Whose feminism counts? Gender(ed) knowledge and professionalisation in development

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ABSTRACT

Gender and development (GAD) has become a transnational discourse and has, as a result, generated its own elite elements. This elitism has tended to be attributed to a Northern hegemony in how feminism has been articulated and then subsequently professionalised and bureaucratised. What has received less attention, and what this paper highlights empirically, is how Southern-based feminisms might themselves be sites of discursive exclusion. The paper interrogates these concerns through an analysis of how professionalisation is evidenced in feminist engagement among civil society organisations working on gender in New Delhi. The analysis suggests that efforts to create spaces for subaltern voices are constrained not only by the disciplining effects of neoliberal frameworks but also – and in tandem – by Southern elite feminist priorities. The implications of these findings are significant: processes of professionalisation and the elitism they engender may have the effect of potentially precluding the engagement of those people on the margins whose voices are so sought after as part of efforts to facilitate inclusive development.

Introduction

Gender and development (GAD), initially a subversive response to the gender-blindness of mainstream development, has itself become a transnational discourse and has, as a result, generated its own elite elements. Concerns around the professionalisation of development discourse, and the concomitant bureaucratisation of GAD that its uptake in practice has entailed, continue to be debated. Within this there is a need to reflect on the nature of current GAD discourse and practice, and its relative inclusivity/exclusivity for different individuals and groups occupying diverse discursive and/or geographical locations. The literature concurs that the professionalisation of GAD discourse is at least partly evidenced by an alignment with neoliberal development imperatives. This has the effect of precluding the engagement of those people on the margins who most often suffer the starkest material consequences of (gender-blind) development shortcomings. What has received less attention, and the concern this paper highlights empirically, is the extent to which the discursive spaces of Southern feminisms – understood as distinct sets of feminist ideas that derive from...
their own indigenous, local, regional or historical contexts – might themselves be sites of exclusion. This paper interrogates these concerns through a theoretical and empirical analysis of how the professionalisation of ideas – interrogated here in relation to how dominant ideas emerge and are subsequently and variously framed, articulated and shared – is evidenced in feminist engagement among civil society organisations working in the area of GAD in New Delhi, India. The analysis suggests that efforts to create spaces for subaltern voices are constrained by the disciplining effects of professionalised global and neoliberal, as well as Southern, local (in this case Indian) elite feminist priorities for gender and/or feminist development discourse and practice.

The analysis begins by unpacking dominant ‘ways of knowing’ wherein the neoliberal hegemony of donors and international financial institutions (IFIs) is implicated as part of a continually contested, but nonetheless dominant development knowledge system. The paper then moves on to consider the extent to which neoliberal development paradigms discipline what was once considered a subaltern, subversive gender/feminist narrative that challenged the gender-blindness of mainstream development. The analysis next considers historical and contemporary charges of elitism within the Indian women’s movement. The empirical evidence interrogates the resultant professionalisation among a diversity of women’s NGOs in New Delhi. The conclusion suggests that efforts designed to privilege subaltern ideas occur in spaces already circumscribed by elite, discursive priorities. More worryingly, these processes of professionalisation and the elitism they engender may have the effect of potentially precluding the engagement of those people on the margins whose voices are so sought after as part of efforts to facilitate inclusive development.

The professionalisation of development discourse

In order to understand the nature and pervasiveness of the professionalisation of ideas within development discourse, we will reflect briefly on how the ascendance of, and response to, dominant development narratives has been disciplined by the discursive power of development itself. Building on Foucault’s definitive insights into the mutuality of the relationship between power and knowledge, Abrahamsen argues that the ascendance of particular narratives is ‘not natural or inevitable, but historically contingent and dependent on power relations that have already rendered a particular topic a legitimate object of investigation’. How, then, do we apply these insights into understanding the power relations that constitute development discourse? This power to determine the shape and focus of development discourse has been the subject of much debate. Some argue that international organisations (IOs) such as the World Bank, given their control over financial resources, ‘are often the actors empowered to decide if there is a problem at all, what kind of problem it is, and whose responsibility it is to solve it’.

Others suggest that global-level discourses represent a contested rather than unified ideational terrain, where global discourses ‘regarding the content of global policy’ are in fact being continually negotiated through interactions between different states, IOs and academic disciplines. Elaborating on the origins of ‘development discourse’, Escobar persuasively argues that IOs’ power to ‘frame’ (however oppositional) may not be understood in isolation from the system. It is not one economic institution or social programme or idea that defines development, but rather ‘a set of relations among these elements’; elements
which Arce suggests are part of a discursive rubric that he terms ‘the language of development’. This language, McEwan argues, establishes a hierarchy whereby ‘certain forms of knowledge are dominant and others are excluded…[the] texts of development contain silences. It is important to ask, therefore, who is silenced, and why.’ Attempts to engage with the subaltern are invariably undertaken to reveal these silences, a concern the analysis revisits in the next section.

With a ‘discursive formation laid down in the period 1945–1955’, Escobar contends that development represents a particularised body of knowledge, a certain ‘way of knowing’. The dominance of this ‘way of knowing’ has been enabled by processes of professionalisation embodied in notions of ‘expertise’ which, as Kothari suggests, have underpinned the expansion of narrowly focused, neoliberal economic development paradigms. This professionalisation means that only those ‘suitably qualified’ may participate, establishing subtle and variable forms of discursive inclusion and exclusion predicated on the creation of an ‘inner circle’ of experts with a knowledge of the ‘new vocabularies’ and ‘master buzzwords’. In this space, and despite efforts to engage with viewpoints and stakeholders drawn from a diversity of Northern and Southern discursive locations, particular narratives of what, or how, development ‘should’ be are ‘rendered legitimate’ by those with power, a self-selecting group who are likely to share certain characteristics that act as prerequisites to participation, such as access to the internet and a command of the English language. Kakande, writing from her standpoint as a senior bureaucrat in Uganda’s Ministry for Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPED), suggests that it is ‘common knowledge’ that participation by civil society organisations in Southern elite networks is limited to those with the discursive capacity to engage in the ‘common language’ of the ‘inner circle’ of IFI and finance ministry officials.

One key response to addressing the dominance of (neoliberal) development narratives has been to privilege local, indigenous or Southern knowledge, acting as a counterpoint to the international scope of dominant Western knowledge systems. While attempts to seek out so-called subaltern narratives to challenge the hegemony of dominant development discourses represent an important recognition that the North does not have a monopoly on useful, credible or relevant knowledge, there are also a number of dangers in this response that help to explain how, rather contradictorily, ‘IK [indigenous knowledge] has evolved as a means of legitimizing as well as resisting mainstream development’. For the purposes of this analysis two key issues arise, and concerns around professionalisation emerge in both. These highlight the impact that dominant ways of knowing have on attempts to engage with the resultant Southern or indigenous narratives that emerge, something which, as the subsequent analysis attests, has important implications for how we understand, and engage with, ‘Southern feminisms’.

First, while a growing number of academics and practitioners are pursuing local knowledge as one method of subverting hegemonic or dominant discourses, knowledge, indigenous or otherwise, is not a static entity to be captured, but rather ‘is embedded in social cultural processes imbued with aspects of power, authority and legitimation’. Briggs argues that ‘indigenous knowledge tends not to be problematized, but is seen as a “given”, almost a benign and consensual knowledge simply waiting to be tapped into’. This conceptualisation is at odds with the understanding of indigenous, or indeed any, knowledge as part of iterative, contested, dynamic and continually evolving knowledge creation processes.
The second concern emerging out of this is that these processes of co-option and contestation, to which all forms of knowledge are subject, occur within the dominant discursive spaces of development, with profound consequences for how indigenous knowledge itself is understood. Mosse questions the power held by ‘outsiders’ attempting to capture ‘local’ or ‘indigenous’ knowledge, suggesting that the knowledge that the outsider gathers is likely to be ‘that which already exists in a codified form, as explicit “indigenous theories”’. That indigenous knowledge is that which is already codified is as likely to result from ‘the idea that local indigenous knowledge must first be professionalised (ordered and systematised) so that it can be circulated and shared’. Professionalising indigenous knowledge, Laurie et al argue, ‘is intimately bound up in transnational development discourses and networks’, which creates an artificial entity called ‘indigenous knowledge’ that is circumscribed by the very knowledge system it is invoked to supersede.

More problematically ‘established geographies of knowledge production…draw a sharp distinction between (local) indigenous knowledge and the construction of an international knowledge system’ yet, in reality, development ‘rationalities’ are so entrenched; given the relative power of the overarching development discourse, some critics have argued that, for many individuals, communities and groups, it would be ‘almost impossible…to envisage futures that are not bound up in some form of development imaginary’. As Fernando reiterates, so-called ‘indigenous knowledge’ is subject to an ever-encroaching globalisation, with the result that ‘there will be fewer and fewer areas where the term indigenous knowledge is applicable in any meaningful way’. We also need to consider the existence of power imbalances at the so-called local level, whence more inclusive, representative and grounded ‘indigenous’ knowledge is itself meant to emerge. Taken together, these concerns around the nature and function of indigenous knowledge have profound implications for those stakeholders or movements attempting to create spaces for the inclusion of so-called subaltern voices to challenge dominant narratives.

Gender and development: a subversive development narrative?

The challenge posed by this critical interrogation of the nature of ‘indigenous knowledge’ has particular implications for GAD discourse and practice. Feminist movements in development have been centrally concerned with the creation of spaces to engage the voices of ‘Third World Women’ and/or the ‘subaltern’. Before we consider the implications for attempts to reach the ‘subaltern’ of power imbalances within so-called ‘indigenous’ articulations of knowledge, we need first to consider the emergence of GAD discourse and practice, wherein women’s NGOs emerge as key interlocutors.

Ground-breaking work by both Western and Third World feminist academics and activists has sought variously to recognise women’s paid and unpaid labour, alongside generating new understandings of women not just as victims but also as development agents in their own right. The Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing in 1995 drew on the strength of this scholarship to establish global commitments to gender equality, which have continued as a central feature of the Millennium Declaration and the 2015 negotiations around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The uptake of gender inequality as an overarching concern within development discourse and practice has been an incredible victory for feminist campaigners. But the literature suggests that the uptake of feminist discourses into the mainstream has come at a price.
Achieving Southern feminist engagement has necessitated an element of professionalisation in how feminist movements engage in the mainstream, and the cost is often articulated in terms of a disconnection. Alvarez identified this ‘disconnect’ in the Latin American context in the run-up to Beijing. She cites some who ‘argued that feminist NGOs’ and networks’ increased focus on national and international policy arenas has distanced them from the grassroots, from the needs and concerns of local women’. Nor has this ‘disconnect’ resolved itself in the post-Beijing period. Research undertaken among women’s NGOs in a diversity of countries in the intervening period all demonstrates that a ‘disconnect’ persists. For Jad, despite the raised profiles of many Palestinian women’s NGOs, ‘this international recognition is not translated into recognition or legitimacy at local and national levels’. Nabacwa has observed in the Ugandan context that the efforts undertaken by women’s NGOs to advocate policy change at the national level ‘have been detached from the districts and have more often been interpreted as elitist women’s issues’. The implications for Ghodsee of the ‘disconnect between the lives of women in Bulgaria and the kinds of advocacy projects being pursued by the women’s NGOs in Sofia’ is that ‘women’s NGOs not only disregard the fundamental problems, but many [may] actively obscure them’. The persistence of this ‘disconnect’, coupled with the critiques of indigenous knowledge in the previous section, raise important questions around representation and legitimacy in relation to how women’s NGOs act as interlocutors with subaltern women.

So what is the cause of this disconnect? One manifestation of the professionalisation that at least partially explains this disconnect is evidenced in a well-established literature that critiques the bureaucratisation and de-politicisation of GAD discourse and practice. In the Latin American context, Alvarez cites ‘the absorption’ by dominant institutions of some of the more culturally acceptable items of the feminist agenda, which lead to the increased specialization and professionalization of growing numbers of feminist NGOs dedicated to intervening in national and international policy processes. This synergy between professionalisation and the adoption of the more ‘palatable’ ideas emerging from feminist activism is achieved through processes of de-politicisation, bureaucratisation and instrumentalisation to facilitate their uptake and co-option into mainstream development discourse. Goetz suggests that bureaucratising feminist knowledge in development is rooted in the ‘dominant economic paradigm’, in which only certain articulations of information are validated, which in turn ‘impose[s] a particular discipline on information about women’ that ‘has the effect of stripping away its political content’. In her discussion of the co-option of women’s empowerment discourses into neoliberal development paradigms as a key outcome in state-led women’s empowerment programmes in India, Sharma extends this concern to further suggest an intrinsic relationship between bureaucratisation and professionalisation that is embodied in notions of expertise and measurability. Nagar and Raju similarly identify the challenge of ‘doing’ empowerment ‘at a time when “Southern” women’s nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are becoming increasingly professionalized and globalized’. Another compelling explanatory factor is rooted in the transnational discourse, which has become circumscribed by dominant neoliberal agendas that delimit the nature and scope of what constitutes knowledge in GAD practice to those concerns that correlate with economic development objectives. Nagar identifies the growth of a ‘gender hegemony’ to accompany the ‘expansion of globalized capitalism since 1989’, where, she argues, a consensus on the priority areas for feminist action in development exclude alternative approaches to the development concerns of marginalised women in particular. Nagar suggests that
‘gender mainstreaming’ and approaches to addressing ‘poor women’s empowerment’ have necessarily responded to the funding agencies’ popularization of ‘gender’ (instead of ‘women’), of a focus on violence against women and HIV/AIDS (instead of infant mortality or price inflation of basic foods), and of micro-credit programs (instead of women’s unions or land reforms).

An important element of this neoliberal disciplining consists of facilitating social development (of which support for gender issues and women’s empowerment is key) in ways that Cammack calls a ‘blueprint’ for ‘the sustainable reproduction of capitalism,’ which necessitates a move ‘beyond simple macro-economics to [consider] the social and cultural dimensions of economic success.’ This narrow articulation of social development simply as a means through which to more sustainably reproduce and proliferate capitalism further reflects concerns around the ‘smart economics’ and the hype surrounding the ‘girl effect’ championed by the donors, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), IFIs and even large corporations that instrumentalise the role of women and girls as conduits to achieving broader economic development objectives.

The implications of this alignment for how women’s NGOs engage with GAD discourse and practice are significant. While this global attention has politicised a range of important gender issues, Nagar echoes Alvarez in her assertion that these efforts have lost their more ‘radical’ edge; instead she suggests that ‘the interventions made by powerful NGOs have often ended up serving the interests of global capital.’ In her comparative analysis of two grassroots initiatives to empower women in the Indian context Raju raises questions about whether ‘the circumstances, the domains (for example, livelihood issues) and the specific manner in which empowering efforts have been targeted…can be completely delinked from neo-liberal processes.’ This literature confirms the relative hegemony of neoliberal approaches as one dominant ‘way of knowing’ even within GAD discourse and practice. But what is also important to note for the purposes of this analysis is that the key referent in these critiques is the power imbalances embodied in the North–South divide. But is this divide the only relevant referent?

It is certainly articulated as the most pervasive. As I have problematised elsewhere, there is a tendency in development discourse and practice to represent the Global South as universally marginalised. Within this the Southern woman is reified. By virtue of her geographical location, she is both herself a source, as well as a representative, of alternative and subversive development paradigms and ideas. In the scholarship in which concerns around feminist professionalisation have been highlighted, the suggestion tends to be that Southern-based elite feminists are co-opted into transnational, Northern or mainstream development narratives, with their engagement occurring at the expense of local, indigenous and/or Southern feminisms or Southern feminist priorities. Monasterios, for instance, cites the evolution of a ‘gender technocracy’ rooted in this co-option that is the source of the above-noted disconnect. It is a term she suggests was coined by autonomous Latin American feminists to distinguish between an elite, liberal and hegemonic ‘northern-hemisphere feminism’ being exported by global institutions such as the UN, and ‘authentic’ grassroots feminist movements and consciousness, from which the now globalised, exported discourse of ‘gender and development’ has remained largely disconnected. Baillie Smith and Jenkins, drawing on Jenkins’ research with women health promoters in Peru, eloquently describe the exclusion of these women from mainstream development spaces as a result of the professionalisation of ‘transnational’ discursive spaces that require an engagement with the ‘appropriate
buzzwords and expert knowledge. Amadiume is perhaps the most explicit in articulating this dichotomy with her notion of the ‘Europeanised African woman,’ who maintains a desire to reproduce European cultures, beliefs and practices, as contrasted with what she perceives as the spirit of African ‘daughters of the Goddess.’

But if we extend the concerns of both the professionalisation of ideas and the power imbalances intrinsic to indigenous or local knowledge systems articulated in the previous section, are there sites of exclusion for subaltern women operating within the Global South? In addition to silences created by a Northern, neoliberal framing of GAD priorities, what is lacking in this literature is a more nuanced, in-depth analysis of the ways in which the expression of Southern feminisms themselves might be disciplined by Southern elite feminisms and feminist practices. These are ideas and/or traditions that emerge not only through sustained engagement with, or co-option by, Northern feminism, but rather as a result of Southern elite feminist priorities that can be traced to local or indigenous historical trajectories that may also be precluding the inclusion of marginalised voices. The empirical analysis here suggests that this historically and locally derived Southern elite feminism elides with Northern feminist development paradigms to circumscribe and effectively ‘invisibilise’ the concerns of women discursively marginalised from both transnational and indigenous elite spaces. In this context the study undertaken here in New Delhi offers empirical insights into a particularised Southern elite feminist positionality that challenges notions of a universally marginalised ‘Southern’ woman’s voice. Moreover, through their role as gatekeepers and mediators between marginalised women and the transnational feminist spaces wherein GAD discourse and practice are proliferated, these Southern elite feminisms may effectively be obscuring any meaningful engagement with the so-called subaltern voices so sought after by progressive Northern (feminist) stakeholders. As this next section highlights, the existing literature on feminism in India has long documented concerns around the exclusive tendencies of elite Indian feminism.

Southern elite feminisms: India

While there is effectively a silence on the nature of indigenous elite feminisms within GAD discourse and practice more broadly, this is not to suggest that a robust scholarship does not exist to document historical and ongoing concerns around elite capture of feminist ideas. Indian feminist movements have a long and historically well-established trajectory characterised by internal divisions, fuelled primarily by class and caste divides. With the entrance of women en masse into the nationalist movement, women’s societies were established and included the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC), which lobbied for reforms to women’s education. The membership of these organisations tended to be drawn from the upper classes, who were not keen to grant equal voice to their working class counterparts. They felt that, as ‘only a few educated women of the land can speak, on behalf of our sex,’ they were qualified to represent ‘Indian womanhood.’ Mazumdar suggests that class-based hierarchies fuelled misperceptions of the needs of ‘the masses of Indian women’, whereby ‘much of what agitated the reformers, hardly touched them. Except for child marriage the other problems taken up by the reform movement meant nothing to them.’ She went on to note that:

the greatest failure of the reform movement lay in its inability to expose the nature of the oppression that affected women in different layers of our society…the movement for women’s emancipation in India remained confined to its urban middle-class roots.
As Subramaniam notes, ‘the ideology of the women’s organizations was too Hindu, too middle class, and too urban to appeal to or adequately represent all Indian women’\(^{58}\). Instead, it became the norm that the ‘movement’ came to represent the concerns of upper class/caste women as the universal concerns of Indian women.\(^{59}\)

Echoing the persistent ‘disconnect’ between elite feminists and the grassroots outlined in the previous section, and reflecting in particular how class (and caste) inequalities have historically circumscribed the articulation of the issues facing ‘Indian women’, Stephen suggests in the current context that mainstream Indian feminists ‘have for long given step-motherly treatment to [marginalised women’s]…issues’\(^{60}\). She further argues that many of the issues that urban, middle-class women’s NGOs address – including ‘legal reform for domestic violence, property rights, workplace rights [and] sexual rights’ – and for which legal and regulatory support that appears to challenge ‘traditional norms and taboos’ is frequently forthcoming – are still those that are of relevance only to urban, middle and upper class women. She goes on to suggest that ‘elite activists’ are rarely found campaigning on issues such as the ‘poor quality of primary education, health and a non-existent public distribution system, transport, and drinking water shortages’, issues that are intrinsically and historically tied to low and variable levels of, and access to, (women’s) employment.\(^{61}\)

Stephen’s list of elite Indian feminist priorities, notably in relation to violence and sexual rights,\(^{62}\) mirrors some global-level GAD priorities but deviates on others. The Sangtin Writers, seven lower-class and caste women who work for a large NGO in a North Indian state at the grassroots on women’s empowerment and consciousness-raising, echo both Nagar’s and Stephen’s concerns, offering unique insights into how the multiple exclusions created by the convergence of both global-level and elite Indian feminist priorities shape their own engagement with development.\(^{63}\) Echoing Foucault’s notion of ‘prohibition’, in which one has ‘the privileged or exclusive right to speak of a particular subject’,\(^{64}\) these women argue that it is the practice of discursive exclusion that ‘forecloses spaces for grassroots workers to connect processes of rural underdevelopment and impoverishment with the marginalization and disempowerment of poor women’.\(^{65}\) The Sangtin Writers suggest a tendency for NGOs to be single-issue focussed and ‘staffed and dominated by Hindu and upper-caste grassroots workers’, whose discussions of ‘grassroots women’s issues’ including ‘casteism, communalism, and untouchability’ exclude grassroots women themselves in ways that resonate with Foucault’s assertion that one must be ‘qualified’ to speak on a particular subject.\(^{66}\)

They further suggest that the professionalisation of development discourse, in both its transnational and indigenous varieties, excludes them from engaging in theoretical debates that consider the political, economic and social complexities of feminism and development that most often have the starkest material consequences for people like them living at the margins of society. Attempts to challenge this status quo are further curbed by what Baillie Smith and Jenkins suggest is a ‘universality’, deployed ‘in the name of technical expediency’, wherein ‘voices of dissent and contestation are increasingly few’.\(^{67}\) These critiques thus raise critical questions about claims to represent and/or facilitate the inclusion of subaltern women.

While the literature articulated here raises a number of important concerns, the effects of this professionalisation are explored in this analysis empirically by interrogating the extent to which the disciplining effects of neoliberal development discourses embodied in Nagar’s ‘gender hegemony’ elide with Indian elite feminist priorities in the issue areas identified as crucial for Indian women by stakeholders in the field site. The empirical analysis
reveals that, rather than neoliberal paradigms supplanting Indian feminist concerns, as we might expect given the dominance of development knowledge systems, these ideas in fact operate alongside one another, effectively making invisible the subaltern women and marginalising them even further from the dialogues whence feminisms in development are meant to emerge.

**Methodology**

The empirical analysis draws on data collected for a larger study investigating the knowledge practices of a network of women/GAD NGOs. The study was a qualitative, multi-site ethnography, consisting of interviews, (participant) observation and extensive documentary analysis. Revealing processes of professionalisation demands a focus on locating, analysing and contextualising information itself. This must be done with consideration for the world systems implicated in the production and dissemination of this information and how these processes in turn interact with other stakeholders in the system in which the information is continually constituted. Quantitative analysis is not foregrounded as a principal methodology, because it is at present primarily quantitative measures, such as numbers of participants, training courses run or reports disseminated that are used as proxy measures of successful grassroots engagement, but which provide little insight into the sustainability of particular programmes or the relative inclusion of marginalised groups. The research has been framed precisely to move away from this purely quantitative picture to understand the ‘story behind the numbers’: what is actually happening with respect to how ideas are framed, articulated and then communicated? What do the statistics reveal, as well as hide, with regard to the ways in which the professionalisation of ideas circumscribes the inclusion of marginalised women? These substantive questions demand a more nuanced, qualitative interrogation.

The empirical analysis therefore set out to examine the changing nature of information as it moved between one gender information intermediary based in the North – the Gender and Development Knowledge Service (GDKS) (a pseudonym) – to a number of intermediaries and user groups based in the South, in this case the city of New Delhi, that are on GDKS’ mailing list. Among a range of data collected including 47 interviews, an in-depth, collective case study of the knowledge work of 17 women’s organisations (hereafter known as the collective case study organisations – CCSOs), including NGOs, research centres and units within large, mainstream Indian development NGOs on GDKS’ mailing list in New Delhi, was undertaken. The empirical analysis here draws on data collected on the key ideas that underpin the work of these organisations. As ‘Southern women’s NGOs’, understood as a category of development stakeholder, these organisations operate at the interface of inclusion and exclusion. Because of their geographical and therefore presumed discursive location, these organisations are understood to be better placed to seek out and engage with subaltern, alternative and/or marginalised groups, a questionable assumption I have problematised elsewhere.

Issues related to gender equality and women’s human rights featured widely in their work. These NGOs engaged in women’s political rights, employment and economic rights, women’s sexual and reproductive health, women’s empowerment, consciousness-raising, education and literacy, social policy and women’s rights, governance, democracy and participation. All 17 mission statements articulate commitments to develop, promote and disseminate increased volumes of information to support activities such as education, awareness-raising, advocacy, conscientisation, training and capacity building to promote the exercise of
‘knowledge as power’ among groups, notably of women, perceived to be marginalised from mainstream development discourse and practice. The organisations ranged from small NGOs housed in a two-bedroomed flat through to mid-size NGOs occupying an entire house to large, internationally recognised research centres providing research and consultancy services on women/GAD in India, with around 10 of them also offering various library-style services. In order to amplify the ‘story behind the numbers’, and in addition to collating data on the work these organisations undertake through a detailed analysis of websites, annual reports and other grey literature, respondents based in these organisations were asked about how either they or their organisation engaged with the marginalised women they all claimed to both serve and represent. How were needs assessed, priorities determined or feedback loops established? The picture that emerges from analysing the answers provided by respondents to these questions is of a seemingly diverse set of ideas that are in fact underpinned by a narrow, almost repetitive set of priorities aligned with both transnational and elite Indian feminist discourses.

An empirical analysis of the professionalisation of ideas

How do we evidence the professionalisation of ideas in the work of these New Delhi-based organisations? Perhaps we might reasonably expect their work to reflect the diversity of issues affecting the status of women and gender relations as these intersect with other axes of difference, including class, caste, sexual orientation, religion, marital status and age, all of which are particularly divisive and often volatile differences in the Indian context. And in fact, as Table 1 emphasises, there appears at first glance to be a diversity of issue areas represented in the work of the CCSOs.

When drawn together, and as the table highlights, the work of the collective case study organisations falls into seven broad categories: democracy and representation, economic participation, education, health, rights, violence against women and children, and women’s empowerment. The table appears at first glance to represent a fulsome and varied programme of work areas. Arguably advocacy, outreach, programme implementation or interest group representation undertaken in a way that is inclusive of the wide range of concerns that align with one or more of these categories would undoubtedly create space for a diversity of voices and concerns from so-called ‘local’, ‘grassroots’ or marginalised women to emerge.

Yet a more detailed analysis of how each of these categories is framed and substantiated suggests instead some rather familiar, almost repetitive forms. Within these broad categories certain issues emerge as priority areas. Echoing Nagar’s observed ascendance of a ‘gender hegemony’,71 HIV/AIDS and violence against women emerge as the most important issues for the collective case study organisations, with all but one engaged in research, advocacy or training in each of these areas. In response to MDG 6 ‘Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases’, HIV/AIDS in particular has captured a great deal of attention and associated funding from a range of private, bilateral and international NGOs in the past few years. Yet temporal studies of funding patterns confirm the critical concerns of Nagar and others that, despite increases in overall development funding for health over the past 20 or so years, funding for health has disproportionately been diverted to support for HIV/AIDS-related programmes and interventions.72 The focus on violence against women both resonates with Nagar’s ‘gender hegemony’ and, as Stephen reiterates, has historically been central to the Indian women’s
Table 1. Issue areas covered by collective case study organisations (CCSOs).

| Issue                             | CCSO 1 | CCSO 2 | CCSO 3 | CCSO 4 | CCSO 5 | CCSO 6 | CCSO 7 | CCSO 8 | CCSO 9 | CCSO 10 | CCSO 11 | CCSO 12 | CCSO 13 | CCSO 14 | CCSO 15 | CCSO 16 | CCSO 17 |
|-----------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Democracy and representation     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Governance                        | X      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Panchayati Raj Institutions       | X      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Women’s movement                  |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Women’s representation, democracy and voting | X      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Economic participation            |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Informal economy                  |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Economic empowerment              |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Microcredit and microfinance     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Women’s work                      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Education                         |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Adolescent education              |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Women’s education and literacy    |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Legal literacy                    |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Health                            |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Adolescent health and support services |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Children’s health                 |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| HIV/AIDS                          |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Maternal health                   |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Nutrition                         |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Reproductive health               |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Women’s health                    |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Rights                            |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Children’s rights                 |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Human rights                      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Sexual rights                     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Women’s (human) rights            |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Youth sexual rights               |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Reproductive rights               |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |

(continued)
| Issue                                         | CCSO 1 | CCSO 2 | CCSO 3 | CCSO 4 | CCSO 5 | CCSO 6 | CCSO 7 | CCSO 8 | CCSO 9 | CCSO 10 | CCSO 11 | CCSO 12 | CCSO 13 | CCSO 14 | CCSO 15 | CCSO 16 | CCSO 17 |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Violence against women and children           | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      |
| Dowry                                         |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Sex selection and female infanticide          |        |        | X      | X      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Sexual harassment                             | X      | X      | X      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Trafficking in women and children             | X      | X      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Violence against women                        | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      |
| Women's empowerment                           |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Gender mainstreaming                          |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Empower women                                 | X      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Self-help groups (research)                   |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Helping oneself, self-reliance                | X      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Social justice                                | X      | X      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Women's leadership                           | X      | X      | X      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Women's participation                         | X      | X      | X      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
movement. Given that it is the one issue that unifies women of all caste, class, ethnic and religious backgrounds, this is not altogether surprising.

Next in importance, according to Table 1, are women’s health and empowerment, followed by reproductive health, women’s education and literacy and economic empowerment. Looking at the top seven priority issues for these NGOs and women’s units, six of them are aligned more explicitly with historically Indian priorities for women’s welfare, including delivering women’s education and literacy. Again echoing Stephen’s critique above, it is important to note that these engagements with education and health do not include campaigning for improvements in the delivery of universal primary education or healthcare. They instead mimic historically Indian approaches to women’s welfare, with a narrow focus on educating women about reproductive (and more recently sexual) health, as well as nutrition and sanitation to address children’s basic health concerns. The seventh, the emphasis on economic empowerment, is also worth noting, given ongoing concerns emerging in the literature and noted above around the instrumental inclusion of women and girls to achieve broader economic development objectives, particularly in relation to the grassroots work undertaken by these organisations. Work with slum and resettlement colonies, as well as a significant proportion of the action research, has an economic empowerment focus.

A more detailed reflection on how some of these organisations are engaging with notions of ‘sexual rights’ provides a telling insight into the juxtaposition of transnational and elite Indian feminism. Sexual rights in particular is one area where some of the newer NGOs are moving away from dominant elite Indian feminist discourses and engaging, by their own admission, with Western feminist paradigms (eg Co-Founder, Southern NGO – CCSO 13). This emphasis on the language of sexual rights coincides with a growing transnational emphasis on women’s sexuality issues. As evidence of the ‘disconnect’ cited above we can observe a dissonance in the delivery of ‘sexuality training’ for rural women’s groups. One respondent, a retired Professor of Geography, recalled in our interview an experience of speaking to rural women’s groups who had received this type of training from what they called ‘Delhi feminists’. She was concerned about a lack of focus on ‘genuine issues’, suggesting that information on sexuality discourses that is not rooted in the material realities of deprivation and caste/class inequality will continue to speak primarily to elite groups.

Just as importantly, her insights suggested a ‘disconnect between what the feminists in Delhi, they envisioned [for the local NGO] and the people on the ground’. This is not simply about a co-option of Indian feminists into Northern feminist discourses on sexuality; it also represented an internal, Indian North–South divide:75

While sexuality here has clearly been interpreted as part of elite and/or dominant development discourses, perhaps a more dialogic and context-sensitive approach might have mitigated this reaction. Instead the focus might have been on creating an opportunity to
generate a shared meaning and value to the importance of discussing sexuality in this Indian context, avoiding the professionalised notion of ‘training’ and the one-sided expertise it connotes. In practice, however, the disciplining effects of neoliberal development paradigms proliferate and sustain notions of expertise through dominant modes of engagement such as ‘training’. Nor, as the quotation emphasises, does this discursive space become necessarily more inclusive within the purview of Indian feminism. Indeed, a Research Fellow based in CCSO3 suggested in our interview that the articulation of Indian feminism is deliberately moving towards even greater inaccessibility:

I mean, you know, the language of the academic community is in fact totally divorced from the mass of people…I would say the analysis of the movement by women’s studies scholars is all in a language which they don’t understand, which the mass of women won’t understand. And trends in language or trends in academics are such that they’re making it more and more dense, more and more abstract.

The professionalisation of these discursive spaces, echoing the concerns of the Sangtin writers, in essence favours the participation and inclusion of some groups of women and their knowledges over others.

One respondent’s (Director, Southern NGO – CCSO 1) overview of how they address ‘grassroots poverty’ provides a real insight into how the ‘gender hegemony’ elides with Indian elite feminist approaches in the delivery of development programmes:

I have to remember that working with the marginalised is a tough job. Going into the slums in terms of cleanliness…it’s tough work, you have to repeat and explain, you have to undo their habits of sanitation…of course I have now such an extraordinary relation, we can get them to even stand on their head now because the thing is that we have been working with them without seeking anything in return just their welfare is our return, their well-being is our return…More than anything else, it’s the commitment to the marginalised in the country and how to pull them up to become like us and so on…In terms of the four programs on functional literacy, on health and nutrition, literacy and…micro-credit, micro-enterprise, all of them find that this is a good package. So that’s what – these are the four legs of our grassroots poverty programme.

Implied in her response to my question about her organisations’ work in New Delhi slums is the convergence of the key concerns that have emerged in relation to the professionalisation of ideas throughout this analysis. First, the ‘four legs’ of this organisation’s ‘grassroots poverty programme’ lend empirical weight to Nagar’s observations of a ‘gender hegemony’. The (instrumental) promotion of women’s economic empowerment is juxtaposed with an emphasis on the written word, whether in relation to literacy, health or microfinance. Second, her views tie into historically elite Indian feminist tendencies to ‘define’ the ‘problems’ of Indian women through the lens of the middle and upper classes, viewing the poor as uncivilised and lacking in ‘basic’ information, who need to be taught how to be ‘like us’ through charitable welfare measures such as the delivery of literacy, health and nutrition education. Finally, her efforts to ‘repeat’, ‘explain’ and ‘undo’ connote the one-sided tendencies of professionalisation revealed to underpin the persistent ‘disconnect’ cited above. In this articulation, it would seem there is little room afforded by this ‘grassroots poverty programme’ for dialogue that might promote the inclusion of subaltern groups in a way that might challenge, or even simply diversify, this narrow articulation of both GAD and elite Indian feminist ‘expertise’.

**Conclusion**

The foregoing theoretical and empirical analysis forcefully highlights the concomitant uptake of both global, neoliberal and elite Southern feminist ideas in ways that risk effectively
obscuring and/or making invisible the voices of subaltern groups. Looking more closely at
the empirical context, in line with India’s entry into a global marketplace and the concomitant
movement of Indian feminists into the arena of transnational development discourse, the
professionalisation of ideas among women’s NGOs in New Delhi has been evidenced here
in relation to how dominant or elite ideas are both framed and articulated. The work of the
NGOs under scrutiny here features a combination of more recent GAD priorities, including
sexual rights and HIV/AIDS, while still retaining some essential features of historically Indian
non-profit work with women, including health programmes and literacy training. And some
problems and solutions, such as the emphasis on HIV/AIDS and economic empowerment,
given the globalisation of the discourses around (instrumentalising) approaches to women’s
empowerment, also fit into a broader national and international consensus on what the
issues ‘are’ in terms of GAD discourse and practice. Echoing the discussion around the ‘fluidity’
of the ‘development imaginary’ and the shifting terrains of ‘development rationality’, there
is no clearly delineated ‘indigeneity’, nor is it the case that only global-level GAD priorities
feature. Rather, the work of these organisations represents a more fluid, and at times selective,
set of organisational priorities that align variously with historical Indian feminist concerns
coupled with transnational, neoliberal development priorities, wherein a broader ‘disconnect’
between elite and so-called subaltern ideas clearly persists.

The implications of these findings are significant. Efforts to engage with subaltern narra-
tives through association with individuals or organisations presumed to be the most geo-
graphically and discursively proximate obscure concerns highlighted here around how
processes of professionalisation underpin the power imbalances inherent in global and
indigenous discourse and practice that reinforce the marginality of subaltern groups. This
finding has the effect of intrinsically narrowing the nature and scope of how we might forge
an alternative (to) development. The issue here, it must be noted, is not about criticising
intent, ie that perpetuating exclusion through professionalisation is deliberate on the part
of the stakeholders implicated in this analysis. While it is no doubt true that dominant inter-
ests seek in various ways and through diverse mechanisms to maintain their elite status, this
does not in itself explain why professionalisation persists. The simplest explanation is perhaps
that, as well-intentioned as many of these efforts tend to be, the nature of the exclusions
are historically embedded; operating alongside dominant global narratives, these systemic
concerns are not so easily undone nor readily addressed. There are also the more complex
variables underpinning institutional and/or organisational survival – Indian and indeed
Southern NGOs more broadly, in most instances, would simply cease to exist if they did not
engage in a certain degree of collusion with dominant frameworks. Nonetheless, the chal-
lenges inherent in working in this discursive space, as highlighted by this analysis, raise
broader concerns about the relative inclusiveness and representativeness of so-called ‘indig-
enous’ or Southern-originated discourses. They further raise critical questions about domi-
nant articulations of the structural and contextual constraints underpinning gender
inequality and how these are conceptualised in this elite, transnational space. Finally, we
must ask whose interests and objectives are ultimately served through initiatives to tackle
gender inequality as part of global efforts to promote inclusive development.

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Notes
1. See for example, Alvarez, “Latin American Feminisms”; Amadiume, Daughters of the Goddess; and Monasterios, “Bolivian Women’s Organizations.”
2. See, for example, Goetz and Sandler, “SWapping Gender”; Mukhopadhyay, “Mainstreaming Gender or ‘Streaming’ Gender Away”; and Mukhopadhyay, “Mainstreaming Gender or Reconstituting the Mainstream?”
3. Nagar, “Postscript.”
4. Sangtin Writers and Nagar, Playing with Fire.
5. Foucault, Discipline and Punish.
6. Abrahamsen, Disciplining Democracy, 14.
7. See, for example, Edwards and Hulme, “Too Close for Comfort?”; Tvedt, Angels of Mercy?; Petras, “NGOs”; Mawdsley et al., Knowledge, Power and Development Agendas; and Ebrahim, “Accountability in Practice.”
8. Barnett and Finnemore, Rules for the World, 6–7.
9. Deacon, Global Social Policy & Governance, 16.
10. Escobar, Encountering Development, 39.
11. Escobar, Encountering Development, 40.
12. Arce, “Creating or Regulating Development,” 33.
13. McEwan, “Postcolonialism, Feminism and Development,” 103.
14. Escobar, Encountering Development, 42.
15. Kothari, “Authority and Expertise.”
16. See Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge; and Sangtin Writers and Nagar, Playing with Fire.
17. Cornwall and Brock, “Buzzwords,” 1052.
18. Kakande, “The Donor–Government–Citizen Frame,” 92.
19. Fernando, “NGOs and Production of Indigenous Knowledge,” 56.
20. Fernando, “NGOs and Production of Indigenous Knowledge,” 55.
21. Pottier, “Negotiating Local Knowledge,” 2–3.
22. Briggs, “The Use of Indigenous Knowledge,” 107.
23. See Davies, “Introduction: Information, Knowledge and Power,” 4.
24. Mosse, “Authority, Gender and Knowledge,” 519.
25. Laurie et al., “Ethnodevelopment,” 484.
26. Ibid.
27. Fernando, “NGOs and Production of Indigenous Knowledge,” 485.
28. Olwig, “Beyond Translation.”
29. Escobar, cited in Laurie et al., “Ethnodevelopment,” 470.
30. Fernando, “NGOs and Production of Indigenous Knowledge,” 58.
31. See Dempsey, “NGOs, Communicative Labour.”
32. See Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Mohanty, “Cartographies of Struggle”; and Sen and Grown, Development, Crises and Alternative Visions.
33. See, for example, Boserup, Woman’s Role in Economic Development; Elson and Pearson, “Nimble Fingers make Cheap Workers”; Molynieux, “Mobilization without Emancipation?”; Sen and Grown, Development, Crises and Alternative Visions; Moser, Gender Planning and Development; and Kabeer, Reversed Realities, to name only a few.
34. Alvarez, “Latin American Feminisms,” 315.
35. Jad, “The NGO-ization of Arab Women’s Movements,” 186.
36. Nabacwa, Sisterhood?, 26.
37. Ghodsee, “Nongovernmental Ogres?,” 47.
38. Alvarez, “Latin American Feminisms,” 306 (emphasis added).
39. Ibid (emphasis in the original).
40. See also Cornwall et al., “Introduction”; and Sharma, Logics of Empowerment.
41. Goetz, “From Feminist Knowledge to Data for Development,” 28.
42. Sharma, “Crossbreeding Institutions,” 79.
43. Nagar and Raju, “Women, NGOs,” 1.
44. Nagar, “Postscript,” 147.
45. Cammack, What the World Bank Means, 7 (emphasis in the original).
46. Alikhan et al., NGOs and the State, 22.
47. See Chant and Sweetman, “Fixing Women”; and Hickel, “The ‘Girl Effect.”
48. Nagar, “Postscript,” 147.
49. Raju, “Contextualising Gender Empowerment,” 292.
50. See Narayanaswamy, “NGOs and Feminisms in Development.”
51. Monasterios, “Bolivian Women’s Organizations.”
52. Baillie Smith and Jenkins, “Disconnections and Exclusions,” 170.
53. Amadiume, Daughters of the Goddess, 155.
54. Chaudhuri, “The Indian Women’s Movement.”
55. See Mies, “Indian Women and Leadership,” 57.
56. Muthulakshmi Reddy, cited in Caplan, Class and Gender in India, 116.
57. Mazumdar, “The Social Reform Movement in India,” 65–66.
58. Subramaniam, The Power of Women’s Organizing, 29.
59. See Caplan, Class and Gender in India; Mies, “Indian Women and Leadership”; and Subramaniam, The Power of Women’s Organizing.
60. Stephen, “Give us our Due.”
61. Ibid.
62. See Ghosh, “LGBTQ Activist Organizations.”
63. Sangtin Writers and Nagar, Playing with Fire.
64. Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 216.
65. Sangtin Writers and Nagar, Playing with Fire, 143.
66. Ibid.
67. Baillie Smith and Jenkins, “Disconnections and Exclusions,” 171.
68. See Hannerz, “Being There.”
69. On the way short-term quantitative measures are used to measure the impact of mainstream NGOs, see, for example, the critiques of Edwards and Hulme, “Too Close for Comfort?” On the way quantitative measures are used to assess the impact of gender-based interventions, see Mayoux, “Avoiding the Black Hole?”
70. See Narayanaswamy, “NGOs and Feminisms in Development.”
71. Nagar, “Postscript,” 147.
72. See, for example, Piva and Dodd, whose study “Where did all the Aid Go?” suggests that funding for MDG 6 accounts for some of the substantial increases in aid for health in the period 1998–2006, while Shiffman, “Has Donor Prioritization?”, suggests that some ‘displacement is likely occurring’, particularly as the share of money diverted to HIV/AIDS funding has grown as a share of total aid for health, itself increasing, between 1992 and 2005.
73. Caplan, Class and Gender in India. See also Subramaniam, The Power of Women’s Organizing for a critique of how these health and education programmes also had a tendency to treat women as ‘dependants’.
74. See Harcourt, “Editorial.”
75. There is a concomitant literature on the ‘elitism’ of New Delhi-based NGOs, a charge that may be similarly levelled at feminist NGOs in Delhi. See, for example, Townsend and Townsend, “Accountability, Motivation and Practice.”
76. See Laurie et al., “Ethnodevelopment”; and Olwig, “Beyond Translation.”

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