

**GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN JUDITH BUTLER AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
FOR FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

Dr. Uchenna Nympha Nkama

Department of Philosophy, Rivers State University

nymphauchenna@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper critically examines Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and its implications for feminist activism in developing countries. Butler's framework challenges traditional gender binaries by arguing that gender is not an inherent trait but rather a series of socially constructed and regulated performative acts. This exploratory analysis examines how Butler's insights reshape feminist discourse, particularly in contexts where activism intersects with cultural traditions and socio-economic constraints. The study highlights the adaptability of Butler's theories in addressing gender-based oppression and promoting intersectional inclusivity. However, critiques of Butler's abstract approach are also considered, with a focus on its practical limitations in addressing the immediate struggles of marginalized women. By integrating Butler's gender performativity into feminist strategies, this paper underscores the potential for subverting entrenched gender norms and advancing gender equality in diverse socio-political landscapes. Finally, the study recommends that feminist movements in developing countries can harness Butler's insights while also contextualizing their activism within local traditions to foster effective and sustainable social change.

Keywords: Gender Performativity, Judith Butler, Feminist Activism, Binary Gender, Grassroots Activism.

Introduction

The critical analysis of gender performativity in the work of Judith Butler highlights the complexities of gender identity as a socially constructed phenomenon, fundamentally reshaping feminist activism, especially in developing countries. Central to Butler's theory is the assertion that gender is not an innate quality but rather a series of performative acts shaped by cultural and societal norms, as articulated in her seminal text (Butler, 1988). This theoretical approach challenges traditional binary classifications of gender, allowing for a more fluid understanding of identity that embraces diversity and intersectionality (Syndu, 2025; Mambrol, 2018; Sus, 2024). Notably, Butler's critique of essentialism emphasizes the limitations of fixed gender categories, fostering a discourse that promotes inclusivity and resilience among marginalized groups. The insights empower activists to rethink strategies and approaches

within their cultural contexts, encouraging grassroots movements to challenge oppressive societal norms and advocate for women's rights in innovative ways (Blumenfeld & Breen, 2001; Breen & Blumenfeld, 2019; Galligan, 2022). This adaptability is particularly crucial in developing countries, where feminist activism often intersects with local traditions, leading to hybrid forms of feminism that resonate more deeply with community values and experiences.

However, Butler's theories have not been without controversy. Critics argue that her abstract and theoretical focus may overlook the lived realities of individuals, particularly in contexts marked by socioeconomic challenges (Sungkawa, 2024; Niedda, 2020). This paper aims to critique the emphasis on performativity, which can create a disconnect between feminist theory and practical activism, potentially limiting its applicability in addressing immediate issues faced by women in developing nations. Nevertheless, Butler's work continues to serve as a critical touchstone for contemporary feminist movements, offering essential tools for empowerment, resistance, and solidarity across cultural boundaries (Government of Canada, 2023; Butler, 1988). Therefore, the implications of Judith Butler's gender performativity theory extend far beyond academia, providing vital insights that shape feminist discourse and activism in developing countries (Davis, 2023). By fostering an understanding of gender as a dynamic, performative construct, this work seeks to equip feminist activists to navigate and transform the intersections of tradition, culture, and modernity in their pursuit of gender equality and social justice.

Judith Butler's Framework

Judith Butler is an American philosopher and gender theorist known for her work in feminist theory, queer theory, and political philosophy. Born in 1956, Butler is best known for *Gender Trouble* (1990), where she introduced the concept of gender performativity, arguing that gender is not an inherent identity but a socially constructed performance reinforced through repeated acts. Butler has also engaged in political activism, particularly in issues related to LGBTQ+ rights, anti-war movements, and social justice. The components of the theoretical framework of Butler's Performativity include gender performativity, critique of essentialism, feminist activism, redefining activism through gender performances, transnational solidarity and resource sharing, cultural contextualization of feminism, political engagement and structural change, and empowerment and agency.

The concept of gender performativity in Butler's framework is central to her philosophical approach and offers a transformative lens for understanding gender and identity. Butler argues that gender is not an inherent quality or a stable identity but rather a series of acts and performances that are socially regulated and repeated over time (Butler, 1990; Syndu, 2025; Mambrol, 2018). This notion challenges the traditional binary categorizations of gender, suggesting that these constructs are socially fabricated rather than natural (Sus, 2024; Blumenfeld & Breen, 2001). Gender performance creates the illusion of a stable identity, as individuals are compelled to conform to societal norms that dictate how one should act based on their perceived gender (Galligan, 2022; Mambrol, 2018). In emphasizing the role of

repetition in gender performance, Butler opens up the possibility for subversion and resistance against rigid norms, providing a critical tool for feminist activism (Syndu, 2025; Sus, 2024).

Furthermore, a significant aspect of Butler's framework is her critique of essentialism, the belief in fixed and universal qualities associated with sex and gender (Sus, 2024). Such essentialist views limit the understanding of gender and identity, leading to exclusionary practices that fail to account for the diversity of human experiences (Galligan, 2022; Sus, 2024). Thus, Butler deconstructs essentialist notions, highlighting the importance of recognizing the social and contextual forces that shape identities, thereby promoting a more inclusive understanding of gender (Syndu, 2025; Blumenfeld & Breen, 2001). The implication of this deconstruction of essentialism is how it influences feminist activism. Particularly in developing countries, feminist activism is deeply influenced by the theoretical frameworks surrounding gender performativity, as articulated by Judith Butler. Understanding gender as a performative construct allows activists to challenge and reshape societal norms that perpetuate inequality and oppression. The implications of this perspective are significant for grassroots movements, transnational networks, and the intersection of feminism with local cultural contexts. Thus, activism may be redefined through gender performance.

Butler's notion of performativity suggests that gender is not an innate quality but rather a series of actions and behaviours that are socially constructed and maintained. This insight can empower activists in developing countries to reimagine gender roles and engage their communities in re-evaluating traditional practices that may hinder women's rights. By promoting the idea that gender roles can be reshaped, activists can inspire collective action that dismantles oppressive structures and advocates for equality. For instance, grassroots organizations can harness local cultural narratives to create new forms of feminist expression that resonate more deeply within their communities, effectively challenging patriarchal norms through localized activism (Sungkawa, 2024), including transnational solidarity. Butler's framework also fosters transnational feminist networks that amplify the voices of women from the Global South. These networks enable the sharing of resources, strategies, and experiences, creating a platform for dialogue that transcends geographic boundaries. Initiatives such as the Global Women's March exemplify how collective action can unify diverse feminist movements to address common issues like violence against women and reproductive rights (Sungkawa, 2024). Such solidarity is vital for building a cohesive feminist agenda that recognizes the unique challenges faced by women in different cultural contexts.

In addition, the significance of culture in shaping Third-World feminist perspectives cannot be overstated. Activists in developing countries are increasingly recognizing the need to contextualize feminist movements within local cultural frameworks. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how traditional practices intersect with contemporary feminist ideals, leading to hybrid forms of activism. For example, Afro-Feminism celebrates African heritage while addressing patriarchal systems, reflecting an integration of cultural identity with feminist goals (Sungkawa, 2024). By honouring local customs and traditions, activists can engage more effectively with their communities, ensuring that feminism is

relevant and accessible. Moreover, the implications of Butler's theories extend to the political realm, where activists are challenged to confront governmental policies and international relations that affect women's rights. The incorporation of gender issues into broader political discourses can significantly advance feminist advocacy in developing countries. Feminists must critically assess how neoliberal policies exacerbate gender inequalities and advocate for changes that prioritize women's rights in economic and social policies (Sungkawa, 2024; Niedda, 2020). This political engagement is essential for ensuring that the feminist movement not only addresses immediate issues but also aims for long-term structural change.

Finally, Butler's insights on the gender performativity framework underscore the importance of empowering women to reclaim their narratives and assert their rights. Empowerment is not merely about providing resources; it involves fostering an environment where women can recognize their agency and challenge existing power dynamics. This involves equipping women with the skills and confidence necessary to speak out against injustices and advocate for their rights within their communities (Government of Canada, 2023). The process of empowerment is both collective and individual, requiring a shift in societal attitudes and the dismantling of systemic barriers to gender equality.

Critical Analysis of Gender Performativity

Butler's framework has practical implications for feminist theory. Thus, the critical analysis will enable an overview of gender performativity theory, critique gender performativity and chart the way moving forward. The profound implications of this framework for feminist theory and activism are the rejection of the binary categorization of gender and advocating for an understanding of gender as a performance. The framework invites feminists to the reevaluation of how feminist movements define and approach the concept of "womanhood." Critics argue that traditional feminist frameworks often create an essentialized notion of women, which can reinforce binary views of gender relations (Butler, 1988). Butler advocates for a more fluid conception of identity that acknowledges the complexities and intersections of race, class, and sexuality, leading to a more inclusive feminist discourse (Davis, 2023; Butler, 1988). In addition, Butler's philosophy has fundamentally reshaped the understanding of gender by positing that it is not an inherent quality but rather an ongoing performance shaped by societal expectations and norms (Smith, 2024). In her seminal work (1990), Butler challenges the conventional view of gender as a stable identity, suggesting instead that gender is constituted through repeated acts, or "stylized repetition of acts" over time (Butler, 1988; Smith, N. 2024). This approach emphasizes the dynamic nature of gender, positioning it as a verb rather than a noun, something that individuals do rather than something they are (Smith, 2024).

Despite its influential nature, Butler's theory has faced criticism for its abstractness and perceived elitism, which some argue can limit its practical application in activism (Philosophica, 2025; Varghese, 2024; Polychroniou, 2022). Critics like Martha Nussbaum contend that Butler's emphasis on performativity overlooks the material realities and lived

experiences of individuals, thus creating a disconnect between theory and practice (Varghese, 2024; Polychroniou, 2022). Furthermore, scholars such as Susan Bordo argue that Butler reduces gender to discourse, failing to account for the importance of the body in gender identity (Philosophica, 2025). These critiques suggest a need for feminist theorists to balance the theoretical aspects of gender with practical considerations that address the lived experiences of women, particularly in developing countries where cultural and socioeconomic factors significantly influence gender dynamics.

Moving forward, it is important to incorporate Butler's insights into gender performativity into feminist activism to provide a richer understanding of identity that transcends rigid categories. Recognizing that gender identity is performatively constructed, activists can better address the diverse and intersecting identities present in communities, leading to more effective and inclusive practices (Philosophica, 2025). As the discourse surrounding gender continues to evolve, Butler's work remains a critical touchstone for understanding the complexities of gender in contemporary society, especially as it relates to the empowerment of marginalized groups in various global contexts (Butler, 1988; Polychroniou, 2022).

Gender Performativity in Developing Countries

In developing countries, gender performativity creates an intersection of tradition and modernity, social constructs and internalization, resistance and transformation, cultural context and feminist activism, and the role of performative acts in social change. In many developing countries, gender performativity is influenced by a complex interplay of traditional practices and contemporary feminist movements. The understanding of gender roles often emerges from longstanding cultural norms that dictate expected behaviours for men and women. For instance, in societies where women are traditionally viewed as caregivers, expectations around femininity are perpetuated through socialization processes that emphasize nurturing roles, as seen in practices such as giving baby dolls to girls to reinforce caregiving behaviours (Varghese, 2024). Conversely, boys are socialized to embody strength and assertiveness, reflecting dominant masculinity norms (Davis, 2023). Gender norms in these contexts can be internalized to the extent that they feel natural to individuals. For example, in educational settings, girls may be expected to maintain long hair, while boys who grow their hair long may face disciplinary actions (Jones, 2025). This illustrates how societal expectations can shift based on gender, even within uniform standards. The implications of this internalization highlight how rigid gender roles can limit personal expression and reinforce harmful stereotypes (Davis, 2023).

Despite the entrenched nature of these gender norms, acts of resistance do occur, often leading to a transformation in understanding gender. Judith Butler's theory posits that gender is not fixed but is a result of ongoing performative acts that individuals unconsciously engage in (Sungkawa, 2024). In this light, individuals can challenge and subvert traditional roles through deliberate acts that defy societal expectations. This dynamic process offers a space for developing new interpretations of gender that can empower individuals and promote equity

(Jones, 2025). The significance of culture in shaping feminist activism cannot be understated. Activists in developing countries often navigate traditional beliefs while advocating for women's rights, creating unique hybrid forms of feminism that resonate with local cultural contexts. For instance, movements such as Afro-Feminism blend the celebration of cultural heritage with a critique of patriarchal structures, illustrating how local identities inform and enhance feminist activism (Butler, 1988). This intersectionality allows for a richer understanding of gender issues and promotes strategies that are more effective in addressing local challenges.

Furthermore, Butler draws parallels between gender performativity and theatrical performance, emphasizing that both involve the enactment of roles within specific cultural contexts (Butler, 1988). This comparison underscores the potential for feminist activism to utilize performative acts as a means of social change. By engaging in public demonstrations or creating narratives that challenge dominant gender norms, activists can disrupt traditional perceptions and advocate for more equitable gender relations. This approach not only highlights the constructed nature of gender but also provides a pathway for reimagining identities and roles within society (Sungkawa, 2024).

Case Studies and Examples

The feminist movements in Latin America offer compelling case studies that highlight the practical applications of Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity and vulnerability within political activism. These movements have skillfully utilized economic power and political representation as tools for advancing women's rights, especially in contexts where reproductive rights are under threat. For instance, Latin American feminists have leveraged their substantial economic influence, estimated at \$3.5 trillion in spending power, to initiate campaigns such as the planned 2025 Latino Freeze boycott, aimed at corporations that withdraw their commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Flores, 2025). This strategic engagement resonates with Butler's emphasis on the performative aspects of identity and resistance, demonstrating how economic agency can serve as a vehicle for feminist activism. The development of transnational legal networks exemplifies the cross-border solidarity that has emerged from these movements, particularly in the context of reproductive justice. U.S. organizers are increasingly adopting strategies from Latin American counterparts, such as *acompañamiento* networks that guide individuals seeking safe abortion care. Collaborations between groups like the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Justice and Mexico's Red Necesito Abortar illustrate how feminist movements are transcending national borders to share resources and strategies aimed at circumventing restrictive laws (Flores, 2025). This transnational approach echoes Butler's idea of vulnerability as a collective experience, emphasizing the interconnectedness of women's struggles across different socio-political landscapes.

The roots of Latin America's feminist movements can be traced back to 20th-century anti-dictatorship protests, which laid the groundwork for contemporary activism. For example, Chile's Mujeres por la Vida were instrumental in demanding democracy and accountability during oppressive regimes, and their legacy informs current campaigns for women's rights. The establishment of November 25 as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women not only honours historical figures but also reinforces the importance of memory in feminist mobilization (Flores, 2025). This historical perspective enhances Butler's theoretical framework by demonstrating how the past informs present struggles and highlights the ongoing need for vigilance in the fight for rights.

The successes and strategies of Latin American feminist movements provide a vital context for evaluating the relevance of Butler's theories in contemporary activism. As these movements confront not only legislative challenges but also societal norms, they exemplify the performative nature of gender as articulated by Butler. Activists embody the very change they advocate for, turning theoretical insights into tangible actions. The recent victories in reproductive rights across several countries, including Colombia's decriminalization of abortion up to 24 weeks and Mexico's federal legalization, are a testament to the power of sustained mobilization and the intersection of policy advocacy with grassroots activism (Flores, 2025). Through examining these case studies, it becomes evident that the integration of Butler's theories with local contexts enhances our understanding of gender performativity in action and reinforces the importance of solidarity in feminist activism, particularly in developing countries facing similar challenges.

Conclusion

The analysis of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity underscores its transformative potential in feminist activism, particularly in developing countries where gender norms are deeply embedded in cultural and societal structures. By challenging the fixed binary understanding of gender, Butler's work provides a framework for resistance and the redefinition of gender identities beyond rigid essentialist categories. This approach has empowered feminist movements to adopt more inclusive and intersectional perspectives, allowing for greater adaptability in addressing local challenges. However, while Butler's theoretical contributions are invaluable, their practical applicability in grassroots activism remains a subject of debate. Critics argue that an overly theoretical emphasis on performativity may not fully account for the lived experiences of women facing socio-economic marginalization, political repression, and gender-based violence. Effective feminist activism in developing countries thus requires a balance between theoretical insights and pragmatic approaches tailored to specific cultural contexts. To maximize the impact of Butler's gender performativity theory, feminist movements must integrate it with locally relevant strategies that acknowledge historical, economic, and social realities. By leveraging both theoretical and practical dimensions, activists can create sustainable interventions that challenge oppressive gender norms while remaining culturally resonant. Finally, Butler's work serves as a vital

intellectual resource for contemporary feminist struggles, offering pathways for empowerment, resistance, and social transformation across diverse global settings.

References

Blumenfeld, W. J. & Breen, M.S. (2001). Introduction to the special issue: Butler matters: Judith Butler's impact on feminist and Queer Studies since *Gender trouble*. *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 6, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010140105088>

Breen, M. & Blumenfeld, W. J. (2019). *Butler matters: Judith Butler's impact on Feminist and Queer Studies*. Routledge.

Butler, J. (1988). Queer Theory. *Science Encyclopedia*, 10944. <https://science.jrank.org/pages/10944/Queer-Theory-Judith-Butler.html>.

Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519–531. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Davis, A. (2023). What is gender performativity theory? Exploring Judith Butler's concepts. *Appgecet*. <https://appgecet.co.in/waht-is-gender-performativity-theory-exploring-judith-butlers-concepts/>

Flores, F. (2025). *From protest to power: How Latin America's feminist movements offer a blueprint for U.S. Latinas*. <https://luzmedia.co/latin-american-feminist-movement>

Galligan, L. (2022). *Agency and precarious life: Reflections on the relevance of Butler's scholarship to feminist activism in the Latin American context*. University of Edinburgh.

Government of Canada. (2023). *Feminist approach - Innovation and effectiveness guidance note*. Government of Canada.

Jones, E. W. (2025). Judith Butler's performative theory of Gender. *Psychology of Mental Health*. <https://psychologyfor.com/judith-butlers-performative-theory-of-gender/>

Mambrol, N. (2018). Key theories of Judith Butler. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. <https://literariness.org/2018/03/11/key-theories-of-judith-butler/>

Niedda, M. (2020). Feminist and queer studies: Judith Butler's conceptualisation of gender. <https://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/civilisation/domaine-americain/feminist-and-queer-studies-judith-butlers-conceptualisation-of-gender>

Philosophica (2025). Judith Butler: Dissecting the Dynamics of Gender and Power.

Philosophica. <https://philosophical.chat/philosophy/philosophers-and-their-philosophies/judith-butler/>

Polychroniou, A. (2022). Towards a radical feminist resignification of vulnerability: A critical juxtaposition of Judith Butler's post-structuralist Philosophy and Martha Fineman's legal theory. *Redescriptions: Political Thought Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*, 25(2), 113–136. doi: 10.33134/rds.379.

Syndu, 2025. Who is Judith Butler? An introduction to her impact on feminist and queer theory. <https://syndu.com/blog/who-is-judith-butler-an-introduction-to-her-impact-on-feminist-and-queer-theory/>

Sus, V. (2024). What is the Gender Philosophy of Judith Butler?

<https://www.thecollector.com/gender-philosophy-judith-butler/>

Sungkawa, B. (2024). Third-World perspectives on Feminism: Where do they stand? *The Feminism Project*. <https://the feminismproject.com/featured/third-world-perspectives-on-feminism-where-do-they-stand/>

Smith, N. (2024). A summary of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. *Medium*.

Varghese, R. R. (2024). On gender performativity: how it challenges the gender binary. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/specials/text-and-context/on-gender-performativity-how-it-challenges-the-gender-binary/article68701885.ece>