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## ***Abstract***

The inclusion by Northern stakeholders of a discursively constructed category of 'Southern women's NGO' – increasingly heralded as the ultimate organisational form of grounded, subaltern, collective action – has come to represent a signifier of commitments to gender equality, poverty reduction and/or social justice. Southern women's NGOs are frequently credited with the capacity to facilitate the inclusion of marginalised groups conventionally excluded from development's frame. This critical review argues that this essentialism derives firstly from the belief in the Southern NGO as a grounded, democratic and accessible organisational form well-suited to reach and represent the diverse and disparate needs of the grassroots. Secondly, it reflects the tendency, despite an abundance of critical black, Third World and postcolonial feminist theory warning to the contrary, to cast 'Southern women' as a category of politicised agents who share trajectories of historical and contemporary oppression that allow them to transcend other axes of difference to achieve improved development outcomes. The discussion examines this tendency and whether it has led to a wholesale belief in the capacity of both 'Southern women' and Southern NGOs' to reach as well as represent anti-hegemonic, subaltern and thus alternative development paradigms. The analysis concludes with some brief reflections on both the discursive and practical implications of privileging the 'Southern women's NGO', expressed as an homogenous category, as a key interlocutor between the powerful and the marginalised in development.

## ***Introduction***

This review article interrogates the inclusion by Northern stakeholders of a discursively constructed category of 'Southern women's NGO' as a signifier of commitments to gender equality, poverty reduction and/or social justice. Whilst the recognition of Southern women's heretofore invisibilised agency marked a victory for Southern feminists working both with and through NGOs, the 'Southern

women's NGO' has come to symbolise the ultimate organisational form of grounded, representative, collective action. The so-called 'voices' of women, galvanised through a growing transnational feminist movement and gaining visibility through multilateral commitments to women's rights, are gathered through women's NGOs, frequently upheld for their presumed capacity to both reach and represent the needs, interests and voices of marginalised people and in turn promote empowerment and ultimately development. This critical review argues that, given their geographical and thus presumed discursive proximity, Southern women's NGOs are frequently credited with the capacity to facilitate the inclusion of marginalised groups conventionally excluded from development's frame. Whilst I would suggest that a precise definition is impossible<sup>1</sup>, I argue here that the term 'Southern women's NGO' is widely understood as a weakly defined concept, a discursive category or even, to borrow from Cornwall and Brock (2005), a 'buzzword'. This essentialism derives firstly from the belief in the Southern-based development NGO as a grounded, democratic and accessible organisational form well-suited to reach and represent the diverse and disparate needs of the so-called grassroots. Secondly, it reflects the perception, despite an abundance of critical black, Third World and postcolonial feminist theory warning to the contrary, of Southern women as politicised agents who share trajectories of historical and contemporary oppression that allow them to transcend other axes of difference to achieve improved development outcomes.

This review begins by examining briefly the historical juncture at which the privileging of Southern women's NGOs, and women's voices more generally, became central to development discourse and practice, alongside a growing body of evidence to suggest why this essentialism is problematic. These reflections are followed by a critical overview of the literature that highlights from where this tendency to essentialise Southern women's NGOs in development discourse and practice emerges, examining separately the presumed anti-hegemonic subject position of both 'Southern women' and Southern NGOs'. Finally, the analysis concludes with some brief reflections on the implications of privileging the 'Southern women's NGO' as a key interlocutor between the powerful and the marginalised in development. The analysis should not be read as a condemnation of all Southern

NGOs or women's NGOs; rather, the analysis interrogates the tendency in development discourse and practice to deploy the term 'Southern women's NGO' as an idealised concept, denying the diversity of organisations that would fit this description and instead for this term and its usage to be made more realistic, nuanced and thus subject to criticism.

### ***Problematizing the Southern women's NGO***

The Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing in 1995 established the first international commitments for governments to tackle gender inequality, which in turn led to increased financial resources for the establishment of women's ministries and NGOs the world over. As a consequence of both the preparation for, and the outcomes of, this process, support for the recognition of women as equal stakeholders in development consolidated and significantly expanded over 25 years of academic and activist research and writing on feminism in development. Ground-breaking work by both Western and Third World feminist academic/activists working on development including Boserup (1970), Elson and Pearson (1981), Molyneux (1985), Sen and Grown (1987), Moser (1993) and Kabeer (1994) (to name only a very few) charts the steady march of this literature from identifying women as economically productive to recognising women not just as victims but also as agents whose productive and reproductive labour is shaped by capitalism, gender, patriarchy and indeed, development itself. This literature is rich in empirical detail about the struggles of women in a range of developing contexts and is too expansive to cover in any detail here. What is important for our purposes is to understand the embodiment of this discursive recognition in the rise of the Southern women's NGO as an important representative for gender issues in development practice.

The establishment of women's NGOs in a range of developing contexts was at least partly a response to this growing national and international recognition of gender issues in the post-Beijing period. 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' (1998, 306; emphasis in original). Indeed the post-Beijing period witnessed an exponential growth in the establishment of gender mainstreaming strategies<sup>2</sup>, channelled through women's ministries and commissions, as well as a growth in funding to women's NGOs to support these mainstreaming activities.

What links with 'women's NGOs in particular' came to represent was a route through which to be (or seen to be) engaging with 'a broader development trend that views NGOs as a vital vehicle for social change and democratization' (Jad, 2007: 178). Embodied in international agreements such as the Millennium Declaration (UN, 2000), development discourses were rapidly moving away from purely economic terms towards embracing broader social justice aims aligned with poverty reduction that, many argued, could not be achieved without addressing gender inequality.<sup>3</sup> Women's rights are human rights, activists and academics exulted, and women's NGOs, distinct from indifferent or weak states and the profit-driven, amoral private sector (see Handy et al., 2006: 13), came to symbolize both the struggle for this recognition as well as a non-threatening, organizational form aligned with feminised notions of altruism and charity ideally suited to achieve this aim (see Sharma, 2006: 68).

So dangerous is the elision between professed investments in progressive development goals and the inclusion of women's NGOs that Mayoux (1998: 176-77), identifying a growth in the number of women's NGOs in the 1990s, including Southern women's NGOs broadly committed to women's empowerment, is moved to caution that

... it cannot be assumed that the views expressed by those women who have access to NGO decision-making processes are necessarily representative of other women, particularly the most disadvantaged. There are significant differences between women from different classes, of different ages and marital status, and from different cultures in all aspects of gender subordination ... (Mayoux, 1998: 176).

The uptake of the idea that gender inequality is a key determinant of the relative success or failure of development interventions, whilst an incredible victory for feminist campaigners, has resulted in important yet nonetheless contradictory outcomes. This move towards professionalisation, on the one hand, has resulted in increased support for research and advocacy related to women's empowerment and gender equality, a substantial proportion of which has been channeled through women's NGOs, creating both visibility for these issues and opportunities for Southern feminists in particular to participate in global development discourses. Alvarez (1998: 310), for instance, remarking on the Latin American context in the run-up to Beijing, suggests that increased Northern funding 'enabled Latin American NGO professionals to participate in North American feminist-controlled global meganetworks ... on a more even footing than ever before'. On the other hand, the result of professionalisation has been the creation of exclusive spaces only accessible to those qualified to speak, including 'card-carrying members of feminist networks ... and other "specialists"' (Alvarez, 1998: 309-10) where the 'knowledge of the formalized language of these conferences has given elite women an advantaged leadership and access to donor agency funding' (Amadiume, 2000: 14).

This contradiction underpinning Southern feminist engagement is often articulated in terms of a disconnection. Jad's (2007) research on Palestinian women's NGOs, Nabacwa's (2002) research on Ugandan women's NGOs and Ghodsee's (2006) research on Bulgarian women's NGOs all concur that despite gaining national and international recognition, measured at least in part by their capacity to attract Northern donor funding, a 'disconnect' nonetheless persists. The consequence of this disconnect for Jad (2003: 186) is simply that 'this international recognition is not translated into recognition or legitimacy at local and national levels'. Nabacwa (2002: 26) suggests that, in the Ugandan context, advocacy work undertaken by women's NGOs to effect changes in policy at the national level 'have been detached from the districts and have more often been interpreted as elitist women's issues'. The more worrying implication for Ghodsee (2006: 47) 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'.

This concern around a 'disconnect' that may obscure Southern feminist engagement in favour of elite women is also echoed by Harcourt (2009), reflecting on her experience as a participant at the 2008 Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) Forum, a large international feminist conference held once every four years. She identifies a similar disconnect between the perceptions of some delegates 'who had attended thinking the whole Forum would be about small grassroots movement organizing', who were instead 'somewhat bewildered at the scene they found there of highly professional speakers, high tech presentations and a whole set of those in the know about the world of New York UN policy debates' (Harcourt, 2009: 134).

That delegates should express 'bewilderment' at the exclusivity of the intellectual space at international meetings designed to bring together Southern women's NGOs and movements suggests something almost intractable about the association made between the terms 'Southern women's NGOs' and the 'grassroots', despite clear evidence to the contrary. This intractability, as the next sections demonstrate, derives at least partly from how both 'Southern NGOs' and 'Southern women' are discursively constructed in the development literature.

### ***Problematizing Southern NGOs***

The role of NGOs in development has resulted in an extensive literature<sup>4</sup> characterised by polarised debates around NGOs that are 'either gratuitously critical or excessively optimistic about NGOs' (Bebbington, 2004: 729). The 'excessively optimistic' voice defends NGOs as 'key promoters of an alternative development agenda based on participation and empowerment' (Mayoux, 1998: 172), thus benefiting those most marginalised from development. These perceptions tend to emphasise 'grassroots-level accountability and legitimacy, bottom-up approaches, decentralized planning, participatory and democratic ways of working, flexibility, and a motivated workforce' (Sharma, 2006: 67; see also Mayoux, 1998: 173). The perceived legitimacy of NGOs persists because they make 'causal

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claims' that are deployed 'behind normative appeals', a process upheld by their perceived capacity to be simultaneously 'heard "at the table" where global norms are defined, as well as making themselves useful "on the ground" implementing those norms among the poor' (DeMars, 2005: 24). In maintaining this polarised duality, the 'NGO acts, not for itself, but to express the power of the grassroots against the elites, or to empower the grassroots' (DeMars, 2005: 25). The power of the normative claim emerges out of a perceived proximity to the marginalised constituencies on whose behalf NGOs claim to work:

Regardless of the extent to which they are accountable to community stakeholders, NGOs are regularly cast as the organizational embodiments of the grassroots. Within scholarly and practitioner accounts, they are seen as "closer to the grassroots" than their state counterparts, or may even be equated with the grassroots ... The term grassroots implies local-level, small-scale efforts that are driven by groups who are directly impacted by the problems or conditions they seek to change (Dempsey, 2009: 329).

This critique of the elision between NGOs and grassroots accountability is bound up at least partly in a lack of definitional clarity. 'Non-governmental organisation', Alvarez (1998: 307; emphasis in original) argues, is a term 'indiscriminately deployed in development discourse to refer to any social actor *not* clearly situated within the realm of the state or the market' and used to describe everything, 'from peasant collectives and community soup kitchens to research oriented policy think tanks'. This 'indiscriminate' usage has resulted in the term 'NGOs in development' being used as a shorthand for representative, inclusive and democratic organisational form.

The 'gratuitously critical' literature has therefore centred on the extent to which many NGOs struggle to maintain this duality and their capacity to 'empower the grassroots'. These critics argue that NGOs variously represent a new form of imperialism to serve donor interests (Petras, 1999); act 'as a channel of resources and authority from the core to the periphery in the system' (Tvedt, 1998: 76); promote 'atomistic civil society ... [which] disaggregates society into a series of unconnected, both spatially and politically, "issues"' (Mohan, 2002: 150), thus 'fragment[ing] poor communities and

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[rendering them] even less able to unite in struggle against the system' (Petras, 1999: 435); and, 'in bringing back to the privileged of the earth images of people, of needs, of realities that attract more funding and legitimization to donors and to NGOs' (Townsend and Townsend, 2004: 273), appear to be 'empowering global civil society' whereas in fact it is 'Northern NGO leaders who are empowering themselves to reshape the south' (DeMars, 2005: 12).

This is an expansive and often contradictory literature that is too large to comprehensively address here. What is important to note for the purposes of the present review and, as some of the quotations above suggest, is that it is *Northern* NGOs, understood as a 'category', which have endured the most sustained scrutiny. A growing number of studies (see for example Mawdsley et al. 2002; Mohan, 2002) have moved away from the tendency for the study of NGOs to be 'case study focused' (Bebbington, 2004). Instead, there has been a move towards a consideration of the wider geographies of their involvement in the processes of development, with a notable emphasis on interrogating the relationships between Northern NGOs and their Southern partners. This type of analysis typically places Northern NGOs as mediators between the demands of donors and of Southern partner NGOs, with concerns expressed about the 'top-down' (Mawdsley, et al., 2002; Edwards and Hulme, 1996b; DeMars, 2005) or dictatorial (Mohan, 2002: 142) nature of this relationship that marginalises the views, agency and independence of Southern NGO partners. Due to their geographical location, Southern NGOs are largely understood to be either marginalised from the dominant development infrastructure or as ineluctably, and often reluctantly, tied to Northern funding and agendas for the sake of their own survival (see for example Mawdsley et al., 2002; Ebrahim, 2003). Southern NGOs are perceived as being caught in a discursive and financial David and Goliath battle (see Clark, 1991). They are charged with negotiating a path between resistance embodied in the defence of the material and informational needs and demands of their own poor, marginalised or grassroots constituents, versus co-option into the development fashions of dominant discourses and the often contradictory and endless processual demands of Northern partners and/or donors. The role and function of Southern NGOs is always perceived as marginalised in the literature in relation to dominant Northern

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hegemony or Northern ideas, their positionality rarely if ever contextualised in relation to their own history, socio-political or economic context.

Instead, the deliberate inclusion of 'Southern NGOs', understood as a discursive category, through more responsive, Southern-oriented programming and support offers an immediate and visible response to the persistent critiques of one-sided, hegemonic practices with which Northern stakeholders are forever charged. In fact, it is in privileging links with Southern or 'community-level' NGOs and movements that Northern NGOs are increasingly able to justify their engagement with development practice. The Southern NGO is perceived in this context as 'an all-purpose intermediary' with a 'proximity to 'the poor' (Cornwall et al., 2008: 3), in whose partnership Northern stakeholders are increasingly staking their legitimacy: '[m]ost donors and NNGOs [Northern NGOs] work with local partner NGOs' since '[f]oreign interests may lack the local knowledge or legitimacy to enter local communities so that [Southern] partner NGOs are important gatekeepers in reaching the grassroots' (Mohan, 2002: 143). The moral claims to representation asserted by Southern NGOs invite significantly less scrutiny due to their perceived proximity to subaltern groups: 'It is precisely this perceived 'closeness' to local communities and understanding of their cultures that gives the SNGOs [Southern NGOs] their power' (Mohan, 2002: 143).

Mohan (2002: 148) goes on to identify what he cites as the 'paradox' faced by Southern NGOs, insofar as they are charged on the one hand with representing the grassroots but are in reality accountable to donors, thus minimising the expression of local needs that 'further marginalises and alienates the rural poor'. Yet this perception of Southern-based NGOs as interlocutors between power brokers and those marginalised from decision-making processes arises out of powerful and intractable discursive associations between terms such as 'Southern', 'local' and 'community-level' with 'the poor', 'the marginalised' or 'the grassroots' that are then placed in hierarchical opposition to terms such as 'Northern', that are not meaningful categorisations. Instead, as Dempsey (2009: 331-2) argues, they act as 'deeply moralizing spatial metaphor[s]' that lead to what she suggests is the 'romanticization of

the local scale [that] disguises the extent to which local social arrangements are as deeply gendered, classed, and raced as other scales’.

The placement of the Southern NGO at the lower end of this hierarchy tends to render the Southern NGO as weaker. That resources are channelled to ‘Southern NGOs’ on the basis of a perceived proximity to ‘poor and marginalised groups’ is not an entirely accurate characterisation, with implications for reaching and representing the much-coveted ‘voices’ of marginalised groups:

In emphasising local knowledge, grassroots initiative, and community development this ideology of empowerment generates a discourse of discrete and bounded places amenable to a particular form of intervention that only they [Southern NGOs], albeit in partnership, can largely control. Again, the rural poor are only brought in as members of fictionalised ‘communities’ and are in practice denied any real voice (Mohan, 2002: 148).

This critique of Southern NGOs as potentially reflective of local power imbalances that may invisibilise relatively marginalised voices amongst those they claim to represent is borne out by other case-study based research on Southern NGOs in development. NGOs in Bangladesh, for instance, have been found to be subject to organisational cultures that are top-down and hierarchical, often mimicking ‘hierarchical and authoritarian social forms’ of the political and economic landscape from which they emerge (Wood, 1997: 87-8). The function of elite networks that marginalise poor constituencies and exclude their expressed needs and concerns from decision-making processes have also been uncovered in relation to the involvement of Southern NGOs in land redistribution policy (Devine, 2002) and national advocacy work (Madon and Lewis, 2003: 14).

The second and related critique that is emerging from this discussion is the notion of Southern-based NGOs as discreet entities, distinct from hegemonic Northern NGOs/donors and therefore more representative of ‘the local’ or ‘the grassroots’. As Pigg (1992), Botchway (2001), Laurie et al. (2005), Olwig (2013) and others remind us, discrete and essentialised categories so frequently used in development discourse such as ‘the community’, ‘the village’ or ‘indigenous groups’ perpetuate fixed-

space representations of both issues and people that mask the temporal and spatial fluidity of both dialogue and dissent in development. In reality, development 'rationalities' (Olwig, 2013) are so entrenched that even amongst the 'grassroots', it would be 'almost impossible ... to envisage futures that are not bound up in some form of development imaginary' (Laurie et al., 2005: 470, citing Escobar, 1995). Instead, Bebbington (2004: 729-730) advocates an understanding of individuals and the organisations with/through whom they work as part of transnational networks that 'identify with different points (North and South) along the network, [and] may often have worked and lived at these different points, and continue to move through them'. This review therefore suggests that the inclusion of Southern NGOs as democratic, accountable and inclusive interlocutors to promote broader social justice objectives rooted in alternative, subaltern or grassroots development paradigms is constrained by the ideological, polarised and contested terrain of development itself.

### ***Southern feminisms and development: women as the politicised 'other'***

The literature on women/gender in development, echoing that of NGOs in development, is also polarised. On the one hand, there is a fervent belief that 'sisterhood is global' (Morgan, 1984). In this perspective, women are frequently credited with the ability to prioritise consensus and compromise over conflict, despite how other axes of difference shape material realities in diverse, site-specific ways, instead tirelessly working outside of mainstream, hegemonic constraints (see for example Mawdsley et al., 2002: 136; Valk et al., 1999). From the 'commonality and solidarity' that abounds in transnational feminist networks (Moghadam, 2005: 20), through to women 'founding [grassroots] NGOs to help their less fortunate sisters' as a 'way of actualizing their feminist beliefs' (Handy et al. 2006: 100), there is a prevailing belief in women's collective action as a key source of untapped development potential. It would seem that, 'as women, we want power; yet we would wish to transform it in accordance with our own values, based on solidarity, equal co-operation, and democracy (Sweetman and Cárdenas, 1997: 63). We should not be surprised, Handy et al. (2006: 18)

suggest, at the 'phenomenon' of 'women helping other women ... given that they best understand the barriers and challenges faced by women'.

There are well-established critical black, Third World and postcolonial feminist theoretical positions that warn away from conceptualising women or feminists as homogenous (see for example Amos and Parmar, 1984; Hill-Collins, 2000; Mohanty et al., 1991; Spivak, 1988; and Yuval-Davis, 1994).

Moreover, Lennie et al. (1993: 61) contend that 'feminism may have its own power-knowledge nexus, which in particular contexts and in particular historical moments, will operate in ways that are oppressive and repressive to people within and/or outside of the constituency of feminism'. There are two important and related implications to draw from these positions. Firstly, women are, like any other diverse and heterogeneous group, subject to the same divisive constraints that shape broader social, political and economic inequalities. Secondly, Lennie et al.'s analysis reinforces that women are as likely to build feminist solidarity with other women on the basis of a shared gender/sex identity as they are to those women with whom they may share additional group identities (i.e., religion, race, class, sexuality etc.), potentially oppressing and/or excluding other women. And indeed, there is substantial empirical evidence to support these two related contentions, which runs contrary to notions of sisterhood or egalitarianism based on gender identities. Exclusion deriving from class politics that undermines an imagined feminist solidarity is evidenced, for example, in an extensive and growing body of research on how both micro-credit programmes and self-help groups in the Indian context may entrench class divides, invisibilising the most marginalised or vulnerable women as neither qualified to speak nor participate. This includes research by Sangtin Writers and Nagar (2006), Raju (2006), Batliwala and Dhanraj (2007), Dwivedi (2007), Sharma and Parthasarathy (2007) and Murthy et al. (2008). Critiques of women and class in Africa include work by Amadiume (2000) on post-colonialism and elite women; Creevey's (2004) analysis of the class-based inequalities that exclude lower class women attempting to participate in women's credit societies in Senegal; and Gugerty and Kremer's (2008) critical analysis of women's community associations in Kenya, where they find that women, contrary to donor assumptions, are neither better at communicating nor above

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concerns around elite capture, even at the local level. In the Latin American context, Gonzalez de la Rocha's (2007: 59) study of survival strategies of the poor in the context of economic crisis and restructuring in Mexico suggests that poverty, as opposed to feminist solidarity, is a key determinant for inclusion in social networks. In de la Rocha's research, despite the importance of women's networks in particular as central to survival strategies, a growing number of both women and men report increased social isolation as a result of increased poverty. As we have seen earlier, Alvarez (1998) also offers critical insights into class divisions and elite capture in Latin American feminist movements.

And yet, despite the substantial and growing body of critical and empirical evidence to the contrary, there is nonetheless a persistent mythologizing of the capacity of women to act for social justice and collective values. The literature confirms that there persists a 'powerful social imagery of women's solidarity' that is 'underpinned by assumptions of women's inherent co-operativeness with each other' (Cornwall, 2007: 150) that represents 'a feminist collectivist politics that is rooted in assumptions of a common (gender) identity and naturalized sisterhood' (Sharma, 2008: xxv). As Hilhorst (2003: 66; emphasis added) argues, this imagery continues to fuel a substantial proportion of development practice:

In 1984, Robin Morgan launched the slogan 'Sisterhood is Global'. Like many feminists in the 1970s, Morgan asserts that women share a common worldview as a result of a common condition. This idea has since been thoroughly discredited, with women pointing to divisions based on class and race. It has also become common sense that there is no one singular kind of women's movement ... It is one thing to assert that feminist movements, like other social movements, have a constructed and emerging character. However, at the same time, *we have to acknowledge that particular frozen images of women's movements continue to play a role in discussions and practices of women engaged in collective action.*

This stubborn reinforcement of an *imagined solidarity* amongst women as a constituency makes them a legitimate and appropriate target for funding and support in relation to development interventions.

And nowhere is this more pronounced than in the inclusion of 'Southern women', which may be likened to the inclusion of 'Southern NGOs', insofar as it has come to represent commitments to social justice, poverty reduction or development. In this narrative we find echoes of the David and Goliath characterisations of Southern versus Northern NGOs that also emerge in Alvarez's discussion of the marginalised status of Latin American feminists vis-à-vis dominant Western feminist movements above. Amidst the chorus of privileged Western feminist perspectives, for example, there 'has been the tendency of development agencies to privilege the information' Western feminists provide 'over the often better-informed perspectives of *developing world women*' (Goetz, 1994: 28; emphasis added). Southern-based feminists are perceived as universally marginalised, their voices unheard at the level of development decision-making. In this worldview, what is needed is to bring 'the concerns of *women from the global South ...* to the attention of more privileged women and raise their consciousness' (Ferree, 2006: 17; emphasis added).

The privileging of 'Southern women' as a category in this narrative derives from the attempts by critical feminists to problematise the dominance of Western feminist thought that has tended to essentialise Southern women as victims of both patriarchy and development, and without further differentiation by other axes of difference. This is rooted, as the next section highlights, in imperialist and development discourses that historically rendered the Global South, and the Southern woman located there, as the disempowered 'other'.

### ***Locating and problematising the 'Southern' woman***

The box-ticking that frequently accompanies the inclusion of 'Southern women' as a way of signifying commitments to social justice and gender equality is at least partially attributable to how feminist scholars responded to the discursive and material effects of colonialism and its subsequent withdrawal as a peculiar feature of modernity (Chakrabarty, 2002). The 'nineteenth-century polarity of Orient and Occident', Bhabha (1994: 29) argues, 'unleashed the exclusionary imperialist ideologies of self and other'. This in turn established the idea of what Said (1978: 204) terms 'the Orient' as 'a

specific kind of knowledge'. This rendering of the 'other' is, Said (ibid) argues, essentially imperialist, ethnocentric and racist, creating a discursive powerlessness or weakness, where 'the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness'.

Given the orientalist (Said, 1978) 'knowledge' of the 'othered' South as weak, it follows, as it did for many Northern feminists attempting to articulate and engage with the concerns of women in the Global South or Third World, that 'Third World Women' are disadvantaged not only because they are women but are further weakened and disempowered due to the 'Third World difference' (Mohanty, 1991b: 53). In seeking to highlight concerns around gender inequality and the consequences for women living within postcolonial developing societies, "The Third World *Woman*" became 'a particularly hallowed signifier' (Spivak 1985: 247; emphasis in original), rendering them both an object of theorising and a site for intervention. Building on existing critiques of what McEwan (2001: 97) terms 'Western feminism's unbecoming' in the 1970s and 1980s that resulted from the critical analysis of the overlaps between Western feminism and the imperialist project, Mohanty (1991b: 58-59) rightly takes issue with the reductionist tendency of Western feminist discourses on women in the Third World. She argues that these discourses descend into binaries that render Third World women as victims to the political, economic and sexual exigencies of Third World men (and associated kinship structures and practices), thus 'never ris[ing] above the debilitating generality of their "object" status' (ibid: 71) in relation to liberated Western female subjects. These perceptions, she argues, are 'normed through Eurocentric assumptions' (ibid: 72), revealing 'a latent ethnocentrism in particular [Western] feminist writings on women in the Third World' (ibid: 74). She asserts that Third World women experience a 'common context of struggle rather than color or racial identifications' rooted in an 'oppositional *political* relation to sexist, and imperialist structures that constitutes our potential commonality' (Mohanty, 1991a: 7). She (ibid: 4) deliberately chooses to 'foreground "Third World Women" as an analytical and political category', thus destabilising the discursive homogenisation and victimisation of women in the Global South by Northern feminist scholarship, in turn reclaiming this discursive space for Southern women as active agents and not passive victims of development's gaze.

This decolonisation of feminism at the level of discourse, as Alvarez's (1998) analysis above reiterates, has been crucial for Southern women's movements to gain international recognition and to be recognised as not just victims but agents. And whilst Mohanty (1991b: 74; emphasis in original) herself is careful to acknowledge that she is 'referring to a *discursive* self-presentation, not necessarily to material reality', 'Southern women' is no longer merely a discursive category. There is, as we have seen in the literature, a tendency for 'Southern women' to be used in a totalising way as a meaningful designation for subaltern status. Yet there are dangers for development theory and practice in investing in an undifferentiated, monolithic category of 'Southern woman' or 'Southern feminist' presumed to share 'a common context of struggle'. Two inter-related concerns emerge. The first is, as Spivak (Sharpe and Spivak, 2003: 618) argues, the elision of geographic proximity or a shared 'Southern-ness' as an indication of an essential capacity held by a 'Southern woman' to represent subaltern views, needs or interests in her own location. Spivak (1990) addresses this contradiction in a discussion with three South Asian feminist academics. She highlights the contradictory positionality of these women, who may be perceived (and perceive themselves) as marginalised or 'developing' subjects within global development discourse, whilst pursuing educational and professional goals that set them apart as elite or 'developed'. Instead these women share life experiences and ideological sympathies that are, Spivak argues, likely to be more in tune with other elite feminist discourses at the transnational level than those of working class or subaltern subjects within their own geographical locations.

The second and related concern then, is the implications this has for Northern stakeholders in particular who adopt the inclusion of 'Southern women' as a shorthand, box-ticking exercise for the representation of marginalised groups in development. Kothari (2002: 49) notes a 'tendency to construct a singular category – "woman" – to suggest a commonality of oppression [which] fails to distinguish between the varied histories and imbalances of power among women'. Suleri (1992: 758), in an excoriating riposte to Mohanty argues that the politicised 'Third World Woman' is 'accorded an iconicity that is altogether too good to be true' (1992: 758), especially given 'the dangerous

democracy accorded the coalition between postcolonial and feminist theories, in which each term serves to reify the potential pietism of the other' (Suleri, 1992: 759). In short, the discursive reifying of 'Southern women' limits any meaningful discussion around inequality or exclusion and is instead rendered beyond criticism or reproach, representing as it does the purest anti-hegemonic subject position. Yet discursive practices involving the representation of others are always mediated by power (Alcoff, 1991: 26), that, despite Mohanty's assertion of a 'common context', do in fact have material consequences for the diversity of women belonging to 'lesser-privileged groups' (ibid) who may occupy the same geographical spaces but are not 'qualified to speak' and are therefore excluded from so-called 'Southern' (feminist) discourses.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Amidst accusations of 'eurocentrism' and Northern hegemony emerging out of the critical feminist and development studies literature, the inclusion of women's NGOs in development policy processes has become a practical and immediately visible device through which to demonstrate a commitment to broader social justice goals. The concept of the 'Southern women's NGO' represents the discursive elision of powerful imagery associated with women's collective agency alongside the anti-hegemonic subject position of both 'Southern women' and Southern NGOs'. Their inclusion has become a tick-box exercise, a symbolic shorthand and 'hallowed' signifier for commitments to poverty reduction, social justice and more progressive, inclusive development. The question this review raises is not whether 'Southern women's NGOs', taken as a category, are less or more effective in promoting better development outcomes. That is a question best answered through broader empirical, case-study based research or systematic reviews of NGO evaluations (where these may be available), nor would I suggest that it would ever be possible to make definitive pronouncements about the effectiveness of Southern women's NGOs as a category. The question is whether we can create space for a dialogue that moves beyond essentialising tendencies that cast development stakeholders into simplistic

binaries of hegemonic (read Northern) versus subaltern (read Southern). Discussions around shared identities may be useful but must be undertaken in a context that creates space for a discussion of intersectionality, where grassroots or feminist collective action doubtless co-exists with other axes of difference and collective identity formation including class, sexuality, age, ethnicity or religion. There is a danger that one essentialism – the Southern woman as victim – has been replaced in discourse and practice with another: the Southern woman, by virtue of her geographic location, as both a source and representative of subaltern and anti-hegemonic development paradigms, as gathered and expressed through that most grounded, democratic, representative and accessible organisational form, the Southern NGO.

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<sup>1</sup> There is the question of what constitutes a 'Southern women's NGO'? In practice, attempting a definition is fraught with issues. Is it an NGO that is staffed by women? Is it an NGO that works only on so-called 'women's issues'? If it is staffed by women but working on community issues that affect both men and women, is it still a 'women's NGO'? Or is it defined by the nature of its work i.e., service delivery versus advocacy? If it is an NGO that happens to provide services (such as maternal health) that cater mainly to women, is that a women's NGO, or is it merely a service provider? The challenges of achieving definitional clarity are captured in an academic 'conversation' between Richa Nagar and Saraswati Raju. In their reflections on the challenges of 'doing' empowerment 'at a time when "Southern" women's nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are becoming increasingly professionalized and globalized' (Nagar and Raju, 2003: 1), they identify the rapidly shifting nature of this terrain, including the legitimacy of NGO activity, as the state withdraws from the provision of even basic services. Their conversation highlights the difficulty of pinning down what it means to empower women through engagement with grassroots NGOs, as function and ideology vary so widely.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of gender mainstreaming has been extensively analysed and critiqued, see for example Goetz and Sandler (2007), Mukhopadhyay (2009, 2013), Woodford Berger (2009) and Subrahmanian (2009).

<sup>3</sup> The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) distilled the key commitments from the Millennium Declaration, which featured not only a separate goal for gender equality and women's empowerment (MDG 3), but also represented a broader commitment to social justice objectives related to health, education and partnership that relied on promoting gender equality.

<sup>4</sup> Some key critical analyses and overviews of various aspects of NGOs in development theory and practice include DeMars (2005), Edwards and Hulme (1996a), Ebrahim (2003), Lewis (2001), Mawdsley et al. (2002), Petras (1999), Tinker (1999), Tvedt (1998) and Wood (2000).