Kara Ellerby
No Shortcut to Change: An Unlikely Path to a More Gender-Equitable World
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Reviewed by Ashley J. Bohrer, 2020

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No Shortcut to Change asks the pressing question: why are we still so far from gender equality, even after state and intergovernmental attention for almost four decades? A central part of the answer, Kara Ellerby explains, is that the current discourse around gender equality is fundamentally flawed. In many state and interstate contexts, discourses of "gender equality" have become conflated with "women's inclusion." This slippage is predicated on the idea that global gender equality represents nothing more than an "add women and stir" mentality that safeguards the structure of patriarchal power from any further scrutiny once some women are allowed to enter it.

The book traces the effects of conflating "women" with "gender" on a series of policies that have framed state and intergovernmental approaches in the last half century: quotas to increase women's participation in electoral and appointed government positions; the removal of economic barriers to employment, inheritance, and property ownership; the adoption of policies and laws that specifically prohibit domestic violence, sexual harassment, and violence against women. Although Ellerby does find merit in the project of increasing women's inclusion in powerful governance institutions, she exposes, through both quantitative data and an analysis of state, NGO, World Bank, and United Nations-produced position papers, the limitation of inclusion as

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the sole mechanism for achieving gender equality. Policies of these institutions have not translated into a more equal world between men and women partially because the resulting programs suffer from poor implementation, even if they are legislated. Moreover, since it is impossible to legislate informal beliefs and assumptions, women's power and authority tends to be significantly circumscribed in these institutions. Perhaps most important and most overlooked by these institutions is that treating gender as a simple variable has deeper consequences: in many cases, "gender is a technocratic 'shortcut' to acknowledging women's subordination without deeply interrogating its structural causes" (18). Without interrogating these causes, many of the widely adopted women's inclusion techniques further entrench essentialized and binary understandings of gender, which, as feminist and queer theorists have argued for decades, themselves form a central component of the violence of gendering. In other words, Ellerby exposes how many institutional attempts to challenge at least some aspects of normative gendering end up, perhaps despite themselves, reinforcing the very logic they seek to contend.

In order to work toward gender equality (not just women's inclusion) in a substantive way, Ellerby suggests that these organizations need to focus on "analytical gender," which she defines as "a tool that seeks to *politicize, historicize, and de-essentialize* the subjugation of women and other marginalized groups" (10). She explains that by not using an analytical gender framework, women's inclusion programs actually reinforce gender binaries and roles. In development discourses, for example, increasing women's access to property, inheritance, credit, and work is emphasized because women are seen to be naturally more community-oriented, more focused on child welfare, and so on; they are constructed as "good investments" precisely because of essentializing narratives about what women are and what they do (chapter 5). This is also true in

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governance sex-quota systems, which are often defended on the basis that women are less liable to be corrupt than men (chapter 4). In each of these cases, the failure to profoundly interrogate *gender* as a historical structure deeply invested with power obscures the harm in relying on gendered expectations to advance (some) women's inclusion. It also, as Ellerby constantly reminds the reader, leaves questions of masculinity completely off the table for interrogation or as sites of potential transformation. It systematically erases trans and nonbinary people, as well as the many nonbinary gender systems around the world.

In one sense, the book dramatizes effectively the necessity for feminist activists and theorists to grapple with the appropriation or effects of our work once it enters the hands of governments and intergovernmental organizations. In this sense, Ellerby's book is in the tradition of research and scholarship on co-optation of feminism by the state (for example, Puar 2007; Fraser 2009; Farris 2017), adding to a discourse that usually focuses specifically on states and analysis of the specific policies of intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations, the World Bank, and others. One of the effects of rising feminist consciousness coupled with formidable feminist movements has been the increased inclusion of gender-based discourses in the halls of power, but often in ways at odds with grassroots intentions or offered solutions. It is in this sense that feminism has been "co-opted" in ways that "actually re-enforce gender differences and gendered, neoliberal world order" (17). Ellerby dramatizes with nuance how the tensions between liberal and more radical accounts of patriarchy are also conserved inside these policies, even if liberal politics fared better in the neoliberal world order (67).

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Ellerby remains pessimistic about stemming this tide; it seems to her that cooptation may be just an ineliminable feature of social-justice work. I cannot help but wonder if perhaps this position silently or subtly frames cooptation even as a problem to be grateful for—if our movements and discourses have risen to the level of appropriation by state and international power, this might, in the end, be the best we can hope for. Or, at least, it might be the only alternative to fringe irrelevance or backlash. Ellerby's text does not touch this question, but for those of us who work in social movements and who think of our feminist work as specifically aimed at challenging institutions of power, she does present a striking and cautionary tale that demands greater and deeper engagement around the *impact* of our work beyond our *intentions.* This raises the very question of what we are fighting and *where* we are fighting it.

For Ellerby's part, she has a very clear answer to what she believes produces gender inequality: *kyriarchy*. She uses the term, originally coined by feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Fiorenza 1993), to name "the sexist, racist, heterosexist, and imperialist system(s) of subordination" (6) that organize power in the contemporary world. The concept of kyriarchy is nobly motivated: in light of intersectional critique and so many modes of overlapping, mutually constituted power and domination, reliance on a more traditional vocabulary (patriarchy, racism, capitalism, colonialism, and so on) perpetuates the illusion that these systems are separate and separable, that we can think about oppression from a single-axis mindset. In this sense, the term *kyriarchy* intends to dramatize the reality of an intersectionally constituted, global system of domination in which race, gender, class, sexuality, and other factors play pivotal roles. Ellerby specifically highlights how race, class, and nation are central to the "add women and stir" approaches she critiques in the book.

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I wonder though, if kyriarchy itself is not its own shortcut. There is a crucial difference between positing that such a system exists and doing the hard work of mapping how, when, and why systems of power interact, intersect, reinforce, and reconstitute one another—and when, where, and why they do not. By naming the structure we live in a *kyriarchy* without a systematic explanation of how oppression and exploitation come together to form such a system, the term itself operates as a placeholder or shortcut to name without deeply analyzing the constitution of such a system.

For example, to return to Ellerby's definition of kyriarchy noted above—"the sexist, racist, heterosexist, and imperialist system(s) of subordination" (6)— a central ambivalence marked by the use of the term "system(s)" bears greater unpacking. In light of decades of debate around intersectionality, double/triple/multiple-jeopardy approaches, and single/dual/multiple-systems theory inside feminist theory, it is plain that a clear and nuanced discussion of how power is structured has deep and far-ranging consequences—even when all parties to these debates agree that gender, race, class, and sexuality in some way or another are deeply important. In the case of Ellerby's argument, some of the deepest and potentially most helpful questions about the systematic relationship between these factors remain unaddressed, floating beneath the quick and easy assertion that kyriarchy exists: Are the named axes of domination part of one coherent system or are they multiple system*s* that come together at particular junctures? How have "add women and stir" policies affected *how* race, class, nation, and imperialism *work* in the large sense (rather than simply note, as Ellerby does, how these policies have differential impact on

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people marginalized through those axes)? Are there ways in which the reduction of "gender" to "women" is itself part of a racial, capitalist, and imperial *project*?

The term *kyriarchy* comes from the Greek *kyrios* (master) and *archos* (to govern). In essence, the term marks the power of the powerful and is, in this sense, a kind of tautology. Although we are not beholden to etymology, in this as in many cases, the conditions of a term's genesis often reveal important aspects of its content. In the case of *kyriarchy*, the term discloses the differential power (or lack thereof) in the global system, but this naming, outside of a clear and nuanced analysis of how and why that power is constituted, functions as a bypass for this critical work.

As intersectionality (or at least some versions of it) becomes a more and more mainstream position within feminist theory and activism, its radical content and the depth of its analysis has often been overlooked (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Bilge 2013; Hancock 2016). Rather than mobilizing intersectional ideas in their complexity, the discourse is often reduced to a question of "'which women' are helped and hurt" by various policy efforts (16). Of course differential impact must be a part of an intersectional understanding of the world, but the intersectional imperative is not exhausted by data tables and regression analysis. Ellerby recognizes this, arguing that part of what a critical analysis of gender equality would do is interrogate (and, ostensibly, transform) "the dynamics of masculinities and femininities" (173) such that real gender equality would be possible. However, despite repeated pronouncements that gender cannot be separated from other systems, this logic seems constantly reinforced in her analysis.

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Take, for example, her analysis of violence against women (VAW). Many states and intergovernmental organizations have, in recent decades, recognized VAW as an epidemic and have implemented a variety of policies purported to end it; as she explains, these reforms have been largely ineffective. In searching for an explanation, she argues, "the 'problem' with violence against women policies and practices" is that they fail to understand "how gender remains a central explanation for this epidemic" (162); she argues that if we began talking rather of "male-perpetrated violence" (173) or "masculinized violence" (174), we would be able to ask the real question underlying violence against women, which is: how to "focus . . . on stopping men from being so violent in the first place" (173). Certainly, promising avenues of research can stem from critical interrogations of hegemonic masculinity in relationship to violence. But if we were to answer this question in an intersectional way—to truly consider the "kyriarchical" structure of the world that Ellerby suggests we live in—we would need to understand differential constructions of masculinity and how structures of age, racialization, imperialism, religion, and sexuality play into these concepts. Whose experience of masculinity is assumed to be the default or the standard in understanding the causes of violence? How are racist and imperial ideas about the status of violence against women used and deployed in capitalist and neo-imperial wars of accumulation or in the concretion of white supremacy (Roberts 1998; Smith 2006; 2015; Farris 2017)? Because kyriarchy names only the thinnest assertion that gender, race, nation, and other factors work together, the explanations offered in its name all too often slide right back into considering gender as a single, homogeneous factor that fails to actually integrate intersectional insights.

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As Ellerby argues, "gender, as a shortcut, became a way to acknowledge power without talking about the production of power" (6), but it may be just as true that kyriarchy as a shortcut has become a way to acknowledge the intersectional distribution of power without talking about the re/production of power.

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