

Feminizing Resistance, Decolonizing Solidarity: Contesting Neoliberal Development in the Global South¹

Tiina Seppälä

University of Lapland, Finland

Abstract

Social movements in the global South have contested neoliberal development, a major cause of forced displacement, already for decades. Since it is usually the poor, low caste women who suffer most from large-scale development projects, they have been active in forming movements that contest neoliberal development and neocolonialism, often struggling also against patriarchy, sexism, and heteronormativity. The phenomenon has been referred to as “feminization of resistance”, and it has been studied from many different perspectives across disciplines. However, in conceptualizing women’s resistance, their political engagement, and activism in the global South, Western theoretical approaches often build on a limited, Eurocentric or Anglo-American perspective, ignoring many aspects that are crucial in non-Western contexts. While especially Western political science is increasingly often criticized for its false universalism, whiteness, and elitism, the demand to decolonize feminism have recently gained more ground in this context. Through an analysis of ethnographic fieldwork with social movement activists in Kolkata, India, and in Kathmandu, Nepal, this article discusses feminization of resistance in South Asia, highlighting the importance of decolonizing forms of feminist solidarity while also reflecting on its potentials and challenges in the context of engaged social movement research. Drawing on activists’ views, critiques,

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conceptualizations, and suggestions, this paper argues that taking into account their perspectives, that is, learning from movements – while simultaneously trying to unlearn one’s own academic privileges – creates potential not only for enriching and broadening the theoretical debate on feminization of resistance, but, can also contribute to efforts of decolonizing Western political thought and feminism.

Keywords: *Feminization of resistance, social movements, neoliberal development, decolonization, feminist solidarity*

Introduction

Questions related to political subjectivity and intersections of gender, class, caste, race, and ethnicity lie at the heart of a broad spectrum of contemporary struggles in the so-called “global South”² where women’s participation and political engagement has increased and intensified in a wide variety of social movements. In the theoretical debate, this has been referred to as “feminization of resistance” (e.g. Motta 2013; Motta et al. 2011), corresponding to the fact that “it is the bodies and labour of women and girls that constitute the heart of these struggles” (Mohanty 2003: 249). As a phenomenon, feminization of resistance is considered interrelated with feminization of poverty: neoliberal policies implemented in the global South have had a devastating effect on women in terms of impoverishment and dispossession, which has inspired them to become increasingly active in social movements (Motta 2013: 36; also Mohanty 2010; Roy 2009). While some of these movements struggle against neoliberal development projects that displace thousands of poor people, others contest new forms of colonialism that have resulted in conflicts over land, forests, and water, causing forced displacement and migration on a massive scale. Many movements work broadly for causes of social justice, equality, and dignity; some concentrate on women’s rights, and

² Although my focus here is on South Asia, the categories of “global South” and “global North” do not have to be understood in the traditional, geographical sense, but rather as positions in relation to capitalist power for global South can exist in the global North through the racialized underclass subjects such as refugees and migrants, and vice versa, global North can exist in the global South through the transnational and local elites, both economic and political (e.g. Dirlik 1997; Mohanty 2003: 226–227).

struggle against patriarchalism, sexism, and heteronormativity – all intimately intertwined with capitalism and colonialism, always raced, always gendered (e.g. Lugones 2010). Importantly, as suggested in postcolonial, decolonial, and intersectional feminist analyses, these struggles can potentially transform the nature, meaning, and subjects of resistance: subjects who simultaneously face multiple oppressions are in a position to re-imagine emancipatory politics, produce and embody difference, and to create and experiment with new subjectivities (Motta 2013; 26, 36). Viewed from this perspective, the feminization of resistance raises many important epistemological and political questions, pointing toward a re-conceptualization of resistance and political agency. As argued by Sara C. Motta (2013: 35), we urgently “need to recognize a feminization of resistance that is historically distinctive”, and that has the potential to challenge “masculinist conceptualizations of political and social transformation”.

The extent to which feminization of resistance is connected to feminism varies substantially. During the past couple of decades many social movements in the global South, especially in regions such as South Asia have creatively combined elements from different feminist perspectives drawing on both their non-Western and Western traditions. Feminism as a philosophy and as an everyday practice has become manifested in diverse ways in a broad range of movements providing feminist approaches more visibility in the global South than perhaps ever before. This has resulted in feminist movements in postcolonial contexts attracting more attention also in terms of research (although, they still do not receive nearly as much interest in the Western academia as their continental European or American counterparts). A challenge in this is that while there exists a great variety of practices in movements across the world that can be interpreted as feminist from the Western perspective, these movements would not always characterize themselves explicitly as such. In other words, from within the Western academia it might seem reasonable to label some movements as feminist on the basis of their discourses, actions, and values – despite the fact that not all of them identify themselves as feminist.

In many countries in the global South it is not an easy or simple choice for movements to declare or define themselves as feminist. The

increasing engagement of women in social movements, together with the growing role of feminist movements, for example, in South Asia has been met by a sharp increase in state violence, surveillance, and intimidation. Social movements and activists are disciplined and punished, marginalized, and represented as being against progress and development (Roy 2009: xiv). Direct violence is used regularly for silencing female activists – they are raped, kidnapped, tortured, and abused. In other words, the dark side of feminization of resistance manifests itself in giving birth to new technologies of rule, governance, and domination over feminized and raced bodies. Additionally, in the mainstream discourses and media representations in the global South, feminism is often attached with highly negative connotations (which is also often the case in the global North). Partly, this can be due to the fact that feminism as a concept is misunderstood due to the power of the patriarchy (Motta et al. 2011: 2). In the global South feminism is viewed negatively also as a result of the hegemonic role of Western feminism, which is sometimes considered to be a form of cultural imperialism (Mohanty 2003: 49–50). In recent years, the premises of Western feminism have not only been critiqued by postcolonial and black feminists, both within and outside the Western academia, but increasingly often also from within social movements in the global South. Some of these critiques are not familiar to Western mainstream audiences. Although feminists of color such as Chandra Mohanty Talpade have written about the discursive colonization of lives and struggles of women of the global South already for 30 years, for many it still seems to come as a surprise that outside the Western world feminism can be regarded as a Eurocentric, highly theoretical, and even elitist philosophy or ideology which serves “the narrow self-interest of Western feminism” (ibid.: 222–223).³

One of the main criticisms is that mainstream feminism often reflects white, bourgeois, and liberal frames of feminism while not taking sufficiently into account questions of race and class. While Mohanty and other South Asian feminists have denounced especially Eurocentric and falsely universalizing methodologies in feminist cross-cultural scholar-

³ It is important to note that it is just as difficult to speak of Western feminism as a singular, homogenous entity as it is to make generalizations about feminisms in the global South (Mohanty 2003: 17, 46).

ship, similar critique has surfaced also among black, queer, and working class feminists who have reproached mainstream feminism for “silencing and sidelining of their experiences, voices and strategies” (Motta et al. 2011: 2; also Motta 2013: 37; Collins 2000; Frankenberg 1993; Roediger 1998). Here, an important source of criticism is that considerable sections of the feminist movement, both inside and outside the academia, have become professionalized and institutionalized, and are therefore “easily assimilated within the logic of late capitalism” (Mohanty 2003: 244), which raises questions of how well they can understand and support struggles against neoliberalism by poor and marginalized women (Motta et al. 2011: 1; Mohanty 2003: 248–250). This relates to another broad aspect that has been debated extensively: the complex relationship between the researcher and the “researched” that takes various forms in local and global networks of power relations. Traditionally, scholars from the global North, whether feminists or not, have been welcomed to study and take part in the struggles of social movements in the global South, but currently academic privileges of Western researchers are being increasingly challenged by movements and activists, including women’s groups and indigenous communities (e.g. Casas-Cortés et al. 2008; Lugones 2010; Tuck and Yang 2012). This is due to their realization that hegemonic Western approaches are problematic due to their tendency to segregate “the knowledge from people, from its contexts and local histories” (D’Souza 2011: 236–237; also Mukherjee et al. 2011), and because they do not often have much to offer in terms of contributing to the actual struggles for social justice taking place on the ground (e.g. Bordering Actors 2014). Especially, the high level of abstraction in feminist theorizing – which is considered to have increased due to the popularity of poststructuralist theory – has been denoted as a problem. According to the criticism, the deconstruction of the subject of “woman” has resulted in academic research detaching itself from women’s actual struggles, thus, depriving “feminist politics of the categorical basis for its own normative claims” (Motta et al. 2011: 11–12; also Mohanty 2003: 6; cf. Butler 1990; Haraway 1985)⁴. In this context, postcolonial feminists have

⁴ Moreover, as Mohanty (2003: 107) importantly notes, “[o]ne problematic effect of the postmodern critique of essentialist notions of identity has been the dissolution of the category of race” as it has been “accomplished at the expense of a recognition of racism”.

stressed the importance of centralizing the experiences and struggles of poor and marginalized women whose histories have previously been considered “deviant, marginal, or inessential to the acquisition of knowledge” (Mohanty 2003: 200, 231–236). This means bringing forward the voices of women who are “excluded and delegitimized by the universalizing and violent power dynamics of patriarchal colonial capitalism” – and doing it in a way that does not disregard contextual differences, produce them as “a singular, monolithic subject” (ibid.: 17), and does not “overlook the concrete agency and experience of those subjects” (Motta 2013: 37; also Spivak 1988).

Although some of the above presented critiques mainly concern research on feminist movements, it is important to note that also in studying feminization of resistance in the global South many of the most popular analytical tools and concepts – such as “agency”, “subjectivity”, and “resistance” – are heavily influenced by continental European tradition, and often closely connected to Western political theory. In an important sense, the imperative to decolonize feminism advocated by postcolonial feminists bears resemblance to demands by Western feminists to “queer” mainstream political science and International Relations (IR) theory (e.g. Ticker 1997; 2011; Enloe 2007; Sylvester 2007)⁵. During the past few decades, many inspiring proposals for decolonizing academic research have been made, and many methods and strategies have been experimented with (e.g. Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Gaztambide-Fernández 2012). One of the most recent and interesting ones is outlined by Motta (2011) in her article on “prefigurative epistemologies”⁶ in which she encourages researchers to unlearn their academic privileges, that is, to relinquish part of what we have been taught about our roles as social scientists in the Western academia in order to widen our understanding of movement-relevant research, learn from the practices of social movements, and transform our practices. What in particular needs to be challenged is the presumption that the researcher has “the epistemic privilege of producing theoretical knowledge” as it fails to recognize that also

⁵ On decolonizing political science and IR, see e.g. Gruffydd-Jones 2006; Seth 2013.

⁶ Cf. discussion on alternative, black feminist epistemologies (e.g. Collins 2000).

movements can create theoretical knowledge (Motta and Nilsen 2011: 21–22). According to Motta (2011: 194–196), theory is not produced individually but collectively, “via reflection, within political struggle, based upon the lived experiences and struggles of excluded and marginalized communities”, and consequently, research that is done “in solidarity with such struggles for social justice” must build on “a horizontal relationship of mutual ‘learning’ in which abstraction is based upon closeness as opposed to distance from lived experience, and in which epistemology becomes a prefigurative practice of everyday life”.

In the context of women’s movements and women in movements, applying this approach means that the realities of poor, impoverished, and marginalized women must be taken seriously in order to learn and “engage in solidarity with the complexity of feminized political subjectivities being formed and the contradictions and tensions in this process” (Motta 2013: 49). Drawing on this perspective, I will discuss and seek to develop further the concept of what Mohanty has called “feminist solidarity” (2003), and what I here refer to as *decolonial feminist solidarity*⁷ which, as an approach, has much in common, firstly, with intersectionality as it stresses the importance of recognizing different social and cultural categories and their interactions on multiple and often simultaneous levels (e.g. Collins 2000), and secondly, with the idea of “border thinking” by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and Walter D. Mignolo (2000), developed further by Maria Lugones (2010) in her “feminist border thinking”. All of these can be thought of as methodologies privileging “those on the margins... without reifying or homogenizing their positionalities and struggles” (Motta 2013: 50). In seeking “to break down conceptual and theoretical categories of knowledge by speaking from the epistemological margins of modernity, be they within the margins of the West or on its margins in the global South”, they encourage – or, in fact, require – a “dialogue between different places and experiences on the margins” through which

⁷ Whereas solidarity can be defined in terms of “accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities”, decolonization is a practice, a historical and collective process that “involves profound transformations of self, community, and governance structures” (Mohanty 2003: 7).

it becomes possible “to further, in solidarity, our struggles” and to bridge “our experiences, struggles, theories, and lives, transgressing the borders of capitalist coloniality that seek to divide us” (Motta 2013: 37; also Anzaldúa and Keating 2002: 3).

Through an analysis of ethnographic fieldwork conducted with social movement activists in Kolkata, India, and in Kathmandu, Nepal, this article discusses feminization of resistance as well as the above mentioned critiques and suggestions, reflecting on the potentials and challenges of decolonial feminist solidarity in the context of engaged scholarship. In Kolkata, I have worked with activists involved in local movements contesting neoliberal development projects which result in aggressive policies of land grabbing and forced displacement in both rural and urban areas (Seppälä 2014). The research material was collected via ethnographic methods during my six month field visit in 2011–2012. The material consists of in-depth interviews and shorter discussions with 26 activists, peasants, fishers, and villagers involved in local anti-land acquisition and anti-eviction movements. In Nepal, I have collaborated with women’s rights activists as well as women activists involved in the local slum-dwellers’ movement defending the rights of over 50 slum communities which are under a constant threat of forced eviction due to urban development projects that are closely connected with the rapidly rising value of land in the city as well as environmental projects taking place in the Kathmandu valley. The methods of data collection have included research-activism collaboration, different forms of participation, and observation in events and campaigns, as well as joint projects planned and implemented together with activists of the local slum dwellers’ movement during two periods of fieldwork (three months in 2012, two in 2014). Both cases are part of my ongoing research project “Governance, Resistance and Neoliberal Development” which studies struggles against development induced forced displacement in South Asia.

The rest of the article is divided into four sections. I will start by introducing the movements that I have been working with, discussing the ways in which their struggles can be interpreted from the perspective of feminization of resistance and how feminism is embodied and reflected in their political philosophy and everyday practices, also reflecting on the broader context of their struggles as well as gendered challenges that the

activists face in different contexts. I will examine themes such as gender and forced land acquisition, women's resistance contra state repression, patriarchy within the movement, conflicts of interest between different groups of women, activists' critiques of Western feminism, and the relationship between feminism and anti-capitalism. I argue that taking into account these perspectives, learning from the movements – while simultaneously trying to unlearn one's own academic privileges – creates potential not only for enriching and broadening the theoretical debate on feminization of resistance, but, can also potentially contribute to efforts to decolonize Western political thought and feminism. The article concludes by discussing the relevance of the findings from a broader theoretical perspective, that of decolonial feminist solidarity.

The fact that I, as an outsider, as a privileged Western researcher will make certain analyses and interpretations of the movements and activists is problematic in the sense that it can be considered, at its worst, yet another arrogant Western endeavor “from above” – especially because not all of the activists cited here explicitly identify themselves as feminists (Seppälä 2014; 2016a). Despite this risk, I hope to be able to contribute, firstly, to the theoretical debate on feminization of resistance by drawing attention to the ways in which social movement activists in South Asia conceptualize the causes of their subordination and strategies in their political struggles against the patriarchal, neoliberal state, liberal governance, and global capitalism. The analysis goes beyond the individual and the personal as the women's narrated experiences and stories also reflect, and touch upon broader socio-political structures and power relations. Secondly, I hope that bringing forward some of the critiques presented within these movements would enable a critical, but, an indulgent evaluation of the foundations of feminism in the Western context, opening it up for transformative perspectives and processes of learning as well as unlearning. Thirdly, by shortly discussing my own position and unpacking some of my privileges I seek to reflect on the transformative potential of unlearning privilege, not to engage in “confessing” or “declaring” privilege as such (Ahmed 2004; Smith 2013).

Governance, Resistance, and Neoliberal Development in South Asia

“Development” is currently considered one of the main technologies for governing “surplus population” that is “superfluous” to the demands of the market and whose “skills, status or even existence are in excess of prevailing conditions and requirements” (Selmeczi 2012: 45; Duffield 2007: 9, 18). A growing number of development scholars argue that instead of helping countries of the global South, many international development projects are implemented and designed with the unstated, yet explicit aim of securing the dominant system, keeping it stable (e.g. Chatterjee 2004; Baviskar 2004; Duffield 2007). Due to pressure to “develop”, many countries in the global South have become indebted to foreign capital, and often social and political rights in these countries are weakened as a result of structural adjustment programs required by international institutions: while trying to demonstrate foreign creditors that it can repay its debts, the state has to “play an increasingly repressive role, keeping the working classes in line and preventing social unrest” (Baviskar 2004: 36).⁸ In countries such as India, national elites together with foreign investors have appropriated natural resources such as land, forests, minerals, and water for commercial purposes (ibid.: 36–37; Roy 2009: 32, 152). Although development projects are justified by referring to public and national interest, they often end up diminishing poor people’s possibilities to use natural resources, especially in rural areas (Baviskar 2004: 32, 36–37, 224; D’Souza 2011: 242). Indeed, the struggle for land lies at the heart of the debate on development (Roy 2009: xiv). In rural India lands are being forcefully grabbed from peasants many of whom, after losing their livelihoods, are forced to move to metropolitan cities where they end up living either in legal or illegal slums (Mohanty 2010: 245).

Development projects are the main cause of forced migration and internal displacement in the world. While around 40 million people are displaced due to conflicts, violence, and natural disasters, over 200 mil-

⁸ The mechanisms of governance work also through national poverty reduction programs designed by these same institutions, extending their scope to systems of education, health, and social policy (Motta and Nilsen 2011: 18).

lion people are displaced due to development projects (UNCHR 2013; Basu 2011; Jha 2011). Globally, India is among the countries with largest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Despite the United Nation's Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement, usually when poor people such as slum dwellers are displaced or evicted, they do not receive any compensation, and in most cases they are not offered rehabilitation or resettlement, or are resettled in remote colonies located on the outskirts of mega-cities (Jha 2011). Paradoxically, displaced people who live in shanty towns are increasingly often being evicted also from slums due to the rapidly growing value of urban land in metropolitan cities. This new form of ghettoization, "new urban apartheid" legitimizes the asymmetries of power between the rich and the poor (ibid.: 1–2; Roy 2009: 122). Displaced people confront many serious problems such as unemployment; police repression; and lack basic sustenance, proper shelter, basic health care, and access to education. In resettlement colonies, women are in risk of being exploited and trafficked, and face gender-based violence and sexual abuse (Ghimire 2011: 30; Basu 2011: 17, Jha 2011: 4). The effects are far greater than just material impacts: displacement always represents "a wider loss of cultural autonomy, knowledge and power" (Baviskar 2004: 36).⁹

Given this condition, as well as many other social, political, and ethical problems generated by the neoliberal development paradigm, it is not surprising that various forms of resistances have surfaced against it. Since, it is usually the poor and the low caste women who suffer the most from large-scale development projects – mainly due to forced displacement and loss of land and livelihoods – they have become very active in forming movements that contest neoliberal development (Mohanty 2010: 239, 244, 254).¹⁰ While some of them co-operate with state authorities and political parties, a burgeoning number of social movements, including women's rights and feminist movements refuse to collaborate with

⁹ Displaced people are not only helpless victims: their power and ability to handle and "transform difficult situations into new social conditions" must be recognized (Canuday 2009: 264).

¹⁰ In India, development projects have been contested especially in rural, forest, and hill areas, both during the colonial and post-colonial period (Baviskar 2004; Nilsen 2011).

any institutionalized actors (ibid.: 239). This is due to ever-growing skepticism towards mainstream politics controlled by political and economic elites. In many countries, movements are facing increasingly aggressive mechanisms of state control, surveillance, and violence. For example, the state of India strongly disciplines and punishes social movements and activists, trying to marginalize them and to represent them as being against progress and reform (Roy 2009: xiv). Violence is common – there are countless examples of police beating, abusing, raping, and even killing activists (Baviskar 2004; Roy 2009; Mohanty 2010: 242–243; Nilsen 2011: 116; Mukherjee et al. 2011: 175; Banerjee and Roy 2012: 41). This demonstrates “the ugly side of development” as well as “the lengths to which the state can go to pursue it, even if it means curtailing the most fundamental of people’s rights, the right to life” (Mohanty 2010: 242). Simultaneously, it is common that the state, fearing that it will lose the subaltern consent completely, not only resorts to coercive force but seeks to establish “clientelistic” relationships between subaltern groups and the elites in an effort to generate dependency of the former on the latter (Motta and Nilsen 2011: 18–19). These new technologies of rule that emphasize “participation and good governance” (Nilsen 2011: 109) are utilized with the aim of turning certain population groups into responsible, self-governing subjects.

How are then these kinds of techniques and mechanisms resisted by social movements in countries such as India and Nepal, and to what extent can we talk about feminization of resistance in this context? How is feminism embodied and reflected in their political philosophy and everyday practice? What kinds of gendered problematiques and challenges activists face in different contexts, and also within their own movements? Next, I will reflect on these themes by, firstly, drawing on my case study that examines resistance to the Rajarhat New Town Project in Kolkata, an urban development project that has displaced hundreds of families and deprived local peasants of their lands and livelihoods. Secondly, but to a significantly lesser extent in this particular article, I will draw on my case study in Kathmandu where the local slum-dwellers’ movement struggles against forced evictions of their communities.

Starting with the Kolkata case, the Rajarhat New Town Project has been one of the most controversial and politicized urban development

projects in the city of Kolkata, the capital city of West Bengal. Even though, the project started in mid-1990s, it became an object of wide public debate only in 2006. Rajarhat used to be a vital agricultural area providing livelihood to hundreds of families. After the project begun, most farmers were forced or duped into selling their lands very cheaply, or handing them over even without any compensation. Later, in the hands of private developers, land prices skyrocketed. While the government and corporations made a good profit, there were no plans for rehabilitation of the displaced people. (Banerjee and Roy 2012: 178–192.) Many farmers had to start collecting and selling garbage for their living, although they had been promised, falsely, that the construction of a new township would create employment in the area. Many fishermen also lost their livelihood as water bodies were put under the project. In addition, due to lack of work, some women were forced to engage in prostitution. (Interviews, Kolkata, 23 February and 18 March, 2012.) In their resistance, the people of Rajarhat, together with activists, have stressed that instead of building shopping malls and residential complexes for those who are already well-off, development projects should benefit the vast majority of people, the poor, who need basic things – work, food, water, schools, and hospitals. (Interviews, Kolkata, 17 and 18 March, 2012.)

The New Town Project has resulted in very critical views of development among the affected people and activists, who believe that it is explicitly designed for the elites and middle-class at the expense of lower classes. In the words of one activist: “What kind of development [the] government wants? [They] are killing farmers and developing some buildings for rich men” (Interview, Kolkata, 1 March, 2012). The Rajarhat peasants have lost much of their independence due to the loss of their lands and livelihoods. Yet, some of them consciously defy the state by refusing to move off their lands, and by continuing to cultivate they try to remain autonomous from the state. A process of growing antipathy towards mainstream politics has clearly taken place, which is not surprising given that all major political parties support neoliberal development, which has become “an essential governmental tool in the hands of the contemporary Indian rulers” (Banerjee and Roy 2012: 60, 130). Instead of benefiting the poor, neoliberal development is believed to serve “the rising demands of the new aristocracy” (Roy 2009: xiv, 38),

becoming a method of “grabbing all the resources” and “having ownership in the hands of a few” (Interview, Kolkata, 17 March, 2012). As a result, the idea of autonomous resistance has become increasingly popular among farmers, low caste people, and the urban poor. In their view, problems generated by neoliberal development must be solved by struggles in the streets, villages, and forests. It is believed that social movements allow people to create new forms of participation and to make up new rules and alternatives on their own – a process which enables transformative practices. Local organization and autonomous decision-making are considered essential forms of people’s democracy. (Interviews, Kolkata, 14 January, 8 February, 1, 17, 18 and 27 March, 2012.) In other words, movements not only resist and oppose, but, they also aim at transforming existing power relations by “not engaging” as well as by actively creating new practices. When refusing to act as “good liberal citizens”, activists challenge normalizing practices, and constitute new kinds of subjectivities (Seppälä 2014).

Often, also the “civil society approach” is considered a part of the problem. Some activists in Kolkata argued that since NGOs are “based on humanitarianism” they cannot challenge “the logic of development” but rather act as “safety guards” of the neoliberal system and state power. (Interviews, Kolkata, 14 January, 8 February, 17 and 26 March, 2012.) In short, the “NGOization” of civil society was considered a process of de-politicization, which makes developing countries increasingly dependent on aid (Chatterjee 2004: 67–68; Roy 2009: 41). At the same time, it was very difficult for many activists to sustain themselves economically, but then again, activism was not regarded as a profession or job but a way of life – a personal and political responsibility of which no glory or benefits, whether social or economic, are to be expected. Rather, it was presumed that hardships would automatically follow the chosen path. This was most evident with activists who “financed” their activist lives by working in the academia. For example, a female activist was suspended from her position as a researcher when the university board found out that she had been arrested taking part in a protest and a break-in organized by the movement. (Interview, Kolkata, 27 March, 2012.) Another activist had faced problems in his work as a university teacher as he was under constant surveillance by the police. He also found it difficult to

manage his time, as activism took up time from his academic work. He considered giving up his university position, which would have put him in a precarious financial position. (Interviews, Kolkata, 14 January and 8 February, 2012.)

It was only in these and similar kinds of situations where I slowly started to understand how categorically different my own position was from the people with whom I was working with. To be sure, this is not to “declare” or to “confess” my privilege (e.g. Ahmed 2004; Smith 2013), but to explain that from the perspective of starting to unlearn some of my academic privileges and to understand the idea of decolonial feminist solidarity it was important for me to realize the facts: I was a fully funded, privileged, white, feminist Western researcher-activist who had been financed to travel to a developing country to do fieldwork – asking sometimes quite stupid questions; studying a struggle that was someone else’s; not having to struggle everyday to make a living or to be afraid of getting into trouble because of my work but instead, very likely to gain more academic opportunities and privileges precisely because of it. This was a realization that enabled me to transform some of my research practices as I started to address and discuss the above mentioned, and other related ethical questions, with the activists. These themes – Western privilege, elitism, and hierarchies of power – will be analyzed in more detail in the following section, together with the activists’ views on issues such as gender and forced land acquisition, women’s resistance contra state repression, patriarchy within the movement, and conflicts of interest between different groups of women.

Feminization of Resistance: Learning from the Movements

Forceful Land Acquisition, Women’s Resistance and State Repression

One of the reasons why women, specifically in countries such as India and Nepal, have become active in social movements that contest development projects is because the burden of forceful land acquisition and development induced displacement is mostly felt by them. According

to women activists involved in the anti-eviction and anti-land acquisition movements in Kolkata, one of the main problems is that when the government acquires land and gives compensatory land to the affected families, the ownership is automatically granted to a man or men in the family – even if the acquired land had originally been owned by a woman or women of the household:

Many women in India are attached to [the] land economically and socially...If land is gone, if the government...will give a job to one person, [it] will be for either her husband or...her son. The women don't get any jobs...When she is working on a field...she is earning independently...I [used to] get money from this land, now my husband or my son will get the money. So, what about me? I am not going to get the money. Now, I have to be dependent under my son or my husband. (Interview, Kolkata, 17 March, 2012.)

In this way, the neoliberal Indian state draws on patriarchal traditions in its land policy created during the era of colonial rule when the colonial state, having an economic interest in keeping landholdings stable to ensure revenue collection “actively discouraged unmarried widows from partitioning landholdings” (Mohanty 2003: 62). The result is often negative for women: the activists stressed that when women own land, they are more independent and can contribute directly to the well-being of the family while also having more social contacts outside the family: “When you are staying at home that takes away a lot of freedoms. Independence, the freedom to move around, to meet people, that is also being cut” (Interview, Kolkata, 28 March, 2012). When women become displaced due to forceful land acquisition, they often lose connections to their social groups and peers, which makes their everyday lives more difficult:

There are some school[s] where children are going to study. There is some doctor or hospital that they know they can go. But in this shift to new place, they will not be knowing. And whatever money will be given in general, small or large, it will go in the hands of men. So [the women] will lose their independence. For them, it is kind of life which

is going away from them. It is not only livelihood but their right to life is also being snatched away from them. (Interview, Kolkata, 28 March, 2012.)

These everyday problems caused by gendered government land acquisition and compensation policies play a major role in the feminization of resistance and on women becoming active in movements that contest development. This is especially the case in rural areas but in recent years the participation of women has intensified also in many urban movements. The activists in Kolkata considered this partly due to the role of gender in the social structure of the semi-feudal Indian society. The questions of safety and security were of significant concern to both the rural and urban women as state violence and repression tend to increase wherever land acquisition takes place. (Interview, Kolkata, 26 March, 2012.) In this context, rape as a specific form of state violence was brought up often in the discussions, and it was usually linked to the violence conducted by the ruling class:

There was...a woman...crying...[Krishna] asked what happened to her. She didn't reply but the others told her she had been raped... That's when [Krishna] told her that rape belongs to mental violence of the ruling class. Just like your fellow...has been shot...you have been raped. So, you should not feel ashamed of it. It is their shame who have done it, not your shame. (Interview, Kolkata, 27, March, 2012.)

Despite of the ever present risk of being abused, raped, or even killed, the women activists in Kolkata stressed that they were ready to resist evictions and forceful land acquisition, bearing on their bodies whatever hardships would follow. Many of them were also willing to accept the ramifications and difficulties that their family members might face due to their political activism. After returning back home, I learned that one of the activists I had interviewed had been arrested and imprisoned for several months, which, again, highlighted how different my position was, being able to freely come and go without having to fear for my personal safety.

According to the activists, it is common that the government accuses the movement of consciously putting female activists in the forefront

during protests in order to prevent the police from physically reaching the male activists. Many of the women activists considered such acquisition to be “nonsense,” as women themselves had made “a conscious decision to take part in the movement” in this particular way. (Interview, Kolkata, 27 March, 2012.) In many protests, they had stood in the forefront with brooms, kitchen knives, and other tools. Although they had not used any violence themselves, often they had become physically insulted and abused by the police. Yet, some activists told that they had sometimes consciously utilized the fact that “men do not know what to do with women activists” (Interview, Kolkata, March 26, 2012):

Whenever we have a [protest], we just let our women loose. They are very good at that... They don't resort to violence. It is really difficult for the police to handle them... because they tend to talk, they are coming in [the] forefront, they may use abusive language... It's peaceful resistance. It is very difficult for the state to handle that. While men... tend to turn into a shouting match and pretty quickly it turns into violence... It is really difficult for the state to handle that, to become repressive in turn.

This indicates that although women activists often face gender-based violence in protests, they have also developed nonviolent counter-strategies, which they utilize in their resistance – sometimes more, sometimes less effectively. This is the case in the context of their struggles against patriarchy also within movements as the following section will illustrate.

Women Activists and Patriarchy within the Movements

Women activists in Kolkata described how they did not only suffer from violence and harassment by the police and state authorities but within the movements there were many problems as well. Some of the problems are due to the patriarchal system. Typically, movement culture is socially dominated by men, only rarely there are any female members in movement committees, and usually women are not given any role in decision-making: “When the [movement] leadership call[s] us, they say that you have to do rally, or you have to do barricade... The women are always in the front position... but... never inside committees, and they don't have

any power in...those.” (Interview, Kolkata, 17 March, 2012.) Some activists told that many women do not dare to challenge these patriarchal structures and hierarchies. Although, it was considered a positive sign that many women take part in movements, the negative side of it is that they do not always remain active for a very long period of time. While men may allow women “to take liberty”, and to participate because their effort in the movement is considered crucial, when the struggle is over, men often ask women “to go back home” (Interview, Kolkata, 23 February, 2012). The activists also described how the female body becomes a political tool for the patriarchal system: men are mobilized on the basis of the slogan that it is their “male duty” to protect their sisters, mothers, and wives. Another challenge mentioned was that women activists do not necessarily dare to challenge the family structure or broader gender politics in society. Instead of challenging the oppressive system, many women as well as men end up supporting it. One activist pointed out that this happens even in revolutions: it is argued that gender issues can be addressed and tackled only after the revolution has taken place. Among the activists, however, it was a common view that any revolution is always going to be incomplete if patriarchy will not be challenged from the very beginning (Interview, Kolkata, 27 March, 2012). Especially women activists were very critical of the fact that not even in socialist movements gender issues are taken seriously. Some male activists, too, gave examples of violent effects of patriarchy within the movement:

There was an activist...I developed a friendship with him...On one day I went...and found that he was not at home...I saw his wife. She had a bandage over her head, over her arms, and she was sitting silently...in the corner of the house...He [had] beat[en] up his wife...so hard that she had to take stitch[es]...I told him: “How can you... do this? You were just seven days ago beaten by the police in a demonstration, and how do you feel about the policeman beating you, and in your home you are doing the same thing? You’re beating up your wife...a woman who has nowhere to go.” To my questionnaires his response was: “You talk about movement, you talk about what is our next program but you leave those family affairs. Don’t mix politics with the family”...I was angry, I told him that... “Next time if you beat your wife, what can I

do? I know she will not protest. I am not talking, that is the only thing I can do, I will not talk to you”...He said it in his own simple term[s]: “These petty family matters, these are outside...of politics”. (Interview, Kolkata, 1 March, 2012.)

The activist had then tried to explain to the man that domestic violence is not outside of politics, stressing that that while “the corporate, the police...are exercising their power on us”, as an activist and a husband it was unacceptable to do the same to his wife. He had emphasized that activists struggling against exploitation should oppose domination anywhere it takes place, also within their own families. (Interview, Kolkata, 1 March, 2012.) Indeed, it is very common that same gendered dynamics that are dominant in the society at large are operational also within social movements. Women activists confront continuously patriarchal power and gendered practices in movements as well (Motta et al. 2011: 2). Sometimes they are able to challenge the gendered divisions at the movement level but might be suffering in their everyday lives and relationships in which they are usually “expected to play the traditional role of wife and mother” (Motta 2013: 49). For this same reason, many women activists in Kolkata criticized the movement as well as state leaders who were considered not interested in challenging patriarchy but only in enhancing their own power. It was often argued that the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, although female, neither advanced women’s issues nor paid any heed to the feminist agenda. Other female leaders such as Indira Gandhi and Sonya Gandhi were also mentioned as examples of women who have not promoted feminism in India but instead supported patriarchy, becoming male-like “dictators” themselves. (Interviews, Kolkata, 23 February, 1, 17, 18 and 26 March, 2012.)

In some instances, religion was mentioned as playing a role in women’s participation in the movement. One activist told about a woman who wanted to give a talk in one of the movement’s public meetings. Her religious community, led by men, did not give her permission to speak, but she decided to deliver her speech anyway. That day when she returned home, she was seriously beaten up by her husband who is also an active member in the same movement. (Interview, Kolkata, 17 March, 2012.) Another activist described a protest against land acquisition, characterizing the event as an example of “a bamboo division” in which the

men were on the one side, and the women on the other due to religious reasons. Considering this separation problematic, some activists decided to make an ultimatum: “Until this partition is removed, we cannot protect your land”. After that, women were allowed to take part in the movement more actively than ever before. (Interview, Kolkata, 23 February, 2012.) There had also been efforts to support women in gaining a more prominent role in decision-making, for instance, in some villages it had been decided that fifty percent of member of the people’s committee (panchayat) should be women. According to the activists, this did not, however, guarantee that the women would be heard, because the general tendency is to render them silent. (Interviews, Kolkata, 14 January and 8 February, 2012.)

These examples demonstrate common tensions between patriarchy, religion, and resistance in women’s struggles. The problems women activists experience in their private lives indicate that more attention should be paid to the tensions and contradictions they face in context of their family lives and their public roles in movements (Mohanty 2003: 76–77; also Collins 2000). The lack of recognition of gendered norms of female political subjectivity – not only at the level of the state but also within movements – can result in the lack of understanding of what Motta (2013: 49) has called “a multilayered and contradictory political subjectivity” of women who, on the one hand, create “dignity, agency, solidarity, and collective power” but who “carry the triple burden of paid, domestic, and political work”, on the other. In many cases, it is exactly these contradictions and tensions, in regard to the position of the women, that “concretize the links between struggles against patriarchy and struggles against capitalism” (ibid.).

Conflicts of Interest between Women, Critique towards Western Feminism

The fact that power relations and hierarchies exist everywhere, between male and female in movements, but also between different groups of women, is one of the reasons why many women activists in Kolkata said that they very actively and consciously tried to avoid imposing their own ideas when working in solidarity with other women, especially in rural areas. Between the women in the movement one of the most obvious

conflicts of interest was said to exist between the middle class, working class, and the poor women.

With women of other classes and the working class it is not always confrontational...One has to build [on] that, and with a conscious working class in a conscious feminist kind of [a] group. It is quite easy to do that. It depends a lot on consciousness...These women who are feminists are socialist...left in their thinking. If they are not, [then] it is very difficult. (Interview, Kolkata, 26 March, 2012.)

Although the activists did not always consider the conflict of interest among different classes of women serious, they reflected on this issue quite often, and from several different perspectives. This highlights the importance of recognizing the complexities of political differences between women of different social classes instead of conceptualizing women as a coherent group with similar interests. As Mohanty (2003: 30) states, women become constituted as women “through the complex interaction between class, culture, religion, and other ideological institutions and frameworks”. This came up also when many activists stressed the significance of acknowledging that the relationship between subaltern women and Western feminists can be problematic. Often, feminism was perceived as an essentially Western conceptualization, one that might compartmentalize issues that are not separate:

First of all, I don't believe in feminism...because the outlook what the feminists preach...they compartmentalize it...they say that this woman movement is...different from the other aspects of the movement... But...this society is very much uneven...in terms of religion, in terms of cast...in terms of gender also...The women agenda also should be seen in this aspect...Whenever you are questioning the society, the structure, then only you can question the problem of a woman. You cannot separate or compartmentalize that...You cannot keep the feudal system and request that the women [would be] liberated...This is absurd. (Interview, Kolkata, 17 March, 2012.)

It was emphasized that although women are exploited across the world, it is difficult to make comparisons between women's issues in

Europe and the global South because their histories as well as current problems are very different. In this context, the hegemonic role of Western feminism was sometimes critiqued quite strongly:

We have a lot of differences with the Western feminist[s]. We find that they don't understand economic issues. Economic issues are very important to our members, and they are only talking [about] violence. Violence and sexuality seem very important [for them] ...while for our members [problems regarding] hunger, wages, work...are important... This conflict is there in any kind of feminist meeting we go...Conflicts are there. Very often we have walked out of them because we have felt that issues we are concerned with cannot be addressed there. (Interview, Kolkata, 26 March, 2012.)

Moreover, it was argued that Western feminists sometimes have a problematic tendency to conceptualize not only oppression but also women's resistance from their own particular, European perspective:

In India women are silently, without being feminist...continuing [a] long struggle...When she was young, society wanted that a woman should not read...not [to] study because it will be harmful... it will be dangerous for her. In spite of that, women... inside their house, they would sit and read books...So, this kind of struggle has been going on for years...Western feminists, don't understand this kind of [a] protest. (Interview, Kolkata, 27 March, 2012.)

These kinds of failures to recognize and conceptualize difference have been critiqued by many black and postcolonial feminists, particularly strongly by Mohanty (2003: 22) who has blamed Western feminists of imperialism and ethnocentric universalism in representing the women of the global South as passive, dependent, and victimized subjects – which, as a notion, is constructed through the implicit “self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions”. Indeed, it was in the context of this particular binary that Mohanty developed her imperative to decolonize feminism, which is also closely related to discussion on the hierarchical relationship between subaltern and

academic subjects (e.g. Spivak 1988). Both of these issues became articulated by women activists in South Asia in straightforward terms: many of them criticized academics, both local and foreign, for maintaining that they “know better than the people”, and for representing their own views as the “voice of the people”. Some argued that instead of trying to educate the poor and the oppressed, both activists and academics should rather learn from the poor as their everyday lives, experiences, and constant encounters with structural violence and injustices make them experts in a broad range of issues. (Interviews, Kolkata, 17 March, 2012; Kathmandu, 30 June, 2012.) Another source of critique was that scholars coming from the global North tend to be more interested in advancing their own academic careers than collaborating or becoming partners with movements or activists. Scholars were considered also hypocritical because, for example, while criticizing neoliberal development, many of them continue to enjoy “all the benefits of modernity”. Academics, and some activists as well, were criticized for supporting the neoliberal system indirectly, for example, by choosing environmentally destructive lifestyles based on consumption. (Interview, Kolkata, 1 March, 2012.)

Feminism and Anti-Capitalism

Many activists in Kolkata underlined that the agenda of the feminist movement is not only a “question of equality vis-à-vis men” but that women and men need to struggle together against the forces of neoliberalism (Interview, Kolkata, 27 March, 2012). They suggested that only in the context of a more systemic struggle it would become possible to fight against patriarchy:

Obviously, any movement...if it is progressive, its nature should be anti-capitalist in some way or another. I don't think any feminist movement can be a feminist movement if it is not anti-capitalist. (Interview, Kolkata, 1 March, 2012.)

Moreover, it was argued that if the feminist movement does not challenge the basic structure of capitalism, it will end up supporting the social framework of patriarchy. While capitalism was conceived as built on masculine, aggressive qualities without which it would not function, men were considered victims of patriarchy as much as women, and it was

stressed that patriarchy is not gender-specific, but oppressive for both, or rather all genders. (Interviews, Kolkata, 1 and 26 March, 2012.) The activists mainly reflected on the intimate historical connections between colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy and less emphasis was put on the new forms of gendered and racialized discourses and practices through which the contemporary neoliberal state operates (such as citizenship and other individual rights). Yet, it was stressed that many of the existing inequalities and injustices have been aggravated by neoliberal policies.¹¹ It was also in this particular context of discussing anti-capitalism in which some activists brought up, again, the question of macro-level differences, and pointed out that the interests of Western feminists and those of middle-class or poor women in the global South are far from being identical: “Feminism cannot be same for educated, white women, and black women. Even in America their agenda is different. Have to be different.” (Interview, Kolkata, 1 March, 2012.)

While being critical of the universalistic as well as individualistic human rights discourses that characterize Western liberal feminist frameworks, some of the activists stressed that special initiatives should be made to educate women about their rights and encourage them to become more active in political decision-making. The main perspective was not, nevertheless, that of liberal feminism. Rather, it was stressed that as the problems women are facing are “nothing but a result of the system”, women need to be politicized and become radical in their struggles against structural inequality. In order to accomplish this, women should ally themselves with men; not to think of them as enemies but, as brothers and friends to unite, and fight together with, against patriarchy and neoliberalism. (Interview, Kolkata, 17 March, 2012.) In this context, one of the most radical suggestions was made by a male activist who argued for giving up all privileges, claiming it as an essential strategy in challenging patriarchy:

The important question is how...you avoid this power, how can it be diminished... It is a cultural and social decision. It is a voluntary deci-

¹¹ For discussion on the cumulative effects of colonial rule and capitalism, see e.g. Mohanty 2003: 62–64.

sion...that you have to deny the privileges that are due to you...certain class, or certain position or some sexuality. Suppose you are homosexual in India or Europe. Just being a heterosexual male in a family...enjoy some privilege or power which he [a homosexual] does not enjoy... Here comes in the role of consciousness whereby you should voluntarily refuse the privileges...which have been historically associated with the position you enjoy. Just because you are white in America you enjoy a position of power there which black or immigrants...or the aboriginals of the country [do not] ... If in any other respect you are same but...you are white...that is not your fault...but you should be conscious [of] that just being white, I enjoy certain privileges that are denied to him. And a conscious activist...it becomes his duty and role, to actually deny the privileges. Only then can you talk about equality. (Interview, Kolkata, 1 March, 2012.)

In the context of political activism and resistance, the idea of refusing privileges seems very well placed. It is so not only when talking about gender, class, and race – as well as their intersections – but also in addressing the power-laden and hierarchical relationship between the researcher and her research “subjects”. As postcolonial scholars have taught us, unlearning academic privileges is a necessary first step in all engaged scholarship (e.g. Spivak 1988; Mohanty 2003; Motta 2011), but we must seriously consider whether it is enough as such, or should we, as researchers working with the poor, impoverished, and marginalized people make more concrete efforts to refuse other privileges we might have. Indeed, living an “activist” life is about being something instead of just knowing something, to frame it in the words of Chitta Ranjan Das (2009: 582) who speaks from the conviction that “all revolution and paradigmatic departures should be accompanied by a personal revolution” as knowledge (jnana) “becomes real and mature only when it is translated to karma, that is, action”.

Towards Decolonial Feminist Solidarity

Based on my observations and experiences of participating in daily activities, meetings, protests, sit-ins, courses, educational events, and pro-

motional campaigns organized by social movement activists in Kolkata and Kathmandu, it has become clear that women's political activism and resistance – whether explicitly articulated as feminism or not in those contexts – is a remarkably complex, and often a highly dangerous endeavor that requires a high level of commitment, as well as harsh personal sacrifices from the participants. Although a phenomenon that can be called feminization of resistance has taken place in countries such as India and Nepal, not all activists who struggle against the forces of global capitalism, neoliberalism, and state power in these countries are explicitly feminists. In fact, as the analysis above has demonstrated, many activists in Kolkata and Kathmandu are highly critical of many different forms of power/knowledge, as not only do they challenge the premises of current world order, so-called 'development', and neoliberal capitalism that backs its position through state power, but they also constantly challenge the role of NGOs, and Western academics, including Western feminists.

What has also become clear in the course of my research is that the struggles in which women engage have much potential of increasing the power and agency of the women involved. The gendered practices within the movements as well as patriarchal relations between movement activists are also becoming increasingly politicized, and thus, also challenged. In this way, the feminization of resistance can construct a growing challenge to what has been described as masculinist theories of political practice (Motta 2013). Indeed, viewed from a broader perspective, many analyses of contemporary movements, including women's movements and feminist movements in the global South, speak to a different conceptualization of resistance of what is common in the traditional Western political thought, and which concentrates on political agency played out in the public sphere, in the context of political parties, trade unions, the state and its institutions (Motta 2013: 36, see also Collins 2000: 228; Brown 1988; Sargisson 1996). However, as we saw, resistance takes place also in the private sphere, in the everyday of women. In working with their communities in order to become autonomous agents of change, these women politicize issues that are not necessarily considered political in traditional Western political theory. It can be interpreted as the politicization of "the everyday, community, and family" which

means that family, community, womanhood, and motherhood are being turned into “a terrain of resistance, potentially transcending the limitations of patriarchal capitalist gendered relationships and roles, breaking down social isolation and creating solidarities” (Motta 2013: 41, 44). In these kinds of feminized practices of resistance, women are not passive or apolitical subjects in the private sphere but, are active organizers who draw attention to women’s agency, and also to the knowledge that they have and produce (ibid.: 48). Yet, one must bear in mind that “the politicization of their role as ensurers of the reproduction of the family and community” often comes at great personal cost and may also reproduce “more traditional gendered representations of the women as self-scarifying caregivers” (ibid.: 44).

So far, Western political theorists have been slow to analyze and theorize these issues despite the fact that they have been addressed by feminists of color already for decades, both within and outside the Western academia. As suggested by Motta et al. (2011: 24–25), we need to pay more attention to “the complexity of the feminised political subjectivities being formed” in order to “re-write the dominant patriarchal script of politics in solidarity with women in movement”, and in doing so, we must “stretch our understanding of what politics is and where it occurs, in ways that encompass the everyday, the private and the informalised world of work”. If we fail to recognize these dynamics and understand that everyday feminist practices can be as important as organized movements (Mohanty 2003: 4), there is a risk of reproducing concepts and theories that continue to mask and ignore “women’s role at the heart of revolutionary and popular struggle” (Motta 2013: 36). Hence, for us in the academia, it is important to take seriously the realities of the poor, impoverished, and marginalized women in order to learn and “engage in solidarity with the complexity of feminized political subjectivities being formed and the contradictions and tensions in this process” (ibid.: 49), as well as to learn from the critiques presented by those who do not feel that white, liberal, and bourgeois frameworks of feminism represent their perspectives. They necessarily compel us to reconsider Western epistemologies as well as their premises.

To which extent this will result in “reconfiguring and reimagining the nature, meaning, and subjects of political resistance and social

transformation” and creating “possibilities for the development of new forms of revolutionary subjectivity”, as anticipated by Motta (2013: 26, 36), remains yet to be seen. The aim, however, should be to “develop a feminism that speaks to multiple and diverse needs while recognizing also “the right of other feminists and women to similar freedoms” (Motta et al. 2011: 7). This kind of ethic of recognition, or what I have here referred to as decolonial feminist solidarity, neither denies tensions and contradictions between different forms of feminism nor does it maintain that alliances could be easily made with different frameworks but it rather seeks to demonstrate and address these tensions among feminists. It suggests that we need to give “voice and legitimacy to feminisms that come from working class and black positionalities” (ibid.; also Mohanty 2003; hooks 2000), and instead of theorizing excluded and marginalized women from a distance, we need to build theory together, in dialogue with them (Motta et al. 2011: 16).

As an approach, decolonial feminist solidarity emphasizes the necessity of developing “a praxis that is mindful of others, opens space for a plurality of voices to be heard, and challenges unspoken assumptions about race, class and gender” (ibid.: 7). Its potential is not limited to feminist studies, but, it has much to offer to other fields as well. In the context of social movement research, for example, the development of movement-relevant theories demands epistemological and conceptual rethinking in order to subvert academic subjectivity and privilege as well as to transcend the binary between theoretical and practical knowledge (Motta 2011: 192). To be able to contribute to the struggles of the movements they study, researchers must work closely together with them, building on questions and “knowledge-practices” that the movements themselves consider important (Casas-Cortés et al. 2008; also Tuck and Yang 2012; Juris and Knashabish 2013).

To offer personal reflection on my own experiences of unlearning some of my academic privileges I must say that working with movements in South Asia has been a huge learning process in which the critiques presented by the activists helped me to understand the complexity of power relations as well as many of my privileges in concrete ways. The transforming aspect in this process was that it changed the way in which I considered the aims of my research, especially in the context of

the second part of my research project, which has included fieldwork with the slum dwellers' community in Nepal, and which I have, on the basis of my experiences in India, planned and designed from a quite different perspective than what was the case in the first part of the research project in Kolkata. For example, the collaboration (still ongoing) with women activists engaged in the slum dwellers' movement in Kathmandu has involved much more reflection and discussion on what they expect from me as a "researcher-in-solidarity", a term that we invented for describing my role to the outsiders when I participated in public protests and sit-ins together with the activists. On the basis of our discussions we have, for example, jointly planned my fieldwork in local slum communities, and designed strategies for meetings with local authorities. These and other experiences have convinced me that the practices of sharing with and learning from each other carry with them the potential of transforming the relationship between theory and political practice into something more reflexive and dialogical.

Conclusions

This article has analyzed feminization of resistance in South Asia, highlighting the importance of decolonial forms of feminist solidarity while also reflecting on its potentials and challenges in the context of engaged social movement research. Drawing on activists' views, critiques, conceptualizations, and suggestions, I have argued that taking them seriously into consideration creates potential for enriching the theoretical discussion on feminization of resistance and may contribute to efforts to decolonize Western political thought and feminism. Moreover, through a reflection of my own experiences I have given some examples on how my own research orientation has been transformed as I have learned in practice how crucial empirical studies are when developing theoretical arguments over concepts and approaches. I also hope to have illustrated that learning from movements is an invaluable, yet, an underestimated method for theorists where the aim is to transform the relationship between theory and political practice into something more reflexive and dialogical. For this to take place, the conception that academia and activism would be somehow dichotomist or antagonistic entities needs to be challenged (e.g. Leavy Solana 2011; Mohanty 2003: 216, 236), which can

be worked toward by building on the ethico-political traditions of critical theory and engaged scholarship in its various forms.

As Mohanty (2003: 125) suggests, we must consider what kinds of conditions, knowledges, and attitudes “make noncolonized dialogue possible”. In the context of women’s movements and women in movements this indicates, at the very least, of thinking of ways in which it would be possible to create “a plurality of forms of knowing”, as well as alliances and solidarities through which we can seek to destabilize “epistemological politics of patriarchal capitalist coloniality”, and to challenge “the dramatic effects of neoliberal capitalism on the lives of women” (Motta 2013: 38), both locally and globally. Along with political science and social movement research, the idea of decolonial feminist solidarity can be considered important in the context of development studies because as a discipline it has taken on an increasingly strong emphasis on gender issues. If the concept is developed further, it can be potentially utilized in producing a counter-discourse for challenging the broader development-power/knowledge nexus, that is, a global system of knowledge production that typically involves fields and disciplines such as development studies, ethnographic research, social movement studies, political science, feminist studies, and anthropology, and is built on Eurocentric development knowledge, favouring Western perspectives and interests either explicitly or implicitly.

To be sure, as a scholar I am not outside, above, or beyond the above mentioned criticisms, problematiques, and power relations, and therefore, I wish to end this article by reminding both myself and others that in a world characterized by extreme inequalities, we need to carefully consider who we wish to serve and benefit with our research, recognizing that when power co-opts knowledge, it becomes “a product, and an articulation and exercise of power” (Miri 2009: 472). Social sciences in the Western academia are increasingly often serving as mechanisms of societal control by the elites and the powerful instead of being sources of creative and progressive thought that would serve human emancipation (Das 2009: 580). This can be regarded as yet another imperative to look outside the academia for new ideas and ways in which global hierarchies of power/knowledge can be contested. Especially, for Western political science it would be beneficial to pay more attention to the ways in which

resistance is conceptualized outside its own realm. Further steps toward a broader conceptualization of feminism within the Western academia need to be taken as well. Both of these combined together could mark, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008: 46) puts it, a move towards the direction “that the world may once again be imagined as radically heterogeneous”.

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