



## Between inclusivity and feminist purism: Young gender justice workers in post-Nirbhaya Delhi

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### ABSTRACT

Gender justice is experiencing a moment of heightened visibility in India in the wake of the anti-rape protests of 2012/13. This paper seeks to understand this widening of the terrain of gender justice through an exploration of the work of young gender justice workers in Delhi. These young people practiced diverse politics and feminisms that challenge generational arguments of lost radicalism and linear conceptions of feminist history. Further, the messy hybridity of the feminisms and politics of individuals and organizations challenges neat conceptualizations of pure, authentic feminisms and co-opted, depoliticized feminisms. However, in the approach of some young people there is evidence of a distancing from the political and an individualizing and psychologizing of structural problems associated with choice, post and corporate feminisms. This transformation of gender justice into a matter of self-work points to potential risks of an overly inclusive feminism.

After three decades in which young women seemed reluctant to identify as feminists (Aronson, 2003; Moi, 2006), feminism is experiencing something of a resurgence. Online feminism has proliferated in websites such as The F Word and The Women's Room, and campaigns such as The Everyday Sexism Project (Cochrane, 2013; Munro, 2013; Retallack, Ringrose, & Lawrence, 2016). In 2011, 'SlutWalk' marches took place in several countries to protest rape culture and victim blaming (Mendes, 2015), and in 2017 millions participated in Women's Marches in an estimated 82 countries to protest the human rights violations of Donald Trump's government, and to demand women's rights more generally. A growing number of celebrities are publicizing their identity as feminists and giving their voices to campaigns for gender equality (Hamad & Taylor, 2015; Keller & Ringrose, 2015). High profile professional women have published their views on the challenges women face in the workplace, generating unprecedented public debate (Rottenberg, 2014). Feminism is experiencing not just heightened visibility, but is also increasingly constructed as a fashionable and desirable identity in the mainstream media (Gill, 2016). While for some this is a reinvigoration of the feminist project, others are concerned that mainstream feminism is increasingly compatible with the market values of neoliberalism (Eisenstein, 2015; Fraser, 2013), and that many new feminisms are in fact undoing feminism (Gill, 2016).

In India too, the desire to be involved in efforts to promote gender equality appears to be increasingly widespread. As one young man I spoke to in Delhi in 2015 put it: "You look at Facebook. Everybody is so aware of gender justice and everybody is so *for* gender justice". The

current visibility of gender issues in India is commonly attributed to the events of December 2012, when the rape and murder in Delhi of a young woman who came to be known as 'Nirbhaya' brought unprecedented numbers of protesters to the streets in Delhi and across the country. In the wake of these anti-rape protests, many new initiatives to promote gender equality emerged, including celebrity-led campaigns such as Bollywood film director and actor Farhan Akhtar's MARD (Men Against Rape and Discrimination) campaign, and youth-led social media campaigns such as MustBol.<sup>1</sup> This resurgence too has had mixed reviews. For example, some see the anti-rape protests as a reflection of the legacy and contemporary strength of the Indian Women's Movement, while others are concerned that this was a not a 'proper' feminism, indicated by the conservative impulse of calls for capital punishment for rapists, the protectionist rhetoric around women's safety, and the selective concern for an urban aspiring middle-class young woman rather than, for example, a rural lower-caste/class woman (e.g., Dutta & Sircar, 2013; Sen, 2013; Shandilya, 2015; Tellis, 2012).

The opening up of the terrain of gender justice by the mobilisation around the Nirbhaya incident raises difficult questions. Is a bigger and broader conversation about gender necessarily a better one or is some of this work counter to feminist goals? In other words, how does one strike a balance between the desire to welcome and support newcomers to gender justice work (feminist inclusivity) and the expectation that they adhere to particular understandings of feminism (feminist purism)? This paper presents material gathered as part of a project that sought to understand the nature of young people's work to promote

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<sup>1</sup> <http://therealmard.org/> and <http://pravah.org/content/files/Campaign%20against%20GBV%20in%20partnership%20with%20Arrow.pdf>

gender equality in Delhi in this 'post-Nirbhaya' context. I present three case studies that represent the diversity of this work – an explicitly political and radical feminist student movement, a development professional who identifies as a feminist but distances herself from feminist stereotypes, and a new NGO led by young people who distance themselves from feminism and approach achieving gender equality as a matter of individual transformation. Along with three case studies, I have three aims in this paper. First, I demonstrate that far from being homogeneous products of a postfeminist era, the young people I spoke to expressed diverse politics and feminisms that challenge generational arguments and linear conceptions of feminist history. Second, I argue that the messy hybridity within each case study challenges neat conceptualizations of pure, authentic feminisms and co-opted, depoliticized feminisms. Third, I assert the relevance to the Global South of neoliberal feminisms predominantly associated with Global North contexts, such as choice feminism, postfeminism and corporate feminism. Whereas the neoliberalization of feminisms in the Global South generally, and in India specifically, has been primarily understood through the lens of NGOization, I illustrate how drawing other 'neoliberal feminism' literatures into analysis can both illuminate the complexity of contemporary feminisms in Delhi, and point to potential limits of inclusivity. I briefly situate this post-Nirbhaya moment in broader narratives about Indian feminism, introduce the various neoliberal feminisms, and outline my methods, before turning to the case studies.

### The Indian women's movement and neoliberal feminisms

While the anti-rape protests of December 2012 and January 2013 may have brought fresh light to debates about 'proper' and 'popular' Indian feminisms, these debates in fact have a long history. A common narrative among scholars and activists alike is that, since its golden age in the 1970s and 1980s, the Indian Women's Movement (IWM hereafter) has been progressively depoliticized as it has been 'mainstreamed'. From the 1990s women were increasingly visible in a variety of institutional contexts – state-run women's development programs, reservations and quotas for women in politics, women's commissions, legal reforms relating to violence against women, and the establishment of women's studies departments, for example (Menon, 2007, 2009; Tharu & Niranjana, 1994). This period also saw a proliferation of women- and gender-related NGOs, impelled by reduced state provision of services and aided by increased access to foreign funds in the context of a liberalizing economy (Roy, 2015). For many, however, this growing visibility and institutionalization was also a process of co-option, increasing both the power of the state and the policing of women's lives in the name of protection, and introducing new vulnerabilities for women (Gangoli, 2007; Mayaram, 2002; Menon, 2007; Sunder Rajan, 2003).<sup>2</sup>

The most prominent concern in these narratives of co-option is that of NGOization. Prior to the proliferation of NGOs in the 1990s, the Indian Women's movement was primarily represented by women's wings of (usually left-wing) political parties and autonomous women's groups. The latter emerged in many ways in response to the former. In the 1970s, many women's groups broke away from male-dominated communist parties and came to represent the most radical and visible face of feminist activism, particularly through their campaigns against violence against women. It was not just their lack of party-affiliation that was seen to constitute the autonomy of these women's organizations, but also their lack of funding. Foreign funding in particular was rejected as an imperialist ruse. By the 1990s, however, many of these groups were transforming into funded NGOs in response to growing

demand for 'gender experts' and the need for full-time members (Biswas, 2006). Nevertheless, autonomy remains an important yardstick by which the legitimacy of Indian feminism and women's organizations are measured, with accountability to external donors rather than to the communities NGOs serve seen as a significant disincentive for transformatory politics (Roy, 2015).

Alongside the loss of autonomy, NGOs are also critiqued for being populated by '9 to 5' gender professionals rather than feminist activists. Feminist researcher and activist, Kalyani Menon-Sen (2001) argues that "overtly feminist groups are now in a minority" and many women's organizations "do not profess a commitment to any school of feminist thought". The 'true' IWM is said to be 'aging', with young women's participation limited to professionalized NGO work, rather than volunteerism within a social movement. Notwithstanding the hierarchies that this has exacerbated between NGO workers and the communities they serve (Nagar & Sangtin Writers, 2006), this professionalization has been critiqued for allowing for the involvement of women with little or no political commitment (Menon, 2007: 219–220). These professionals, it is argued, rely on formal education and deploy 'expert knowledge' to provide project-based technocratic solutions that fail to address the broader context of social and economic processes that structure power relations (Kamat, 2003; Roy, 2011). A further dimension of the NGOization critique relates to the neoliberal subjects produced by the development sector. Scholars have observed that popular initiatives such as micro-credit and women's self-help groups emphasise discourses of self-reliance and entrepreneurship, promote the free-market economy, and hold women (rather than the state) responsible for their own welfare (Madhok & Rai, 2012, Roy, 2014b: 178, Kamat, 2003). This is not just a de-radicalization of feminist goals, but an active promotion of capitalist ideals antithetical to the socialist foundations of Indian feminism.

Associated with such narratives of 'real' feminism are assumptions about the 'proper' targets of feminist action. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the origins of many women's organizations in socialist political parties, the priority of much early feminist work was the material concerns of low caste-class women. This focus has also been seen by some as a strategy to secure the Indianness and legitimacy of the IWM in the face of accusations that feminism is an elite and Western concern (John, 1996: 126, Roy, 2009: 349, Dave, 2012: 101–102). In the decade preceding the anti-rape protests of December 2012 and January 2013, new campaigns began to emerge in India that moved away from a focus on legal reform and issues of work and literacy and toward demands for women's freedom in the public domain. In 2003, Jasmeen Patheja started a public art project confronting street harassment in Bangalore that grew into Blank Noise, a multi-city campaign involving street action and public interventions. In 2009, following attacks on women by Hindu right-wing organizations in the name of morality and public decency, a group called the 'Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women' launched the Pink Chaddi campaign encouraging people to send pink underpants (chaddi) to the offices of one such organization. And in 2011, Indian versions of the international SlutWalk marches were held in Bhopal, New Delhi and Kolkata. Since December 2012 similar initiatives have continued to emerge, including Why Loiter and Kiss of Love. Some of these movements have been criticised for their composition – elitist – their politics – individualizing – and their methods – 'clicktivism' without 'real world' effects (Mani, 2014; Mehta, 2008). According to Hemangini Gupta (2016), for example, the public interventions that characterise emergent forms of feminism in urban India frame women as neoliberal 'entrepreneurial selves' responsible for their own safety.

Notably, many of the above critiques are framed in generational terms – it is not just contemporary feminisms, but feminisms of this generation of young people that are posited as co-opted, leading to diagnoses of generation gap and intergenerational conflict (Sunder Rajan, 2003: 31, John, 2002: 61). However, after decades of pessimism in relation to contemporary feminist politics globally, scholars are

<sup>2</sup> Feminism in India has also been internally critiqued by Dalit and lesbian feminisms (Madhok, 2014; Menon-Sen, 2001), but my concern here is primarily with debates relating to the institutionalization and de-radicalization of feminism.

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