Inspired by “a concern to think through my own complicity” (Cook, 2007, p. 2) as a Western tourist and researcher in Pakistan, she offers an incredibly rich and nuanced account of the many ways Western women workers made meaning of their lives in this community. Focusing on the processes of subjectivity formation, Cook (2007) highlights the ways the Western women “perpetuate, legitimate, resist, and transform relations of domination” as they imagine themselves in relation to the people among whom they live and work (p. 6).

Elsewhere Cook (2005) draws upon this same project to explore the significance of clothing choices to the “formation of western women’s subjectivities and to the transcultural power relations in this post-colonial setting” (p. 351). While many of the women in Cook’s (2005) study devised ways to “rationalize and manage” wearing the local attire (*shalwar kameez*), she observes that the “bodily shame, lack of autonomy, and cultural ‘backwardness’ supposedly implied by a woman’s head-coverings are attitudes even most cultural sympathizers are unwilling to accept as part of their identity in Gilgit” (p. 365). In so doing, she extends literature on the coloniality of Western attitudes toward veiling practices (e.g., Jiwani & Dakroury, 2009; Razack, 2008), to reveal dominant discourses of race, culture and imperialism being perpetuated through the everyday clothing practices of Western development workers in local contexts. Drawing upon research with Canadian women development workers in Africa, Heron (2007) also makes an important contribution to exploring such embodied practices and

understandings of the self as critical to the “politics of accountability.” Across these works, it becomes clear that creating space for the voices and embodied lived experiences of international women working in contexts of development provides valuable insights into their (conscious and unconscious) understandings of relationality and difference. These understandings take shape at the intersection of global power relations, local gendered regimes and social hierarchies, and inevitably impact women’s relationships and work.

### ***Embodying Gender in the SDP Industry***

SDP is perhaps uniquely positioned under the Aidland umbrella. For example, SDP researchers have examined the motivations and experiences of staff and volunteers, some of whom work (or have worked) across a range of other development and/or aid organizations. Scholars have increasingly considered various aspects of work experiences within SDP organizations (see, for example, Gallant, Sherry, & Nicholson, 2015; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; MacIntosh, Couture, & Spence, 2015; Shilbury, Sotiriadou, & Green, 2008). In particular, Welty Peachey and colleagues have engaged in a range of projects focused on leadership (Welty Peachey & Burton, 2017) and the motives, retention factors, and rewards of volunteers (Welty Peachey, Borland, Lobpriess, & Cohen, 2015; Welty Peachey, Welty Peachey, Lyras, Cohen, Bruening, & Cunningham, 2014) in the field of SDP. In so doing, their findings draw many parallels with literature in Aidland studies more broadly, including largely overlooking issues of gender in development work. However, a key distinction evident in this work is that many SDP workers and volunteers have a passion for sport, and/or particular skill sets associated with sport or physical activities, often with the assumption that they can help make the world better through offering improved access and opportunities to the sports that gave them so much at critical stages in their own lives.

With critical scholars increasingly questioning the assumptions underpinning the SDP movement, some are examining the assumptions of staff and volunteers and how these are navigated in the field. For example, focusing particularly on the experiences of volunteer interns of SDP organizations from a sociocultural perspective, Darnell (2010) described a tendency to interpret difference as “markers of underdevelopment” which worked to sustain the neoliberal focus of development (p. 396). As Hartmann and Kwauk (2011) note, if any development is to be accomplished through SDP programming then projects must be aware that “sport-based development workers have a double-burden: They must offer successful athletic activities [programmes using sport and/or physical activities] as well as operate sophisticated, self-conscious development programming” (p. 290).

Despite a growing body of literature in management studies and sociology of sport on volunteer and staff experiences in the field of SDP – and the ‘double burden’ of this work – women’s experiences of volunteering and working for SDP organizations have been given much less attention (for exceptions, see Darnell, 2010; Thorpe & Chawansky, 2017). Important feminist work, however, has focused on the embodied experiences of women SDP researchers in the field. For

example, Caudwell (2007), Hillyer (2010) and Chawansky (2015) have all written about the emotional, embodied and political complexities of working in SDP spaces (also see Chapter 2). In this chapter we build upon and extend such literature by bringing the contributions of feminist development scholars into dialogue with geographers of development to explore how the gendered body (of women workers) is lived within and across local spaces of SDP. In so doing, we hope this approach facilitates new considerations and reflections as to what such everyday embodied experiences might tell us about the gendered power relations within SDP, and development and humanitarianism more broadly.

## **Feminist Geographies of Development**

Feminist geographers have long focused on women's embodied and bodily experiences in social spaces (Johnston & Longhurst, 2010). Much of this work has explored and problematized gendered conceptions of public and private spaces (Armstrong & Squires, 2002; Landes, 1998). An enduring theme within this literature has been women's experiences of risk, fear and safety within different spaces, including the home, outdoors, public parks, workplaces, and urban environments (Valentine, 1989). Feminist sport and leisure scholars too have explored the gendered risks associated with particular sporting and recreational spaces, and women's embodied experiences of fear and risk management (Green & Singleton, 2007; Toffoletti, Thorpe, Pavlidis, Olive, & Moran, 2021).

While space appears in many of the feminist development studies cited in the previous section, it tends to be secondary in the analysis. Yet, since the late 1980s, feminist geographers have increasingly contributed to the field of development studies through their work on gendered subjects and practices. Drawing upon postcolonial and transnational feminisms, feminist geographers of development have offered multiscalar approaches ranging from "the bodily to the globalized spheres, gendered and racialized nationalism, neoliberal globalization, and multiple axes of difference among women and men" (Radcliffe, 2006, p. 527). Some critical feminist geographers are also raising important questions about the processes of "doing development." Of particular relevance here is the work of Lahiri-Dutt (2017) who makes a strong case for rethinking the "normalised presence and civilising agency of (mostly) white western women in the space of development" (p. 327). Similarly, Heron (2007) concludes her study of white, middle-class Canadian women development workers in Africa by stating that:

In the end, our desire for development, while a manifestation of the helping imperative, can be more accurately understood as a profound desire for the self. And it is this, as much as the ways in which we are discursively produced as white middle-class women to understand the sites of development, that shapes our seeing, our negotiations, and our resistance to our positions in relations of power once we are "there." We need to understand this if we want

to become more accountable, and thus, find ourselves a “place of integrity” in this world.

(p. 156)

We concur with many of Heron’s (2007) and Lahiri-Dutt’s (2017) critiques. However, we are concerned that moving toward “mutual understandings of difference” are not necessarily enhanced when we conceive of white Western women – the often less visible (relative to white men) “doers of development” – as a singular, homogenous category. As illustrated in the work of Partis-Jennings (2017, 2019), Read (2018) and others, we should problematize the notion that “international” actors can be seen as a homogenous category. According to Read (2018), such understandings of the lived, gendered nuances and complexities of development work can be enhanced with a focus on embodiment: “insisting on humanitarianism as an embodied practice allows for the differences between those international aid workers to be interrogated, and the implications of the power relations which produce these differences to be questioned” (p. 305).

Rather than assuming Western women development workers’ motivations and assumptions apriori, we argue that feminist SDP scholarship would do well to create space for the bodily and embodied experiences of women working within and across spaces of work and leisure in SDP. Such work could further take inspiration from the work of Smirl (2008, 2015) who brought a feminist approach to examining the spatial dimensions of international humanitarian response. Her scholarship on how various work- and nonwork-related spaces of aid – i.e., cars, compounds, and hotels – shape humanitarianism is exemplary, and highlights the importance of paying attention to the power and politics within and across the spaces and places of Aidland. In this chapter we work at the intersection of feminist geographies of development and embodiment, to explore international women SDP professionals’ gendered experiences of embodiment in public and work spaces in Kabul. In so doing, we get a better understanding of how, for some women, their embodied experiences within and across working and nonworking spaces of development can lead to partial knowledge, heightened reflexivity, critique of the development industry, and deep questioning as to the very identity politics and rethinking of relationships and responsibilities that Lahiri-Dutt (2017) and others have been calling for.

Extending this work, feminist SDP approaches could expand ways of knowing and producing knowledge in the field by paying attention to SDP staff and volunteers’ embodied experiences across spaces and places of work (i.e., indoor and outdoor courts, fields, stadium, climbing walls, skate parks, classrooms), leisure (i.e., social gatherings with fellow workmates, expats, spaces of sport and fitness), and objects of SDP (i.e., basketballs, soccer balls, shoes, skateboards, backpacks, uniforms). With a focus on the geographies of embodiment, we might come to new understandings of how SDP staff and volunteers experience their bodies – as physically active, gendered, sexualized, racialized, even ‘othered’ – within and across indoor and outdoor sporting spaces, mixed or female-only spaces, as well as public spaces (i.e., the streets, cafes, supermarkets) and other spaces where SDP workers may interact with each other and the local communities. More

importantly, how do such experiences prompt SDP workers to respond? Or put differently, do such experiences encourage new questions, insights, and/or actions in their everyday SDP work practices and relations with local staff, students, and community members? In the upcoming sections, we explore such questions with a case study focused on the embodied experiences of the international women staff of Sport for Youth\* (pseudonym).

### **Navigating Bodies Out of Place: The Embodied Experiences of International SDP Women Staff**

To illustrate the potential of feminist geographies and embodiment scholarship for rethinking SDP, in the remainder of this chapter we draw upon semi-structured interviews conducted between early 2015 and mid-2017 with eight international women staff that had spent extended periods of time (at least six months) working in Afghanistan (Thorpe & Chawansky, 2021). As discussed in Chapter Four, the larger project sought to understand the roles, responsibilities, and lived experiences of local and international staff of Sport for Youth, and their experiences of working for an NGO focused on girls' sporting and educational opportunities in the context of Afghanistan.

During the first interview conducted for this project, the international woman staff member reflected on some of the challenges she perceived of being a Western woman in Afghanistan and particularly her embodied experiences in public spaces. This conversation inspired new lines of questioning in subsequent interviews that sought to further explore women's lived experiences of the gendered body within and across public and work spaces of SDP. Importantly, the purpose of this case study is not to offer generalizable statements about all Western women working in Afghanistan, but rather to highlight the potential in an embodied approach for understanding difference as lived and practiced by Western women as the "doers of development" (Lahiri-Dutt, 2017), and more specifically, the "doers" of sport for development. It is also worth noting that the women included herein were initially motivated to work for this particular NGO (with a particular focus on using action sports to empower Afghan girls) because it appeared (from a distance) to align with some of their own feminist values (see Thorpe & Chawansky, 2016, 2017). Thus, parallels could be drawn with other international women workers who approach their SDP work with similar sensibilities.

The eight participants (pseudonyms used throughout) were in their mid to late twenties at the time of interviews, and primarily from Canada, Germany, and the United States. Participants had worked for the organization for an average of 3.5 years. At the time of interviews, some were still working in Afghanistan, but due to the time span of this project, other interviews were conducted when staff had left Afghanistan and were either working for the same NGO at the international office or at other facilities, or had moved onto other work. The further the participants were temporally and physically removed from the organization, the more critical and open the participants seemed to be in speaking about their experiences in Afghanistan. All were highly educated (with undergraduate or

Masters degrees in development, international relations, and/or education) with extensive experience traveling and working overseas, including less developed countries. It is worth noting that one of the participants (Joanne) talked about her Middle Eastern heritage, and how this impacted how her body was read and interpreted in the context of Afghanistan. As is discussed later, while she “could technically pass as Afghan” because of her skin color, her Western identity (and outsider status) was read through other aspects of her bodily deportment (gait, posture, language), which further complicated her positioning in Afghanistan.

Interviews were conducted via Skype with each over an hour in duration. As previously noted, the discussion focused on two key themes: (1) the efforts of the organization to cater to the unique needs of Afghan children and particularly girls, and (2) the personal experiences of the staff working in this high-risk location. The embodied tensions experienced between these two topics emerged as a significant theme. Yet, it should be noted that the embodied experiences of international women workers was not the most significant theme emerging from the data, with some participants focusing more on discussing their programs and day-to-day operations (see Thorpe & Chawansky, 2020).

Nonetheless, each of the participants offered vivid reflections on the struggles and tensions they experienced in public spaces in Kabul, with some commenting on their experiences within and across other spaces including compounds, vehicles, the Sport for Youth facility, their own and others’ homes, mosques, and leisure settings (i.e., cafes, yoga classes, parties). Some of these spaces prompted highly emotive and affective experiences and memories of being in Afghanistan. For example, one of the women recalled her experience of being picked up from the Kabul airport for the first time:

Landing in Kabul was a cocktail of lots of different emotions. On the one hand, I was focused on getting used to my headscarf. I was also very touched by [the two male staff members], that these two strangers who were so caring and supportive. They came and picked me up in this crazy car. The car alone was an experience because they had a little golden vase on the dashboard, and carpet and curtains. It was about to become autumn, there was lots of rubbish around, the city was stinking actually and the smell filled the little car. As we drove through the countryside, it was grey and there was all this dust and barbed wire, and army soldiers everywhere. But it was a crazy mixture of colours, both grey and very colourful. I will always remember that car ride.

Due to the varied significance of these themes (and length restrictions), herein we focus primarily on the women’s experiences within public spaces, with some discussion of the indoor Sport for Youth facilities. Taking our lead from cultural theorists such as Bhabha (1994) and Hall (1990), we adopted an interpretive approach that allowed space for participants to inhabit discontinuous and contradictory subjectivities within and across space.

***The “Embodied Geopolitics” of Western Women in Afghanistan***

To date, a few feminist scholars have explored the corporeal experiences of those (local and international staff) working in development spaces in Afghanistan. Fluri (2011) examined “the embodied geopolitics” in Afghanistan by way of “gender roles and relations” among and between international workers and Afghan recipients of international aid and development (p. 519). In examining the bodily experiences of male and female international staff, alongside those of Afghans implicated and involved in processes of development and aid work, Fluri (2011) offers a critical reading of corporeality based on gender, dress, mobility and sexuality. She explores the body as a contested site that reinforces, challenges, resists and reformulates notions of modernity and tradition following the US invasion of Afghanistan. More recently, Partis-Jennings (2019) draws upon interviews with female international humanitarian actors in Afghanistan to examine their “experiences of performing their gender in hybridized ways” (p. 178). According to Partis-Jennings (2019), postconflict Afghanistan was a very important context in which to explore “how gender threads through the everyday praxis of peacebuilding” (p. 180). Throughout her interviews, many of the foreign women discussed their experiences of difference (as not entirely male or female) containing a “complex uncertainty that was both gendered and racialised”:

The interaction between some concept of “foreign” and some concept of the “female” played out as a site of friction in which “porous boundaries” between different notions of woman were marked by distinctions between foreign and local bodies in terms of differential freedom and access.

(p. 185)

To explain these context-specific experiences of positionality, Partis-Jennings (2019) adapted the concept of “third gender,” which she refers to as “a kind of embodied, performed hybridity.” As she makes clear, such experiences of gender are firmly located within the Afghan context: “perceived gendered expectations of Afghanistan are mixed with the bodies, behaviors and expectations of international women to form something that contains gendered elements of masculinity, femininity, the ‘illiberal’ and the liberal social orders” (p. 183). Partis-Jennings’ (2019) work has many important parallels with the findings of this study.

In the remainder of this chapter we engage in dialogue with feminist literature on embodiment and geographical understandings of development, and the empirical material from the interviews with international women working in Afghanistan. The following discussion consists of three main parts. First, we explain how the women SDP workers experienced their Western bodies in public spaces (particularly streets and markets), including managing eye contact, clothing choices, and responses to various forms of harassment and assault. Second, we offer a brief discussion of the significance of the gendered, moving, sporting body inside and outside of the NGO facilities, and how the Sport for Youth building became a “bubble” for the women in this study. Across these

parts we reveal the various ways these women experienced and managed their Western gendered moving bodies within and across work- and nonwork-related public spaces. Finally, we consider how such experiences of embodiment prompted highly reflexive and, in some cases, critical feminist understandings of SDP work in Afghanistan and beyond.

### **Western Women in the Streets of Kabul**

Writing about the rights of Afghan women during the late 1980s and 1990s, Moghadam (2002) explained that women were largely “banned from participation and decision-making, and from the public space itself” (p. 19). During this time in Afghan history, the majority of women were required to wear a burqa, and largely confined to their homes, denied the right to schooling, and excluded from any form of public decision-making. Writing specifically about Afghan women’s limited access to public space, Moghadam (2002) explained how men continued to control not only their female relatives’ access to public space but also all women’s access to social spaces. She describes the mechanisms of such control as varied, including “familial and household rules and constraints; compulsory veiling; laws that restrict women’s mobility and travel; the appropriation of coffee shops and tea houses by men; and men’s tendency to stare, leer, or touch women” (p. 28). Despite concerns raised among feminist geographers about the public–private distinction, Moghadam (2002) makes a strong case that the concepts of public space and private space “are perhaps nowhere more relevant than in Afghanistan, where women’s access to public space has long been politicized, contested, and denied” (p. 28).

Of course, not all Afghan women accept the patriarchal code and social structures that restrict their social and physical mobilities. Indeed, “the greatest threat to the patriarchal community and the power of men is posed by ‘public women’ – those who work, or go to school, or even walk from one place to another” (Moghadam, 2002, p. 28). Fluri (2011) further explains that women’s limited access to mobility within public spaces has been reinforced through clothing as well as (in some cases) the expectation “to travel with a mahram [unmarriageable kin whom acts as an escort] as an additional layer of protection to her bodily privacy and integrity” (p. 525).

A number of feminist scholars have explored how Afghan women have been excluded from public spaces (Fluri, 2011; Moghadam, 2002), with some offering a counternarrative that focuses on how Afghan women are also strategic in navigating social spaces (Rostami-Povey, 2004). Understandably, less work has explored how Western women working for international NGOs experience such cultural codes and restrictions. This is the focus herein, though the broader context of cultural and gender relations in Afghanistan, and treatment of women in public spaces, are important considerations throughout.

For the participants in this study, over time their organization had come to put in place restrictions on women staff accessing public spaces – always covered and never alone – in efforts to protect their safety amid growing risk management concerns (see Thorpe, 2020b). As Hazel recalled, “It was forbidden for me to walk

alone in public due to a high risk of kidnapping foreign females.” While many of the women struggled with such limitations, most understood and accepted organizational policy on this matter:

There were a lot of questions for me being someone who has always been very independent and outspoken, and is a feminist and all of these things. I really grappled with needing to be escorted everywhere by a male colleague. Yes, I really missed being able to walk somewhere by myself, but at the same time I had no real desire to do that in Afghanistan because I didn't want to deal with what would come as a result of that.

(Sandra)

According to Roth (2011), “risk is overall downplayed” by development and aid workers (p. 151). While this was also the case among our participants, most of the women did discuss their experiences of fear, particularly in public spaces. For example, Anna recalls a situation in which a male colleague was picking her up after a conference, but asked her to meet him at the end of the road: “I felt really, really uncomfortable walking by myself down the street just to meet him”. Another participant describes the challenge of keeping risk in perspective and coping with her fear:

I knew that realistically and statistically speaking, it would be very, very unlikely to be caught in some IED attack or to be kidnapped, but there's just that more reptilian side of your brain that's constantly on alert and stressed. ... I would have these horrific dreams of being kidnapped and really horrible stuff happening. I felt completely exhausted.

(Julie)

While some experienced chronic fear and anxiety throughout their term, others found much excitement in the high-risk environment in which they were working. For example, one participant admitted that while “I was a little bit scared... it also gave me a little kick, this whole masculine energy of war” (Marie). Just as the women's perceptions of, and responses to, risk in Afghanistan differed, so too did their interest in accessing public spaces. Many of the women expressed desire to get out of their work and home facilities, with comments made about occasionally enjoying yoga and salsa at the Embassies, doing action sports in deserted parts of the countryside, playing pool at hotels, visiting cafes, and shopping to buy clothing and shoes. But some admitted to being “quite nervous a lot of the time” (Julie), and thus not seeking out visits to public spaces.

Some participants also made observations that mirror findings from Partis-Jennings (2019) recent work on Western women in Afghanistan. For example, Julie noted that, as a Western woman, she was able to access places that Afghan women could not:

If you're a foreigner, in my experience, you tend to be treated as this kind of third gender where the rules don't really apply to you if you're a female foreigner. You can be in female spaces, *and* you can be in male spaces... There are lots of those kinds of nuances and unwritten rules...

While white women development workers can become “honorary men” in some spaces of development work (Heron, 2007), such positionings are always specific to the cultural and gendered hierarchies within a particular location. As Partis-Jennings (2019) explains, in the context of Afghanistan, “third gender” acts as “a hybrid identification framework in everyday praxis, symptomatic of the liberal peace paradigm in Afghanistan in which ‘international’ and ‘local’ norms interact” (p. 179). As well as offering parallels with Partis-Jennings’ (2019) research, the comments from Julie are also suggestive of the spatial and gendered dimensions of the “liminal subjectivities” (Smirl, 2012) of international women development professionals in Afghanistan. They are always “in-between” and “out of place,” not fitting readily into either male or female Afghan spaces.

It is worth noting that the ability to cross over and navigate male and female spaces was not experienced unanimously by the women. For example, Marie observed that, as a Western woman, she tended to have greater access to culturally defined male spaces than her Afghan women friends and colleagues. This was particularly the case when she accompanied a Western male colleague to meetings or to have tea with Afghan male leaders. However, when she was invited by her Afghan women friends into their homes – into their private, family spaces, such as the kitchen – she was treated as an Afghan woman:

We worked together on the food in the kitchen. Then we got served the left over food that the males did not finish eating... we women just ate what was left over. The bones from the chicken the men had eaten. It was so normal for the ladies of the house; they did not know anything else. I was gobsmacked. I kept silent though, because I wanted to fit in and did not want to embarrass the host.

Such comments reflect Abu-Lughod’s (1998, 2002) important work that examines the ways women build solidarity, coalitions and language of alliances, instead of pursuing narratives of “salvation” or feeling “sorry” for women in the Middle East.

Later in the interview, Marie described other incidents such as men jumping ahead in queues while shopping or waiting for a taxi, “as if it is the most normal thing to do.” She acknowledges that while at the time these seem like “little things,” they “built up and made me feel like shit.” Such examples highlight the space-specific dimensions of Partis-Jennings’ (2019) conceptualizing of “third gender” in Afghanistan, where bodies are read differently in public (i.e., supermarkets, taxi queues) and private (i.e., meetings, Afghan homes) spaces depending on who one accompanies. Furthermore, this highlights some of the

highly affective experiences (i.e., pleasure, fear, sensuality, disgust, shame) that are closely related to women's experiences of embodiment in Afghanistan. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter, we suggest the affective dimensions of women's embodied experiences within and across work- and nonwork-specific spaces of Aidland are deserving of further examination (Partis-Jennings, 2017).

### ***The Gaze and the Female SDP Worker as "Spectacle"***

Another theme that emerged from our analysis was how the women experienced and navigated the "male gaze" in public spaces, particularly in the streets and market places. As Garland-Thomson (2005) writes:

Staring witnesses an intrusive interest on the part of the starrer and thrusts an uneasy attention on the object of the stare. At once transgressive and intimate.... staring is thus a kind of potent social choreography that marks bodies by enacting a dynamic visual exchange between a spectator and a spectacle.

(p. 31)

Recognizing the power in the gaze, feminist scholars have long articulated the normative heterosexual male gaze (e.g., Dolan, 1988), and postcolonial scholars have identified the problematics of the colonializing gaze (e.g., Kaplan, 1997). As foreign women working in Afghanistan, each of our participants felt the presence of the gaze. For example, Joanne explains:

Just driving around town, I definitely got some very, very leery looks... there is a weird feeling of exposure just being a woman in public space in Afghanistan, where you feel very on display in a way that's very sexualized, especially being a foreign woman.

Another participant also acknowledged the constant presence of the gaze, but did not experience it in sexual terms: "The eyes are always there. I felt like I had eyes on me all the time, but for me it wasn't necessarily sexual all the time, it was often very curious" (Tess).

According to Partis-Jennings (2017), the combination of "a perceived patriarchal context" with "security routines... which rely on hypermasculine signifiers" works to "create and perpetuate the conditions in which the female (for both internationals and Afghans) is marked with insecurity" (p. 411). In this context of female insecurity, one of our participants described developing her own gaze as a coping strategy, directing her sight away from hypermasculine symbols of war and toward objects of beauty:

Of course I saw the weapon, but I tried to focus on other things. I think weapons are very powerful things – they draw your attention and they scare you, but that's amplifying the power. Instead, I

tried to focus on the balloon person or the woman who was wearing these amazing shoes on the horrible dirt roads. I was trying to focus on these things as a coping mechanism.

(Marie)

Some of our participants also spoke about navigating eye contact in ways that minimize feelings of being “out of place”: “I try my best not to look at people because I could technically pass as Afghan, but most people can tell that I am not in the way that I dress and comport myself” (Joanne). While some tried to navigate eye contact – directing their gaze down and away from others – in their efforts to “pass” as Afghan, or at least, not to feel so “out of place,” clothing was another important element in how the Western women negotiated their bodies in public spaces.

### *Clothing and Covering*

For Afghan women in public spaces, clothing tends to be loose fitting and with the headscarf (hijab), with some wearing the chadori and burqa. According to Fluri (2011), Afghan dress for women provides “spatial privacy to the body”; “it visually identifies the covered body as a private space that is not for public view (by men outside one’s kinship group)” (p. 523). Continuing, she explains that both international workers and Afghan women in her study wore clothing that primarily covered the body, but “covering the head/hair remained a much more politically charged and contentious issue” (Fluri, 2011, p. 523). Similar to the Western women working in northern Pakistan in Cook’s (2005) study, some of the international women workers in Fluri’s (2011) project were adamant about not wearing a headscarf in order “to preserve their personal identity, autonomy and in many cases to ‘model’ alternative forms of dress” (p. 523). However, choosing not to cover as a way of “setting an example” is idealizing the Western feminine position as normative (Fluri, 2011, p. 523), or worse, culturally superior (Cook, 2005). But as Kabeer (1994) and Parpart (1995, 2009) and colleagues (Parpart, Rai, & Staudt, 2002), remind us, it is important to explore the nuances of resistance, agency, voice, and embodied lived experience in gendered development work.

In contrast to the clothing practices of Western women in research by Cook (2005) and Fluri (2011), all of the women in our project wore the headscarf at all times in public spaces and within their organizational facilities. Some mentioned initial tensions in wearing the headscarf similar to concerns raised by women in previous work (Cook, 2005; Fluri, 2011), but even while acknowledging that it wasn’t part of their cultural identity, most came to respect and even enjoy wearing it. For example, Joanne explained:

Wearing a headscarf is not part of my identity, but it is part of my ancestral culture. Going in wearing the headscarf, it just felt like I was participating and following the etiquette of the society that I

was living in. Initially, I felt impartial to wearing a headscarf, and I then grew to like it. It became a security blanket and I really missed it after that... having something to cover my face with when I was making uncomfortable eye contact or things like that.

Embracing the headscarf as a “security blanket” to avoid the male gaze and uncomfortable eye contact was similar to some of the international women in previous studies that also identified the headscarf as “a necessary form of dress in order to avoid stares or verbal harassment in public space” (Cook, 2005; Fluri, 2011, p. 523).

Many of the participants in our project purchased Afghan clothing for themselves shortly upon arrival. For example, Marie recalls: “I bought my clothes in Kabul, so in that way I was also feeling more local.” Continuing, however, she notes that despite such efforts, she could never disguise herself as an Afghan woman (despite wanting to at times) because bodies are carefully read for all signs and symbols of identity, belonging, and difference. Despite such efforts, Marie knew that others “could notice I was foreign by the way I walk, because my steps had more energy than an Afghan woman, like more certainty.”

Other culturally specific corporeal subtleties were observed, with some modifying adornment practices. For example, some opted to wear wedding rings: “On my first day we went shopping for Afghan clothes and a wedding ring. I often pretended to be married to save a lot of hassle” (Anna). Another removed her glasses to avoid particular readings of her body: “I didn’t wear my glasses in public. There was this tendency that women with glasses appeared to be western and slutty” (Ruby). In these small examples of the corporeal awareness and decisions being made by the women, we see how much cultural knowledge is obtained in and through the body, and how the women sought to navigate cultural body codes with some levels of cultural sensitivity both out of respect for the society in which they were living and working, but also to minimize risk to their own personal safety.

In sum, clothing is an “embodied set of cultural codes,” and thus “a vital part of performing subjectivity and enacting power” (Cook, 2005, p. 357). In contrast to the Western women in research by Cook (2005) and Fluri (2011), however, the participants in this study are not “forg[ing] ambivalent and conflicted subjectivities in relation to indigenous Muslim women as they perpetuate and resist accepted logocentric imperial thinking” (p. 366). Rather, they are giving careful consideration to their clothing choices and trying to find ways to embody cultural norms and values in respectful ways. In discussing their clothing practices, there were no comments that suggested the assumed superiority of Western clothing. Arguably, this example highlights differences from the Western women workers in previous research, particularly regarding their relational positioning to Afghan women. This case also highlights the need to critically examine how underlying relations of neocolonial power impact SGD programs. Such analyses are imperative for uncovering how notions of “salvation” and “solidarity” influence and are embedded (and embodied) in Global North/South relations.

***Assault and Bodies “out of Place”***

As a growing body of industry reports demonstrate, women working in development and aid contexts experience high levels of physical and sexual abuse both inside and outside of their organizations (Costello, 2018; Norbert, 2017; Spencer, 2018). Despite a number of reports documenting the prevalence of sexual harassment in Aidland, few studies (if any) have focused on women’s embodied experiences of such events within particular spaces, or how they respond and make meaning of such incidents in specific cultural, work- and nonwork-related contexts.

For the women in this study, the streets were a place that held particularly high risk, with all of the women experiencing versions of sexual assault:

There were a few occasions where I was in a market and wasn’t close enough to a male colleague and I was groped. ... Things of that nature felt very unsettling and felt violating and aggressive.

(Ruby)

One time a man intentionally bumped into me in the marketplace and grabbed my bottom. The [Afghan] male colleague I was with handled it in a very Afghan way where he very discreetly picked up a knife from the local butcher and very calmly whisper threatened him. Then a crowd started to form and we walked away as quickly as we could.

(Joanne)

Some of the initial volunteers recalled a number of incidents in which they were given a clear message (i.e., tomatoes being thrown, grabbing) that they did not belong in particular male-defined public spaces:

This is the general feeling I had over the whole time I was there, even when going to the small cities outside of Kabul. But I was grabbed two times. One time I had tomatoes thrown at me while [skating] on the street. I was with a couple of kids and [a male staff member] from Australia, but he looked a little bit Afghan. There was a couple of times for example when I used to go to buzkashi, which is a horse riding game, and also a football match. Also I went to a holiday spot and there was grabbed on my arse. One guy came to me, grabbed me around the waist, everybody was laughing and I was like what do we do now. I ran behind them once and wanted to hit them and they got super scared.

(Hazel)

Through such experiences, it became clear that actively participating in sporting activities (i.e., doing action sports outdoors) and attending sporting events were not appropriate for Afghan or foreign women alike. It is worth noting that the examples offered by Hazel were not common across our interviewees. As one of the first international volunteers working for Sport for Youth, Hazel recalled initially enjoying the adventure of living and working in Afghanistan and embracing opportunities to do action sports and enjoy other social activities (i.e., buzkashi, football) in public outdoor spaces. However, such opportunities were not available to other women staff that joined the NGO later, when more risk avoidance strategies were put in place. In this way, some of the early women staff of Sport for Youth learned the unspoken cultural and gender rules through trial and error in outdoor public spaces, with this knowledge subsequently shaping formal and informal organizational policy.

In their responses to incidents of assault in public spaces, each of the women took into consideration their own cultural assumptions and embraced local recommendations as how best to act:

I had my ass grabbed several times. We were advised to get angry and shout swear words in Dari. This was the best response for me. It worked and the men laughed but ran away. There was no such system as going to the police.

(Marie)

The understanding that there is “no such system” for reporting (both with the authorities and within their organizations) is a common reason women aid and development workers give for not reporting sexual assault (Humanitarian Women’s Network, 2015). Other participants explained some of the cultural negotiations and considerations that they went through following an assault, and in preparing for the next:

At the time, I felt it was important to behave as much as possible as the Afghan females around me. To not make a fuss and to not be different, because of security issues. I did not want to get any attention on me, and just wanted to be safe and not noticed.

(Tess)

What I tried to do was not react like I might in the western world. I also tried to not judge myself in that moment as a western person because, of course, I have those rules in my head. I come from a western society where women, most of the time, are nearly treated equally as the men. I tried not to judge myself on my feminist values from the western world because everything is very different in Kabul.

(Marie)

In such comments, we see parallels with the work of Fluri (2011) where she reveals there are “territorial and corporeal tensions between ‘universal’ discourses of human rights and ‘Western’ embodiments of sexual harassment and violence” (p. 531). Continuing, she explains that such tensions illustrate “the fissures and fractures of these ‘universal’ paradigms that at one geopolitical scale attempt to project moral superiority while at the scale of human interaction often counter these assumed moralities” (Fluri, 2011, p. 532). For our participants, experiences of sexual harassment prompted some highly reflexive (re)considerations of their own positioning in Afghanistan as Western development workers, as well as raising questions about their own understandings of women’s rights that are not universal but rather located within specific sociocultural geographies.

Importantly, some of our participants took care to make disclaimers surrounding their experiences of sexual assault in public spaces. One woman explained that, while some Afghan men might grab women in public spaces as a way of reinforcing that they are “out of place,” most of the Afghan men that she worked with treated her with “respect and empathy”: “Most of the Afghan men I encountered were very kind, respectful and supportive to me” (Marie). Herein, we see participants refusing to accept the “pathologised image of the Afghan man” as a dangerous misogynist that has come to dominate the mainstream Western imaginary (Manchanda, 2015, p. 130). Another of our participants commented: “From my observations, these situations happen to Afghan women more often, or just as often, as to western women. Some of my Afghan female friends never left the house without an umbrella to hit potential gropers” (Ruby). This comment reflects a common theme of the Western women recognizing the agency of Afghan women, and learning from their strategies to safely access and negotiate public spaces. Some were also careful not to consider such offences out of context, or to reinforce problematic binaries of the “west” treating women well, and Afghanistan treating women poorly: “Of course it was uncomfortable [getting grabbed], but it happens here too [in Europe]. I had my butt grabbed on a train here [European city] recently” (Anna). Although subtle, in such comments we see participants resisting problematic “war on terror” narratives that positioned Afghan women as needing saving, and the West as the most suitable savior because of their enlightened gender relations (Kandiyoti, 2007a, 2007b; Wibben, 2016).

As reported in various feminist accounts of the abuses women experience in Aidland, many professional women development and aid workers (learn to) accept sexual assault as part of their work in high-risk or developing contexts. While such discussions have not been on the agenda in SDP, this was certainly the case among our participants, with one woman noting quite matter-of-factly: “I’m lucky I did not get raped or kidnapped, only groped, ignored and insulted for being a woman.” It is common in the development and aid sector for such experiences to be normalized by both men and women within NGOs. One of our participants expressed her concerns to a senior Western woman colleague after her first experience of being physically accosted in a market, only to have the woman laugh and tell her to “get used to it” (Hazel). Another commented: “With the western women I talked about this with, the attitude was, ‘stop making a fuss

and get on with it. There is nothing you can do anyway and there are much more important things to get on with” (Sandra).

This rationale is common in the sector where the “real work” (e.g., reducing poverty, educating children, empowering women) is much more important than individualized assaults on women’s bodies. Others sought advice from their Afghan friends and colleagues, many of whom adopted practical responses: “With the older Afghan women who I spoke with about this, they had the attitude that nothing can be done, so just get on with it. We need to survive! Cook food or take care of the kids” (Marie). Each of our participants had experienced some type of sexual harassment while in the streets, but all were highly resistant to painting a picture of victimhood in the context of Afghanistan. Their experiences were always understood as relational to those of their Afghan female colleagues and friends (“these situations happen to Afghan women more often,” Ruby), other countries that they had traveled to (“Afghanistan wasn’t nearly as bad as I thought it was going to be, I found Egypt so much worse in terms of men harassing me on the street,” Sandra), as well as their “home” countries (“It happens here too,” Anna). The volunteers and staff “resistance to painting victimhood” in the context of Afghanistan was both a point of (informal) discussion among Sport for Youth staff, as well as something that was experientially learned during their time in Afghanistan.

### **Indoor Sporting Facilities as the “Bubble”**

Working in Afghanistan is demanding for both male and female staff, but the social constraints upon women staff (i.e., always accompanied by a male when outside the program facilities, unable to drive) meant that their local mobilities and social interactions were particularly constrained. According to some of our interviewees, the difficulties they experienced when leaving the Sport for Youth facilities and entering public spaces also meant they chose to do so very rarely. Yet, social isolation and lack of “work–life balance” took its toll during their longer placements:

The first couple of years I worked at [Sport for Youth], we worked six days a week. We would mostly hang out with each other. Firstly because you live and work with the same people, and secondly because we probably had the most in common out of anyone else that was there. It was a default. We do more than other [ex-pats]... [We’d] still go shopping and do stuff, but you’re just working, basically. It’s kind of strange. It’s definitely not normal.

(Julie)

Whereas some of the women embraced opportunities to leave work and home spaces and to interact with Afghan locals and expats in public and social environments, others withdrew from public spaces as a result of fears and concerns for their safety.

To date, much of the research in Aidland studies (and similarly the limited research on SDP staff experiences) has focused on the interactions and experiences within work-specific spaces. In so doing, researchers have revealed a common theme of workers often referring to their organizations, and the aid community more broadly, as a “bubble” or “cocoon” (see Mosse, 2011). Some of our participants made similar comments (“it’s like a mini paradise inside”). The women described the uniqueness of the Sport for Youth facility, which offered an “oasis” from the physical and cultural “stresses” they experienced outside the facility and in public spaces, and opportunities for them to express themselves through familiar and enjoyable movement experiences:

When you’re in Afghanistan everything is hectic and messy. You’re also kind of constantly worried, well not worried, but aware of your surroundings and not trying to offend anyone or do anything that’s breaking a social custom that you don’t even know about. Inside [Sport for Youth], it’s like a mini paradise in Afghanistan – kids and girls can run around. There’s this massive space, it’s a space where kids can play. Everyone is still dressing and acting appropriately by Afghanistan standards, but the space feels so much more free and so much more safe than anywhere else in the country.

(Hazel)

Research on urban-based action sports has shown that in many Western countries, the gender relations between participants are unique in that they navigate access and share the same built (i.e., purposefully built parks) and found (i.e., streets) environments (i.e., Abulhawa, 2020; Atencio, Beal, & Wilson, 2009; Bäckström, 2013). Furthermore, research has shown that urban-based action sport participants develop unique relationships with the built environment through their creative readings of urban spaces (Borden, 2019; Glenney & Mull, 2018). For the women in our study, all of whom were active action sport participants, the context of Afghanistan radically limited their engagements with outdoor public spaces as opportunities for creative and expressive physical movement. However, inside the Sport for Youth facility, at particular times of the day, they were free to participate in action sports and to enjoy their physically active bodies as strong, powerful, fast and dynamic. Thus, moving together with other action sport participants, sharing the purposefully built indoor features with momentum, creativity, and joy felt particularly liberating in this context.

While the Sport for Youth facility may offer an escape (for both staff and participants) from the “hectic and messy” world outside the organization, “dressing and acting appropriately by Afghanistan standards” means that the facility was also a highly gendered space, which had implications for the relationships that were accessible to international female staff. Hazel acknowledged there is “a social divide between men and women,” such that the male staff (international and local) tended to become very close, as did the women staff (international and local), but interactions across the sexes was limited in their

working, sporting, and social lives. Whereas the women staff were all active action sport participants themselves and enjoyed moving their bodies actively within the Sport for Youth premises, they rarely shared the action sport experience with their male peers. This was quite different to their home countries where urban action sports are often activities involving different genders sharing the same spaces. As a result of the gendered arrangements of the work and leisure spaces in Afghanistan, Hazel reports that the “relationships with the female staff are quite tight; we’re really good friends” who have become very good at “supporting each other.”

Despite the sense of safety and freedom offered by the Sport for Youth facility, some women spoke of the importance of trying to engage in social interactions outside the Sport for Youth “bubble.” For Joanne, interactions with people outside of aid or development work was important for “keeping perspective” and:

To know where work fits into your life, and to then also keep your head on straight and not get a big head about the work. You see this a lot I think with the expat community... where people think they’re pretty important, pretty special, doing something so magnificent. And they are... but so are a lot of the local people. I think it’s important to find ways to keep perspective even when you’re moving all around and doing something pretty different to what most people are doing.

Whereas Joanne spoke of the value she placed on her almost daily Skype conversations with family or friends to help her “keep perspective,” Hazel described her efforts to meet others working in Afghanistan:

I don’t know how many months I spent in Afghanistan, probably 30 or something, and over time, we’ve had staff change all the time so that’s been interesting but it’s important to try and meet people outside work because otherwise you totally can drive each other crazy. Occasionally we hang out with other expats that work for NGOs or for the UN or embassies. Sometimes there’s barbecues or parties and you meet people, but mostly you’re hanging out with each other.

Continuing, however, Hazel acknowledges the difficulties of social interactions outside of their workplace due to “big security regulations”: “a lot of people couldn’t come to our house because it wasn’t secure enough by UN standards or embassy standards.” Another noted that the gender relations in some expat leisure spaces were highly problematic, with “middle aged western contractors... drunk at embassy parties,” whom she described as “sexually much more inappropriate than any Afghan male!” Here we see how the work–life balance, across public and private spaces, is particularly difficult for international female staff with social

needs and expectations developed from their Western upbringing, but with gendered risks across social spaces. In Afghanistan, they were limited in their potential for social interactions with men in public spaces, within the organization and Aidland more broadly. But, individually and collectively, they found ways to navigate these cultural and gendered power relations as they moved across these spaces, each with different social rules, regulations, and risks.

## **Embodied Tensions and Reflexivity within and Across Spaces of SDP**

In this chapter we have explored the embodied experiences of a small group of international women working in SDP. Using the case study of Sport for Youth, we revealed that during their work, Western women traverse a number of different spaces, and their embodied experiences are not isolated to organizational facilities or those that might typically be considered the spaces of “Aidland.” The case study highlights the significance of embodied experiences both inside and outside of organizational facilities – i.e., the streets of Kabul – for how Western women come to (partially) know the places, people, and culture in which they are working.

As Lahiri-Dutt (2017) argues, feminist critical geographers of development need to “expand the space in which we can explore the politics of identity in developmental work” because it is only “once we are able to recognise ourselves in the complex mosaic of identities’ that we will be able to ‘build coalitions based on mutual understandings of difference” (p. 327). In their calls for researchers and development professionals to develop more self-reflexive practices and rethink “western feminist visions” underpinning their work, many feminist development scholars have recommended drawing upon theory (e.g., postcolonial theory, see Cook, 2005; Cornwall, 2007) or theoretical concepts (i.e., relationality, de Jong, 2017; politics of accountability, Heron, 2007; intersectionality, Lahiri-Dutt, 2017) to facilitate greater reflexivity. While much less guidance is provided to practitioners seeking to unpack the gendered, cultural, and racial assumptions underpinning their everyday work, reflexivity is widely held up as a central tenet to doing “good” feminist development work. Yet feminist scholars working outside of development have raised questions as to how to develop reflexivity, particularly regarding those hard-to-reach “blind spots” (e.g., ethnicity, privilege) in our identities. For some, the body is an important site for facilitating heightened reflexivity (e.g., Metcalfe, 2008; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000; Thorpe, 2009). As our research reveals, for many international women development professionals, the body is an important source of (partial) knowledge and learning, and in some cases, corporeal experiences prompt the types of reflexivity that critical feminist geographers are advocating.

Through their embodied, affective, and sensual experiences within and across work and public spaces in Afghanistan, some of the women in our study came to question assumptions about the intersections of their classed, gendered, sexual, and racial bodies, and their positions of both privilege and liminality within

Afghanistan, and SDP and Aidland more broadly. The following comment is illustrative of the reflexive lines of questioning that were prompted by the embodied tensions experienced within and across spaces:

There are some very interesting gendered experiences. These raised a lot of questions for me that don't just apply to Afghanistan, but just how I conduct myself in the world in general, respecting different ways of doing things and different cultures, and what is inherently moral and what's culturally moral, and things like that.  
(Hazel)

Herein, we see elements of the broader feminist debates focused on "women's rights as universal human rights" versus "feminism-as-imperialism" that the so-called "war on terror" evoked (Kandijoti, 2004, p. 135). In such comments, we also see signs of reflection and concerns about being "white women saving brown women from brown men" (Abu-Lughod, 1998, p. 14; Spivak, 1994). For some of the women, their embodied experiences and observations during their work in Afghanistan prompted questions similar to those raised by Zehfuss (2008) when she asked us to consider: "who do we think we are that we want to change the world?" (p. 612; also see Abu-Lughod, 1998, 2002; de Jong, 2017; Heron, 2007).

Postcolonial feminist approaches "demand that we are able to see, responsibly and respectfully, from another's point of view," while recognizing the power inequalities that produce such differences, and a recognition that such knowledge will always be partial and situated (McEwan, 2001, p. 105). For some of the women in this study, their embodied experiences within and across spaces in Afghanistan (and subsequent conversations with their Afghan female colleagues and friends) offered glimpses into some of the everyday pleasures, struggles and strategies of Afghan women. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, such partial knowledge is an important step toward more ethical encounters with "the Other" (de Jong, 2017; Narayan and Harding, 2000). As the comment below suggests, this partial knowledge prompted some to engage in questions about their own privilege, their difference and relationality to the Afghan women they were working with and for, as well as critical introspection as to their role in a highly problematic development industry:

Sometimes I feel I should just go home and not come back, because it's like, what right do we have as a western society to go and tell them how to live their lives? It doesn't matter where I come from, what right do I have as a woman to show them what I like, or what I think is a better life?  
(Marie)

For some, such embodied experiences and partial knowledge prompted critical reflection on their role and responsibility in (re)producing gender change in Afghanistan, and development work more broadly. For a few of the participants in this study, such reflections prompted them to leave Afghanistan and this line of

work entirely, while others drew upon such experiences and critical ponderings to rethink their relationships and practices in development work in Afghanistan, as well as upon returning “home.”

Of course, as Boler (1997), de Jong (2009), and others have cautioned, empathy, reflexivity, and acknowledgment of complicity in the global power relations of development and humanitarianism are not a panacea. For Boler (1997), “passive empathy” – a combination of pity, sympathy, compassion, and fear for oneself – “produces no action towards justice but situates the powerful western eye/I as the judging subject, never called upon to cast her gaze at her own reflection” (p. 259). While the embodied experiences of the women in our study did prompt the turning of the gaze back toward themselves and their problematic positioning in SDP work, it is unlikely that such practices of reflexivity will remedy the structural power inequalities that underpin Aidland. Yet, for many of the women in this project, embodied ways of knowing did inform their efforts to “find ways to operate productively and responsibly within unequal power relations” (de Jong, 2009, p. 399), and to move toward more ethical encounters with ‘the Other.’ In describing their embodied encounters within and across spaces, the Western women often looked to their Afghan female colleagues for advice and guidance, recognizing and respecting their knowledge and expertise, and thus fostering a mutual accountability.

## **Final Thoughts**

In sum, we concur with de Jong (2009) who calls for more research that “trace[s] empirical examples of the ways people stumble along the ethical route towards reflexivity and constructive complicity, while remaining attentive to the ways structural constraints are negotiated” (p. 400). Furthermore, creating space for women’s mundane, everyday embodied experiences in local contexts and across work- and nonwork-specific spaces can provide valuable insight into understandings of difference and relationality in SDP. It also illuminates how power “threads through the everyday praxis” of SDP work in implicit, explicit, tacit, and embodied ways (Partis-Jennings, 2019, p. 180). Ultimately, we hope this chapter highlights some of the many productive synergies between feminist geographies of development and embodiment for offering a window into the complex global and local operations of power that press upon women’s bodies in SDP, and how their corporeal experiences may lead to alternative ways of knowing and doing development.