

Power Relations in International Development Projects (IDPs): The Experiences of
Women Project Managers

Developmental Paper

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International development projects (IDPs) present several challenges and issues that project managers face: a complex environment where sociopolitical factors play a crucial role, including complex power dynamics with a multitude of actors. Understanding these challenges adds value for project managers. In this in-depth qualitative research, we explored the experiences of thirteen women project managers in IDPs through their relationships with three key actors: funders, partners from the Global South, and the organizations. The concept of power opens new possibilities for analyzing power dynamics among key actors from the perspective of the privileged and crucial position of the project manager. The experiences of women project managers and their power have been understudied; this research contributes to understanding and deepening knowledge on this issue. We also want to introduce project management research to a feminist lens to highlight its potential to the field.

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General background:

International development projects (IDPs) are very different from other types of projects to the extent that they are sources of knowledge and expertise for conventional project management (Brière & al. 2021; Ika & al.; 2020). IDPs' management entails understanding and integrating aspects from a complex international context characterized by different legislations, the involvement of many different economic sectors involved, and the multilayer socioeconomic objectives they pursue. Their complexity arises from several factors: a) being situated within a North-South post-colonial context; b) engaging multiple stakeholders including multilateral funding institutions, Southern government agencies, international and local private businesses, and often non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and c) generating projects with ambiguous objectives regarding human development, social transformation, and poverty reduction (Ika & Donnelly, 2017). Most importantly, IDPs operate in a context of historically and structurally unequal power relations between industrialized countries (North) and developing countries (Global South). This context emphasizes the importance of power on the project's political processes and their management (Brière & al. 2021); nevertheless, power has not been a priority subject matter in project management literature, and political games remain hidden aspects given their negative reputation and the discomfort surrounding them (Clegg & Hauggard, 2009; Clegg & Kreiner, 2013; Pinto, 2000; Wynn & al. 2021; Zhang & Qian, 2017). We argue that understanding these issues is valuable for project managers.

Canada is one of the top bilateral and multilateral funders according to the OECD (2023). In 2017, the election of the Liberal government marked Canada's return as a pioneer in international development by adopting the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), aimed at promoting gender equality in IDPs. In 2020-2021, nearly 93% of the development assistance projects funded integrated gender equality and women's empowerment (Government of Canada, 2021). The Canadian context is an example of the overrepresentation of discourse on gender equality and the feminization of professionals in international development organizations; however, at the management level, the IDP field has traditionally been and remains male-dominated (Auclair et al., 2022; 2019; Colette et al., 2010; PMI, 2023). As a fact, women represent 43% of the workforce and one woman to three men are project managers (PMI, 2023; UNOCHA, 2019).

Despite this, several authors agreed that research in this area remains limited (Auclair et al., 2019; Bielinska & Osbert-Pochiecha, 2018; Cartwright & Gale, 1995;; Geraldini & Soderlund, 2018; Henderson & Stackman, 2010; Karch, 2012; Legault & Chasserio, 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2017). Additionally, literature reveals that women project managers (WPMs) in international development face different challenges than their male counterparts and experience various inequalities due to their gender (Angeloff, 2016; Auclair et al., 2022; 2019; Colette et al., 2010; Narayanaswamy, 2016). In our view, this provides a fertile ground for exploring specifically the experiences of WPMs, who are, as we'll argue, in positions of power in relation to other actors. Since there is no literature about WPMs' experience of power, we aim to explore their experience of power as

managers of IDPs in close relationship with three key actors: funding institutions, southern partners, and people within their organization.

Objectives:

The conceptualization of power entails recognizing the structural factors that govern norms at social, organizational, and individual levels, as well as the capacity for groups and individuals to act (Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Clegg et al., 2006; Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Gaventa, 2006; Lainey, 2017; Pettit & McGee, 2020). Since sources of literature are rare addressing this phenomenon, our research is exploratory, and we aim to understand how WPMs perceive power and politics as we agree that understanding organizational politics, power, and political processes is crucial for grasping how to manage IDPs (Navarro-Flores, 2011). Furthermore, while doing this with WPMs, we introduce an unorthodox feminist perspective to project management studies.

Political games, i.e., mechanisms for regulating relationships, are necessary for the proper functioning of social and organizational life (Clegg & al. 2006; Lainey, 2017; Pinto, 2000). This means that IDP's organizational life provide opportunities and constraints that WPMs must overcome and successfully integrate into their projects' management (Johns, 2006). We thus analyze the WPM's power dynamics through two processes: 1) perception of power, which refers to the interpretation of power dynamics and behaviors in relation to entities, while 2) exercise of power, involves the behaviors and strategies adopted by the WPMs to influence. We view power as a blend of structural and agency theories, applying to agents with the capacity to influence different structures (particularly social and organizational) shaping perceptions of the world. These influences are conveyed through power dynamics, and they can be perceived or real. Studies shows the importance of human and political skills for IDPs and traditional project managers (Brière & al. 2015; Pinto, 2000). These competencies entail integrating aspects of power by understanding the forms and bases of powers (French & Raven, 1959; Lainey, 2017; Pinto, 2000; Rickley, 2023). In IDPs, the multitude of actors requires WPMs to manage diverse relationships with distinct needs, characteristics and issues.

We focus on the relationship between WPMs and three key actors.

1. Institutional funders: Power is centralized within them due to the dominance of capitalism in the international development market, resulting in control over resources (Navarro-Flores, 2006; Sondarjee, 2022).
2. Southern partners: Recognizing power relations is crucial for attempting to balance these relationships (Lister, 2000; Navarro-Flores, 2006)
3. International development organizations: Women's experiences in development organizations are unequal compared to men (Auclair et al., 2022; 2019), with power and politics often causing discomfort and misunderstanding within organizations (Clegg & Kreiner, 2013; Lainey, 2017; Pinto, 2000).

Our research diverges from traditional project management studies, which have tended to be instrumental and prescriptive, focusing on the project as the unit of measurement (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). Several studies in management and project management do

not reference gender, race, and sexuality of managers, which limits the thorough exploration of power dynamics (Ashcraft, 2012; Acker, 2006). In this paper, our feminist perspective recognizes that sex and gender influence social relationships, dividing and hierarchizing them (Clegg & Haugaard, 2009; Ollivier & Tremblay, 2000). Due to the existence of gendered power relations (where one gender is advantaged over another) we seek to make visible the experiences of WPMs in particular, enabling them to assert their positions (their powers), thus, our research is not about comparing genders but rather analyzing solely the women's perspective (Calás. & Smircich, 2006; 1999; Ollivier & Tremblay, 2000). By taking this approach, we join an increasing number of researchers interested in the connections between projects, societal issues, and global challenges (Ika et al., 2020); shedding light on the experiences of women project managers in IDPs, we hope to contribute to better the understanding of the challenges related to gender equality in the context of IDPs.

Methodology:

We use a qualitative exploratory approach with a distinctly feminist lens. Instead of approaching them quantitatively and comparatively, we sought to recognize and account for the diversity of women's perspectives on power in IDPs (Ollivier & Tremblay, 2000). Our feminist lens proposes to focus on several aspects such as the production of knowledge (multidisciplinary, researcher bias), and the relationships between women and other participants (participant engagement in the research, the researcher's positionality). We conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with WPMs working or having worked in Canadian international development organizations. Research participants' age varied between 20 to 65 years old, they work in different type of development projects within government agencies, non-governmental organizations and private foundations. They also held different positions such as project manager, region director, humanitarian chief, etc., and had a range of years of experience between 3 to 35 years, in different regions, Africa and South America, especially. We choose semi-structured question for our interviews to encourage our participants to speak freely about their experiences, creating a trusting climate where that allowed us to listened attentively and to show empathy if necessary (Joyeau et al., 2010). Our interviews focused on women's definition, perception and exercise of power through their relationships with different actors as managers of IDPs.

Our analysis was based on Blais and Martineau's 5 steps (2006): 1) we integrated our verbatims into NVIVO, 2) we read the transcriptions multiple times, 3) we used frequency queries and identified approximately 60 emerging themes, 4) to further immerse ourselves in our data analysis, we visually represented our data using sticky notes on a wall, which helped us gain deeper insights into our data, and 5) we consolidated elements involving feelings and behaviors about perception and exercise of power. We concluded with three main categories and twelve emerging themes.

Preliminary results:

Data analysis revealed three main processes in the management of power by WPMs in IDPs:

- 1) Recognition: these professionals recognize different power dynamics among actors, identify them, and act accordingly. Additionally, they discern nuances, enriching their processes to recognize various power relations.
- 2) Action: the participants aiming to be impactful through action, more specifically to through distribution of power, sharing decisions and responsibilities with actors. They understand the position of each actor, so they need to interpret certain elements to maintain the relationship. Furthermore, creating impact for them personally and for the actors is important.
- 3) Reflexivity: the issue of power prompts reflection on methods to manage relationships with different actors, and how norms and structure influence behaviors, decisions, and personal boundaries.

WPMs reflexivity, concretely their ability to " [take] time and space for reflection", emerged from the data analysis. Data analysis also revealed the women advocate for various strategies to enhance their impact, incorporating a critical view of their environment: procedures, tools, organizations, etc. Some participants referred to this as "feminist power", emphasizing its feminine qualities. A) Their understanding of power remains complex: they acknowledge both unequal and equal dynamics. They identify and articulate the elements that shape norms, as well as the processes that influence their behaviors, discourses, and decisions. They also recognize that their position varies depending on the actors involved. Indeed, some positions and discourses can be perplexing and cause discomfort. The issue of power prompts deep reflection and necessitates an examination of their roles on social, organizational, and interpersonal levels. B) WPMs perceive their power as the capacity to take actions that advance personal and social ideals. In this context, it is important to remember that the ultimate aim of IDPs is to enhance the living conditions of vulnerable populations (Diallo & Thuillier, 2005; Ika et al., 2018). Our discussions highlight that personal empowerment is closely tied to the ability to envision and undertake concrete actions, which is integral to the exercise of power. C) Participants are actively pursuing strategies that influence power dynamics, such as shared decision-making and fostering authentic relationships. Following Menon's management approach (2001), they aim to provide tools and opportunities to (re)empower individuals. However, we contend that empowerment involves more than just the distribution of power. It encompasses essential social, organizational, and interpersonal change processes that are vital for WPMs in IDPs. By offering tools, creating opportunities, and addressing relationships, they help actors develop their capacity to act (Bacqué & Biewener, 2013).

By focusing on women's experiences as project managers, we aimed to illuminate on their growing roles as political and social influencers, moving beyond technical and traditional roles. Incorporating a feminist perspective into our exploratory design will open new and compelling avenues for future research in project management.

Next steps:

Our next steps include discussing: 1) the practical implications of researching power in projects, and 2) the potential of feminist, critical perspectives in project research and how we can further explore political and social themes in project research.

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