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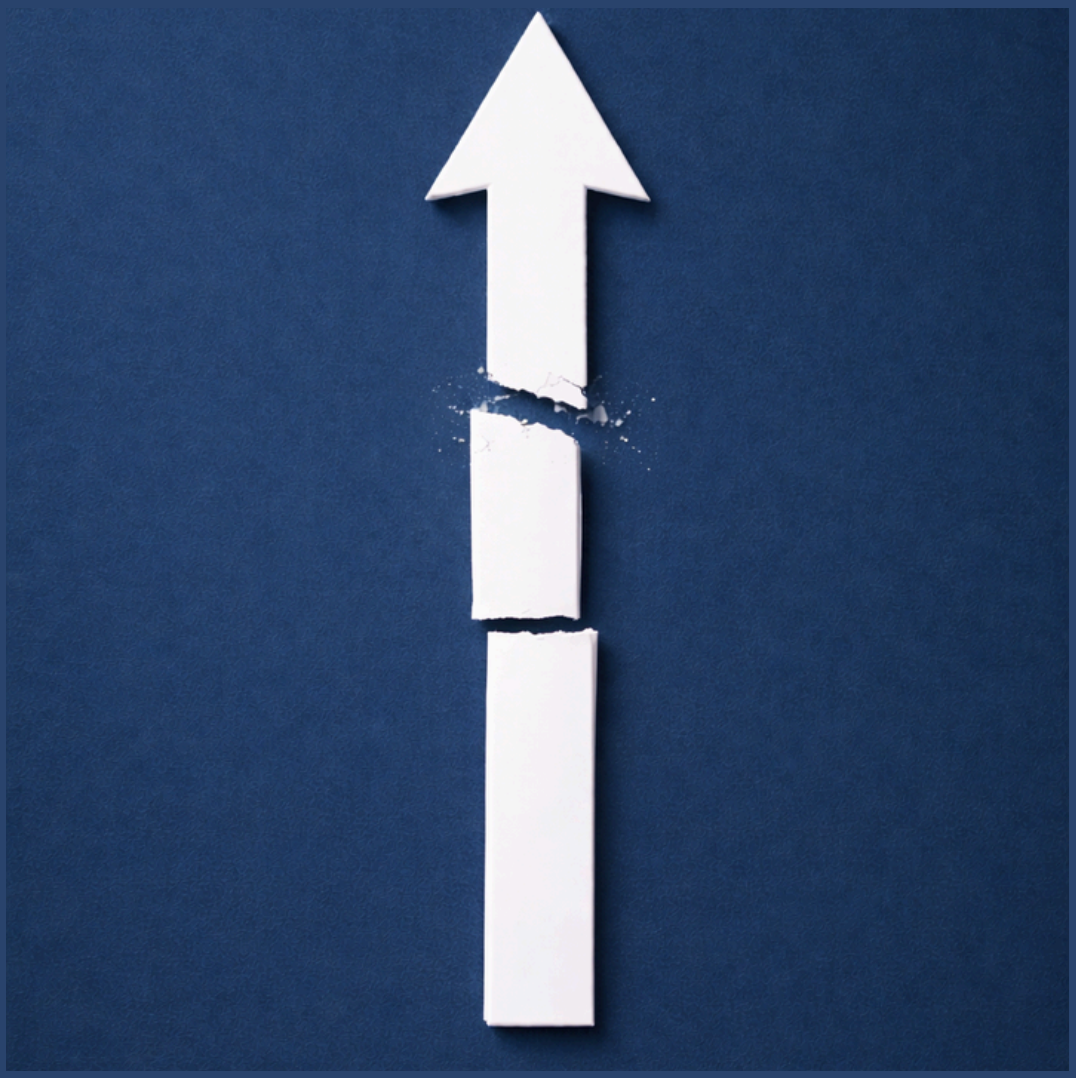

PUSHING FOR A JUST AND EQUITABLE SOCIETY FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

The Graduate Inequality Review

Department of Social Policy and Intervention

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FOREWORD

We are delighted to share the fourth volume of the **Graduate Inequality Review (GIR)**, a student-run journal based in the Department of Social Policy and Intervention (DSPI) at the University of Oxford. This volume brings together work by students and early-career scholars from across disciplines who are engaging with one of the most urgent and enduring challenges of our time: inequality.

This issue includes a mix of academic articles and perspective pieces, reflecting our belief that inequality is best understood through multiple forms of inquiry. The academic articles offer in-depth analyses grounded in research and case studies, exploring the structural and institutional forces that shape unequal outcomes. The perspective pieces are shorter and more reflective, drawing on personal, academic, or professional experiences to highlight how inequality is encountered in everyday life. Together, these contributions create an open and engaging space for learning, reflection, and dialogue.

This volume is centred on the theme **"Pushing for a Just and Equitable Society for a Sustainable Future."** Across a range of contexts and disciplines, the contributions invite readers to look beyond technical solutions and efficiency-driven reforms, and to reflect on the deeper social structures and power relations that shape who benefits from innovation and who is left behind.

We are deeply grateful to the authors, editors, and external reviewers whose time, care, and commitment made this volume possible. The authors' thoughtful contributions have enriched critical conversations on inequality, while the editorial team's dedication ensured clarity, coherence, and scholarly rigour throughout the publication process. We also extend our sincere thanks to our external reviewers for their generous and constructive feedback. This volume is the result of a truly collaborative effort, and we are proud to share it with you.

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AY 2024/2025

Editorial Piece

Innovation without justice is not progress

MARIANNE JOY ANACLETO VITAL

DPhil in Social Policy, University of Oxford

Editor-in-chief / Managing Editor

Graduate Inequality Review, 2024/25

Across climate governance, disability rights, Indigenous land struggles, and HIV prevention, a shared analytical warning emerges: **Inequality is not a residual problem awaiting better solutions, but a constitutive feature of social systems**. The articles featured in this Volume 4 of the Graduate Inequality Review collectively challenge the dominant assumption in contemporary policy discourse that innovation, efficiency, and technical fixes can resolve deeply rooted injustices without confronting the power relations that produce them in the first place.

From a political economy perspective, this assumption reflects what Nancy Fraser describes as the displacement of *redistribution* and *recognition* by managerial governance, in which social problems are treated as technical challenges to be managed through efficiency, metrics, and policy design rather than through structural reform (Fraser, 1998, 2008). In the contexts illustrated in this journal, policy responses prioritise and optimise certain targets—reducing emissions, scaling health technologies, expanding formal access. However, these policies leave in place deeper structures that determine who is protected and who is left at risk. As the articles in this Volume make clear, **innovation that is not grounded in justice risks reinforcing, rather than reducing, existing inequalities**.

Coutinho's (Article 1, pp 1–6) intervention into climate discourse provides a crucial starting point by situating the Anthropocene not merely as a geological descriptor, but as an ideological and cultural project rooted in liberal capitalism, consumerism, and Eurocentric rationality. Drawing on Gramscian notions of hegemony and decolonial critiques of modernity, the article exposes how extractivism, growth, and consumption are normalised as common sense, foreclosing alternative ways of living and relating to the natural world (Escobar, 2018; Gramsci, 2011; Malm, 2016). The unequal distribution of climate harm—where marginalised populations bear the brunt of ecological disruption while contributing least to emissions—is therefore not accidental but structurally produced. As political ecology scholars have long argued, environmental crises are socio-environmental conflicts, shaped by historical and ongoing relations of power (Schlosberg, 2007).

This critique flows directly into the analysis of green grabbing in Afghanistan and India, which illustrates how these ideological foundations materialise in contemporary climate policy. While renewable energy transitions and net-zero targets are framed as progressive and necessary, the article by Das and Das (Article 2, pp 7–17) demonstrates how they frequently

rely on extractive practices that dispossess Indigenous communities of land, livelihoods, and cultural heritage. This dynamic reflects what David Harvey (2003) famously conceptualised as *accumulation by dispossession*, whereby new rounds of capital expansion are secured through enclosure and displacement. Under the banner of sustainability, Indigenous territories once again become sacrifice zones—this time justified not by colonial conquest or industrial development, but by environmental urgency. Decolonial scholars warn that these transitions often treat Western models of development as universal, while sidelining Indigenous knowledge and systems of governance, resulting in a deeply unequal "green" future (Escobar, 2018). The promise of climate innovation thus risks reproducing colonial patterns of inequality unless justice, consent, and participation are placed at the centre of energy transitions.

The persistence of inequality through ostensibly progressive frameworks is further illuminated in Celebrado and Ancha's (Article 3, pp 18–34) analysis of microaggressions against Filipino women with mobility disabilities. Drawing on Iris Marion Young's discourse, the authors show how oppression is sustained through what Young calls the "normal processes of everyday life" (Young, 1990). Microaggressions operate as mechanisms of *cultural imperialism* and *powerlessness*, subtly reinforcing able-bodied and patriarchal norms even in contexts where formal rights and inclusive policies exist. This exposes a critical limitation of rights-based and innovation-driven approaches: formal inclusion does not dismantle informal hierarchies. If cultural and institutional norms that shape everyday interactions are left unchallenged, policy reforms are merely offering symbolic inclusion without reducing structural inequality (Fraser, 1998).

A parallel pattern emerges in the domain of HIV prevention. Despite major advances, progress remains uneven, with structural inequalities continuing to determine who benefits from innovation (UNAIDS, 2024). As Manyeruke (Article 4, pp 35–41) illustrates, access to HIV prevention is shaped less by the availability of technologies than by entrenched barriers such as criminalisation, stigma, gender-based violence, fragmented services, and unequal funding priorities. In this context, biomedical breakthroughs expand what is technically possible without necessarily expanding what is socially accessible. As Amartya Sen (1999, 2009) reminds us, capabilities depend not on tools alone, but on the conditions that allow people to use them. Without sustained investment in community-led models, service integration, and locally grounded knowledge production, HIV prevention risks becoming another case of innovation addressing only the symptoms, while leaving the structural drivers of inequality intact.

What unites these diverse contexts is a shared critique of what might be called *solutionism*—the belief that faster, smarter, or more innovative interventions can bypass the demanding work of structural transformation. These articles do not reject innovation; rather, they insist that it be politically situated. Feminist, intersectional, and decolonial perspectives remind us that inequality is relational and historical, produced through institutions, norms, and epistemic hierarchies that determine whose knowledge counts and whose suffering is tolerable (Crenshaw, 1997; Kabeer, 2015; Waylen, 2014).

Altogether these articles demand more than incremental reform, but transformative remedies. Addressing inequality requires more than inclusive language or participatory add-ons. It requires rethinking the assumptions that underpin policy itself. Indigenous epistemologies, feminist disability studies, and community-led health approaches are not peripheral perspectives, but critical frameworks for challenging dominant models of governance. Without this shift in perspective, even well-intentioned innovations might reproduce the very inequalities they aim to resolve.

In a fast-moving world enamoured with technological fixes, these articles insist on a slower, more demanding task. We must understand how inequality is embedded in existing social structures and ensure that those most marginalised are not merely recipients of policy, but authors of alternative futures.

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Perspective

A cultural revolution to address the climate crisis and promote equitable futures

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Abstract:
This article analyses the climate crisis as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by ecological degradation, as well as economic, political, cultural, and social factors. It argues that liberal capitalism, rooted in industrialisation and consumerism, deepens structural inequalities while driving planetary disruption in the Anthropocene. By foregrounding Indigenous knowledge, intersectional approaches, and socio-environmental perspectives, the article contends that climate justice requires more than mitigation programmes: it demands the dismantling of inequalities through a cultural revolution that challenges existing power structures. Such a revolution calls for a holistic approach that integrates ancient wisdom, alternative ontological practices, and modern science to foster a profound reconnection between humans and nature, a key pathway for generating the behavioural transformations necessary to build equitable futures capable of confronting the climate emergency.

We are experiencing a climate emergency unprecedented in human history. For over fifty years, scientific research has warned about the possibility of this scenario (Glavovic et al., 2022), accompanied by numerous initiatives aimed at reversing it, such as climate conferences, global agreements and the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations (UN), which seek to integrate civil society into actions to combat climate change. However, none of these initiatives have been able to contain the impacts of what is escalating every day: rising sea levels, extreme heatwaves**,** droughts, floods and other climate disasters that are becoming increasingly frequent (Guerreiro et al., 2018), generating forced migration processes, especially in socially vulnerable territories (Castles, 2016). This clearly reveals that the climate crisis is profoundly unequal (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014), as the richest 10% of the global population are responsible for half of all greenhouse gas emissions, while the poorest 3.5 billion people account for only 10% (IPCC, 2022; Kartha et al., 2020).

To address this complex scenario, this article argues that the climate crisis is multifaceted, encompassing economic, political, cultural, and social dimensions, and is fundamentally linked to the dominant ideologies that shape modes of existence, particularly those embedded in liberal capitalism, which perpetuate structural inequalities while inhibiting deeper change. The impact of these modes of existence is so profound that the current

geological era, the Anthropocene, was named precisely because these ways of living dominate and alter, on a planetary scale and at unprecedented speed, the Earth's physical, biological, and chemical processes, compromising its balanced functioning (Malhi, 2017). Thus, this article argues that we cannot focus solely on climate disaster mitigation programmes but must also promote cultural practices capable of challenging and subverting the dominant power dynamics that shape our societies and ways of living.

THE VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE CRISIS

When analysing the economic factors contributing to this crisis, the evidence reveals that it stems from a global desire for progress fundamentally centred around economic growth, which is seen as a key success indicator for organisations, but also for governments (Mazzucato, 2021). The process of industrialisation, aimed at improving quality of life, led to the unrestrained use of the Earth's natural resources, especially fossil fuels, which are a central resource for current Eurocentric ways of life and the primary driver of greenhouse gas emissions (Malm, 2016). Furthermore, liberal capitalism has imposed a state of mind on the working class that precludes reflection and critical questioning, as production systems that deepen economic disparities, opportunities for deeper reflection on ways of life are becoming increasingly rare (Klein,2014).

From a political standpoint, climate concern is frequently intertwined with ideological positions. In the name of national sovereignty, more conservative, nationalist, and populist groups adopt a protectionist and non-collaborative stance, making strategic mitigation agreements unfeasible (Conca, 1994).

From a cultural perspective, the media celebrates a consumer-centred way of life, which is fundamental to the functioning of the liberal economic model (Bauman, 2013). Furthermore, those in more privileged positions often respond to collective demands for change with a feeling of loss of privilege and a threat to the status quo (Gidron & Hall, 2020; Lübke, 2022). Even in the face of numerous warnings from renowned scientists about the relationship between our lifestyles and the climate crisis, current culture and behaviour continue as if nothing were happening (Klein, 2014).

From a social perspective, the climate crisis is also a social crisis, as minority groups, such as women, Black people, poor, and Indigenous people, are the most impacted by social inequalities and the climate crisis (Porto, 2004). The term *environmental racism* reinforces the unequal exposure of certain populations to environmental impacts and risks, justified not only by their geographic location but also by structural racism that identifies territories occupied by socioeconomically vulnerable populations as *sacrifice zones,* places where high-impact activities such as pollution, contamination, irregular waste disposal, and effluent drainage are permitted (Lerner, 2012). Moreover, when viewed through the lens of the intersectional approach, which acknowledges individuals in society based on various identity factors (race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, geography), it becomes clear how these intersecting axes shape unique experiences for individuals, encompassing both discrimination

and privilege (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012). In this context, the intersection between poverty, Blackness and female gender identity places this group among the most vulnerable, both socially and environmentally.

NEW FORMS OF EXISTENCE

Over time, human thought has been shaped by behaviours that privilege specific values and beliefs, operating to reinforce the dominant ideology and produce subjects who accept Eurocentric rational thought as natural, legitimate and unique (Althusser, 2014). Dominant groups maintain social control by promoting cultural practices and meanings that marginalise alternative modes of existence (Gramsci, 2011). In 19th-century evolutionary theories, so-called primitive societies represented outdated stages of progress. Indigenous cultures, marked by contemplation and the intrinsic relationship with nature, were commonly associated with a culture of non-work and laziness. (Lévi-Strauss, 2011). Such shaping is orchestrated to prioritise economic relations and production forces and not ideas guiding the world (Duncombe, 2002).

However, *meaning* is not fixed; it is socially and culturally constructed, and hegemony is constantly contested and negotiated (Hall, 2000). Therefore, there is an urgent need for more and more cultural practices that challenge and subvert dominant power dynamics, which are the main cause of this crisis. This crisis is not only ecological but also deeply social, as it is shaped by historical and structural inequalities that determine whose voices are heard and whose are silenced and, consequently, who suffers most from climate impacts.

Indigenous leader Ailton Krenak states that it is necessary to tell stories, especially those of voices silenced by hegemonic Eurocentric thinking, to delay the end of the world (Krenak & Doyle, 2025). Brum argues that the Amazon and the knowledge of its peoples should not be seen as peripheral, but rather as a project for a new model of the future (Brum, 2023). Specifically, Indigenous communities, in particular, play a crucial role as stewards of our natural environment and biodiversity (Garnett et al., 2018; Conde et al., 2017). Foregrounding these epistemologies makes explicit how cultural silencing translates into unequal exposure to climate harm.

From this perspective, climate justice links the causes and consequences of climate change to broader struggles for social justice, underscoring that those historically silenced are often those who contribute least to emissions yet bear the greatest burden of its impacts. Achieving climate justice, therefore, requires not only equitable distribution of resources and responsibilities but also the active recognition, participation, and leadership of these communities in shaping public policies and climate solutions (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). In Latin America, scholars frequently use the term *socio-environmental* to reflect the inseparability of the natural and social dimensions (Porto, 2004). Therefore, achieving climate justice requires amplifying historically non-hegemonic and silenced voices—such as economically vulnerable populations, Black women, and Indigenous peoples, ensuring they are central in shaping public policies that address our global socio-environmental challenges (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). This integration of cultural transformation and climate justice

underscores that meaningful environmental change will only occur if structural inequalities are dismantled alongside ecological degradation.

It is essential to awaken a global critical consciousness in society that is capable of both highlighting the severity of our current situation, and the real causes that led us to this scenario, as well as promoting and disseminating values that embody other ways of living (Andreotti, 2012). Consciousness must be global because this is a problem that will affect all of us, as inhabitants of this planet, at some point in our lives (IPCC, 2018). It is critical because it challenges the current ways of living, adopted as unique and correct, and the narrative that fails to put into perspective, from a historical and critical point of view, why the world is the way it is.

A cultural revolution that challenges existing power structures and fosters a profound reconnection between humans and nature, must adopt a holistic approach that integrates ancient wisdom, alternative ontological practices (ways of understanding being and existence), and modern science, encompassing mind, body, and spirit. This reconnection with modes of existence historically subjugated by hegemonic thinking is a key pathway to foster profound behavioural changes essential for constructing truly equitable futures capable of effectively confronting the climate crisis (Andreotti, 2012; Stengers, 2018; Herman, 2016; Scarano, 2024).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I am aware of no conflicts of interest that would make my writing bad and unprofessional and disreputable.

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Green grabbing:
Exploring Indigenous inequality in the face of just energy transition in Afghanistan & India

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Abstract:
Climate change is a global emergency, but its effects are unequally distributed. The Indigenous and marginalised communities are among the first and worst hit by the crisis than any other groups due to their close relationship with the environment and reliance on the natural resources. The pledge to achieve 'Net-Zero' goal has sadly widened the inequality chasm and worsened the on-going climate injustices faced by the Indigenous Communities. The transition to a green economy will require extraction of unprecedented quantities of base minerals and rare earth metals- which occur on or near Indigenous land which possesses half of the world's major portion of natural reserves. This current uneven green transition to renewable resources and conservation projects have dispossessed Indigenous Communities of their own land in the name of energy transition to produce biofuels and installation of huge solar panels and wind turbines on their land without their prior consent. This paper will provide evidence on how green energy transition are leading to land grabbing and leading to Indigenous displacement and land dispossession. This paper will further cite case studies of India and Afghanistan to demonstrate unjust energy transition. This paper finally argues the necessity to include Indigenous Communities in global policymaking and build stronger connections with these communities to achieve a just, equitable and meaningful inclusion of Indigenous and local communities in green energy transition. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pledged that "no one will be left behind" but perhaps those who are leading are left far behind in this race for green energy transition. Surmounting this challenge will require focusing on Indigenous and local communities and harnessing their potential as agents of change and development.

1. INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING GREEN GRABBING AND INDIGENOUS INEQUALITY

Today, the world is witnessing a surge in green transition, marking a paradigm shift towards sustainable solutions. The impact of just energy transition is far from being "JUST" and "EQUAL", with marginalised communities, particularly Indigenous and local communities, bearing a disproportionate brunt of climate change and green transition. Net Zero emissions refer to as a state where emissions are reduced as much as possible and any remaining emissions are balanced by measures that absorb or remove an equivalent amount of CO2 (UNFCCC, 2024). This means cutting carbon emissions to a small amount of residual emissions that can be absorbed and durably stored by nature and other carbon dioxide removal measures, leaving zero in the atmosphere. Today, clean energy technologies such as wind turbines and solar panels use significant amounts of minerals and metals such as steel, copper, and rare earth elements. We need a lot of these natural minerals and resources as these materials

will decarbonise our economy. This reliance on the energy transition to renewable resources and minerals could lead to a massive increase in global demand for mineral and renewable resources.

Another concerning aspect of green energy transition is how it has been intertwined with human rights violations. The lack of legal safeguards to protect human rights of Indigenous Communities have contributed to forced displacement, land grabbing and other systemic human rights violations. Green grabbing has been described as the "*appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends*" and explains that it often leads to exclusion of Indigenous and local communities from their ancestral lands, exacerbating inequalities and leading to socio-economic and cultural impacts (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones, 2012).

Indigenous Peoples who are deeply rooted to their lands and their value intricately interwoven into the social fabric of their ancestral lands, cultures, and spiritual practices, are now witnessing a blatant violation of their human rights (Anaya J., 2005). Their intrinsic fundamental rights to livelihoods, access to resources, housing and sacrosanct connection to nature are today in danger due to the climate crisis and the green energy transition. This "green transition", often considered as a solution to climate change is paradoxically inducing displacement and widening the inequality chasm (Dowie M., 2009).

This research intends to delve deep into interwoven threads of equality, human dignity, Indigenous rights and climate justice. The first part highlights the current state and trajectory of the green energy transition that contributes to land grabbing and illegal land acquisitions which causes human rights violations. The second section traces the historical developments and contemporary shifts to explore evolution, legal frameworks and recognition of Indigenous rights under international regimes that have shaped laws and practices concerning Indigenous Peoples globally. The third section examines two case studies from Afghanistan and India to understand how commitment to green energy transition sidelines justice, equity and fails to respect and protect the fundamental human rights of Indigenous Peoples. The fourth section explores existing legal frameworks, policies and principles of human rights and analyses how these frameworks have been interpreted and implemented to advance equal rights for Indigenous Peoples and ensure climate justice. Lastly, recommendations for incorporating human rights standards into the green energy transition to uphold and protect human dignity.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research uses a qualitative approach to study the impact on Indigenous and local communities in India and Afghanistan due to green energy projects. The study adopts a case-study approach, focusing on Mes Aynak mining project in Afghanistan and the Sardar Sarovar Dam project in India with respect to land grabbing and the exclusion of Indigenous Communities from decision-making processes. This research analyses secondary data sources—i.e., government publications, legal documents, project reports, academic papers and media articles. The research applied thematic analysis to identify key patterns and it provides a comprehensive analysis into how local and Indigenous Communities are affected by land acquisition and displacement. It will also analyse the legal frameworks and national policies, against international standards—i.e., the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

(UNDRIP). It will also draw comparisons between two case studies to identify common challenges and best practices in energy transitions.

It is pertinent to mention here that the study does not make strong causal claims, for the methodology cannot be interpreted as a systematic causal analysis, but it aims to offer insights into the implications of energy projects on affected communities. The research seeks to provide information and insights into the nature of these transition projects, rather than providing definitive cause-effect relationships. In doing so, this study attempts to contribute to discussions on more inclusive and sustainable energy policies while protecting and respecting the rights of local and Indigenous Populations.

3. ENERGY TRANSITION AND MINING-INDUCED DISPLACEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

3.1. AFGHANISTAN'S UNTAPPED MINERALS AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Afghanistan, located in South-Central Asia, is a landlocked country with a rich and complex history shaped by its strategic location and diverse cultural heritage. Afghanistan is a country abundantly rich in natural resources (Gouhari, 2013). As of the latest estimates, Afghanistan's population is approximately 40 million people. The population is ethnically diverse, with major groups including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and others. Afghanistan which is home to about 30 million tonnes of copper (Afghanistan's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum report, 2019), 2.3 billion metric tonnes of iron ore, and 1.4 million metric tonnes of rare earth minerals and other natural resources (Blumenthal & Bassetti, 2022). USGS announced that Afghanistan's mineral wealth is worth $1trillion (USGS, 2010). The energy transition is creating a huge demand for minerals like lithium, copper, iron ore and other minerals and natural resources. Extracting such minerals is highly land-intensive, and largely takes place in Indigenous and local Peoples' territories, impacting habitats, environment and populations' health, livelihood, and education. Most countries are expanding on renewable energy capacity to tackle the growing climate crisis and in this process communities in Afghanistan have been neglected for quite a long time.

There has been sharp increase in mining projects in Afghanistan for commodities such as copper, iron, lithium, coal etc. Copper which is a critical component of advanced renewable energy technologies. There is a growing demand for it and as the world goes through its green energy transformation and tries to meet the sustainable development goal of the United Nations to provide clean energy to all (Wiessner, 2011).

Afghanistan now wants the extractive industry to become a substantial revenue generator. It was estimated that 14 major mining projects by 2016 would generate about $1.5 billion a year. More than 50 per cent of this revenue will come from four projects—copper mines at Mes-Aynak, iron ore mine at Hajigak, oil and natural gas reserves at Amu Dariya and Afghan-Tajik Basin. The Ministry of Mines hopes each of these four projects will generate $200 million or more revenue per year.

The absence of robust legal protections to uphold and defend human rights in mining operations in Afghanistan has led to the forced displacement of local communities from their ancestral lands. The local and marginalised communities, in particular, have been

disproportionately affected by displacement, as their traditional roles in agriculture, gathering forest resources, livestock management, and related activities have been disrupted by the immediate consequences of mining, resulting in the violation of their fundamental human rights as they are compelled to leave their land-based livelihoods behind.

3.2. MINING INDUCED DISPLACEMENT AT MES AYNAK COPPER MINE

The Mes Aynak is the world's second largest copper mine in the world situated in Logar province, 40km from Kabul, Afghanistan (Mes Aynak, Ministry of Mines, MoMP). It has copper deposits worth USD 43 billion (Khan et al., 2021). It is 2000 years old ancient Buddhist city which sits on largely preserved under layers of unexploited earth minerals, more specifically copper (Bezhan, 2012).

To achieve this goal, in 2007, the Chinese mining company Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) headed a state-owned consortium took on a 30 year lease and signed a $3 billion contract to mine copper ore in Afghanistan (World Bank, 2013). The mining and extensive extraction operations at Aynak of copper ore have resulted in forced and involuntary displacement of local communities residing in the vicinity of mine site. It is estimated that one in seven villages affected by the project faced 'involuntary relocation (Khan et al. 2021), around 393 families were displaced due to this project (Ministry of Mines and Petroleum [MoMP], 2014). The displacement was primarily due to the need to clear land for mining infrastructure, such as open-pit mining operations, processing facilities, and associated infrastructure like roads and utilities. However, later on the mining project at Aynak got tied up in some contract problems, and it never got past some initial test shafts before it ground to a halt (Kullab, 2022).

More than 10 million people, each year are involuntarily displaced to make way for development projects (Cernea, 2000). While, hydropower generation is mostly responsible for the involuntary displacement of local communities, mining accounts for an undetermined proportion (Downing, 2002).

However, due to mining, displaced communities have lost access to their traditional lands and resources, disrupting their livelihoods that were based on agriculture, grazing, or other local economic activities. This leads to economic hardship, food insecurity, and social dislocation. The mining-induced displacement at Mes Aynak illustrates a complex interplay of cultural loss, social disruption, and economic inequality. Furthermore, mining activities often benefit external investors and government authorities more than local communities, exacerbating inequalities in resource distribution and economic benefits (Deberdt, Buffenoir, and Gholami, 2024).

Now the talks are underway for resumption of mining copper at Mes Aynak, which was earlier put on hold. If the project were to proceed without adequate planning and consideration for the village and its inhabitants, it could lead to further displacement and other adverse effects. Preservation of both cultural heritage and the well-being of local populations should ideally be prioritised in such developments. Also, if the company is allowed to exploit the site for a quick profit, it would most likely hurt the environment. Furthermore, water aquifers near the mine that supply water to Kabul and beyond would also be at risk of severe contamination from mining activity. The mining activities at Mes Aynak, would also affect farming in the

region, killing the livelihoods of local communities in and around the region. However, the current Afghanistan governance does not facilitate fair recognition and community participatory governance processes for the local communities at Mes Aynak (Rickard, 2019).

Mining-induced displacement violates many human rights, such as: inadequate compensation for displacement from their land, lack of participation of local communities in the division of profits from the exploitation of resources, infringement of social and cultural rights (especially Indigenous and tribal people), cultural devastation caused by resettlement; violation of housing rights; and violation of other rights such as economic, social, and cultural ones (e.g. lack of access to education in the new place of residence, lack of access to social facilities). For now Mes Aynak is safe, but for how long?

3.3. DOMESTIC LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN AFGHANISTAN

The Domestic legislation i.e., the Constitution of Afghanistan, which was adopted in 2004, states that property can only be confiscated in accordance with law and in pursuant to court order (Article 19, The Constitution of Afghanistan). The same article also has reference to the "prior and just compensation within the bounds of law" and limits confiscation to the purpose of securing public interests. However, the Land Expropriation Law is more specific about the expropriation of land, including a short provision on compensation.

In addition to the laws mentioned above, the Land Acquisition law, amended in 2017, according to which the expropriating authority is authorised to expropriate land for mining and extraction purposes (Article 5). The law states for compensation for land acquisition, and provides that the compensation must be paid "prior to the implementation of the project" (Article 37).

While these local laws are generally aligned with international principles, there are some concerns in their legislation and/or implementation. As previously stated, the Afghan government refers to World Bank's Operational Policies 4.12 (World Bank Policies) in relation to the Aynak project, in the following sub-section, (the details of the Aynak case is explained). When we compare these policies and the Law on Land Acquisition, three discrepancies stand out. First, contrary to the World Bank Policies (III, 6(a) (ii)), the Law on Land Acquisition is developed in a semi-participatory way which means community consultation is not required. Second, the same rule does not apply to resettlement plans and resettlement support, which World Bank policies outline in detail as resettlement measures (Part I. Resettlement Plan). There are no provisions for public monitoring mechanisms, and they are not properly implemented. Third, the grievance procedures, which the World Bank regulations support in informal dispute (Part I, 17), are not mandated under the law.

4. DISPLACEMENT AND INEQUALITY IN INDIA

India's commitment to green transition is evident through its various ambitious projects, such water, solar and hydroelectric projects. The Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River in India is one such project which further solidifies India's key position as a player in the green energy movement. Unfortunately, this project is a case of green transition that has caused displacement, both directly and indirectly at a massive scale. Further, the inadequate resettlement and rehabilitation actions have exacerbated inequalities. In spite of multiple

benefits flowing from the dam project, the number of people displaced by it cannot be overlooked.

4.1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Starting from the central states of India's Madhya Pradesh to flowing west through the states of Gujarat to Maharashtra to the gulf of Khambhat, the Narmada River is the fifth longest river in India. The Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada River seeks to harness its potential for electricity generation, irrigation in the arid, economic development and poverty alleviation.

Dams are pivotal to India's green movement since they provide tangible benefits through hydroelectricity and modernised agriculture and irrigation (Savur 1995). The aim of the project is three-fold: (i) to provide drinking water to approximately 40 million people in the drought prone regions of Rajasthan (ii) irrigation facilities to regions in Gujarat and Rajasthan; (iii) provide hydroelectric power. However, the project has further exacerbated inequalities, displacing marginalised communities from their land and cultures. The people to be displaced by this project are "tribal communities who have lands in the steep, rocky and forested areas" (Morse B. and Berger T., 1992)

Development projects in India have resulted in relocation of approximately 50 million people, between 1947 and 1997, with large dams alone causing the displacement of 16 million people (Baviskar, 1995). Although it has its roots in the colonial and post-colonial eras, development-induced displacement in the Indian context became a major issue in the neo-liberal period. Various developmental activities namely dams (Singh, 2020), mining activities (Noy, 2023), Special Economic Zones (Levien, 2013; Paul, 2019) have created displacement in the name of development a recurring phenomenon.

4.2. FORCED DISPLACEMENT OF THE ADIVASI (INDIGENOUS) COMMUNITIES

All human rights violations were manifested with the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam, the second largest project in the Narmada, both in terms of areas submerged and the number of Indigenous Adivasi's displaced (Baviskar, 1995). As per World Bank, it was estimated that the project once completed would submerge around 37,000 hectares of land; 80,000 hectares of canal routes and will displace 1,00,000 people from 245 villages (Morse and Berger, 1992).

Interestingly, as per independent on-ground reports, the Sardar Sarovar Dam project has presently displaced Adivasis and farmers in massive numbers. It has displaced approximately 244 villages and one township, which includes communities from states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat in India i.e., 192 villages in Madhya Pradesh, 33 villages in Maharashtra, and 19 villages in Gujarat (Modi, 2004).

Under some circumstances, displacement could be justified if communities displaced are properly consulted and then sufficiently rehabilitated and compensated. Michael Cernea has argued that development induced environmental displacement can be justified only when displaced people are not left worse off than they were before the project (Cemea, 1993). It is the moral responsibility of the states and international institutions to ensure proper rehabilitation, resettlement and compensation of people displaced as a result of the environmental project.

It is, unfortunately, neither the case that the displaced communities of the Sardar Sarovar Dam project were fully compensated and rehabilitated, nor were the different social groups equally sharing in the costs and the benefits of the project. The Justice Jha Commission's investigation highlighted severe irregularities and corruption in the rehabilitation process, with many resettlement sites lacking basic amenities, such as schools, water and healthcare (Justice Jha Commission report, 2008). This is typical of the pattern of environmental displacement in which the communities deemed "in the way" of national development are often the most vulnerable members of society (Bodley 1990; Penz 2019).

4.3. DOMESTIC LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN INDIA

The Domestic legal framework in India i.e., The Forests Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) recognises the right of local communities to manage their lands and forests and mandates consent from Gram Sabhas (village assemblies) for any land diversion, including green energy projects. However, many projects bypass this requirement and there is inconsistency in implementation with delay in recognising forest rights of Indigenous Communities. Also, The Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement Act (LARR), 2013 governs the acquisition of land for public purposes which also includes green energy projects. The act provides for fair compensation, rehabilitation and resettlement procedures. However, wind, farm, solar and water projects come under public projects and often exempt them from the above-mentioned requirements.

Apart from the two local laws, India also has The Environment Protection Act, 1986 which includes provisions, such as Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) which are assessments to be carried out mandatorily to assess the impact of any green project on forest lands, biodiversity and local communities' rights. However, the EIA is sometimes exempted in certain green energy projects. In some cases, it is also fast-tracked, leading to bypassing of community consultations and environment assessments.

5. POLICY AND LEGAL RESPONSES

While interpreting Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights (ICCPR), the human right committee under its general comment no. 36 states that "right to life" shall be understood broadly to include individuals to enjoy their lives with dignity (UN Human Rights Committee, General comment no. 36). It implies that states must take appropriate steps in situations that give rise to threats to lives or prevent individuals from enjoying their lives to live with dignity (ibid, para 26). The committee explicitly states that these also include the 'deprivation of Indigenous Peoples territories, lands and resources'(ibid).

Further reflecting on international human rights laws and understanding human rights as the core value, the rights provided under United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) provides comprehensive rights for the Indigenous Peoples and lays down minimum standards for the dignity and survival of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP

Art. 43). Albeit a non-binding instrument, the UNDRIP elaborates on existing human rights obligations and fundamental rights which applies to the specific situations of Indigenous Communities.

Another international legal framework which addresses the protection Indigenous Peoples human rights is the ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ILO C169). Article 2 of the said convention puts states under obligation to develop coordinated and systematic action, with participation of Indigenous Communities to ensure protection and guarantee respect of these peoples.

The Fundamental principle of Indigenous rights is the right to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) and the state parties are obligated to respect and follow the principles of FPIC as contained within both UNDRIP and ILO. Article 10 of UNDRIP states that Indigenous Communities shall not be forcibly removed from their territories and lands. Without Free, Prior, and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples, no relocation shall take place and must take place only after agreement on just and fair compensation. The principles of FPIC are pivotal for preserving the Indigenous livelihoods and culture. Such projects, without checks and balances, challenge the legitimacy of 'Green' transition. As a result, projects implemented through green grabbing as explained above threatens the Indigenous way of life.

The Indigenous identities are central to their values and culture which is intertwined with their ancestral lands, and therefore, another relevant international legal framework is the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) which provides for the right to take part in cultural life and is guaranteed under Article 15(1)(a). Therefore, forced displacement and land grabbing threaten their livelihoods, including access to natural resources, means of subsistence which also leads to loss of their cultural identities(Mazel O., 2009).

International treaties and frameworks have made it clear that the right to live with dignity is violated when Indigenous Peoples are forcibly displaced from their ancestral lands. This has also been made clear by international courts and tribunals. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACTHR) in the case of Yakye Axa v Paraguay has held that states must make every endeavour to respect and protect the right to life by taking measures towards fulfilment to the right to decent life, particularly in cases where people are vulnerable and mostly at risk (para 162). The court has further interpreted that forced displacement of members of Yakye Axa Community from their ancestral lands was incompatible with their human dignity (para 168). The right to life is significant as it is considered as a "supreme right" (UN Human Rights Committee).

6. CONCLUSION: ADDRESSING BARRIERS FOR A JUST AND INCLUSIVE GREEN ENERGY TRANSITION

The complex relationship between Indigenous rights and energy transition has become an increasingly prominent issue worldwide. With the increasing demand for minerals and renewable resources, the regions rich in these resources often overlap with territories inhabited by Indigenous and local communities. These communities have unique rights and cultural ties to their land which must be respected and protected at all times. However, this does not mean

that mineral extraction must cease completely. Rather, a careful balance must be struck to ensure that both parties' needs and rights are met.

To truly address these issues, human rights-based approach is imperative.

Firstly, there is an urgent need to adopt a human rights based approach in the mining sector, which fully incorporates the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This approach must recognise the importance of land rights as well as ensuring meaningful engagement, equitable benefit-sharing and providing fair compensation for any adverse impacts and establishing transparent mechanisms for resolving conflicts. Ensuring accountability across scales is important, from different layers of responsibility in local/national institutions to operating companies and their shareholders.

Secondly, it is important to create an inclusive community consultation with the local and Indigenous Communities. Consulting them ensures their rights are respected and their voices heard in decisions that affect their lives and environment. inclusive community consultation, particularly with Indigenous and local communities, is essential for ensuring that the energy transition is fair, equitable, and sustainable. Also, Indigenous and local communities possess valuable knowledge about their environments, including biodiversity, traditional practices, and sustainable resource management. Integrating this knowledge into project planning can lead to more sustainable outcomes.

In the context of extractive industries and renewable energy projects, an unsettling reality emerges that perpetuates the exploitation, marginalisation and exacerbates inequalities of Indigenous and local communities. The transition to green energy and efforts to combat climate change are gaining importance, yet the encroachment imposed by extractive industries and renewable energy projects challenges the notion of a truly sustainable and just transition. Merely categorising these projects as part of the green energy transition is inadequate and insufficient unless there is recognition, inclusion, equity and involving, and obtaining FPIC principles discussed earlier. This raises questions about the authenticity of the "greenness" of the green energy transition. Energy transition to the "Green Economy" cannot happen without the participation and leadership of Indigenous and local communities. Transformative action is indispensable in realising a just transition that upholds sustainability, equality, and human rights for all.

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Restricting rights, preserving inequalities: When microaggressions function as tools to maintain ableist and sexist hegemonies

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Abstract:
How do microaggressions directed at Filipino women with mobility disabilities function as mechanisms of oppression that simultaneously restrict their exercise of fundamental human rights and maintain systems of ableist and sexist hegemonies? We aim to address this question by focusing on the qualitative data obtained from a focus group discussion with 10 women with mobility disabilities from Tahanang Walang Hagdanan, Inc., to elucidate the link between microaggressions and inequalities. Using feminist disability studies and faces of oppression as theoretical lens, we identified two overarching themes: (1) Microaggressions as tools to limit rights enjoyment: demonstrates how microaggressions restrict women with mobility disabilities' enjoyment of human rights; and (2) Microaggressions as tools to maintain existing inequalities: shows how microaggressions preserve existing hegemonic power structures that privilege able-bodied individuals and patriarchal norms. Building on these findings, we argue that microaggressions are not subtle nor isolated incidents all the time. They vary across certain spaces and times, and their nuances make them implicit tools to maintain ableist and sexist hegemonies. There is a need to problematise microaggressions as actual problems embedded in social structures that have been normalised. Moreover, revealing their complexities and ambiguities is necessary rather than accepting them as "unintended consequences" of social inclusion. We posit the urgency to critically discuss how microaggressions that occur in public and private spaces must be addressed in context-specific manners.

INTRODUCTION

Legislative and policy strides in disability and gender inclusion have challenged some systems of oppression. In the case of the Philippines, two major legislative frameworks, the Magna Carta for Disabled People[1] in 1992 and the Magna Carta of Women in 2009, have

[1] The Magna Carta for Disabled Persons in 1992 has been amended to RA 9442 in 2007 with three major coverages: renaming disabled persons to persons with disability, expanding additional privileges and incentives to persons with disabilities, and prohibiting verbal, non-verbal ridicule and vilification against persons with disabilities. In the RA 9442, the closest association the law could cover in terms of microaggressions is the prohibition of ridicule and vilification, though implicitly. Other amendments were made such as the RA 10070 in

established legal definitions of discrimination, detailed what constitutes it, and identified some structural barriers that must be eliminated. From a human rights perspective, these legislative frameworks establish a significant win for both the disability and women's rights movement, as these warrant persons with disabilities and women to have the same entitlements as able-bodied and men. Moreover, these are recognitions of how social systems have been unequal and hegemonised by able-bodiedness and patriarchy. Having a legislative reference to guarantee rights entitlement to persons with disabilities and women has aimed not only at reducing inequalities, but it has also paved the way to document how inequalities continue to perpetuate, though at a limited level.

Despite efforts towards gender mainstreaming and disability inclusion, persons with disabilities, specifically women, continue to suffer from social inequalities, not only in the Philippines but also in other parts of the world (Sol Cruz et al., 2021; United Nations, 2020; WHO and World Bank, 2011). Social inequality and discrimination are deeply intertwined (Makhanya, 2024). For example, when social inequalities are contextualised from legal definitions of discrimination, some of their manifestations become obvious (e.g., economic inequality occurs when persons with disabilities are denied access to employment or if they get employed, they are paid less than their able-bodied counterparts; health inequality occurs when persons with disabilities and low-income women cannot access healthcare by chance or choice; and opportunity inequality occurs when there are barriers that prevent persons with disabilities and low-income women from achieving their full potential). From a rights-based perspective, because these discriminations are clearly defined within existing legal references, addressing them becomes a state obligation, as they are understood as structural problems. However, we argue that microaggressions have continually been overlooked as a distinct form of discrimination that perpetuates social inequalities, hence social injustices. Microaggressions are the "everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or harmful messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalised group membership" (Sue, 2010, p. 229). Because of their covert and subtle characteristics, this type of discrimination has not met the legal definitions written in existing laws. Thus, addressing them has come at the expense of the targeted marginalised group instead of the state. Therefore, challenging these tends to be at the interpersonal level (Ancha, 2022; Ancha & Celebrado, 2024; Olkin, 2022; Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2021) or individual problems that marginalised identities navigate daily.

At the intersection of gender and disability, women and girls with disabilities face distinct forms of *microaggression* that shape their gendered and disabled lived experiences. However, how microaggressions reinforce inequalities and maintain sexist and ableist hegemonies is yet to be documented in the Philippine context.

2010, which mandates local government units to prioritise services for persons with disabilities through the Persons with Disabilities Affairs Office (PDAO); RA 11228 in 2019 which provided mandatory Philippine Health Insurance (PhilHealth) coverage to all persons with disabilities; and RA 10524 which requires public and private sectors with specific job quotas and allocations for persons with disabilities.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In principle, both Magna Carta for Disabled People and Magna Carta of Women outline eliminating discrimination, granting equal opportunities, and allocating job employment (e.g., 1% of jobs in public or private sectors must be allocated for persons with disabilities, and a 50-50 gender balance for job positions in government), among others, as rightful entitlements for persons with disabilities and marginalised women. However, Mina's (2013) research on the employment of persons with disabilities in Metro Manila and Rosario, Batangas revealed that persons with disabilities were better employed in urban areas than in rural areas; employment of the visually impaired was high in urban areas, while employment of the hearing impaired was high in rural areas. Mina (2013) also highlighted that most persons with disabilities were disproportionately underemployed, and opportunities were limited to blue-collar or skill-based jobs. Bucchave and Belghith (2022) also explained that despite the Philippines' impressive performances in closing gender gaps since the enactment of the Magna Carta of Women, women's labour force participation remains persistently low, where many women dominate jobs that are low-skilled, casual, and oftentimes have no social protection. In other words, the right entitlements in the Philippines did not necessarily translate into the availability of better opportunities for those they wish to serve. To an extent, these studies have only highlighted how inequality continues in the lives of marginalised groups.

Amartya Sen (1992, 1999) contextualised inequality within the concept of capabilities and functionings. Sen was a known critic of traditional development approaches that solely focused on expanding material wealth and aggregate gross domestic product (GDP) but not quality of life (Day et al., 2016). Sen (1992, 1999) explained that whilst material income is important, development must focus on the ability of individuals to choose a quality of life that they value. From Sen's (1999) perspective, development is achieved if individuals have freedom. However, freedom can only materialise when individuals have capabilities that can be turned to certain functionings. Capabilities are the "actual and real opportunities to realise given functionings" (Day et al., 2016, p. 258). In the context of Filipino women with disabilities, the existence of Magna Carta for Disabled People and Magna Carta of Women, alongside their detailed provisions for Filipino women, did not religiously translate to accessibility of real and actual opportunities and elimination of inequalities in significant figures (see Agbon & Mina, 2017; Ancha, 2022; Ancha & Celebrado, 2024; De Luna-Narido & Tacadao, 2016; Mina, 2013; Reyes et al., 2017). As a result, inequalities continue to be part of the social fabric of Filipino persons with disabilities, with more profound impacts on women with disabilities. The interrelationship of inequality and capabilities is concomitant with Feminist scholar Naila Kabeer's concept of inequality. For Kabeer, addressing inequalities must be two-pronged: one that challenges vertical inequalities, and the other that challenges horizontal inequalities. Kabeer (2015) argued that vertical inequalities refer to class-based inequalities, including economic and social inequalities. Thus, the relationship between vertical inequalities and blatant discrimination is clear. However, Kabeer (2015) noted that horizontal inequalities refer to discrimination based on group differences (e.g., between gender, race, age, ethnicity, caste, etc). In most instances, horizontal inequalities overlap with the vertical

inequalities. In the case of Filipino women with disabilities in Ancha & Celebrado's (2024) research, 29.7% of the participants were undergraduate degree holders but worked in casual, piece-per-unit jobs. This shows a misalignment of what they can be based on their current capacities, but are unable to materialise their potential because of the lack of actual and real capabilities; additionally, this also reflects Mina's (2013) report on the underemployment of persons with disabilities. These inequalities are further exacerbated by discriminations and microaggressions that persons with disabilities described in Ancha's (2022) study as "daily tortures". Another example of this is Ancha and Celebrado's (2024, p. 63) study, where the study participants themselves defined microaggression as "a sense of otherness for persons with disabilities that, despite their readiness to withstand insults or comments, still perpetuates their sense of difference from the majority". Stemming from Sen's concept of inequality, the horizontal inequalities they experience due to microaggressions against their group membership impede them from unleashing their potential and achieving freedoms. In this logical sequence, it can be argued that horizontal inequalities are reinforced by the overlapping of overt discrimination and microaggression.

Applying Sen's concept of inequality in the current context of persons with disabilities and marginalised women, we argue that while they both navigate overt discrimination by reclaiming their rights, they may consciously or unconsciously navigate covert forms of discrimination, in other words, microaggressions. However, in Ancha and Celebrado's (2024) study on microaggressions, Filipino women with mobility disabilities are left to challenge microaggressions upon themselves. Because the contextualisation of microaggressions is not clearly defined within legal definitions of discrimination and is minimally implied in other existing laws (e.g., Safe Spaces Act of 2019), or there is limited awareness of the concept, addressing microaggressions becomes an individual problem to challenge. Therefore, as inequality and discrimination are intertwined, so are microaggressions. However, studies on how microaggressions and inequality influence each other in the context of Filipino women with disabilities are limited.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our present paper examines how everyday microaggressions directed at Filipino women with mobility disabilities function as mechanisms of oppression that simultaneously impact their exercise of fundamental human rights and maintain existing ableist and sexist hegemonic power structures. Specifically, it seeks to answer two research questions:

1. How do microaggressions affect Filipino women with mobility disabilities' enjoyment of fundamental human rights?
2. In what ways do microaggressions preserve ableist and sexist hegemonic power structures and perpetuate inequalities for Filipino women with mobility disabilities?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In analysing our data, we draw upon Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work in feminist disability studies, alongside Iris Marion Young's framework of the five faces of oppression. We believe that the integration of these theories allows us to conduct an in-depth examination of how gender and disability, as analytical categories, intersect in participants' everyday experiences of microaggressions, while also revealing how these subtle actions or remarks have cumulative effects that can contribute to Filipino women with mobility disabilities' experiences of oppression.

We employ feminist disability studies as a lens to explore the intersection of gender and disability vis-à-vis microaggressions and their connection to inequality. This interdisciplinary perspective critically examines the dominant assumptions that frame disability as a medical flaw (see the microaggression examples of Ancha, 2022; Ancha & Celebrado, 2024) rather than a social construction (Garland-Thomson, 2001, 2005; Hall, 2002). Moreover, this lens acknowledges disability as "a culturally fabricated narrative of the body" that intersects with other systems of oppression, including gender and race, which operate simultaneously and compound one another (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p. 5). By applying feminist disability studies lens, we emphasise that women with disabilities' lived experiences must be at the centre of analysis, which necessitates discourse beyond essentialism or social or medical models of disability. Using this lens, we aim to illuminate the subtle power dynamics produced by microaggressions that often reflect essentialist constructions of the body.

While the feminist disability studies lens is particularly useful in understanding the distinct ways in which microaggressions target Filipino women with mobility disabilities at the intersection of gender and disability, we also acknowledge the need to examine how these everyday encounters contribute to structural inequalities and broader injustices. We navigate this analytical issue by integrating Iris Marion Young's (1990) five faces of oppression framework, detailed in her seminal text "Justice and the Politics of Difference." Departing from the conventional understanding of justice that emphasises fair distribution of resources and responsibilities, Young's (1990) conception of social justice also requires "institutional conditions [that are] necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation" (p. 39). Injustice, according to Young, refers to "two forms of disabling constraints, oppression and domination" (p. 39).

We assert that Young's operationalisation of oppression is particularly valuable for our analysis. She expanded the concept of oppression beyond the deliberate practice of tyranny to structural constraints embedded within everyday institutional and social practices or—to borrow from her own words—"the normal processes of everyday life" (Young, 1990, p. 41). Rather than developing a conceptualization of oppression anchored in every oppressed group, Young identified five distinct but interconnected "faces" for identifying oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (see Table 1 for the description). Her framework recognises that different social groups may experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously. However, the presence of even a single condition constitutes sufficient grounds for recognising a group as oppressed (Young, 1990).

Faces of Oppression	Definition
Exploitation	The systematic "transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another" (p. 49)
Marginalization	The expulsion of group of people "from useful participation in social life" (p. 53)
Powerlessness	The "lack of authority, status, and sense of self" (p. 57)
Cultural Imperialism	The "universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm" (p. 59)
Violence	Not only includes physical attack, but also "less severe incidents of harassment, intimidation, or ridicule simply for the purpose of degrading, humiliating, or stigmatizing group members" (p. 61)

TABLE 1*: The Five Faces of Oppression (Young, 1990)*

The integration of Garland-Thomson's feminist disability studies and Young's five faces of oppression as our paper's theoretical grounding proved to be valuable in addressing the research questions for two reasons. First, the analytical lens offered by both theories is relevant in uncovering how gender and disability converge in the dominant societal narratives privileging heterosexuality and able-bodiedness, producing and reproducing unique experiences of oppression that disproportionately affect Filipino women with mobility disabilities' enjoyment of fundamental human rights. Second, both theories can further advance our understanding of how these seemingly minor acts or remarks—often seen as a result of individual prejudice or discriminatory practices and policies —can translate into concrete forms of structural and institutional oppressions.

METHODS

STUDY DESIGN AND PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT[2]

Drawing from a larger convergent parallel mixed-methods study examining the experiences of microaggression among Filipino women with mobility disabilities (Ancha & Celebrado, 2024), this present paper specifically utilised and examined qualitative data to provide a rich and contextual understanding of participants' lived realities (Creswell & Creswell, 2023) and illustrate how everyday microaggressions can impede the enjoyment of human rights and preserve hegemonic power structures and inequalities.

We collaborated with *Tahanang Walang Hagdanan Inc*. (TWHI)[3] to recruit participants for the study. Using convenience sampling, 10 women with mobility disabilities were subsampled from 37 survey respondents. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity.

[2] For more comprehensive description of the study's methods and materials, please refer to our article "Microaggression Toward Filipino Women with Mobility Disabilities: From Microstories to Macrostruggles" by C. J. R. Ancha and J. E. R. Celebrado, 2024, *Review of Women's Studies*, *34*(1). Copyright 2024 by the UP Center for Women's and Gender Studies.

[3] TWHI is a non-stock, non-profit, and non-governmental organization in the Philippines whose primary focus is to improve the lives of persons with mobility disabilities.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Qualitative data were collected through a focus group discussion (FGD) conducted in November 2023. Our discussion with the participants lasted 90 minutes (about 3 hours) and was scheduled based on their availability (i.e., after their working hours in TWHI). The topics covered in the FGD included distinct manifestations of microaggressions in the everyday realities of women with mobility disabilities and their strategies to address these specific manifestations. Prior to asking the interview questions, all participants were asked to sign an informed consent form, and their questions about the study were addressed. The discussion was audio-recorded with permission from the participants, anonymised for their privacy, and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were stored in a password-protected file and were not shared with anyone except the researchers. All FGD participants received a grocery store gift card worth Php 500.00 (approximately GBP 6.70) as an honourarium for participating in the study.

We analysed the qualitative data using thematic analysis (Green et al., 2007), which included reading and re-reading of the FGD transcription to be familiarised with the data, processing of codes through inductive and deductive approaches, transferring the participants' responses and corresponding codes to Microsoft Excel for further processing, identifying patterns and categories, and developing the themes and sub-themes. We conducted the initial identification of codes and themes independently and convened several times to compare our codes and themes to resolve discrepancies.

POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

As feminist researchers, we recognise that our social background may have influenced how we designed, collected, and analysed the data of this study.

Jan Erron R. Celebrado. I approached this research as an able-bodied cisgender gay man with experience advocating for gender, sexual minorities, and disability rights. While I positioned myself as an outsider to the community of women with mobility disabilities, as this research was my first direct engagement with this group, I brought relevant experience working on disability-related issues through my professional work in the development sector and academic background in women and gender studies. Throughout the research process, I remained mindful of how my outsider status might influence my interpretation of the participants' experiences. I addressed this by engaging in regular reflexive discussions with my co-researcher, who was more familiar with the community. As a feminist researcher attuned to intersectional oppressions, I recognised the importance of centering participants' narratives while acknowledging the limitations of my perspectives.

Christelle Juin R. Ancha. I approached this research with the awareness that I am an able-bodied, cisgender lesbian woman, within the upper-middle-income working-class category. I have been involved with TWHI for nearly 10 years as a student, development worker, researcher, and sometimes volunteer. Throughout the decade, I have created personal and professional relationships with persons with disabilities at TWHI. At varying capacities, the stories that I have shared and received alongside people of TWHI continue to influence my biases as a researcher. My intersecting identities and combined lived experiences have shaped my sociological thinking towards gender and disability issues. Therefore, when I co-wrote this

research, I was aware of my biases towards women's emancipation and was never neutral when engaging with our research participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What follows is a discussion on the two key findings of this paper: (1) Microaggressions as tools to limit rights enjoyment; and (2) Microaggressions as tools to maintain existing inequalities.

MICROAGGRESSIONS AS TOOLS TO LIMIT RIGHTS ENJOYMENT

This theme shows that microaggressions, although subtle and unintentional, can impede the enjoyment of fundamental human rights for women with mobility disabilities and—in the process—produce and reproduce systemic inequalities. We observed that some forms of microaggression can impose restrictions on women with mobility disabilities: (1) right to movement; (2) sexual and reproductive rights; (3) right to social participation; and (4) right to employment and education.

Right to Movement. Almost all participants shared their experience of being restricted in their fundamental mobility rights through two forms of microaggression: *overprotection from family members*, which occurs when "family members of women with disabilities restrict the latter's capability to become the decision-makers of themselves and their bodies" (Ancha, 2022) and *second-class citizenship*, which happens when "persons with disabilities' rights to equality are denied because they are bothersome, expensive, and a waste of time, effort, and resources" (Keller & Galgay, 2010, p. 250). As narrated by Jessa (48 years old, Operations), she received overprotection remarks from family members (rooted in sexism), and Jaz (48 years old, Administration Department) was questioned about her mobility when using public transport services (stemming from ableism). This has resulted in some degree of discomfort, particularly in how it limited their agency, as reflected in their frustrations towards others who are making decisions on their behalf:

> When I would go out before, my mother would tell me, "Do not go out, children will mock you." Jessa (48 years old, Operations)
>
> …I have had experiences with taxi drivers too. They would question why I was wandering around, asking, "Why are you travelling alone?" Things like that. "Why are you wandering? Don't you find it difficult? Of course, you would be annoyed by it. Why? Are able-bodied people only have the right to move freely? Do we not have the right to take leisure walks? Or to unwind?" Jaz (48 years old, Administration Department)

Jessa's and Jaz's narratives reflect how sexism and ableism converge in subtle but complex ways to simultaneously justify these mobility restrictions and how ableism and sexism have shaped one's understanding of the world. In the case of Jessa's parent and Jaz's experience with a taxi driver, both perpetrators questioned or limited Jessa's and Jaz's agency, but never the barriers that restrict them. Through this intersection, we argue that Jessa and Jaz, and probably other participants, experience oppression in the form of *marginalisation*, being expelled from everyday social participation, and *powerlessness*, or the absence of decision-

making power in their own lives (Young, 1990). Although both marginalisation and powerlessness in Young's (1990) original conception looked into power relations within the social division of labour (e.g., between professionals and non-professionals, middle class and working class), our analysis of power relations shows how Jessa's parent and Jaz's interaction with the taxi driver, both able-bodied, seemed to have power over them to commit those microaggressions. The perpetrators of microaggressions—or the oppressors—are individuals whom they encounter daily, providing us a glimpse of how oppression takes new forms in the form of microaggressions that are deeply personal yet also structural.

Sexual and Reproductive Rights. Microaggressions also target sexuality and intimacy, potentially undermining sexual and reproductive autonomy. Some participants experienced *desexualisation*, which happens "when sexuality and sexual being [are] denied' (Keller & Galgay, 2010, p. 250). When asked about romantic and sexual relationships, Julie and Jing were questioned about their choices to be intimate with able-bodied individuals; others assumed they were incapable of sexual desires or relationships (stemming from ableism), while simultaneously being questioned about their ability to perform reproductive roles (rooted in sexism):

> When I had an able-bodied boyfriend, his family told him, "What do you need? Why do you need a person with a disability? Someone with an impairment. That is just a burden. What will happen to your life with them? They just need to be taken care of." So, I no longer pursued someone able-bodied. I felt hurt when they treated me that way when I had an able-bodied boyfriend. (Julie, 29 years old, Operations)
>
> Some wonder how they manage [to be together]. How do they [have sex]? How do they have children? Those kinds of things. Sometimes, you even question yourself because my capacity as a mother is being doubted. (Jing, 49 years old, Operations)

In Julie's and Jing's accounts, it becomes evident that some forms of microaggressions are shaped by dominant narratives on sexuality, privileging able-bodiedness; thus, the underpinnings of sexuality are limited to able-bodied imaginations. In their cases, their experiences of microaggressions paint a "collective cultural imagination" (Garland-Thomson, 2005, p. 1567) that casts women with disabilities as incapable of exercising intimacy or unfit for parenthood. These hegemonic notions on the sexual and reproductive health of women with disabilities align with the medical model of disability, which feminist disability scholars have challenged due to its promotion of normalisation that privileges able-bodiedness as the ultimate image of what is normal and devalues bodies that do not conform to cultural norms (Garland-Thomson, 2008). Such narratives also align with Young's (1990) conceptualisation of *cultural imperialism*—or the privileging of dominant group's experience and culture as the norm—further resulting in some participants internalising these hegemonic beliefs and affecting their sexual and reproductive autonomy.

Right to Social Participation. Movement restrictions among the participants also limit their full potential to participate in their communities equally with others. This was reflected in participants' experiences of *overprotection from their family members,* where the convergence of sexist and ableist presumptions of female inferiority and dependency resulted in limited participation in outside activities. Although most participants reported that these comments or behaviours stemmed from concern rather than discrimination, it is crucial to point out that *microaggressions* often thrive in innocuous environments with unequal power

relations, incrementally contributing to existing inequalities. As Jessa (48 years old, Operations) shared:

> …it was as if you felt that you no longer had freedom. You were confined to your home; that is, the extent of your world. Sometimes, they even emphasised that you cannot do anything, so you tend to feel diminished as a person.

Right to Employment and Education. The negative consequences of microaggression extend to participants' access to employment and education. Jesusa shared how *overprotection from family members* resulted in limited employment opportunities, whereas Jasmin lamented how *overprotection* from her teachers led to exclusion from school activities. In both instances, the intersection of ableism and sexism is present, particularly how able-bodied individuals assume that participants are fragile and incapacitated for being women with mobility disabilities. Nonetheless, we see how some participants resisted the restrictions bestowed upon them, reflecting how they exercise agency within constraints:

> I was not permitted by my mother to apply to regular offices because she said I might struggle with commuting, but I am resilient. I am determined to proceed, even if it is difficult. (Jesusa, 30 years old, Operations)
>
> I was exempt during flag ceremonies. If it rained even slightly, they told me not to attend school. But I was stubborn! As long as the classes were not suspended, I would attend them. Teachers tend to be overprotective, thinking that we will always face difficulties. (Jasmin, 46 years old, Operations)

Another form of microaggression, *helplessness,* occurs when "people frantically try to help persons with disabilities" (Keller & Galgay, 2010, p. 249), which may also result in limited employment opportunities for some participants. Stemming from dominant cultural narratives that construct persons with disabilities as recipients of charity, helplessness can contribute to negative perceptions that significantly limit women with disabilities' employment opportunities. We observed that helplessness is evident in participants' experiences of receiving unsolicited financial assistance. For example, Jesusa (30 years old, Operations) vividly recounted: "I was buying something from a bakery when someone handed me money to cover my purchases," while Julie (29 years old, Operations) shared: "At the church, someone stopped and gave me money to buy rice." What these encounters reveal is how strangers automatically assume that these women required charity based solely on their visible disability, despite both being employed at TWHI. Such interactions suggest how helplessness reinforces societal assumptions that women with disabilities are naturally dependent and therefore unsuitable for stable employment.

The perpetual positioning of women with mobility disabilities as recipients of protection and assistance through overprotection from family members and helplessness aligns with the charity and medical model of disability, which feminist disability scholars problematise (Garland-Thomson, 2008). Furthermore, we argue that this form of microaggression reflects the intersection of multiple faces of oppression, specifically through *cultural imperialism*, *powerlessness*, and *marginalisation* (Young, 1990).

In this theme, we attempted to demonstrate how microaggressions function as tools for oppression that violate fundamental rights guaranteed under international treaties (e.g., the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and national legislations (e.g., the

Philippines' Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities and Magna Carta of Women). We believe that we are successful to some extent, particularly in highlighting these limitations that prevent them from participating on an equal basis with others, thereby contributing to structural inequalities across different spheres of public and private life.

Nevertheless, how do these microaggressions operate as mechanisms for oppression in the context of Filipino women with mobility disabilities' enjoyment of fundamental human rights? We answer this question through three key points. First, our findings highlight how dominant cultural narratives about gender (e.g., being inferior, submissive, incapable, unfit to be mothers) and disability (e.g., being dependent, incapacitated, asexual) intersect to create ableist-sexist microaggressions that systematically exclude participants from equal access and participation in society, constituting violations of their right to mobility, sexual and reproductive autonomy, social participation, education and employment. Second, we showed how these seemingly individualised, minor, and frequently dismissed encounters of ableist-sexist microaggressions have the cumulative ability to fundamentally restrict Filipino women with mobility disabilities' exercise of their rights. Lastly, rather than considering them as isolated incidents, our findings suggest that these microaggressions, within the context of gender and disability rights, operationalise multiple faces of oppression simultaneously—like small but active gears, levers, and hidden wires that are necessary to run a well-oiled machine relentlessly. We observed this operationalisation in participants' accounts where they faced exclusion from full social participation (marginalisation), were denied autonomy over their own lives (powerlessness), and consistently compared with able-bodied individuals (cultural imperialism).

Put another way, although observable at the individual level, we agree with other scholars who argue that microaggressions are symptoms of structural and systemic issues (for gender, see Ancha, 2022; for disability, see Olkin, 2022; for racial microaggressions, see Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2021). The second theme identified in this study further explains this argument, specifically how microaggressions serve as tools to preserve existing hegemonic power structures that oppress women with disabilities, specifically Filipino women with mobility disabilities.

MICROAGGRESSIONS AS TOOLS TO MAINTAIN EXISTING INEQUALITIES

Building on our analysis of how microaggressions impede fundamental human rights, we identify two ways through which these seemingly minor acts preserve existing power structures and reinforce the oppression of Filipino women with mobility disabilities: (1) through normalisation of exclusion; and (2) through reinforcement of dependency.

First, we observed that exclusion was normalised through microaggression. One example is *second-class citizenship*, particularly participants' encounters of being ignored by public transportation service providers and being labelled a "hassle" or taking "too much time to accommodate" (Ancha & Celebrado, 2024, p. 58). This form of microaggression frames inaccessibility as inevitable rather than discriminatory, positioning it as an individual problem rather than a social concern (Garland-Thomson, 2005; Olkin, 2022). Normalisation of exclusion was also observed not only in the public, but also in the private sphere: in the form

of *overprotection of family members.* When asked about its effects, Jing (49 years old, Operations) answered, "When you are confined to your home all the time, you will begin to pity yourself. You will think that… ah, so that is how people outside are… they will only judge you or merely show you pity." In these two examples, we argue that ableist-sexist microaggressions support dominant narratives on gender and disability by sending subtle but clear messages that women with disabilities should not use public transportation or remain within their homes. This messaging serves dominant groups' interests by keeping the heterosexual and able-bodied status quo and not addressing existing environmental and attitudinal barriers.

Second, microaggressions reinforce dominant assumptions about dependency that strip Filipino women with mobility disabilities of agency and autonomy. The intersection of gender and disability assumptions is evident in *overprotection from family members, desexualisation,* and *helplessness* examples, where family members and other authority figures, or even strangers, automatically assume decision-making ability, perpetuating the idea that Filipino women with mobility disabilities are passive dependents rather than autonomous agents of their own lives. Reinforcement of dependency was also evident in *secondary gain,* which occurs when "a person expects to feel good or be praised for doing something for a [person with disability]" (Keller & Galgay, 2010, p. 249). The most reported form of microaggression among women with mobility disabilities in TWHI (Ancha & Celebrado, 2024), *secondary gain,* which reinforces the notion that persons with disabilities are passive recipients of charity while allowing perpetrators, mostly able-bodied individuals, to exploit this unequal power relation for their sense of self-worth (Keller & Galgay, 2010). The unsolicited help, usually in monetary form, might be construed as benevolence by perpetrators; however, participants emphasised such actions as insulting and diminishing: "…there are some types of help that are not helpful, but rather insulting" (Jolly, 47 years old, Administration). By reinforcing the "dependent narratives," we argue that microaggressions preserve unequal power relations, where able-bodied individuals assume authority over the lives and choices of women with disabilities, thereby maintaining social hierarchies that disadvantage them.

Understanding microaggressions requires recognising their function within broader systems of what Young (1990, p. 40) conceptualises as oppression, or the everyday processes that "inhibit the ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings." In this theme, we demonstrated how the accumulation of small acts of microaggressions has the power to render the lives and experiences of Filipino women with mobility disabilities invisible and ignored within dominant social and cultural narratives that maintain the status quo.

CONCLUSION

Our paper makes a critical intervention in the gender and disability discourse by challenging the prevailing understanding of microaggressions. As researchers who worked independently and collaboratively on gender and disability issues in the Philippines (see Ancha,

2022; Ancha & Celebrado, 2024; Celebrado, 2022, 2024), and immersed ourselves, in the lives of research participants who trusted their stories with us, microaggressions have always emerged as a concerning issue for the Filipino women with disabilities we encountered. Our commitment to contribute to gender and disability discourse in academia meant reexamining our positions towards microaggressions. When we began researching microaggressions using Pierce (1970), Sue (2010), Keller & Galgay (2010), and Olkin et al., (2019) literature, we both initially believed that microaggressions could be a wide range of descriptions from being subtle snubs or insults, derogatory comments or compliments to being harmful messages targeted at persons with disabilities, and other marginalised identities. However, as we went through the process of data gathering and analysis, we learned from Filipino women with disabilities that they have never taken microaggressions lightly. In Ancha's (2022) study, a participant described microaggressions as daily tortures; in Ancha & Celebrado's (2024) study, participants have defined microaggressions as reminders of their difference from the majority. In this paper, we contend that microaggressions are not subtle nor isolated insults all the time. They vary across certain spaces and times, and their nuances make them implicit tools to maintain ableist and sexist hegemonies. We also noticed that whilst legislative wins are necessary to a significant degree, these are not full assurances that microaggressions, as a distinct form of discrimination, will be eliminated over time.

We assert that *microaggressions* should be problematised as actual problems embedded in social structures that have been normalised. When microaggressions are discussed, questioned, and put into our social consciousness, we reveal their complexities and ambiguities. Therefore, we give new meaning to concepts that were once believed to be subtle and unintentional. The cumulative aspect of microaggressions makes our analysis of the concept an effective tool to reinforce and perpetuate the subordinate position of women with disabilities in a society that privileges able-bodiedness and heterosexuality despite the entitlements of women with disabilities from a human rights perspective.

The findings presented in this paper have clear political and theoretical stakes. Politically, our work provides a strong foundation for advocacy and policy reform by arguing the need to critically discuss how microaggressions that occur in public and private spaces must be addressed in context-specific manners. We demonstrated how microaggressions can impede the enjoyment of Filipino women with mobility disabilities' rights on an equal basis with others. Their microaggression experiences also reveal how they must constantly negotiate their intersecting identities, often at a significant personal cost. Thus, we assert that microaggressions must be seen relatively of the same gravity as blatant discrimination but with certain caveats. Whilst we argue microaggressions must be taken seriously as blatant discrimination, perpetrators need not necessarily be prosecuted in equal measures by those who commit overt discrimination. Some legal remedies may be helpful, such as the case of the Philippines in 2019 for legislating the Safe Spaces Act, wherein any forms of sexist comments and actions targeted at women in public spaces are subject to certain penalties: either a small fine, attending a gender sensitivity seminar, or doing community work. We believe that a legal remedy similar to the Safe Spaces Act can be applied in the context of microaggressions, with two key political goals: (1) to formalize a commitment to promoting and protecting the rights of Filipino women with mobility disabilities, sending a clear message that these behaviors are

unacceptable; and (2) to introduce context-specific policy actions that move beyond a one-size-fits-all punitive approach. Additionally, we highlight how Filipino women with disabilities challenge microaggressions through exercising their agency. In the case of *overprotection from family members*, even when Jessa (48 years old, Operations Department) was restricted by her parents, she decided to leave her home and find a life in TWHI. In the case of helplessness, they insisted that they never needed help and intentionally refused to receive help, especially when they never asked for it.

One key reason for recommending different pathways in addressing microaggression (i.e., not only through legislation) is the perpetrator's underlying motivations. For instance, we can differentiate the intentions between microaggressions coming from a place of affection or concern, such as *overprotection from family members* and *helplessness*, and microaggressions that are directly hostile, such as *second-class citizenship* and *desexualisation,* and we cannot guarantee that legislating microaggressions can address the issues, particularly those happening in the private sphere. While the motivations behind these everyday microaggressions vary, from family members' genuine concern to strangers' outright hostility, we maintain that impact, not intent, determines their oppressive function. As our findings suggest, regardless of the perpetrator's motivation, both microaggressions coming from a place of affection and directly hostile to Filipino women with mobility disabilities function as mechanisms that restrict their enjoyment of rights and maintain existing inequalities.

Theoretically, the integration of Garland-Thomson's (2001, 2005, 2008) feminist disability studies lens and Young's (1990) five faces of oppression in our paper can contribute to how we understand injustices at the intersection of gender and disability. We demonstrated this using microaggressions in the context of Filipino women with mobility disabilities and how these seemingly minor and often brushed-off actions or remarks can serve as a crucial mechanism through which systemic oppression is enacted and maintained. We assert that the two theories complemented each other: the feminist disability studies lens was able to explain how some forms of microaggressions reflect the intersection of gender and disability in dominant cultural narratives that position Filipino women with mobility disabilities at the lower level of social hierarchies. At the same time, the five faces of oppression framework problematises the "individualised" nature of everyday experiences of microaggressions and considers it a structural concern. Through this integrated theoretical framework, we offer a reconceptualization of microaggression that differs from previous literature by acknowledging the insufficiency of examining these acts solely through single-issue analyses or micro-level interactions.

In sum, dismissing microaggressions as "individual problems" that Filipino women with mobility disabilities need to deal with perpetuates systemic inequalities. Echoing the phrase that gained prominence during second-wave feminism, "*the personal is political",* we maintain that microaggressions are not isolated personal matters but manifestations of broader social and political structures that exist in societies in which sexist and ableist values and ideologies determine the inclusion or exclusion of groups of people. We urge gender and disability scholars to shift their focus when examining the nature of microaggressions, from a single-axis and individualised approach to its intersecting and structural nature, because only

then can we begin the urgent project of identifying and dismantling the oppressive structures they uphold.

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Revisiting HIV prevention in Africa: Confronting challenges, harnessing opportunities

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INTRODUCTION

In 2023, the number of new HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) cases reported annually (incidence) reached its lowest point globally since the early peaks of the AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) pandemic in the 1990s, yet progress remains uneven (UNAIDS, 2024). Despite this significant milestone, the 2023 incidence was three times higher than the set 2025 global target, with a reported rise in number of new HIV infections in multiple nations worldwide (UNAIDS, 2024; IHME, 2024).

Almost half of new HIV infections recorded in 2023 were in Africa, with approximately two thirds of the 39 million people worldwide living with HIV residing on the continent (UNAIDS, 2024). However, as highlighted by IHME (2024), these broad brushed headlines can often conceal the regional and country variation in progress, as well as the persistence of longstanding and emerging challenges. This is underscored by forecasting from IHME (2024), which warns that the world will miss UNAIDS' 2030 goals without renewed focus on HIV prevention and treatment scale-up.

WHAT INEQUALITIES ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

This perspective piece applies an equity lens to approaching the evidence on HIV prevention strategies, with a particular focus on the African continent, recognising that structural and systemic forces often shape who benefits from scientific advancements (UNAIDS, 2024; Dahlgren and Whitehead, 2021; Whitehead, 2007). Drawing on Whitehead's typology of actions to tackle social inequalities in healthcare and the Dahlgren-Whitehead model of health determinants; these inequities can be understood as arising from multiple layers of influence on individual behaviours to macro-level policies (Whitehead, 2007; Dahlgren and Whitehead, 2021).

Four interlinked domains of inequity stand out in the HIV prevention landscape:

1. Funding priorities

Global HIV responses have historically struggled to balance prevention and treatment investments (UNAIDS,2024; Merson et al., 2008). During the late 1990s and early 2000s, rapid and necessary expansion of antiretroviral therapy often overshadowed prevention, particularly community-based interventions (Merson et al., 2008). While treatment scale-up was urgently needed, this imbalance left prevention underfunded and fragmented, with insufficient investment in vaccine research and combination prevention strategies (UNAIDS, 2024). This reflects value judgements about immediacy versus long-term solutions, often shaped by actors in high-income countries, particularly the Global North (Merson et al., 2008).

2. Access

Key populations, including sex workers, young women and adolescent girls, gender diverse individuals and persons who use injectable drugs; often face structural barriers such as criminalisation, stigma, violence and human rights violations that restrict their ability to access HIV services (UNAIDS, 2024; Ayala et al., 2021). These barriers result in exclusion from facility-based HIV testing, prevention and treatment services, compounded by fear of discrimination and punitive laws (Macdonald, Verster and Baggaley, 2017).

Differentiated service delivery models, such as community-based testing and lay provider approaches, are recommended by WHO to overcome these barriers, yet implementation remains limited in many settings (WHO, 2023; Macdonald, Verster and Baggaley, 2017). Notably, countries such as Lesotho, Malawi, South Africa, and Uganda have expanded age-differentiated pregnancy and postpartum care for adolescent mothers, demonstrating the potential of tailored approaches to improve service uptake among priority populations (UNAIDS, 2024).

3. Service integration and sustainability

Notably, even when services are available, uptake across countries and regions remains variable (UNAIDS, 2024). Global data show that fewer than half of key populations receive HIV testing annually, and antiretroviral therapy coverage lags behind the general population (Mpirirwe et al., 2024; UNAIDS, 2024). Peer-led and integrated care models, such as National Empowerment Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS in Kenya (NEPHAK), have shown to improve linkage and retention of adolescents to care, but these approaches have not yet been widely scaled up more broadly across Africa (Bulstra et al., 2021; Macdonald, Verster and Baggaley, 2017).

4. Knowledge production

Research capacity and agenda-setting remain concentrated in high-income countries, reinforcing historical asymmetries in global health knowledge production and limiting context-specific innovation in high-burden regions, such as the African continent (Nabyonga-Orem, Asamani and Makanga, 2021; Emanuel et al., 2004). Most studies on HIV-related knowledge and service equity originate from developed countries, leaving populations most affected underrepresented in research agendas (Endalamaw et al., 2024). Addressing these disparities requires investment in research governance, capacity building and equitable partnerships to ensure knowledge co-production in high-burden settings (Endalamaw et al., 2024).

AFRICA IS NOT A MONOLITH

The African continent's trajectory beyond the AIDS pandemic is diverse, yet increasingly marked by promising progress, with several countries demonstrating leadership in innovation, service delivery, and community-led responses (UNAIDS, 2024; IHME, 2024). Implementation of HIV prevention and treatment strategies across Sub-Saharan Africa has significantly contributed to the global decline in HIV incidence, but progress and gaps differ by subregion and country (UNAIDS, 2024).

Historical legacies of colonial rule in Africa have shaped health systems unevenly across the region; influencing policy capacity, service integration and community engagement (Flint and Hewitt, 2015). Despite these challenges, Eswatini has charted a path of resilience and exceeded the 95-95-95 targets in part through community-led male engagement that links men to pre exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), condoms, HIV self-testing and voluntary medical male circumcision (UNAIDS, 2024). Notably, HIV incidence among adolescent girls and young women varies considerably across subnational regions in Africa, with particularly high rates reported in Southern Africa (UNAIDS, 2024). Distinctly in Figure 1, the absence of data from several subnational sites within some African countries, including parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, underscores the critical need to strengthen surveillance systems, particularly in settings affected by conflict, to enable more targeted and equitable HIV prevention strategies (UNAIDS, 2024; IHME, 2024; Flint and Hewitt, 2015).

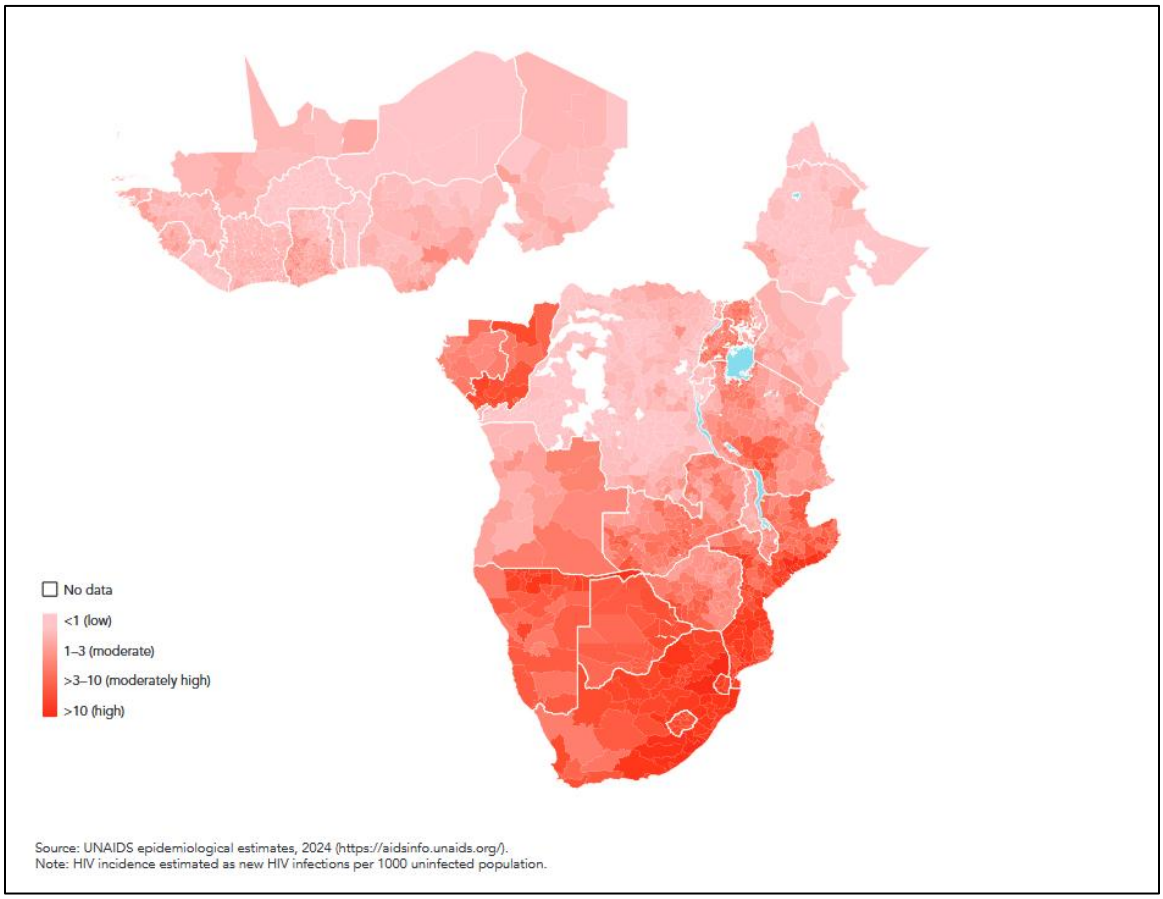

Figure 1: Estimated HIV incidence among adolescent girls and young women (15–24 years) across subnational regions in Africa, 2024 (UNAIDS, 2024).

NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY IN HIV RESPONSE FINANCING

The future of international HIV funding is increasingly uncertain, as five major donors, including the United States (US), have announced significant foreign aid reductions (Brink et al., 2025; Rahim et al., 2025). A projected 24 percent average aid cut could result in 10.75 million additional HIV infections and 2.93 million HIV-related deaths between 2025 and 2030 (Brink et al., 2025). To mitigate these anticipated risks, countries are encouraged to increase domestic financing (Brink et al., 2025). For example, Zimbabwe offers a promising model through its implementation of a national AIDS levy (introduced in 1999), which channels domestic tax revenue into HIV programmes and has helped sustain services during funding crises (Brink et al., 2025). Strengthening health systems and research capacity in high-burden sub-regions and countries within Africa is essential to address historical inequities in knowledge production and funding prioritisation (Nabyonga-Orem, Asamani and Makanga, 2021).

CONDOMS REMAIN THE MOST SCALABLE

Condoms remain the most effective HIV prevention method worldwide, with the multi-benefit of prevention of HIV, STIs and unplanned pregnancies; and an estimated 117 million HIV cases averted through their use (Stover and Teng, 2022). Shifting global priorities have led to stagnating condom use rates, even though integration with reproductive health education curricula for adolescent girls in Africa has yielded relative progress towards reducing HIV incidence rates in this key subgroup (USAID, 2022).

VACCINES AND LONG-ACTING PrEP: COMPLEMENTARY, NOT COMPETING

The HIV vaccine development pipeline remains challenging, but progress continues (Kaur and Vaccari, 2024). Concurrently, advances in long-acting PrEP is transforming HIV prevention policy and practice (Kelley et al., 2025). Notably, the PURPOSE 2 trial, conducted in several countries including South Africa, found that twice-yearly injectable lenacapavir, a long-acting form of PrEP, was significantly more effective in preventing HIV than daily oral PrEP among cisgender men and gender-diverse individuals (Kelley et al., 2025). This breakthrough adds a vital tool to the HIV prevention portfolio, offering a long-acting alternative to daily oral PrEP at a time when vaccine development remains ongoing and adherence challenges persist among key populations (Muhumuza et al., 2021; Kelley et al., 2025).

Despite this significant discovery, there has been limited PrEP uptake reported, particularly by female sex workers, likely due to the intersectional nature of the systemic barriers of power dynamics, gender based violence and stigma that have not been fully addressed at PrEP regional and national policy levels in several countries worldwide (Mpirirwe et al., 2024). However, there is growing consensus that decentralised PrEP delivery, coupled with effective community engagement efforts involving active participation of vulnerable populations, could improve wider spread uptake of these interventions, as it did for condom use (Ayala et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

The arc of HIV prevention is bending toward more options, particularly long-acting PrEP, renewed condom distribution strategies, and eventual vaccine availability (Kaur and Vaccari, 2024; UNAIDS,2024). However, it will not bend toward equity without intentional choices that address structural and systemic barriers (Whitehead, 2007; Dahlgren and Whitehead, 2021). An African equity lens clarifies the task by highlighting the need to align funding with a balanced prevention portfolio, dismantle legal and social barriers, integrate services at the front line and shift knowledge production closer to where the burden is heaviest (Nabyonga-Orem, Asamani and Makanga, 2021; Flint and Hewitt, 2015).

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