Introduction: Gender, Media, and Developmentalism

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The moving image archive of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) includes a copy of the film *The Double Day* (1975), cataloged in the series *Moving Images Relating to International Development Programs and Activities, 1979–1991*, a collection of more than eight hundred titles "created to provide information on assistance programs supported by the Agency for International Development (AID)."[1] Yet, *The Double Day* does not, in fact, directly depict or engage with any specific development or aid initiative. Instead, the film—directed by US-based Brazilian filmmaker Helena Solberg as part of the International Women's Film Project collective and described as "the first Latin American feminist documentary"—examines the gendered dynamics of paid and unpaid labor through the testimonies of women from Argentina, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Mexico. Its presence in the USAID archive is likely a consequence of its funding history, having received support from the Inter-American Foundation, a USAID-affiliated entity; the development agencies of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden; the United Nations Development Program; and US philanthropist Calvin Cafritz.[2]

These transnational funding structures not only enabled the film's production but also determined its archival destination, which renders legible its place within the history of international development. *The Double Day*'s institutional trajectory reflects the shifting configurations of aid, gender, and media during a historic moment when women were being repositioned at the center of what Arturo Escobar has described as development's "regimes of visuality."[3] Especially relevant to *The Double Day*'s production and exhibition was the

international institutional framework of Women in Development (WID). Emerging in the early 1970s and culminating in United Nations' proclamation of 1975 as International Women's Year, WID emphasized women's participation in the global economy as both an index and mechanism of development. Indeed, *The Double Day* premiered at the World Conference of the International Women's Year, held in Mexico City.[4] Within this context, the film forms part of a broader trajectory of media use by international organizations that intensified during the 1970s—as best exemplified by *Media Habitat*, a collection of 236 documentary films commissioned by the United Nations to represent urban and rural development initiatives for the 1976 Habitat Conference on Human Settlements in Vancouver. As a policy-shaping initiative, Media Habitat primarily featured films from the Global South intended not only to illustrate but also to help codify standardized audiovisual markers of "underdevelopment" that determined access to the emerging global economic order and to international aid.[5]

Framed in relation to these international institutions and their operations, *The Double Day* could similarly be considered "development media"—exemplifying the type of nonfiction media produced and distributed outside of the commercial film circuits whose aspects and subcategories have been variously described in scholarship as nontheatrical, useful, sponsored, institutional, industrial, educational, or nonprofessional/amateur.[6] Scholars working in this area have emphasized the institutional contexts of such media's production and exhibition infrastructures as shaping its instrumentalized effects. From a feminist perspective, such an approach is crucial to grappling with the broader question of how "gender impacts [these works'] shape, content, and trajectories."[7] Yet we also argue that, taken in isolation, the institutional and infrastructural contexts are insufficient to account for the complex relationship between media and development, potentially not only limiting our understanding of the reach and impact of

development but also distorting our interpretive conclusions. For example, to categorize *The Double Day* as "development media" is to overlook the film's place within Solberg's directorial oeuvre, as well as within the histories of both transnational women's filmmaking and radical Latin American documentary cinema to which it simultaneously belongs. Such exclusive framing is especially limiting given that women globally were disproportionately engaged in nonfiction production throughout the twentieth century—sometimes by political choice but more often due to structural exclusions from fiction filmmaking. Even in nonfiction historiography, however, institutional media has remained particularly marginal, reinforcing hierarchies that separate such works from the aesthetic and authorial frameworks through which film history has been constructed.[8] This marginalization not only tends to erase women's contributions but also presumes a "weak" or derivative authorship, rendering these films unworthy of the interpretive attention needed to apprehend their aesthetic and political complexity.[9] The same dynamic is likely to structure assumptions about "development media" as well.

Categorizing *The Double Day* exclusively within this category would further prompt us to assume top-down institutional analyses that have been characteristic of both institutional media methodologies and the scholarship on development at large. This, in turn, would risk obscuring this film's radical Marxist approach to women's labor as well as its concrete contribution to activism and its attendant grassroot structures. In Mexico City, *The Double Day* became a catalyst for feminist solidarity in practice when one of the film's protagonists, Bolivian activist and trade unionist Domitila Barrios de Chungara, was invited to participate in the Tribune of Non-Governmental Organizations held alongside the official UN conference.[10] There, Barrios de Chungara challenged Western feminist priorities by reframing the debate around labor, class, and imperialism, helping to articulate a shared Third World feminist agenda that

significantly departed from the developmentalist vision of the United Nations and USAID.[11] Seen through the lens of activist media, *The Double Day* helped forge transnational solidarity networks by enabling information exchange across the diverse voices that shaped its making—from the women featured in the film to the activists who circulated it—revealing a considerably more dynamic interplay between institutional and grassroots or contingent media practices.

Moreover, the film's Latin American context—reflected in Solberg's formation in Brazil as the only woman in Cinema Novo, its focus on women from across the region, and its premiere and key reception in Mexico City—requires grappling with the regional specificities of the very notion of development in its multiple iterations.[12] Far from being an epistemological and political framework imposed solely by the Global North, both the practices of development and the theoretical foundations of developmentalism (understood as a broad and polysemic set of discourses) were shaped through the active participation of Latin American economists.[13] Within this iteration, underdevelopment, as a constitutive notion of developmentalism, became central to a distinctly critical strand, which by the late 1960s became known as the dependency theory.[14] This same approach is reflected in some of the best-known Latin American radical film manifestos of the time, arising precisely from the same milieus to which Solberg belonged.[15]

These various considerations of the film's history illustrate the methodological challenges confronting feminist scholars seeking to assess the impact of development on media projects, theories, and practices. To disregard the developmentalist context of such works by emphasizing their political aesthetics and affects risks reproducing a romanticized narrative of heroic resistance (albeit from a feminist perspective). Yet to engage exclusively with their institutional and material infrastructures risks naturalizing

developmentalism's political and epistemological foundations at the expense of the goals and beliefs of the many women who participated in these projects. The contradictions and ambivalences that animate such histories call for feminist frameworks capable of holding both institutional complicity and radical possibility in view.

This challenge resonates with ongoing debates about the politics of the archive and what Allyson Field has termed "the practice of informed speculation."[16] As she reminds us, feminist, queer, and decolonial methodologies have long taught us to "press at the limits" of the archive to "inoculate our scholarship against our evidence's afflictions."[17] The concern that the evidence we draw on in our analysis reproduces the very structures and blind spots of the dominant ideology and therefore shapes and delimits our interpretation becomes particularly urgent when engaging the developmentalist media corpus. Informed speculation offers an alternative by inviting the experimental, creative, and speculative rewriting of history, mobilizing the archive "in a project that runs counter to the original purpose, or the imperative to preserve, or the conditions that led to erasure."[18] Yet, as Field cautions, such speculative gestures must remain grounded in a deep and "intimate familiarity with the archive" that we are working with and against. Building on this imperative, we suggest that the developmentalist archive, in particular, demands expansion and critical reconsideration in ways that unsettle the very disciplinary frameworks through which it has been studied as well as the larger institutional contexts for such knowledge production.

Our focus on *The Double Day* in the opening of this introduction thus foregrounds the entanglements of institutional and grassroots forces, local and international contexts, structural and interpersonal relations, and creative and economic factors that have shaped not only this film but the broader ecosystem of development media projects—and their preservation—over time.

Addressing such a constellation involves transgressing methodologically entrenched divisions between political economy and aesthetics, between material infrastructures and affective regimes; reckoning with divergent periodizations across film history and world economics; and situating these within the local specificities of women's movements and international institutional programs. It also demands attentiveness to the coexistence of multiple, and sometimes competing, understandings of development—each historically, geographically, and ideologically situated.

We imagine this special issue as an opening toward a critical dialogue, not only about how such an approach might be enacted in practice but also about the far-reaching ways development paradigms have shaped both our objects of study and the contours of the field itself. The decision to center institutionally sponsored films across all the essays in this issue is deliberate and enables us to highlight institutional critique as a vital methodological imperative within our analytical framework. Created within the frameworks of international organizations, state agencies, or NGOs, these films' histories make legible the institutional logics that underwrite their production. Yet our critique does not stop at these specific entities. Rather, we argue for a broader interrogation of the political conditions and institutional infrastructures that shape media and knowledge production more generally. This includes contemporary corporations embedded in the digital platform economy, from streaming services to the rapid expansion of AI. Equally critical is a reflexive examination of academia itself, where departments of economics, political science, and centers for development have played a formative role in producing and legitimizing developmentalist theories and policy frameworks. While the humanities and arts have at times offered critical alternatives, they have also frequently mirrored and reinforced many of the same developmentalist assumptions. A feminist

analysis of the nexus between development and media must therefore unsettle not only dominant archives but also the institutional and disciplinary foundations of our own scholarly practices.

As scholars, we share the complex position of navigating the same tensions between institutional complicity and emancipatory aspiration as many of the media-makers whose work we study. Mirroring our subjects is also the transnational, collective mode of this special issue's own production as it emerges from an ongoing informal working group we have sustained over several years. While relying on institutional and disciplinary affordances—such as university funding for conferences or access to academic publishing platforms—we have been working toward creating a community that exceeds, and often resists, the prevailing logics of our academic institutions. Our aim has been to create a space for shared inquiry and mutual support that pushes back against disciplinary siloing and technocratic neoliberal assessment modes of both labor and knowledge production—and this certainly extends to our experience collaborating with the journal editors throughout the publication process. Our goal has been to examine both the persistence and variability of developmentalism, understood as what Gustavo Esteva calls a "powerful but fragile semantic constellation," as a conceptual formation that has historically inspired, legitimized, and mobilized media projects across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.[19] And gendered biopolitics, from population control to gender mainstreaming, have remained integral to development policies and media practices, recurring across formats from institutional newsreels to film festivals.

We share the conviction that, far beyond the history of nonfiction institutional media, development (as both a broad ideological project and a network of material and institutional practices) and developmentalism (as a set of discourses and theoretical models associated with development) have exerted a far-reaching influence on film and media cultures at large. As such,

they must be treated as a major force in shaping global film and media systems and also the many ongoing assumptions behind their critical discourses. The discipline of communication studies was founded on modernization theory governed by Cold War goals of dissemination of Western liberal democracy around the world, while "an area studies framework allowed compartmentalizing Western and non-Western outcomes of technologies that were always claimed to be universal."[20] Despite critique from postcolonial and critical race studies, many of these frameworks have remained foundational for media theory.[21] In historical scholarship, as we increasingly move beyond "modernity" as a dominant conceptual anchor, engaging with practices and discourses of development opens more precise analytical pathways. These follow film and media's entanglements with the logics of industrial and technological growth, measurable economic progress, and the normative cultural values associated with them, as well as their conceptual counterpoints: underdevelopment, degrowth, delinking, and decoloniality. Their impact manifests itself in areas as diverse as environmental and extractive dimensions of media production, aesthetic and historiographic paradigms in film criticism, and film festival and coproduction funding mechanisms.[22] Neither are developmentalist assumptions limited to the so-called developing world; they continue to underwrite the narrative and industrial logics of Hollywood and global media platforms alike, from the structure of the tentpole film to the algorithmic cultures of convenience.[23] We argue that a closer examination of the historical entanglements between film and developmentalist ideologies—across aesthetics, modes of representation, storytelling, as well as infrastructures and economies—offers critical insight into the continuities and ruptures that define our contemporary media landscapes.

What follows, then, is twofold: a brief outline of the historical contours of development as a field of inquiry and, embedded within it, a discussion of some of the

methodologies used by the authors featured in this special issue, each addressing a distinct aspect of this complex history, pointing to the larger issues at stake in addressing media, development, and gender together.

For all its ubiquity, development remains a conceptually elusive category. Wolfgang Sachs describes it as an idea of "monumental emptiness [that] can be easily filled with conflicting perspectives," encompassing practices as divergent as "putting up skyscrapers" and "putting in latrines."[24] In 2025, as we concluded work on this issue, the news of the closure of the USAID reignited the ideological divides that have characterize~~d~~ the history of international aid. Given the scale and importance of this organization on the global level, its dissolution may signal a turning point away from development as a global practice and as an institutional and professional field, which over the decades has served as a diplomatic tool with its own distinct media apparatus. Yet USAID's closure, whether temporary or permanent, does not erase the historical impact of these institutions, nor resolve the contradictions they have reflected and reproduced over the past century, as the concept of development underwent several crucial transformations.

Initially tied to the economic theories of modernization, development prioritized state-led initiatives designed to spur industrial growth and address internal inequalities. By midcentury, through the rise of the Bretton Woods institutions, development had evolved into an international policy framework aimed at redistributing resources from the Global North to alleviate the "troubled" economies of the Global South. By the 1970s, impacted by the increasing political role of Thirdworldism and the rise of the New International Economic Order, the emphasis on market-led growth was challenged by dependency theory and structuralist critiques, aimed at recasting development as necessitating global structural transformation. With the neoliberal turn

of the 1980s, the Structural Adjustment Programs triggered by the IMF and World Bank imposed market liberalization, privatization, and deregulation as conditions for receiving loans and other forms of financial assistance (what became known as the Washington Consensus), making them into major markers for international development policies.[25] More recently, development has expanded once again, moving beyond economic redistribution to incorporate new indicators such as the Human Development Index and the Gender Development Index, and away from international organizations such as the United Nations to a broader network of NGOs. These frameworks increasingly integrate metrics of governance and human rights, reflecting liberal ideals of democracy, self-expression, and entrepreneurship combined with what in many ways still amounts to various "antipoverty measures."[26]

But while the postdevelopment critiques of the 1990s sought to dismantle development's epistemological authority, more recent English-language scholarship has turned toward a granular reconstruction of its heterogeneous genealogies and material practices.[27] Today, the field has opened to a proliferation of minoritarian and critical perspectives, including those advanced by queer and Indigenous scholars, which collectively reframe development as a dynamic terrain of conceptual and political negotiation.[28] Responding to these perspectives, the case studies gathered in this special issue follow Corinna Unger's call for sustained "historical analysis in place of meta-critique."[29] In doing so, we draw from a combination of "informed speculation" and "pragmatic theorization" that rejects essentialism in favor of multifaceted experiences of gender and sexuality.[30] Contributors to this special issue engage examples that traverse continents and decades, from 1920s Mexico to contemporary India, exploring specific

local historical articulations of global paradigms, foregrounding distinctly feminist methodologies as well as attention to medium specificity.

The two case studies that bookend this issue trace a century-long arc in the global history of development media. Alejandra Rosenberg Navarro's essay on Adriana and Dolores Ehlers's documentary work in postrevolutionary Mexico highlights how early women filmmakers visualized national infrastructures as symbols of progress while courting US capital. Their films reflect an early convergence of state nationalism and transnational investment. By focusing on a case rooted outside the Global North—often seen as the origin of developmentalist discourse—Rosenberg Navarro, following Thornton, repositions both the geographic and temporal markers of development media, tracing its emergence to the 1910s–1920s and foregrounding Latin America's central role. Her analysis, grounded in archival absence, also underscores women's authorship in constructing transnational modernities and navigates the methodological tension of reconstructing developmental archives built on loss.

Daphne Gershon's study of the Indian entertainment-education web series *Sex Ki Adalat* (2017) turns to a contrasting context: a digital media landscape defined not by scarcity but by overabundance. Here, women appear not as authors but as subjects and audiences within circuits of neoliberal reform, health advocacy, and NGO-driven communication. Through the aesthetics and rhetoric of online popular culture, Gershon traces how development's meaning has shifted—from state-centered models of industrial progress to contemporary neoliberal paradigms of empowerment and individual rights. Her analysis reveals how digital dispositifs—technologies, infrastructures, genres, and participatory forms—mediate new relations among gender norms and practices, discourses on rights, and their sources of legitimacy. Taken together, these essays

show the persistency of some of the historical tropes of developmentalist media—such as the question of the role of the nation state within such projects.

Based on a notion of economic growth as a linear and measurable process, the dominant model of development that emerged after President Truman's 1947 Doctrine speech positioned the state as the primary agent for transferring resources, technologies, and expertise through large-scale infrastructural projects. This understanding of development was shared across both sides of the Iron Curtain as well as in the so-called Third World. The United States and the Soviet Union alike increasingly mobilized international aid—and, in the case of the socialist bloc, developed modes of international cooperation aimed at the postcolonial world—as instruments of foreign policy and ideological influence. These programs were aimed at the expansion of their respective capitalist and socialist spheres of power, while intersecting with the nationalist and decolonial struggles of newly independent states. The conceptual overlap between modernization and development that characterized the Cold War–era found common ground in Enlightenment narratives of progress and hierarchies of civilization, ideas that had long underpinned European colonial and imperial governance. As an expanding number of postcolonial nations gained independence, their role as principal recipients of international aid generated increasing concern about the neocolonial dimensions of Western development projects. In response, alternative approaches emerged across the Global South that sought to address structural inequities between "centers and peripheries" through policies of resource nationalism, protectionism, and regionalism. In many cases, they were further integrated into the global governance structures. In Latin America, for example, this approach was institutionalized through organizations such as

the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, CEPAL.[31]

Thus, both developmentalist projects and their theorizations have taken many forms historically, geopolitically, and regionally. Historically, they have undergone significant shifts and phases. Geopolitically, they have been tied to a range of projects, including capitalist, socialist, anticolonial, and postcolonial agendas. Regionally and locally, development has been articulated, practiced, and experienced in distinct ways and with frequently diverging political goals. While many of these alternative frameworks recognized the asymmetries embedded in dominant Western models, they often preserved core technocratic and extractivist assumptions. Similarly, gender and gender relations—increasingly used as metrics for evaluating the "success" of modernization—continued to be shaped by universalizing logics.[32] This becomes particularly visible in the media productions that accompanied successive phases of development policy, where women frequently occupied a crucial representational space. Typically associated with domestic, rural, and otherwise "backward" spheres, women were portrayed as both the subjects and symbols of progress: their participation in the industrial and formal labor sectors often served as the visual index of modernization. In this issue, Ritika Kaushik's study of Indian state-sponsored documentaries from the 1970s reveals how women were depicted as beneficiaries of this process, even as these representations expressed anxieties about women's agency, urban modernity, and social transgression. Tracing recurring motifs, developmental montages, and moments of dissonance, Kaushik identifies a "counterarchive" within the state's own visual record, instances of resistance, contradiction, and unintended critique that complicate official narratives. Paradoxically, her examination of bureaucratic archives and state-authored images enables a feminist interrogation of their limits, mobilizing a tradition of reading "against the grain" even in the absence of visible female agency.

Weixian Pan's contribution to this issue similarly illustrates the complexity of a similar dynamic within as well as across ideological blocs. She analyzes the duality of women's roles—as agents and objects—within the media apparatus of the Chinese state-driven industrial and scientific initiatives. Depicted as active participants in socialist scientific labor and as integral to the state's technocratic apparatus, women geologists became emblems of progress even as their embodied labor remained a site of accumulation and dispossession. Pan's analysis combines textual readings and archival research with attention to the geopolitically specific articulations of scientific discourse and practice. It also invites transnational perspectives that consider extractivism as a material, symbolic, and affective formation, a nexus of technical operations and representational practices through which gender, media, and developmentalism continuously redefine one another.

By treating film not merely as a representational form but as part of the infrastructure of development—operating alongside industrial and scientific technologies—Pan's work echoes a broader concern of this special issue: media industries as a contested site of developmentalist projects. The debates surrounding the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), which dominated international forums such as the United Nations and UNESCO after 1976, offer a critical historical touchstone for such explorations. Advocated primarily by postcolonial nations and members of the Non-Aligned Movement, NWICO called for the creation of autonomous media and communication infrastructures in developing countries as tools to counter Western imperialism. The initiative established a clear link between cultural hegemony and economic dependency, underscoring how unequal systems of media

ownership, production, and circulation reinforced global hierarchies of power and resources.[33]

Although rooted in an anti-imperialist agenda that supported state-owned and alternative media infrastructures across postcolonial contexts, the NWICO framework largely ignored gender as an analytical category. This "gender blindness," already recognized in the 1970s by advocates of the Women in Development (WID) movement (mentioned earlier in relation to *The Double Day*), exposed its political limitations. WID's critique of NWICO aligned with its broader mission to center women in development policy through lobbying and bureaucratic reform. This was also evident in WID's uses of media, which was shaped by its international reach and advocacy work, spanning areas like audiovisual production and training, distribution and exhibition, and broadcasting.[34] Yet, as WID gained institutional traction, it also contributed to the fragmentation and bureaucratization of the women's development programs most often administered by NGOs in newly decolonizing nations.[35] These efforts were accompanied by a proliferation of studies, conferences, and reports on "women and the media," designed to produce "proof of women's presence and worth" through the quantification of their economic and social roles.[36] In this issue, Nikolaus Perneczky's essay on the Senegalese filmmaker Safi Faye addresses this history directly by analyzing the precarious and fragmented "structures of opportunity" created for politically committed women auteurs by the WID framework during the 1980s. Faye's collaborations with NGOs and government agencies reveals the paradoxes of operating "with and against Women in Development" at the threshold of the neoliberal turn, when institutional media often presented the only route to access and financial support necessary to later develop her most ambitious independent projects. The article makes an important argument by identifying this dynamic as paradigmatic of the way filmmakers from the Global

South are forced to engage with the developmentalist assumptions underwriting European funding models that enable their productions.

Miguel Errazu's essay similarly identifies the 1980s as a crucial, transitional phase in developmentalist media history marked by the NGO-ization of solidarity, technological obsolescence, and increasing bureaucratic mediation. His article centers on the short-lived yet ambitious Miners' Film Workshop (1983), a collaboration between Bolivia's Federation of Mineworkers' Union (FSTMB) and the French NGO Ateliers Varan. Errazu reframes historiographic attention toward the often-erased reproductive and logistic labor performed by women—trainers, editors, administrators, and cooperants—whose work was foundational yet systematically disavowed. Foregrounding the fragility of cooperation and the contested legacies of audiovisual aid, Errazu proposes "frustration" as both a structuring condition of North–South development projects and a critical method for reading their archives.

Taken together, the articles in this issue argue for a systematic engagement with media, gender, and developmentalism as an interconnected field of inquiry—one that is critically engaged, politically grounded, and shaped by feminist epistemologies and methodologies and interventions that challenge the long-standing entanglements between academic knowledge production and exclusionary, colonial, and technocratic development paradigms. And while no single methodological stance can fully confront these dynamics at the structural level, the counterhegemonic orientation of feminist approaches in media and cinema studies—as embodied by this journal—at the very least provides a necessary starting point.

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[9] Dalila Missero, “Re-bordering UK Feminist Video in the 1980s: Cross-Border Exchanges and Reflexivity in a Digital and Archive-based Project,” *VIEW: Journal of European Television History and Culture* 12, no. 24 (2023): 81.

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[16] Allyson Nadia Field, “Doing More with Less: Informed Speculation as Method,” *Feminist Media Histories* 11, no. 4 (2025): 128–35.

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[18] Field, “Doing More with Less,” 131.

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