Against the Odds: Intersectional Feminist Theory And Practice In India

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Abstract

UPDATED—22 February 2017. This project is a critical memoir of my time spent as a feminist activist with Organizations using technology to further the feminist agenda of consciousness raising and movement building in India. This work aims to outline the fascinating process of moving from feminist theory to practice in the context of a development Organization with feminist values in a patriarchal society in South Asia. My intent with this paper is to navigate and unpack the complicated ways in which implementing a feminist techno-science approach towards women's movement, activism and mobilization work in India, within the framework of an NGO, can help us situate these efforts as key players in bridging the gap between our imagination of 'developed' and 'underdeveloped', and look critically at the limit experiences of such Organizations as openings for newer considerations, conversations and re-evaluations of the feminist movement in India.

Author Keywords

ICT4D; feminist technology; feminism; South Asian Feminism; intersectionality; feminist theory.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

What does it mean for an organization in a developing country to try to work towards building a feminist world by also embodying feminist values within the way it works? What does it take for a non-profit dependent on resources of a deeply rooted neoliberal development rhetoric of 'helping' or 'empowering' women in ways that funders deem acceptable to also stay true to the beneficiaries it is serving? Is it possible for an initiative to be truly feminist in nature when the development infrastructure demands efficiency like that of capitalistic corporations that fund it? What are the limitations of putting feminist theory into practice when trying to build the movement in South Asian countries which are strongly influenced by conceptions of gender roles through religion and patriarchy? What role does technology play in this setup? What can these limitations tell us about the intersectionality of the feminist movement in South Asia, and how can this be extended to other contexts in the world? How can these limit experiences, messy implementations, and negotiations reveal the creative ways in which to push the boundaries of both theory and practice of feminism in India?

In the two years that I worked with feminist Organizations in India, I gravitated towards these questions because of my experience of using technology for feminist movement building and activism at a local as well as national level. Although both organizations have feminist ideals at the core of their work and are case studies for my work, for the purposes of this workshop I will focus on ORG-A specifically. ORG-A's mission is to empower women by enhancing women's awareness, interest, and participation in technology. [1] It works with teenage girls from slums in New Delhi, to teach them about computers, photography and film-making while having crucial conversations around gender, sexuality, patriarchy, etc. using a mentor-mentee relationship between the team and the beneficiaries. Some of the beneficiaries eventually join the team through leadership development programs.

Feminist Organizational Structure

"When it was just the two of us, it was different, she [Lata] was different." Meena[A], a long-time employee and beneficiary of ORG-A, went on to elucidate how when they started out there was open communication, transparency and no hierarchy in the team. Now there is a chain of power and authority which decides everything and values different things from working with, and from, the bottom up. This sentiment was also acknowledged by the head of the organization, Lata, but she advocated that these changes were taking place for the sake of efficiency. I remember her almost dishearteningly noting that she started out wanting to have a 'flat structure' in ORG-A, where everyone was at the same level and there were no hierarchies. *"But with time my friends, the board members and I have realized that there needs to be some hierarchy/structure to help the Organization work efficiently."*

When I arrived at ORG-A the phrase I heard a lot from the older team members was *"It wasn't like this before. (The founder) has changed so much, ORG-A has changed so much."* When I asked some of the older members who had seen it grow to the current scale

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[A] Names of interlocutors have been changed to protect their identities.

from a small initiative back in the day, what they meant by that phrase, they would highlight two aspects of ORG-A. First was the growing preference of building a team of college educated, non-community members over team members from the community. According to them, team members who came from the community were more invested in the greater goal of ORG-A than outsiders would ever be, implying that expertise in ORG-A was now being judged by industrial/educational standards which were elite and were, in some ways, not aligned with what the Organization preached in terms of feminism. As I observed the treatment of trainees and interns from the community, in comparison to interns who came in from outside the community through other job portal and referral methods, I noticed that the barrier for entrance to the organization as a team-member was much greater for community members.

Second, there was a shared feeling in the long-standing team members who were *not* from the community that the girls they worked with, and the community team members, knew much more about feminism and 'real-world' feminist resistance than them. Meena hailed from the community and worked with ORG-A for four years before she quit. When I joined the team, a sad atmosphere was conjured up every time someone brought up Meena's name. Meena was 'the ideal' co-worker for everyone in the team; *"She is the one who taught me all about real feminism, not the kind we read about in books, but the kind that we live every day. She is a rebel in the truest sense"* said one of our co-workers, Rita, who did her schooling in social sciences. *"But with her leaving, I am no longer sure of the kind of feminism we are trying to pursue here."*

I want to highlight the above statement from my colleague for the value it holds in trying to understand conversion of feminist ideals and theory into practice and processes. ORG-A's methods of working on activism initially emerged from an egalitarian, feminist ways of organizing and working. My observations revealed that they have changed due to various limiting experiences that have made ORG-A's founder realize that they might not be the most efficient or focused manners of running an organization. Meena was disappointed and dejected with the way things had changed beyond the core of the intent of the organization and it seemed to be a shared feeling among other community team members.

What indeed is this tension of expectations of a development organization with certain standards and metrics of efficiency, versus a feminist initiative that has led to change in methods and goals for organizations like ORG-A. Where and how does this tension emerge? What are the trade-offs being made in balancing out these expectations against the ideals that feminist spaces may want to put into practice?

Agency and Trusteeship

"The notion of experience has been problematic for feminist theory, which has assumed a 'unity' between women as women, and viewed experience as a source of 'true' knowledge while neglecting its relation to locally constructed knowledge. An awareness of the disarray between women as women and the heterogeneity of women's experiences in relation to class, ethnicity, and age for example is crucial when discussing women's role in the urban space." [1]

This notion of experience is highlighted and encountered by ORG-A on an everyday basis since it operates at a position between feminist theory and practice. The physical environment in which ORG-A is located is kept separate and distant from the communities that its participants hail from, to encourage the girls to leave their homes and localities and step into a new space where they can be comfortable in their own skin and not feel obligated to behave, dress or move around as dictated by the norms of the community, family or society they belong to. The journey that participating girls undertake to come from their homes to ORG-A's premises is truly a piece of wonder, both in terms of the ways in which they learn to step out of the house and be mobile, as well as the obstacles they dodge/negotiate with, to make it to ORG-A's building successfully. The obstacles include, but are not limited to, street harassment by the notorious men from the slums and in the market, the negotiations that they must undertake to convince their families that they are going to learn 'computers' and will be back before it is dark, and the modes of dressing to cover the parts of their body that they think would be most vulnerable to attacks as they make their way to the community center (ORG-A.)

I distinctly remember the first few months and the anger I felt as a new team member when I heard the stories of injustice and struggle narrated by girls as well as team members. Stories of dealing with the poverty, patriarchal norms, abusive families, abusive relationships; the struggles involved in doing something as simple as using the community toilet in the slums seem to reveal the foul-play of underdevelopment that capitalism, modernity and neo-liberalism had unleashed to feed the power structures of the metropolis and the

stronghold of men in the Indian society that controlled women's lives.

But slowly I came to realize that anger was an experience that came from a position of privilege; it came from a standpoint that was distant from the ground realities of these women who dealt with injustice on an everyday basis. The 'need to help' and the 'humanist' in me needed to simplify understanding of the marginalization of women and not look at them as active agents, but rather as victims of patriarchy. *"Whatever I learned about Feminism and a feminist struggle has all been through these girls I worked with and Meena,"* said Rita. She alluded to the fact that the way local challenges were negotiated and tackled by women in their communities was an important take away for all the radical feminists, social scientists and social workers who have come to work with them learning about the feminist resistance from books and positions of privilege. The modes of everyday resistance were negotiations and not anger. Small victories and joys like staying out late after sunset with girlfriends to go eat ice-cream was achieved not by rebelling against the man of the house, but through a calm and strategic negotiation with them and effectively pushing the limits of what is legitimate and possible for women in a world that constantly controlled their mobility and modes of pleasure/entertainment.

"Acknowledging the agency of the world in knowledge makes room for some unsettling possibilities, including a sense of the world's independent sense of humor. Such a sense of humor is not comfortable for humanists and others committed to the world as a resource." [2]

How indeed does a feminist initiative balance between the agency of its participants and trusteeship in ways that allows space for experiences of different women, but also pushes the boundaries for what can be imagined to be possible by women within their individual patriarchal realities? The multiplicity of feminisms practiced by women of different classes warrants different negotiations. These women come together to form a movement in spaces like ORG-A and thus need a greater reconciliation of realities that each of them grapple with such that one does not seem superior than the other. Often though, that is not the case and the nature of interaction between different classes becomes that of patronage rather than solidarity. I too had fallen into the same trap of thinking that I know better. The negotiations demand a legitimacy of rebellion, but are we ready to grant them that within the movement?

Care and Scoping – Limit Experiences
I have found the question of 'scoping' to be the strongest point of tension in ORG-A, as it tries to articulate the legitimacy of its work in the global feminist conversations and make the movement realistic enough to be owned and led by women from local communities in India. What I mean by scoping is the way ORG-A actively chooses what not to be involved with as it encounters difficult situations with its operations. ORG-A runs into 'limiting experiences' on an everyday basis and this is effectively shaping its agenda and intent based on what can be/should be tackled as a part of their involvement with the community and what should be left out. This line is sometimes drawn by the team members and sometimes by the founder herself. It is also important to note that just because ORG-A agrees to not get

involved in some matters of the lives of the girls they work with, it does not mean that the team members can disengage from these pressing situations in the lives of their mentees. The relationship between mentors and mentees is deep and intimate and it is difficult for the mentors to back off just because the organization does not want them to get involved with complicated situations. These are the kind of situations that do not fit the reporting format of funders, performance reviews of team and vision/mission statement of ORG-A. The process of scoping the involvement of ORG-A in the lives of these girls is difficult and it plays out in different ways with every limiting experience.

For instance, a 14-year old student at ORG-A decided to travel 150 miles by herself to meet her 'boyfriend' whom she only knew from Facebook. This incident caused her mother to threaten to discontinue her education and pressure her into getting married as soon as she turns 18, because she thought that letting their daughter 'explore herself' through technology was a bad idea. Sonia was, to some extent, informed of the possible perils of talking to strangers online. Yet, the fact that she wasn't allowed to talk to boys in the offline world, along with her new-found confidence in expressing her sexuality online, made her online and offline worlds intersect in problematic ways. As the boundary between these two worlds started to blur, it encouraged behaviors that had unforeseen consequences. This incident challenged ORG-A's idea of 'empowerment' that this kind of access to technology is claiming to facilitate in India. It lay bare the complex ways in which mobile and computing technologies are deeply embedded in their socio-political contexts for women in India and how a technology utopia that was

portrayed by ORG-A as a tool for women's emancipation could indeed be a reason for further control being exercised on her rights and freedom. ORG-A's response to this incident was cold and passive, they did not factor in the vulnerabilities that girls faced because of their efforts in consciousness raising and technology, because they expected Sonia to act a certain way and she defied their assumptions. ORG-A had not fully considered the ways in which online and offline spaces occupied by women are going to affect each other, what are the kinds of tools and strategies that would be required to help girls navigate these interwoven spaces and what was the extent to which this ambitious notion of 'freeing the girls from patriarchy' was limited by the fact that these girls are minors living with their families in challenging conditions and communities that they call home.

Conclusion

"These professional experiences produced extraordinary affects, but they also involved, somehow, ordinary affects – that was the scandal. The extraordinary and the ordinary were out of all proportion to each other, irreconcilable, yet occupied the same impossible space. They intruded into and distorted each other. It is this kind of impossible situation where psychic and ethical insufficiency is generated (Piniella 2002:108). In a way, there is a failure. You experience an "ought" and feel your own ordinariness." [3]

I have come to realize that ORG-A is a place working against many odds and like any other implementation of righteous ways to social change, it is messy. But it keeps making its way against these obstacles and can find joy in doing so despite the aforementioned difficult situations, much like the feminist movement around the world. The spirit of

ORG-A is as resilient as is the spirit of the women around the world who continue to resist, negotiate, celebrate, cry and move forward together in whatever little ways they can. Not everyone can be comfortable with the messy nature of this struggle, impossible situations and ironies as it plays out in the field; I sure wasn't. But those who can move past its limitations, while engaging with them critically, do the necessary work that needs to be done in the real world to build a world of feminist imagination.

This was beautifully illustrated by Meena in one of my interactions with her where she taught me (without an intention of doing so) the importance of playfulness and the need for enjoying the process of changing the mindsets of people you are going to work with in ORG-A. It made me realize that the issues we deal with may be serious, but we need not be unimaginative and boring about it.

Taking forward this encouraging thought I hope to discuss the possibilities of engaging with the limiting experiences on the field in creative ways to keep moving forward; in fact, with the help of these experiences that reveal the underlying assumptions of the facile methods of building a feminist world. Borrowing from Steven Jackson's understanding of standardization and creativity, I'd like to end with a note of re-consideration of the accepted methods of feminist practice to delve into what their breakdowns might have to reveal for bridging the gap between theory and practice.

"If we build from standards, we also build to them. Reflective consideration of the numerous tweaks, breakdowns, and

departures from standards (including in the systems we build) may support a more thoughtful, creative, and resilient engagement with standards over time. In sum, we should learn to engage proactively with standards, working with rather than against the 'grain' of the world that standards, in part, supply. This may involve new forms of listening to fields we encounter, seeking new insights into the forces that structure value and action in the worlds we engage – a form of accommodation and humility that may sit uneasily with more heroic notions of design. But we may also need to find creative and improvisational potentials in and around the settled worlds of standards around us." [4]

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