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Article

Machiavellianism in Mainstream Sustainability and Development: Re-Imagining Alternative Futures through Empowerment

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Abstract: Despite concepts of human flourishing, a term connected to empowerment that acts as an architectural structure within the development and sustainability discourse, tensions remain between exponential economic growth, planetary health and community empowerment. Scholars argue that the development agenda is *maldevelopment* due to the unrequested interventions delivered to communities, mainly in the Global South (Shiva, 1999). A current state of disorientation grips the modern world, and despite sophisticated global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), internal approaches are sidelined. This research article repositions empowerment and compassion at the centre of the sustainable development discourse by drawing on the Inner Development Framework, particularly goal one – Being – ‘*Relationship to Self*’ and goal three – Relating – ‘*Caring for others and the World*’ as a guiding theoretical underpinning. Accordingly, this research article presents a qualitative interpretative study that examines the lived experience of women and their journeys to empowerment. The key findings indicate an intricate relationship between wellbeing and empowerment and the realisation of inner development as a tool to re-imagine alternative futures. The Machiavellian tendency to the sustainability agenda is deeply embedded in the profiteering of the misery of affected communities.

Keywords: inner development; empowerment; caring for others and the world; sustainability

1. Introduction

Despite the rise and expansion of technological development, humans remain in a perpetual state of conflict with each other and the planet (Smith, 1984). The plague of uneven development has surged from a chronically ill social and economic system that, through colonial projects, has marginalised communities and rendered rural and indigenous women vulnerable (Prashad, 2022). Within this colonial legacy, sophisticated ecosystems are being driven to the brink of extinction, and meaningful, sustainable responses and philosophies promoting oneness are ever more marginalised (Shiva, 1999). This research article unravels the conflicting discourses that despite the many forums that advocate for sustainability and development within the boundaries of planetary health, joy, compassion and health for humans and the planet are sacrificed on the altar of efficient economic systems that play on emotive statements of care (Kleinman, 2020). The glacier pace to secure sustainability can be partly attributed to differences in levels and rates of access to resources in different sectors strongly driven by neoliberal policies, leaving communities and the planet in fragile circumstances (Smith, 1984). By examining the relationship between sustainability and inner development, this article proposes an alternative paradigm of empowerment to cultivate human development and planetary health. Traditional knowledge systems and approaches rarely have the same relevance as Western mainstream approaches. Women from an uneven development context from the Global South and indigenous communities hold more than mere *wisdom* (Mignolo, 2007). Contrary to universal terms like knowledge and science, commonly used to legitimise a singularity in epistemology, there is, in fact, *knowledges* and *sciences* that are yet to be understood and applied as solutions to modern challenges like disasters and conflicts increase in complexity and magnitude

(Mignolo, 2007). This research article draws on women's narratives from the Global South to elicit core qualities of empowerment from their lived experiences.

From the outset, the critique on mainstream sustainability and development is that an externally focused approach has been preferred as it is ideal for sustaining a needs-service economy through dependency strategies (Illich et al., 1978; Illich; 1977, 1973, 1970). The lull across the educated society blunts critical thinking as the destruction of nature and human life becomes routinised. The poor examination of power imbalances within sustainability and development has become an accepted status quo propped up by modernity's philosophy that human worth can be commoditised, similar to education, care and health (Mignolo, 20007; Illich et al., 1978; Illich; 1977, 1973, 1970). In order to challenge policymakers, the humanitarian industry, academics and development practitioners to rethink mainstream approaches and seek more compassionate paradigms, the disabling definitions of empowerment as an external phenomenon must be dispelled. Currently, there remains a monopoly of Western approaches to sustainability and development that is encroaching on alternative paradigms; for example, the hard stance taken by small-scale farmers, environmental activists and Indigenous groups to boycott the UN food summit over agendas that protected agribusinesses' interests over ecological preservation highlights the citizenship in these social groups and an uncolonized mind that demonstrates a push-back on this monopoly (Vidal, 2021). Resistance and civil disobedience to what was 'deemed a form of 'corporate colonization' is an act of empowerment that contradicts the broad-brush strokes of vulnerability that paint affected communities by powerful development agendas (Vidal, 2021; Solnit, 2010; Shiva, 1999). Sustainability is the foundation for today's leading global framework, the SDG's 2023. Attention should be paid to definitions and the language adopted within these discourses as this sets the scope of policy and impact. Similarly, the broad definition of 'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' This definition retains the undertones of an economic agenda principled in extractive methods missing indigenous principles and codes of ethics that promote reciprocity (Kimmerer, 2020). The definition addresses human needs without setting boundaries on greed and excess, "Earth provides enough to satisfy every [hu]man's needs, but not every man's greed" Mahatma Gandhi (1869 – 1944). The absence of explicit consideration of planetary health cements its vagueness and, more critically, puts into question the credibility and relevance of a Western-led sustainable agenda when to this day the colonial legacy and history of extractive policies continue to play into current world affairs.

The Machiavellianism to sustainability is witnessed in the one million displaced Congolese driven by a thriving tech industry that depends on the cobalt mines of the Democratic Republic of the Congo for its \$484.8 billion smartphone industry and a projected \$858 billion electric car sector by 2027 (Wilson, 2023). The numerous case studies that showcase the plundering and marginalisation of specific social groups are the result of a discriminative system that was never built to provide freedoms to all. The application of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international legal frameworks on humanitarian law and human rights law states the right to life for all. However, at best, international law has become an aspiration (Nyabola, 2023). The deliberate departure by many, including the vagaries of Western liberalism, calls into question the applicability of primarily externally focused systems. The blatant disregard for *some* lives, for example, in the rich Copperbelt region of Zambia, yet another rich resource country plundered into deprivation to source sustainable transportation for highly developed economies, has a 60 per cent illiteracy rate amongst the children in the region working the mines (Prashad, 2022). Such rampant examples delineate the distorted link between development and sustainability within the current economic landscape. A critical discussion point from these case studies is that, like in the case of Zambia, the plundering of its resources supports a Western-led 'sustainable' agenda on greener transport solutions, while little is discussed about the real trade-offs.

In many ways, modern society has been conditioned to normalise high levels of violence. Fanon (1961) argues that external violence represents a more profound internal conflict within ourselves. The normalisation of deprivation sustains industries that profit from suffering and misery (Zadeh-Cummings, 2022). Machiavellianism, similar to colonialism, possesses a cunningness and ability to

manipulate and benefit from the misery of others for its economic gain. Undeniably so, the current sustainable development agenda, rooted in a neoliberal capitalist system, can only bring about exploitation and depravation (Mignolo, 2007). As argued by Kleinman (1995, p.101),

“There are routinised forms of suffering that are either shared aspects of human conditions – chronic illness or death – or experiences of deprivation and exploitation and degradation and oppression that certain categories of individuals (the poor, the vulnerable, the defeated) are especially exposed to and others relatively protected from”.

What emerges from this critical examination of sustainable development is an absence of inner development as an integral part of modern approaches, which contributes to the dehumanisation of affected communities (Freire, 1972). The alternative paradigm proposed in this research article is that empowerment paradigms rooted in reciprocity, compassion, inclusivity and self-governance shift the current trend of external approaches to integrative world views and actions accessible through inner development. In the same vein, the pathway to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 (SDG) favours development actors over a mobilisation of communities; this is notable in the language of the SDGs that fail to harness the empowerment of populations, framing the goals as noble causes replicating language and objectives of humanitarian actors over the everyday resistance of communities surviving disasters and crisis (Scott, 1985). SDG No. 2, “Zero hunger,” is morally sane but nonetheless a by-product of the immorality of capital accumulation in the dominant neoliberal economic architecture that destabilises communities and principles of sovereignty (Ortiz Montemayor, 2018). The creation of the SDGs comes from a legacy of failed attempts by Western powers to bring sustainability, peace and compassion to modern society without addressing the deprivation and systematic oppression from extractive practices shouldered by the Global South (Prashad, 2021). Sustainability, as a relatively new term within the development lexicon, is evolving and, to some degree or other, has influenced the direction of development commonly framed as economic progress. Greater global awareness and scientific research from the international community are adding to the pressure on governments and global market economies to address conflicting practices pushing planetary health beyond the hope of recovery. Consequently, wellbeing is a condition from which only a few benefit.

The multi-dysfunctionality in global approaches to address modern challenges like the current education crisis, the climate crisis and the rise in humanitarian issues have excluded the principle of femininity that encumbers a reckoning that we and nature are not separate (Adler, 2023). Discussing carbon emissions and greenhouse gases is vital in understanding the climate crisis. However, more emphasis needs to be placed on the adverse impact currently experienced by countries rich in natural resources that sit in the low ranks of the Human Development Index (HDI) (World Population Review, 2023). It is not a coincidence within this statistical analysis that links to coloniality have prevented a local and meaningful reimagination of alternative futures since these countries gained independence. Modern neoliberal capitalist systems are shaping the agendas that govern sustainability. Sustainability, whose negative trade-offs are shouldered by communities already affected by routinised suffering (Kleinman, 1995). The current state of disorientation discussed in this article refers to social dynamics of violence that tinge on both internal and external relations, impacting society at large.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that peace is a rare state in modern society. One can argue that peace is shifting in meaning and is being re-defined as an absence of armed conflict (Bush, 2000). The common application of peace is a negotiation between warring parties. For example, Angola's extended history of war between 1992 and 1994, which saw over 300,000 deaths, provides a poignant example of the preferred short-term resolutions of negotiated agreements that quickly crumble that paved the way for indiscriminate violence (Bercovitch and Simpson, 2009). The question is whether peace can be negotiated or if it is a process of reconciliation facilitated by principles of inner development. Within a humanitarian lens, peace has been commoditised to terms of agreement, leaving the root issues unaddressed. The current state of wars and failed mediations support the presumption that to establish long-lasting peace and not simply the absence of armed conflict, the internal violence within ourselves needs to be addressed through inner development. With only 26

days of peace experienced globally since World War II, following the creation of the United Nations, there lies a disconnect between development that should arise from the enhancement of human capabilities (Mignolo, 2007). The standard approach to Human Development relies heavily on benchmarks, targets and indicators from various international bodies that dictate progress, usually within economic standards. Thus, there is a need to ignite a discussion on alternative paradigm that draws on non-missionary notions of compassion when rethinking sustainability.

Inner Development, for this article, draws on Goal 1, *Being: Relationship to Self* and Inner Development 3, *Relating: Caring for others and the World*, as part of the theoretical framework. Concepts of compassion are compromised daily by the neoliberal agenda (Jayawickrama, 2018, 2013; Kleinman, 2006). The pockets of concentrated power continue to be dominated by old colonial states, like the UK, Europe and the USA, leaving sways of unrepresented populations disenfranchised by current policies that separate humans from each other and nature. Thus, the political dominance of the West fails to address humanity's modern needs. The lack of representation of Latin America and Africa as permanent members of the Security Council is a flagrant misrepresentation of modern society and an example of an international community that needs to re-evaluate its structures (Prashad, 2023). The current formation of the Security Council is a crucial example of a tone-deaf international community that refuses to yield to co-creating a political and economic climate that supports the rhetoric of meaningful sustainability. The Global South is at an interesting juncture as it continues through different movements and forums like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and BRICS to re-define itself against any major power bloc that dwarfs its population size, resources, political and economic power (Prashad, 2023). The communities that are thrown into the thick of disaster and conflict due to the unsustainability of the current globalised market economy are subjected to the stench of death and misery brought about by an agenda of war – followed by unrequested development programmes whose impact is questionable.

2. Materials and Methods

My research examined the pedagogical approaches that facilitated the empowerment of women from an uneven development context to elicit the lived experience of empowerment and wellbeing. In accordance with the problematic applicability of sustainability, the research aims to examine modern philosophies and ancient wisdoms that outline the qualities of empowerment from the lived experience of women. The guiding philosophical underpinnings of this research took on a critical and emancipatory stance in line with indigenous, critical and liberatory methodologies (Held, 2019). The overarching research question is: Do educational experiences empower women in non-Western societies? The significance of this research question is that it facilitates an inquiry into missing concepts of resistance, self-determination of empowerment from non-Western women that remain uncolonized in a geo-political ecosystem that breeds dependency and disablement that has ultimately shaped our relationship with each other and our approaches to planetary health. The methodological framework uses a qualitative research design, a three-method process of; (1) An ethnographic account of seeking empowerment through education, (2) A participant observation of a virtual community and (3) Key informant, semi-structured interviews. The methodological framework draws from various methodologies, methods and theories, breaking away from the strict confines of Western scientific protocol (Blaak, Openjuru and Zeelen, 2013; Schipper, 2012). The interview texts were analysed through grounded theory, thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis and a gonzo journalist analysis. Therefore, the three-method process provides a systematic rigour to the research led by a question-driven approach instead of a method-driven one (Yanchar, Gantt and Clay, 2005; Feyereabend, 1975).

2.1. Data Collection

The data collection uses three sets of group participants that were informed by the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Table 1. Purposeful sampling was used to identify and select information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). The research only includes female participants, with no exception to race, sexuality, religious beliefs or ethnicity, who have broad experience working with

women's empowerment and a diverse set of educational experiences. The first of the methods is an autoethnographic account of the lives of the author, grandmother and mother, followed by two-stage virtual meetings with ten key stakeholders, and the final of the third method process is an observer participation of a feminist humanitarian network of thirty female members that reparents INGO's, NGO's and women's rights groups of a four-month period. Due to COVID-19, the interviews were carried out remotely using Zoom. All of the interviews in the second method process were recorded and transcribed; the same process was followed with the main questions asked to all participants. The semi-structured nature of the interviews and observation of the virtual community facilitated a deep exploration into what empowerment and wellbeing mean from the lived experience of women. Compassion, inclusivity, oneness and self-governance were amongst the emerging themes that characterise empowerment. In addition, the sincerity of these engagements sheds light on the commonalities that link women to women.

2.1.1. Emerging Themes Through Thematic Analysis

The themes that emerged through thematic analysis identified patterns within the rich data set (Braun and Clarke, 2008). The emersion into the anthropological narratives of the three-method process gave the flexibility to listen deeply and accommodate questioning more specific to the particular social, cultural, political, geographical and religious context of the key stakeholders in all three of the methods, bringing a phenomenological lens to ethnography (Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio, 2019). The four overarching themes are:

- Systems;
- Societal Impact;
- Empowerment;
- Care.

Followed by 17 sub-themes and 36 codes. The data analysed does not provide definitions for the themes identified; rather, the research looks at an intricate descriptive narration of dependent co-arising set of experiences as depicted in Buddhist thought, contrary to the Western notion of causality (Schipper, 2012). From the broad range of ethnographies, challenges and suffering were important themes that underpinned many of the experiences of the key stakeholders. The thick ties of care found in relating to others were closely linked to feelings of empowerment that dispelled notions of individualism.



Figure 1. Inductive Thematic Coding (Source: Authors Own).

The first of the themes, ‘Systems’, is found within all data sets and is an essential component of the key stakeholders’ ethnography. At its core, the experience of systems by the key stakeholders was

discussed as hierarchal, both within formal and strict cultural norms that prevented freedom of Being. The underpinning of the themes is freedom – what is the freedom to be? To express oneself? To connect and be a part of a more expansive sense of identity? The disabling of people and communities through the continuous growth of service economies is a commodification of these basic capabilities that restrict relations with ourselves, others and the planet.

Table 1. Key Themes. (Authors Own).

Theme	Sub-themes
Systems The theme, systems, encompasses societal institutions, mainly the structure and systems within formal education, mainstream health services, and humanitarian systems.	Judgement The opinions and consequences that result in discrimination and disadvantage relating to hierarchal structures and subjective opinions. Bondage Situations that perpetuate restrictions and limitations contrary to one's wishes. Ignorance The false assumption of knowledge and inability to engage, listen, and learn from others. This applies to systems and people. Dishonesty Masking the truth or disguising inefficiency knowingly. Wellbeing Physical and psychological issues.
Societal Impact The theme of societal impact includes the external factors and stressors which make up part of the key stakeholders' experiences and lived experiences. This ranges across cultural, political, religious, and societal norms and values, which are influential or relevant to the background of the key stakeholders' experience.	Challenges Struggles, problems, and experiences for which the key stakeholder has expended effort or made sacrifices to overcome. Awareness An understanding and knowledge about entering into a situation or understanding how to navigate a system. Imagined futures. A creative process where key stakeholders could create a reality not yet achieved. Freedom To be free from structural limitations or psychological restraints and limitations. Participation To play a part in society and communities. Technology Technological advances and influence on education and work. Mentoring and Poverty Having role models or listening to people who inspire and motivate you to achieve or embark on projects.
Empowerment The theme discusses the key stakeholders' understanding of the term 'empowerment' and how they define it.	Self-governance To govern oneself internally and live consciously. To exert control over one's life and decision-making, showing independence, respect for oneself, and choice.
Care To show compassion, love, and kindness to others. These are also acts of love shown to you.	Community Support Informal networks and bonds are created by engaging with different groups and people, which key stakeholders feel part of in some capacity. Deep Involvement

Theme	Sub-themes
	To listen deeply and interact with respect and a sense of equality.
	Community Approach
	Initiatives and projects that involve communities and certain social groups. This could also be government initiatives aimed at certain communities.
	Humility
	To be rid of arrogance and display equal respect for everyone. To connect with people primarily through a shared sense of humanity.
	Family Bonds
	The link and love between family. This includes solidarity and support that the key stakeholders have found in the family and its members.
	Non-judgement
	To avoid discrimination and division by various categorisations or lack of categorisations.
	All aspects of care, love, and kindness that the key stakeholders have experienced and project.

3. Results

The findings and analysis of the data have exposed the frustration and illusion of care presented within bureaucratic structures.

3.1. Imagining Alternative Futures

The key stakeholders created their own identity through their experience of challenges and suffering, understanding that there was wisdom within the depths of misery:

“Now, having worked in Syria, like at the borders and seeing a lot of families, and reflecting on what she did, I don’t know how she was that resilient. I didn’t understand until today, and then, how you make things simple as a child, and maybe she did not know all the fancy words of mental health and social integration and this and that, and maybe she had this wisdom and knowledge that maybe comes with disasters and that I don’t think they teach in schools. I think there is some sort of knowledge that is not explicit that comes with misery” (Key stakeholder account).

The creative power in the unknown, in which freedom to create, was a key finding supported by other scholars who examine the effects of those living through suffering (Solnit, 2009). The uncolonized mind emerges from the pits of chaos which saw many of the key stakeholders flee from war, divorce, stigmatisation and poverty:

“I sometimes resent it; also, I sometimes think, “Why did you do that?” but when I analyse it now, I realise that is what made us tough” (Key stakeholder account).

In turn, empowerment is discussed as an intrinsically intimate process that embarks on family and community instead of a self-serving individualistic economic betterment. The inclusivity attributed to empowerment unravelled the personhood in connection with nature. Their ability to connect demonstrates a greater consciousness and sense of ‘Becoming’. Therefore, the political fictions that dominate mainstream discussions on sustainability and development are grounded on the epistemological assumption of nature as external, objectified in theory, propagate the superhero, the self-made man, and the self-sufficient pioneer as ideals negating the essentiality of human interactions of care (Kleinman, 2020; Smith, 1984).

The power to define ourselves and recreate relationships based on compassion indicates that empowerment is a journey of realisation of the interconnectedness (Adler, 20220). Thus, creative expression is a form of civil disobedience. The ability to think critically and challenge status quos is epistemic disobedience that leads to processes of freedom (Freire, 1972). The resistance demonstrated by peasants, indigenous and marginalised women is similar to non-violent movements that unshackled entire communities. Gandhi argued that his ability to take India to independence was

made possible by 'experiments' in living (Gandhi, 2001, p.2). The current streamlining approach that has reduced mainstream education into primarily a memorising and repeating process acts as a tool that restricts creative expression (Freire, 1972).

3.2. *Becoming*

The ownership of empowerment and what empowerment is are contested debates (Zhaho, 2011). From the results, the key stakeholders all experienced taking more control of their lives through exposure and lived experiences:

"Personally, for me, it's to do anything I want, say anything I want, to make a difference because, in my personal life, I don't even have to speak about empowerment, from my father to my husband to my son. I'm always a little bit feminist, and I don't feel a need to prove anything because I know I am the greatest thing to ever happen to the household: that's a joke, but you know what I mean, but on the outside world, for me, it's to be able to live in Sri Lanka, not to be scared to speak, to give my opinion, and to be recognised. I mean empowerment doesn't only come from within, but from the people around you and how they deal with you, and I feel really empowered when I speak with people, when I deliver a lecture, or when I'm at a social gathering. For example, last week, we went out with a bunch of lawyers, and I felt really empowered because the men were in a very patriarchal profession but would listen to my opinion and seek my opinion, and that's empowerment for me. I feel very powerful" (Key Stakeholder).

Within the diverse settings and the distinct geographical, religious, political and economic backgrounds of the key stakeholders, self-governance was an underlining theme understood as freedom. An important distinction must be made between understanding freedom as devoid of discipline. Instead, from a phenomenological lens, freedom is the mastery of self-creation that draws on discipline, determination and perseverance. Exercising compassion and inclusivity requires discipline and living in awareness. Creating safe spaces and reflection was also an important finding within the dataset. A particular pedagogical approach was contemplation as a method to induce awareness. Being still in thought allows our True Self to unravel as a path of freedom (Vivekananda, 1989).

From a health and wellbeing lens, empowerment enabled the key stakeholder to regain control over her career and relieve the pressure as a consultant. This facilitated her to address the health implications that came with systems of bondage (Illich et al., 1977). From a Hindu and Buddhist lens, this is Samsara – the protracted delusion of the mind/the cycle of birth, death and rebirth (Sadhguru, 2021, p.250), commonly known as the "rat race" (Watts, 1987). At the core of the key stakeholder engagement, the findings show the inextricable connections between self-governance, empowerment, and wellbeing:

"Well, we have a medicine industry here that is very interested in pain and disease; this is a fact, and there is an industry around pain, a very big industry around pain everywhere, and even an industry around disaster." (Key Stakeholder)

The above poignant extract unmasks the fiction of care in healthcare professions (Kleinman, 2020, 1995; Lindekens and Jayawickrama, 2019; Illich et al., 1977). The extract indirectly applies to the commercialisation and acquisition of women's agency (Shiva, 1999; Illich et al., 1977). In the analysis of this extract, the key stakeholders demonstrate an awareness or a 'knowing' regarding the structures that engulf them personally and professionally.

3.3. *Navigating the Unknown*

The key findings on societal structures and cultural norms that imposed constricting rules preventing the exploration of self-development and the enhancement of capabilities were found to be oppressive. The data analysis drew on Marxist, feminist, and indigenous theories to reveal the disabling nature of market-driven economies for those operating within these systems (Shiva, 1999). The findings further showed the key stakeholders oscillated between acting collectively and individually within different aspects of their lives, as shown in **Figure 2**. For example, one of the key stakeholders in her professional life had to adapt to a calculated, individualistic manner whilst, in

her family setting, her South African familial dynamics of collectivism were in stark contrast to her working world. The key stakeholders, when discussing the various challenges and suffering, did not discuss this with resentment.

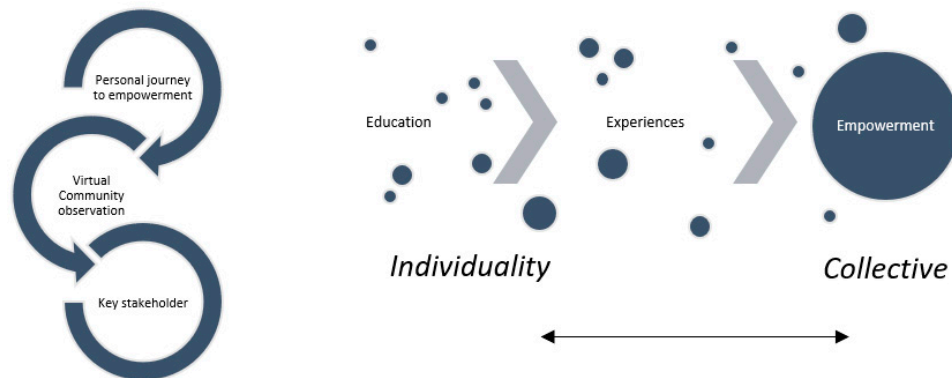


Figure 2. Understanding collectiveness and individualism (Source: Authors Own).

In many of the cultures and traditions of the key stakeholders that come from the Global South, death, for example, was accepted and merged in their cultural norms with common proverbs like *Ayni* – ‘Hoy por ti, mañana por mí’ that means today for you and tomorrow for me, wisdoms that acknowledge life as uncertain and dangerous (Kleinman, 2006). Thus, the key findings showed that joy, peace, and empowerment were internal qualities that, despite the challenges experienced, the key stakeholders were able to enjoy and persevere as best they could. In addition, through thematic analysis, what emerged was the dialectical play between suffering and self-governance. Another interesting observation is meaningful ‘choices’ demonstrated by the key stakeholders within their decision-making. At the core is determination, resistance and adaptability without anaesthetising the discomfort of self-reflection. One of the commonalities within the results was from external circumstances, challenges are born beyond anyone’s control. Thus, it is through an independent co-creating of joy and suffering that learning and commonalities emerge (Schipper, 2012; Watts, 1987). However, how one responds to these external circumstances draws on the individual’s morals and values. The absence of internal approaches in modern industrial societies has resulted in an over-dependence on external frameworks that are failing to teach people how to be happy and healthy. The glue that brings communities together has faded in the drive to individualism, and from the findings, care and compassion were central to the empowerment of the key stakeholders and their lived experience of the phenomena.

4. Discussion

The Internal Development Goals are important theoretical underpinnings within the overall discussion of the article and enrich the analysis of the data gathered by the semi-structured interviews on ten women key stakeholders, one virtual community and an autoethnographic account of the author’s life and narratives of her mother and grandmother. To define empowerment would be to perpetuate the disabling approach that modern agencies adopt in their development programmes (Adler, 2022). The Chipko movement by the rural women in India who belonged to the Bishnois community began over 300 years ago. *Chipko*, which means to hug in Hindi, saw women sacrificing their lives to save their sacred *Kherji trees* by clinging to them. It is within these narratives of women from all walks of life that demonstrate that empowerment surges from all diverse settings (Shiva, 1999). The fundamental linkage between women’s empowerment from rural and indigenous backgrounds is their largely uncolonized minds and their relation to nature (Adler, 2022). There remains a reluctance to accept the status quo of a state of separateness (Smith, 1984). Therefore, returning to the feminine principle that embarks on all that is oneness, regeneration and reciprocity

paves the way for a methodological pathway to reconcile humanity with each other and the planet (Shiva, 1999).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data shows that the number of refugees worldwide in 2021 was 27.1 million, with the highest-ever increase recorded to 35.3 million at the end of 2022 (UNHCR, 2023). Similarly, the growing humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza is reflective of an international community that has primed politics over human life. The power to veto is detached from the realities on the ground, which is the slaughter of innocent women, children and men caught under a sky that rains artillery provided by the security council members themselves (Borger, 2023). In light of current world affairs, this research article advocates for a shift to relying solely on external approaches and a halt to ignoring internal transformative practices (Ashlam, 2022). The link between climate change and human health is gaining interest. The impact of unhealthy environments, like pollution, pesticides in our food, and soil degradation, to name a few, is a missing piece of the puzzle regarding the link for humans to reconnect with nature (Vivekananda, 1989). The Human Development Report (2020) describes the planet as a 'resource' that ought to be used with caution but fails to implement an analytical framework of oneness and interconnectedness that may transform the colonist legacy within global development (Adler, 2023). Although our main institutions, like education, health, and governance, have excluded the knowledges from the Global South to legitimise Western science as 'science' in its singularity, mounting anthropocentric world views are perpetuating the deteriorating state of planetary health (Mignolo, 2007). The ability to recognise the many thousands of peasants and indigenous women in science, traditional health care practices, governance, soil scientists, ethnobotany specialists, water managers and plant breeders is the systematic racism and discrimination that facilitates solutions from tech giants and multinational chemical companies that are principled on destruction and capital rather than the preservation of life (Ellis-Petersen, 2021; Torrado, Hernandez Bonilla and Osorio, 2021). If to be considered empowered, one must be only formally educated and, or part of mainstream politics, the range of community organisations and civil defence people like the white helmets, the women from the Chipko movement, the Indian farmers and Colombia's working-class communities that resist oppression are mistakenly discussed as being devout of empowerment (Adler, 2022). Thus, key solutions and approaches to peace and reconciliation remain in the shadows of mainstream sustainability and development agendas.

Discussions that involve empowerment are intrinsically ontological pursuits to understanding one's personhood (Nussbaum, 2000). Human development that is squarely within an economic frame lacks other basic capabilities such as imagination and thought, relating to others and the world, play, self-governance and one's environment that bring about wellbeing (Nussbaum, 2000). Central to the discussion is creativity and the ability to re-imagine alternative futures. The fixed social and cultural structures that limited the key stakeholder's full expression also limited their creative impact. Despite these limitations, the key stakeholders referred to their faith and the love they received from particular family members as a support mechanism in times of hardship. From a theological lens, the idea that humans are created in God's own image can be ultimately interpreted as humans' intrinsic nature is to create, whilst anything contrary is to frustrate this natural state (Genesis 1:27). Thus, the current state of disorientation lies in global responses executed by those within higher echelons of power that are removed from the context and nuances of communities, an approach that is extensively debated on its appropriateness and validity, particularly in non-Western contexts. Thus, the findings do not advocate for eradicating global responses but rather a reform and a call for a collaborative approach (Brown, 2014; Summerfield, 1999).

Care is the human glue that holds together families, communities, and societies. Care offers an alternative story of how we live and who we are. But it is being silenced and diminished in value, in the United States and around the world, sacrificed on the altar of economy and efficiency, demanding more and more of families and health care professionals with few and fewer resources, and threatening to displace meaning in health care. The moral language of humane experience, of people's suffering and healing – the bedrock of our common existence – is being stifled, and, at worst, will be lost (Kleinman, 2020, p.4).

Alternative notions of compassion have been trampled on by the universal rollout of a missionary drive mainstream responses to humanitarianism, development and sustainability that support a need-service industry more than it does humanity. A return to an empowerment paradigm principled on compassion is a renewed call for a Global South-led pathway that promotes creative expression amongst communities that are living sustainably.

5. Conclusions

The development and sustainability discourse too readily debilitate the role of women in decision-making from crisis-affected rural and indigenous communities, imposing a vulnerability paradigm. Although there are precarious and vulnerable settings that perpetuate both the physical, cultural, and epistemic displacement of these social groups, one must address the root disruptors of peace (Butler, 2020). The drive to empower women through mainstream development programmes is premised on false assumptions of a deficit of empowerment (Shiva, 1999). Rather, women are already empowered, and the conversation needs to shift to address the disproportionate shouldering of misery that is being maintained by illegal deforestation and multinational fossil fuel projects that deepen planetary and human health concerns. Concepts of conscientization, empowerment, and peace are internal processes that need to be facilitated by internal frameworks materialising in critical expressions that form alternative futures principled on wellbeing. The fundamental issue is not to control challenges and suffering as they belong to life's landscape, but rather, how can one expand human flourishing in all of life's uncertainties, remembering that much like a vessel, we may think because we are seated in different compartments, we are navigating alone, the actuality is we share each other, and this planet, thus, the vessel is all our homes collectively.

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