Mind the Gap: Practicing Feminist HCI in the Global South

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Abstract

Conversations on feminism are increasingly taking center stage on online forums as well as offline settings, and have brought to light the diversity of approaches to feminism, often informed by an individual's personal experiences confronting oppression. Heated debates between self-identified feminists have also exposed the gap between academic and popular feminism, as pointed out by writers such as Adichie [1]. Further, *who* feminism is for has come under scrutiny as feminist movements frequently align with the agendas of those in power, and non-white non-cis identifying individuals are sidelined. In light of current discussions on *intersectional feminism* [7, 9], we bring to scrutiny how we, as feminist/HCI researchers, engage with feminism in our everyday practice. Drawing on empirical data on the work practices of frontline health workers involved in data collection in Delhi (India), we point out that familiar constructs of feminism in HCI can fail to capture the everyday acts of resistance enacted by women in the Global South [4]. We present questions for feminist/HCI researchers to reflect on gaps between their notions of feminism and: (1) as viewed and practiced by marginalized populations, and (2) as emerges in their mundane everyday activities.

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intersectionality; feminism; postcolonial; India

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

Introduction

Active feminist discourses in current HCI research tend to adopt a western capitalist approach to feminism, which focuses on women's advancement along the corporate ladder, as Mohanty discusses [6]. This perspective has also captured public consciousness with the recent emergence of accounts of gender inequality and sexual abuse in the workplace, including (and particularly) in computing and technology. While these are inarguably concerns that need addressing, such a perspective overlooks other diverse mechanisms by which patriarchal capitalist systems exert power.

Our study on the work practices of frontline health workers engaged in data collection in Delhi (India), exposed other sources and forms of oppression [4]. These workers, also known as Accredited Social Health Activists (or ASHAs), live and work in a highly patriarchal society and healthcare system. Though they desired and fought for better pay, they were also moved to be activist due to other concerns—the struggles of local communities and marginalized women, the personal and work challenges faced by other ASHAs, and their own aspirations for more independence and mobility [4]. Through these efforts, they pushed against the expectations of their families, society, and the state government [2]. The ASHAs' resistance to the oppression by the government resulted in a movement to increase their pay and benefits, but not their social status in society or the healthcare sector [4]. Thus, there was a disconnect between what the movement was able to achieve and the ASHAs' broader realities of engaging everyday with deeply embedded patriarchal institutions.

In her book, *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed argues that feminist theory emerges from everyday life and ordinary experiences of being feminist at home and at work [2]. The ASHAs' practices demonstrate the everyday acts of resistance that Ahmed emphasizes [2]. However, though the ASHAs were feminist in their outlook (as evinced by the care they extended to marginalized women and communities and their efforts against patriarchal systems), it is unlikely that they would identify with and subscribe to western notions of feminism and the value they place on individual ambition [4]. Below, we reflect on this conflict that feminist/HCI researchers face while working in non-western contexts, and also ask: how do acts of resistance as enacted everyday in Global South contexts relate to broader (western) feminist activist movements and feminist theory?

Who (and what) is feminist?

In her book arguing that feminism is for everybody, bell hooks describes feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" [3]. According to Ahmed, "Feminism is a sensible reaction to the injustices of the world" [2]. Both writers strongly emphasize that one is either feminist or not, demonstrated through unwavering commitment to anti-oppression. Promoting such a stance may prove challenging in non-western contexts, where supposed "injustices" may be perceived differently than in the West [5]. Further, in practice, researchers are often outsiders to the target community and may be afforded only limited power to effect social justice. Researchers and designers may thus be forced to make a choice between working within the constraints placed, and rejecting the limited view of social justice that they are allowed to propagate.

On the other hand, Mohanty does not dwell on questions

around who is feminist or not, but takes a more pragmatic approach which considers the mechanisms by which oppression is enacted on a global scale [5]. Her intersectional perspective on feminism rejects "third world women" as a homogeneous category, and points out how culture, class, caste, and other differences within these contexts shape women experiences. She also recommends that an "experiential and analytic anchor in the lives of marginalized communities of women provides the most inclusive paradigm for thinking about social justice" [5]. Her stance presents one way in which feminist/HCI researchers might approach postcolonial work, which we adopted in our analysis of the practices of ASHAs [4].

Who decides?
The irony of feminism is that (for the most part) it is those with privilege who decide what feminism means and give acts of resistance a name. Further, as Spivak points out in her critique of postcolonial studies, the generation of knowledge is itself a colonial process and is derived from a western intellectual tradition [8]. The ASHAs we interacted with neither cared what "feminism" and terms such as "patriarchy" meant, nor saw this language as particularly useful. This does not mean that they were ignorant of or did not experience patriarchy, they had their own ways of referring to instances of oppression which were descriptive and free from jargon, revealing where abstraction can conceal [1]. Much of the ASHAs' beliefs around feminism appeared to be manifest in the values they advocated for and tried to instill in their communities, and the opportunities they worked hard to provide to their daughters and to other women in their society who were more marginalized. Here, feminism was not only a personal struggle, experiences were passed on from mother to daughter, from woman to woman. The importance of knowledge transfer between generations has been emphasized in prior work by feminists of color [2, 10].

Feminist HCI in Practice
Given the above discussion, we examine spaces for researchers to consider while practicing feminist HCI in Global South and marginalized contexts:

- Ahmed and numerous other feminists have demonstrated and argued that language is powerful [2, 3, 5]. What is the value that communities and individuals involved in our research derive from defining feminism and what value do we as researchers derive from giving abstractions a name?
- Conversely, what is lost when we use terminology and when might it not be desirable? Are there alternatives that can lead towards more inclusive ways of capturing instances of feminism when communicating across languages and cultures—as terminology can come with (western) baggage?
- In communities that we do not belong to and whose experiences we might not identify with, how can we demonstrate solidarity without trivializing existing efforts? Should we support action when being activist in a particular context has consequences, should we try to minimize consequences of action, or do nothing?
- How do we align the local with the global, and ensure that feminist HCI remains tied to local movements and everyday feminism?

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