

**PERFORMING GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP:  
WOMEN NGO WORKERS' NEGOTIATIONS OF  
COMPLICITIES IN THEIR WORK PRACTICES**

**Sara de Jong**

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# **Abstract**

The practices of NGOs and development agencies located in the global North have been criticised for displaying (post-)colonial continuities. Concurrently, western feminism has been critiqued for assuming universality in the experiences of white western women. Hence there is a need for reflection on operating within and resisting of these power structures.

Using interview data, this thesis investigates the reflections of women NGO workers located in the global North working on gendered issues to support women in and from the global South. The thesis situates the women's reflections in the context of the critiques arising from feminist theory, postcolonial theory, global civil society and critical development literature. In this theoretically informed empirical study it is analysed how the women NGO workers understand their own work practices and how they negotiate their relations with the women they seek to support. This work can be placed within a relatively new genre within critical development literature, which focuses on the subjectivities, experiences, and identity construction of NGO and development workers.

The aim of the thesis is first to contribute to our understanding of the complexities and contradictions in the positioning of women who engage in justice seeking practices related to gendered issues in a global context. Second, the intention of this work is to enhance the reflexive and analytic practices of NGOs/IGOs and their employees. The thesis sketches a multi-faceted picture of the women NGO workers that transcends the good versus bad binary; it argues that while the narratives of the women NGO workers underline their complicity in hegemonic discourses, the narratives also show their awareness of the contentiousness of their position and point to possible ruptures of and resistances to the dominant power structures.

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# Table of Contents

<b>1 - Introduction .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2 - Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>18</b>
Introduction .....	18
Postcoloniality .....	18
Interrogating Gender .....	23
Moving Global .....	28
Separate Spheres?.....	33
Conclusion .....	38
<b>3 - Methodological Approaches .....</b>	<b>40</b>
Introduction .....	40
Sampling .....	41
The Practice of Interviewing and Analysis .....	46
Intersectionality .....	52
Self and Other in Research.....	56
<b>4 - Travelling through Feminism, ‘Racing to Innocence’ .....</b>	<b>62</b>
Introduction .....	62
Understandings of Feminism .....	66
Sisterhood.....	89
Race to Innocence .....	103
Conclusion .....	124
<b>5 - Post-colonial Tendencies, Cultural Challenges .....</b>	<b>128</b>
Introduction .....	128
Colonialism .....	131
‘Race’/ Culture .....	140
Self versus Other .....	158
Challenges and Resistances.....	183
Conclusion .....	193
<b>6 - Performing Global Citizenship.....</b>	<b>198</b>
Introduction .....	198
Global Civil Society and Representation .....	200
Global Citizenship and Responsibility .....	221
Global Citizenship and Global Civil Society –The Public/Private Divide .....	239
Conclusion .....	260
<b>7 - The Relation to the Other: Negotiations Across Space .....</b>	<b>265</b>
Introduction .....	265
Myths, Stories and Field Work Experiences .....	271
Partner Organisations: Bridge and Replacement.....	286
Negotiating Distance .....	313
Conclusion .....	324
<b>8 - Conclusion .....</b>	<b>328</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>343</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Sample Email Interview Request.....</b>	<b>369</b>

<b>Appendix 2: Interview Consent Form.....</b>	<b>371</b>
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# 1 - Introduction

In 2008, women comprised only 18.4 percent of national parliamentarians worldwide, with the number of female heads of state or government totalling 17 (UNIFEM). Women are not systematically included in peace negotiations and only comprise 2.4 percent of the signatories of peace agreements (UNIFEM). As the Women's Refugee Commission points out, almost 80% of the displaced worldwide are women and children (Women's Refugee Commission 2010). At least one third of women worldwide have suffered some kind of physical abuse, such as coercion into sex, and violence is one of the main death causes for women between 15 and 44 (UNIFEM). Every eight minutes a woman dies after having had an unsafe illegal abortion (Women on Waves 2004). It is often maintained that women are disproportionately losing out in the globalisation game (Hennessy 2003, Mohanty 2003). At the dawn of the millennium 70% of the global poor were women, owning less than one-hundredth of the world's property, while the wage gap is still at 17% (Hennessy 2003:69, Mohanty 2003:234-235, UNIFEM). In the growing fields of home-working and the service economy mainly women have been victim to exploitation (Hennessy 2003:69). Women trafficking is still a major part of global trade (Hennessy 2003:69). In addition, it is expected that the current economic downturn particularly affects women adversely, as many women are working in vulnerable export-led factories and service industries (UNIFEM).

These are some of the issues that concern national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs and INGOs) in the fields of development, women's rights, health and migration. While few people doubt the need to address these inequalities and injustices, since the 1990s the work of those organisations has been highly debated (Shiva 1989, Escobar 1995, Sogge 1996, Stirrat and Henkel 1997, Gronemeyer 1999, Kothari 2005, Nederveen Pieterse 2006, Duffield 2007). Jan Nederveen Pieterse maintains that the role of NGOs "is now viewed with less naivety and more discrimination concerning the institutional, discursive, economic and political constraints under which they operate" (Nederveen Pieterse 2006:85). Initially, NGOs had been hailed by political scientists for their potential as players in new forms of global civil society compared to older 'conventional' political institutions (Morris-Suzuki 2000, see also Hahn and Holzscheiter 2005 on first generation of NGO literature).

Nowadays, NGOs are often contrasted with social movements, with the former characterised as more bureaucratic, more hierarchical, more dependent on external funding, and less radical or political than the latter (see Kothari 2005 and Chhotray 2008 for critique of technocratic approach to development). Whereas social movements instigate social mobilisation, "NGOs emphasise projects, not movements", and hence are said to be less threatening to the fundamental structures of neoliberalism (Petras 1997:14). For example, Tully speaks of "CONGOs" (co-opted NGOs) to refer to NGOs that operate in favour of hegemonic powers (Tully 2005:14, see also Spivak 2000:123). As

Petras (1997) describes, NGOs have been linked to neo-liberal developments like the decline of the welfare state, as NGOs have increasingly become service providers taking over the tasks of the welfare state (see also Alvarez 1998, Roy 2004, Dagnino 2008). Other critics have pointed out that NGOs, rather than being answerable to those they seek to represent and/or provide with services, are in fact only accountable to their donors (Roy 2004, Eyben 2006, Dagnino 2008).

Feminist NGOs and NGOs focussing on women's rights have been subjected to a similar critique. It is argued that women's organisations with a neo-liberal agenda have been more successful in attracting funding from the UN than more radical organisations, and that service-delivery type organisations have been more successful than conscious-raising groups as "women's practical needs are prioritised over their strategic needs" (Silliman 1999:29). While many have recognised the successes and achievements related to the women's movement's engagement with the UN<sup>1</sup>, for example, in terms of agenda

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<sup>1</sup> The women's movement has always had an international orientation -as famously expressed in Virginia Woolf's claim "as a woman I have no country" (quoted in: Yuval Davis 2006b:278-279)- though globalisation has changed the nature of this orientation (Naples 2002a, Ferree et al. 2004). First wave feminism already organised internationally around issues such as abolitionism and women's suffrage and engaged with the UN; for example through organisations such as WILPF, YWCA (Desai 2002, Moghadam 2005). In 1975 the UN declared International Women's Year and organised the first international women's world conference in Mexico City, which was followed by the declaration of the UN's International Women's Decade in which the Copenhagen conference (1980) and the Nairobi Conference (1985) were organised (Desai 2002, Moghadam 2005). The (preparation for the) Nairobi conference is generally regarded as an important break-through moment in the cooperation and communication between women from the global South and the global North and as the moment when "a collective sense of injustice" (Moghadam 2005:1) and a "reflexive solidarity" (Desai 2002:27) was formulated. Before that, this relation was fraught with tensions on both sides illustrated by a divergence of interests with the Southern women focussing on the consequences of colonisation, poverty and other non-gender specific issues, and the women from the North concentrating on body politics (Moghadam 2005, see also Tripp 2006:61). This tension was exacerbated by the dominance of the Northern women's movement. Other major milestones for the international women's movement are the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Common Action (1995) (see Moghadam 2005). The transnational



setting through slogans such as ‘women’s rights are human rights’<sup>2</sup> and the allocation of funds to women’s projects, they also argue that women’s NGOs have been co-opted by the agenda of the UN and that the powerful NGOs are mainly dominated by the highly educated elites from the global North and South<sup>3</sup> (Silliman 1999, Desai 2002, Moghadam 2005). Chandra Mohanty speaks of a “mainstreaming of the feminist movement” since feminism has been replaced by (women’s) rights discourses (Mohanty 2003:249). It has also been argued that there has been a depoliticisation of the women’s movement as a result of the “NGOisation” of the women’s movement (Lang 1997:115, see also Alvarez 1998, Silliman 1999, Menon 2004, de Alwis 2009). It is now common to distinguish the women’s movement from feminist NGOs as two separate projects fragmenting the women’s movement (Alvarez 1998, Squires 2007). While it is recognised that this ‘NGOisation’ has provided relative job security to former activists, it is also feared that this has led to a reduction of radical feminist political spaces, to an increasing dependence on the state, to the emergence of the ‘career feminist’ and to project-based work that negates long-term political goals (Alvarez 1998).

In the light of the above criticism, this thesis investigates the reflections of women NGO workers, who work with gendered issues, on their practices. The central question of this thesis captures issues raised in feminist theory, post-

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orientation of the women’s movement is often seen as exemplary for the labour movement (see Waterman 1993 and Moghadam 2005), due to its flexibility in organisation, its use of technology, and its presence in mainstream forums such as the UN and alternative ones, such as the World Social Forum.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Women’s rights are human rights’ and other similar frames are described as “signifying a process of mutual accommodation between radical feminist demands for transformation of gender relations and the dominant institutional discourses of individual rights, human capital and personal self-fulfilment” (Ferree and Pudrovska 2006:294).

<sup>3</sup> The use of the terms ‘global South’ and ‘global North’ in this thesis will be clarified in Chapter Three.

colonial theory, global citizenship theory and critical NGO literature: ‘How do women NGO workers located in the global North working on gendered issues understand their own work practices and negotiate their relations with the women in/from the global South whom they seek to support?’<sup>4</sup>. These theories have challenged the idea that those active in NGOs or in the feminist movement have a moral innocence by virtue of their good intentions. This research will not repeat those critiques, but rather try to understand the perspectives of women situated at their nexus. My focus on the reflections of the women NGO workers is inspired by an interest in the ethical and political positioning of people who are situated at a complex intersection of Western feminism and post-colonialism when following justice-seeking or ‘helping’ imperatives.

A range of structural issues and questions are implicated in and subsumed under this larger research question. For example, the question requires exploration of how the position of women worldwide is framed in the first place and how the women that are supported are imagined and constructed. Moreover, the question implies an investigation of who is in the position to support or speak on behalf of these women, and what they gain from their work. More generally, it requires an analysis of the operation of power in helping relations. The question also needs to be placed in relation to historical

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<sup>4</sup> I have chosen to use the generic term ‘women they support’ rather than female *beneficiaries*, *target group* or *clients* as it serves as an umbrella term for those more specific designations, which are all used differently by the interviewees. Moreover, “women they support” (also rather than “help”) is intended to be a neutral term, since the notions of beneficiaries, target group, or clients have been all subject to debate and have particular histories. As Eyben (2007b:34) for example explains, while 30 years ago the ‘target population’ was an innovative term from development literature, now it “has become a relatively unfashionable phrase because a generation of practitioners (...) objected to the term, pointing out that ‘targets’ were something you shot at”.

continuities and discontinuities for example with regard to colonialism and Western feminism. Rather than seeking one definitive answer to the central research question, I want to create a dialogue between the reflections of the individual NGO workers and the critical issues associated with their work by drawing on the interview material of 20 interviews with women NGO workers.

Earlier development critiques have mainly been concerned with the macro-structures and the organisational dimension of NGOs and development organisations (Shiva 1989, Escobar 1995, Sogge 1996, Petras 1997, Stirrat and Henkel 1997, Gronemeyer 1999, Kothari 2005, Nederveen Pieterse 2006, Chambers 2006, Eade 2007). For example, Mokbul Ahmad argues that most of the critical development literature focuses merely on the activities and tasks of NGOs, while the “opinions of fieldworkers [are] an underused resource rarely consulted by (...) academics” (Ahmad 2002:177). Maria Eriksson Baaz has argued that the discussions about development have been strikingly silent about the influence of the identity of aid and development workers on aid practice (Baaz 2005). And Dorothea Hilhorst (2003), in her ethnographic study of a Philippine NGO, maintains that if researchers want to understand NGOs, they should focus more on how the agents of NGOs negotiate the local, national and global complexities that influence the values and practices of NGOs. In recent years, an increasing number of books have been published which are written by ‘insiders’ of the development and aid industry who look back on their own practices in the light of the critique or who have used their own experiences as a basis for further critical research (see e.g. Vaux 2001, Goudge 2003, Eyben 2006, Heron 2007). These publications have introduced

a language of reflection and a focus on the personal in critical development studies. In addition, in recent years the field of critical development studies has been enriched by the work of researchers who spent a considerable time researching or working within the organisation (Hilhorst 2003, Hopgood 2006, Kapoor 2008). However, most of these ‘critiques from within’ tend to focus on larger NGOs and on those active in the global South. There seems comparatively little on national NGOs that work in the global North with people from the global South or on international organisations with headquarters in the North that are small-scale and less well-known.

This study should be read as part of this newer set of studies, as it uses individual experiences as material to explore wider structural issues of inequality, power, altruism, and post-colonialism. It thus works with the assumption that these micro processes can tell us something meaningful about developments at the macro level. In that sense this thesis also follows Trinh Minh-ha when she says, “every single tiny action we carry out reflects and affects our politics” (Minh-ha 1996:13). It also suggests that the research participants’ experiences and reflections can only be understood in interaction with (in resistance to and as co-opted by) these structures. As Chandra Mohanty formulates it:

“This issue of subjectivity represents a realisation of the fact that who we are, how we act, what we think, and what stories we tell becomes more intelligible within an epistemological framework that begins by recognising hegemonic histories” (Mohanty 2003:195).

Hence, this thesis will elaborate on hegemonic histories of white middle-class Western feminism, post-colonialism and dominant understandings of representation and responsibility and the critiques that have emerged in order to then trace the women's position in and responses to these histories.

Theoretical critiques rather than personal experiences have been used as the starting point of this research. Earlier I pointed to some questions raised in critical development research. Critical NGO studies/critical development studies have borrowed from feminist, post-colonial and global citizenship/civil society theory to analyse, reform and critique the practices of NGOs. These bodies of thought problematised the position of the women working for NGOs and thus formed the main point of departure for this research. In the next chapter, I will situate this research project and the central research question in the context of the debates in post-colonial theory, feminist theory and global civil society/global citizenship theory.

What has become clear from the outline of critical NGO literature above is that “the path of aid is laid with mines” (Bulbeck 1998:187). On the one hand, helping can be read as a continuation of imperialist practices while on the other hand, passivity or even paralysis in the face of this critique is to ignore the reality of the unequal relations between women globally (Bulbeck 1998:187, see also Varadharajan 1995:xvi). Hence, as there is no outside of the power structure, one needs to act critically and reflexively from within. Sara Ahmed (2000b:180) speaks of an “in-it-ness” as the starting point for politics. Passivity and paralysis are not viable options –as Spivak states: “I am not asking metropolitan feminism to stop. I am asking it to take more trouble”

(Spivak 2000:28:ftn.2) – and, since paralysis implies inaction, this was apparently not the default position of the NGO workers *in action*, currently doing work for organisations that seek to improve the lives of women in and from the South. Hence one of the further purposes of this research is to untangle and analyse some of the tensions, dilemmas and complexities for the women NGO workers and to explore the ways in which the women NGO workers negotiate potential complicities in their work.

The notion of reflexivity as used in feminist theory (Harding 1991, Haraway 1991) and the notion of constructive complicity as introduced in post-colonial theory (Spivak 1999) are both useful responses to the need to find ways to operate productively and responsibly within unequal power structures. However, as accounts of reflexivity and of constructive complicity are often highly theoretical or merely framed as questions (Ahmed 2000b:171) or as imperatives without much practical guidance (Kapoor 2008:73), I became interested in potential examples of practised embodiment of constructive complicity and reflexivity. Or to put it differently, how this more abstract philosophical concept of ‘constructive complicity’ and the theoretical notion of reflexivity plays out in the practice of women’s work on gendered issues for NGOs.

This thesis is structured according to four theoretical critiques: feminist theories (Chapter Four), post-colonial theories (Chapter Five), global citizenship/civil society theories (Chapter Six) and finally, critical development theories (Chapter Seven). The first motivation for this structure

is to address the respective themes suggested by those critiques in a systematic manner. The second reason for this structure is that through reading the narratives of the women NGO workers through four different theoretical lenses, a nuanced and multi-faceted picture of the women NGO workers can be sketched which takes account of their multiple positionalities.

Chapter Two discusses the analytical framework of this research. While the theories mentioned above have served to *problematise* the position of the women working for NGOs as the point of departure for this research, they also contribute to an *understanding* of the complex positioning of these women. In Chapter Three, I will discuss the methodological implications of the research focus and outline my empirical methods.

The fourth chapter situates the women NGO workers and their organisations in relation to feminism. As Sherene Razack writes, “tracing complicity (...) begins with a mapping of relations among women. We can then critically examine those constructs that homogenise our differences or package them as innate, decontextualised, and ahistorical” (Razack 2001:21). Thus subsequently, the fourth chapter will explore the women’s understanding of sisterhood and (the critiques of) the assumed universality of women’s experiences, specifically referring to the shifting understanding from sisterhood to solidarity. Through the concepts of ‘reflexivity’ and intersectionality it will be discussed how some of the narratives challenge the erasure of privilege caused by simplistic notions of sisterhood.

Chapter Five first looks at some direct references in the interview narratives to colonial times, both in relation to the NGO workers' own position and in relation to their organisation. It then builds on Razack's argument to unpack the participants' assumptions about cultural difference and the way 'culture' is used as a proxy for 'race'. In this context, the interviewees' understanding of racism will be explored and alternative understandings of racism will be proposed. The final section of the chapter will focus on 'ruptures' and look at how colonial and racial discourses can be challenged using Spivak's notions of 'constructive complicity' (Spivak 1999) and 'privilege as a loss' (Spivak 1990).

The sixth chapter highlights and analyses issues of representation, the public/private divide and (global) responsibility within the theoretical framework of global civil society/global citizenship. I explore critiques of representation in the context of the absence of global democratic procedures and relate these to the women's narratives about their attempts to facilitate representation. In addition, related issues of power are discussed and the way in which the representative role can reinforce power differences. In the second section I explore global citizenship and the notions of responsibility in relation to alterity. The third section discusses the public/private divide as the central defining feature of the concepts of citizenship and civil society with its associated ambiguities. I explore how the women NGO workers position themselves at the private/public dichotomy.



Chapter Seven discusses how the women NGO workers negotiate their relation with the beneficiaries across spatial distance. In these cases, the women working for the NGOs are far removed from those who are eventually supposed to benefit from the lobbying, advocacy and project work of the NGOs. In relation to this bridging of the geographical distance, the chapter first critically engages with the function of fieldwork and the creation of stories about the beneficiaries. I then explore the relationships with partner organisations in the global South as an essential element in understanding how the participants bridged the distance between themselves and the final target group of their projects, while paying attention to critical accounts of the power differences in such relationships.

## **2 - Theoretical Framework**

### **Introduction**

Feminist theory, post-colonial theory, global civil society/global citizenship theory and critical development theory have all problematised the specific position of women NGO workers and therefore prompted my research question. At the same time, these theories, and those produced at the interface of those fields (like post-colonial feminism, or critical development theory with a feminist or post-colonial approach), are instrumental for establishing an *understanding* of the complex positioning of these women and therefore serve as the theoretical framework of this thesis. Hence, this chapter will refer to these bodies of thought and discuss them in a more detailed and focussed manner in order to begin outlining how the research problems and questions will be addressed. It first needs to be observed however, that the different bodies of thought engage on different levels with the position of women NGO workers. While feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and global civil society/global citizenship theory provide a more structural critique of key issues such as global relations of responsibility and power inequalities, critical development theory, as an emerging field informed by the former three traditions, is more applied and offers insights from practitioners themselves.

### **Postcoloniality**

One of the main claims of post-colonial theory is that there are certain continuities between the colonial era and the current 'post-colonial' time. One

of the most poignant examples of post-colonial continuities is the practice of development, both in its continuation of imperialist intervention and in its ‘civilising mission’ (Stoler and Cooper 1997, Spivak 1999). Ilan Kapoor identifies that discourses of development display a “relative amnesia about (neo) colonialism” (Kapoor 2008:xv), while Gayatri Spivak states in the context of the work of the UN and powerful NGOs on women’s issues, that “one group of women of the Northern hemisphere (...) are helping to exploit another, quite as the old colonial subject used to do the dirty work of the colonisers” (Spivak 2000:123). Critical development theories inspired by post-colonial theory have criticised the notions of development and underdevelopment at stake in the practices and policies of such organisations. Modernisation theory, which borrows from the ‘civilising mission’ of colonialism, has had and still has a major impact on development discourse. It functions according to the assumption that for nations to be developed they have to follow and adopt the Western model with industrialisation as the final goal (Kapoor 2008, McEwan 2009). Anderson and Rieff (2004) suggest that the work of NGOs should be understood as modern missionary work: an attempt to spread a series of values (notably the universal declaration of human rights). They maintain that NGOs’ reluctance to accept that alternative label of ‘missionary’ stems from their refusal to give up the moral hegemony they have achieved under the banner of ‘global civil society’ (Anderson and Rieff 2004). Hence, one of the starting points of this research, as suggested by post-colonial theory, is to look at NGO practices through a post-colonial lens to uncover how post-colonial continuities play out.

Academic debate has concerned itself with whether post-colonial critique as a critical interrogation of Western dominance (both in the material sense, as imperialism and in the discursive sense, as systems of knowledge), can only strictly be applied to relations between colonisers and ex-colonies or whether it merits wider application (Frankenberg and Mani 1993). Moore-Gilbert (1997) draws a comparison between the relevance of the application of feminist critiques outside strictly ‘feminist’ texts and post-colonial critiques. He points to the danger of a “beauty parade” as a competition for the prize of ‘the most colonised’ (Moore-Gilbert 1997:11). He concludes that it is legitimate to apply post-colonial theory to any range of different contexts. In this thesis I follow his understanding of post-colonial criticism when he argues:

“post-colonial criticism can still be seen as a more or less distinct set of reading practices, if it is understood as preoccupied principally with analysis of cultural forms which mediate, challenge or reflect upon the relation of domination and subordination –economic, cultural, political –between (and often within) nations, races or cultures, which characteristically have their roots in the history of modern European colonialism and imperialism and which, equally characteristically, continue to be apparent in the present day of neo-colonialism” (Moore-Gilbert 1997:11).

Following a range of other studies on Eastern Europe and the Balkans that have successfully applied post-colonial theory (Bakic-Hayden et al. 1992, Buchowski 2006), I also deploy post-colonial theories about otherness in relation to Eastern Europe. Hence rather than interpreting post-colonial theory

as narrowly applying to colonised nations, it is broadly applied here (see Myers 2006). Many scholars who seek to situate post-colonial theory emphasise that the ‘post-’ in post-colonial should not be read as a simple ‘after’ that closes off the current epoch from the colonial era (McLeod 2000, Ahmed 2000a, Ahmed 2000b). Rather, ‘post-colonial’ “marks a *decisive, though not definitive* shift that stages contemporary encounters” (Frankenberg and Mani 1993:301 emphasis added). As Sara Ahmed states, post-colonialism is about “the complexity of the relationship between the past and the present, between the histories of European colonisation and contemporary forms of globalisation” (Ahmed 2000b:11); this relationship is complex as it wavers between the one extreme notion that the present is a complete break away from the past and the other extreme idea that the present is merely a continuation of the past (Ahmed 2000b). Examples of how colonial continuities play out in a post-colonial era can be found in the notion of partnership and the culturalisation of race.

Postcolonial theory and critical development theory have criticised the attractive notion of ‘partnership’ between Northern and Southern NGOs; while it implies equality and a break with colonial relations, in reality it masks the continuing unequal power relationship (Elliott 1987, Stirrat and Henkel 1997, Baaz 2005, Eade 2007). While partnership denotes a relation between equals, the fact that Northern NGOs often function as donors for Southern NGOs corrupts that relation. Northern NGOs are often in the power position to choose their Southern NGO partners, whereas Southern NGOs have to compete with one another to be chosen.

Differences between nations, or between ‘the West and the rest’ were in colonial times explained with reference to race; however, this is rare in contemporary development discourse. As Kothari (2006a) points out, nowadays ‘culture’ has substituted ‘race’ without replacing the attached connotations. Culture is quoted as the reason for radical difference and can either lead to a cultural relativist approach of non-intervention or a universalist approach in which Western values are promoted as universal (Kapoor 2008). Particularly in relation to women’s rights, culture is often named as the source of oppression, with media representations of dowry deaths, or female genital mutilation reinforcing this picture (Narayan 1997). Post-colonial theory however has also questioned the simplistic binary of (Western) Self versus the Other and calls for more nuanced perspectives on Self-Other relationships (Minh-ha 1991, Bhabha 2005). Stereotypes of the other do not reflect a stabilised fixed image of otherness; rather stereotypes in their constant repetitiveness are used to attempt to fix the other, who escapes easy classification (Bhabha 2005). In addition, the stereotypes are used to present an image of the Self in juxtaposition to the image of the Other.

Critical development theorists who use post-colonial theory to critique development practices have also attempted to use it constructively, utilising post-colonial concepts and ideas for productive suggestions to improve aid practices. McEwan (2009:202-203) and Kapoor (2008:55-56) discuss Spivak’s notions of “unlearning one’s privilege as a loss” and “learning to learn from below” as ways to engage differently with knowledge production in

development. This would require making oneself conscious of one's positionality and our privileges and realising that these privileges can be obstacles in learning to know about the Other. It would mean learning to create an epistemological space to learn from the Other, be open to the Other, and to enable her to be the subject rather than the object of development (Kapoor 2008).

### **Interrogating Gender**

While Western feminist theories have been tremendously important in identifying gendered power relations, they have been criticised for their relative blindness towards other types of oppression mediated through 'race', class or sexuality (Lorde 1984, hooks 1981, 1986, Spelman 1990, Carby 1992, Crenshaw 2000, Lazreg 2000). The focus on sex and gender in feminist analysis happened at the cost of a more complex analysis in which white Western middle class women were not only victims of oppression but also complicit in the domination of others. As Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Meg Coulson state, "the desire for universal sisterhood obscured the white, middle class reference point at the centre of Western feminism" (Bhavnani and Coulson 2003:74).

Sojourner Truth's speech in 1851 at the Women's Rights Convention in Ohio was an early challenge to the assumption of the white Western middle-class woman as the norm within feminism by pointing to how her identity as an

enslaved black woman had positioned her outside this norm.<sup>5</sup> Truth's critique has been elaborated by black and post-colonial feminists (Lorde 1984, hooks 1981, 1986, Carby 1992, Lazreg 2000). They specifically problematise the notion of a universal sisterhood on the basis of the assumption of a shared oppression prevalent in Western feminism, by stressing that women have different experiences and priorities and that all women are positioned differently, with some facing multiple forms of oppression, sometimes at the hands of other women. Hence, it was at best naïve and at worst harmful to assume that women could automatically be allies of each other; rather, women's solidarity should be based on more than just shared womanhood and hence needs hard work and commitment (see hooks 1981:157, Spivak 1990:137, Caraway 1992:201).

Through the engagement of feminism with development theory, development organisations moved from a 'Women in Development' (WID) to a 'Women and Development' (WAD) and finally, to a 'Gender and Development' (GAD) approach (Desai 2002, Bhavnani and Coulson 2003, Smillie 2000:81-97).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sojourner Truth famously stated: "But what is all this talking about? That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps me any best place. And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed [sic], I have planted and I have gathered into barns. And no man could head me. And ain't I a woman? I could work as much, and eat as much as a man –when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne children and see most of them sold into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman?" (Sojourner Truth quoted in: Brah and Phoenix 2004:77, as recounted in 1863 by Frances Gage).

<sup>6</sup> Bhavnani and Coulson describe WID as an approach which merely added women without challenging the definition of development, the WAD approach as "suggest[ing] that women and development must be seen synonymously, each drawn to recast the other" and GAD as an intervention which understands gender (rather than women) to be a more powerful tool in capturing power relations between men and women in the context of development (Bhavnani and Coulson 2003:83). While the three labels are meant to reflect different historical periods, ways of conceptualising sex and gender and related politics, White (2003) argues that in practice it is difficult to neatly distinguish the three from one another as they are often



Though each subsequent policy change was intended as an improvement of the previous policy, many now argue that the GAD approach has depoliticised the original feminist intentions (Piálek 2008). Gender mainstreaming<sup>7</sup>, a strategy associated with GAD (Squires 2007:44) was originally hailed as a radical and all-encompassing approach. Increasingly, however, it is argued that gender mainstreaming in development has become a technocratic rather than a feminist approach (Piálek 2008:279, see also Verloo 2001:13, Squires 2007:137). The incorporation of women into development projects was first promoted on the basis of instrumentalist efficiency, the belief that if women are excluded, a “valuable resource was being wasted” (Crewe and Harrison 1998:46, Harcourt 2009). Recently more focus has been placed on the ‘empowerment’ of women and other marginalised groups. However, many have argued that ‘empowerment’ and its siblings, ‘participation’, ‘capacity building’, and ‘indigenous knowledges’, while originating from a more critical agenda that seeks to challenge the hierarchies between the organisations and the beneficiaries, often remain empty concepts (Petrás 1997, Crewe and Harrison 1998, Eade 2007).

When gender started to be recognised as an important dimension in development work, women started to be incorporated into the NGO world, albeit in very different positions; some as the professionals working for NGOs on gender projects, some as the proposed beneficiaries of projects (White

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combined or say more about organisational politics than anything substantial in relation to policies.

<sup>7</sup> The United Nation’s Conference on Women (Beijing 1995) marked the start of the prominence of the concept of gender mainstreaming (Rees 2002). A short definition is formulated by Rees: “Mainstreaming is the systematic integration of gender equality into all systems and structures, policies, programmes, processes and projects, into ways of seeing and doing, into cultures and their organisations” (Rees 2002:1).

2003). These women shared experiences of gender oppression in their own countries, while at the same time, different race and class positions negated this gender unity. As Sarah White states:

“The refraction of gender through other aspects of social identity is tangible (...) every time a ‘professional’ receives a pay slip giving her in a month what a ‘village woman’ would see as more than a fortune; (...) every time she takes a mouthful, cooked by a low-paid catering worker at an international conference dedicated to the advancement of the ‘poorest of the poor’” (White 2003:9-10).

Feminist theories can offer tools for understanding this positioning in a number of ways. Feminists have attempted to analyse and understand the way gender is produced, the way gender shapes people’s experiences, and the way gender is linked to power structures of domination and oppression. Hence, feminist theories can contribute to an understanding of how the women who worked for NGOs are positioned as women and how their experiences are shaped by gender structures. It can also help to understand how the women that are supported are portrayed. As Mohanty has pointed out, Western feminists have created an image of “the third world woman” as universally oppressed, backward, without agency and compare themselves favourably with that image (Mohanty 1984:335).

Feminist critiques of the NGO discourse on trafficking stand at the interface of feminism, post-colonialism and critical NGO theories and hence can bring out the interplay between universalised assumptions of feminism and post-colonial

tendencies. According to Doezema (2001), for example, the trafficked Third World woman is not entrusted with her own political voice and is presented as 'backward', in need of rescue by her Western sisters. Doezema's analysis is a powerful example of how colonial images can be specifically projected on women. It also shows how a critical feminist perspective combined with a post-colonial approach can provide insight into aid relations between women in the global North and women from the global South. Adding to the critiques targeting Western feminism for assuming that the experiences of white Western women could be taken as the norm of women's experiences, some theorists have sought to understand this tendency, exploring *why* white Western middle-class women would display blindness to other women's experiences. Fellows and Razack (1998) coined the term 'race to innocence' for white women's refusal to acknowledge complicity with other oppressions and their belief that gender oppression is of more significance than other forms of oppression. Other theorists, who rejected the notion of a global or universal sisterhood, have attempted to rethink women's solidarity across borders (see Lorde 1984, Caraway 1992, Mohanty 2003).

This critique of feminist theory and practice when combined with post-colonial theory, problematises the relation between women located in the global North as 'aid givers' and women in/from the global South as 'recipients'. It stresses how this relationship is mediated through power relations. I was interested to see whether processes of self-reflection (prompted by the critique against Western feminism) have contributed to a rethinking of relations between women across the globe. In addition, since my

participants worked across the North/South axis, I wanted to explore whether a notion of global sisterhood was rejected, strengthened, reformed, or unquestioningly embraced.

### **Moving Global**

The last decades have seen a mushrooming of international organisations, and many authors writing on global civil society refer to the astonishing growth in the number of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and their increasing interconnectedness and embeddedness in institutions of global governance like the UN or the World Bank (see Anheier et al. 2001, Taylor 2002, Desforges 2004, Baker and Chandler 2005, Duffield 2007) or even the conflation of civil society with NGOs (Dagnino 2008). The NGO and voluntary sector commonly has strong associations with women. Duffield, for example, describes the move from colonialism to the aid industry as the basis for a “move away from the masculinity of colonialism to the more feminine subjectivity of aid” (Duffield 2007:61). Mindry (2001) points to the continuities between the Victorian colonial discourse of feminine virtue and current discourses of feminine virtue and benevolence in relations between women NGOs from the North and women from the South. Heron (2007) describes how bourgeois white women attempted to find a place in the public sphere in the Empire through philanthropy and missionary work. In addition, there is a legacy of voluntary work for middle- and upper-class women in the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century when it was socially unacceptable for women to perform paid work. As Mahood writes about E. Jebb, the founder of ‘Save the Children’, “like many women of similar

background, Jebb understood the importance of finding *purposeful* work, without needing to derive an income from it” (Mahood 2008:5 italics added). For a long time, women have been associated with peace movements (and femininity with peace), with more recent examples including women’s involvement in the post-war NGO sector in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the dominant donor (essentialist) representations of these women as a-political and non-nationalist peace-makers, mothers, and nurturers (York 1998, Helms 2003, Eyben 2007a, Pupavac 2008).

In relation to the application of the notion of global citizenship to feminist practices, Hutchings notes that due to the universalistic language of global citizenship and its generic conception of the human individual, it initially seems illogical to associate international feminism with global citizenship (Hutchings 2002). However, she rejects her initial doubts and concludes that feminists are actually a good example of global citizens as they are dedicated to transforming the current circumstances women are facing in order to achieve a more just situation in the future (Hutchings 2002:53, see also Urry 2003). Mohanty uses the figure of the “citizen-consumer” to illustrate the relation between local and global processes of colonisation and exploitation, which she understands to be a crucial element of any comparative feminist project (Mohanty 1997:5)

While both citizenship and civil society theory started with a predominantly national focus, they have, in the last two decades, become increasingly internationally oriented (Falk 1994, Amoore and Langley 2004, Anheier et al. 2004). The attempts to translate nationally focussed citizenship and civil

society theory to the global level has not been without pitfalls. Since both civil society and citizenship theory have been conceptualised in relation to the state, one of the main barriers to an unproblematic translation to theories at the global level is the absence of a global state. Lacking a global state, the elements that shape citizenship and civil society, like democratic voting procedures, constitutional rights and duties, are similarly absent. In addition, moving from a national focus to a global one challenged the assumption of an inside and an outside to the territory. Hence, theorists in this field have been faced with both the inevitability of considering global dimensions in their theory and the fact that the theories cannot unproblematically be transferred to the global level. This has prompted a few key issues that served as a point of departure for defining the problem of this research. First, the question is whether everyone belongs to the 'global citizenry' or whether global citizenship is a privilege reserved only to a few. Second, one can wonder how citizens in a global world are related in terms of the obligations and responsibilities they have towards one another. Third, it remains a question whether in the absence of institutionalised democratic procedures there can be any form of global representation. These questions about representation and responsibility can be accessed through asking how women working for NGOs conceptualised their relations with the women they supported.

With NGOs nowadays being highly dependent on external funding, often directly or indirectly from governments, it is debatable in how far NGOs are truly non-governmental (Petras 1997, Van Rooy and Robinson 1998:201, Morris-Suzuki 2000, Nederveen Pieterse 2006). The relation between the state

and civil society has in fact always been contested. Theories in the tradition of *civilis societas* describe the state as serving the community's interest (the state as an instrument of civil society) (Van Rooy 1998). In this Roman tradition of thinking (Aquinas, Locke) civil and political society were the same (Van Rooy 1998). Anheier et al. (2001) recognise three trends in the evolution of the concept of civil society. In the first one, associated with the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, civil society is contrasted to the state of nature; civil versus barbaric people. The words 'state', 'civil society' and 'political society' were used interchangeably (Van Rooy 1998). Anheier et al. (2001) introduce Hegel and Tocqueville as examples of the second trend in which for the first time civil society was juxtaposed with the state, and in which civil society was envisaged as a check on state power. The third trend is represented by Gramsci's understanding of civil society as encompassing cultural institutions like the church, which places civil society between the state and the market.<sup>8</sup>

The term civil society became *en vogue* again with the Latin American revolutions and the breakdown of the Soviet regime (Van Rooy 1998, Anheier et al. 2001). In Western society the term civil society was taken up again as an attempt to revitalise democracy and address the apathetic electorate (Van Rooy 1998, Anheier et al. 2001). Corry (2006) states that the first time that the term 'global civil society' was used in a major newspaper was in 1991 by Shevardnadze, the former Soviet foreign minister, Munck (2002:350) traces the birth of the "myth" (!) of global civil society to the Earth Summit in 1992

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<sup>8</sup> However, Gramsci's notion of civil society cannot easily be categorised as his writing leaves some ambiguity concerning its role. On the one hand it is through the institutions of civil society that the ruling power ensures its hegemony, on the other hand civil society can provide a space for revolting against the hegemonic powers (Anheier et al. 2001, Munck 2006).

in Rio de Janeiro as that generated unrivalled media attention. Others relate it to Seattle and the revolutions in Eastern Europe and the uprising of the Zapatistas in Mexico (Anheier et al. 2001, Corry 2006). While most at least seem to agree that some significant development took place in the early 1990s, there is also the accusation of ‘presentism’, the exaggerated focus on global civil society as a new phenomenon and the lack of recognition of continuity with the past (Munck 2002). On the other extreme of this ‘presentism’, some ask whether global civil society and the global citizen exist at all (Urry 1999, Bowden 2003, Anderson and Rieff 2004). Rather than concentrating on the question whether global civil society exists or not, it is more important to understand the prominence of the concept ‘global civil society’ in terms of its role “in ordering global social relations in certain terms” (Corry 2006:305).

While older (and current) notions of world citizenship and the relation to the universe can be traced back to the Stoics (see Dower 2002, Hutchings 2004) and the ideals of cooperation and tolerance for diversity to cosmopolitanism (e.g. Kant or more recently, Nussbaum) (see Carter 2001, Bowden 2003), the addition of the adjective ‘global’ to civil society and citizenship is certainly linked to the (literature about the) phenomenon of globalisation. As John Urry states, “globalisation appears to be changing what it is to be a citizen” (Urry 1999:312). Globalisation here refers to such diverse issues as the establishment of an international declaration of human rights (Linklater in: Armstrong 2006), the technological developments leading to global communication and media (Urry 1999, Anheier et al. 2001), global risks and shared environmental problems like pollution that crosses borders (Heins



2001), which make us part of a single “community of fate” (Held and McGrew in: Armstrong 2006:349), economic global integration and the flow of goods and people (Falk 1994).

Following Corry (2006), I interpret the word ‘global’ of global citizen in a social or psychological rather than a physical sense, so being global *in scope* rather than in actual physical contact with people from all over the globe or literally crossing national borders (for this physical sense, the word ‘international’ might be more apt (see Scholte in: Corry 2006)). In this way “a civil society organisation may be ‘global’ simply by the way it *conceives* of its constituency [and] the interests it chooses to advance” (Corry 2006:319 emphasis added).

### **Separate Spheres?**

Application of the lens of public and private spheres complicates the understanding civil society further (see Benn and Gauss 1983). While a liberal understanding would situate civil society in the private sphere and the state in the public sphere, a republican understanding would situate civil society in the public sphere as the meeting place for deliberation between citizens (Weintraub 1997, Squires 2004). In this liberal view, politics is exercised by the administrative state; the public sphere is hence the realm of the public interest and the private sphere, civil society (the market) is associated with private interests (Weintraub 1997). This is reliant on the classical distinction between the polity and civic society (Benn and Gauss 1983). However, a republican view understands civil society as the public realm of political

community and debate, in which the people voice their interests as citizens in contrast to the sphere of both the state and the market (Benn and Gauss 1983). Inevitably, the interpretation of politics shifts with the republican understanding, namely from the authority of the state in the liberal understanding to political debate, discussion and decision-making. An example of this approach can be found when the public sphere is defined as the “domain of civil society”, which “provides space for the day-to-day workings of a deep democracy” (Plummer 2003:68).

This traditional republican understanding of the public nature of citizenship has been challenged by more recent, alternative interpretations, such as ‘intimate citizenship’ (Plummer 2003). Intimate citizenship, as coined by Plummer (2003), indicates the interplay between issues deemed private (e.g. sexuality, gender, family life) and the public (e.g. legal or media) discourse. He argues that the separation between the public and the private sphere is in some ways untenable in our current societies. The public and political sphere for example, “are actually constituted through a network of passionate human beings engaging with each other, often in highly personalised ways” (Plummer 2003:70).

This assertion is highly significant in the understanding of the experiences of the women NGO workers and their reflections on their work. Their experiences can be better understood as the actions, thoughts and reflections of passionate human beings than as disembodied, neutral citizens. Tully’s discussion of what he calls ‘modern’ and ‘diverse’ citizenship (two parallel

and sometimes conflicting forms of citizenship practice), offers another way to rethink the relation between the public and the private (Tully 2005). 'Modern citizenship', as he calls it, is the dominant form of citizenship in the West, associated with laws and constitutions while 'diverse citizenship' is based on democratic participatory elements and has been exercised on the margins by those who were denied modern citizenship (Tully 2005). He thus associates diverse citizenship with critical approaches to governance and oppression (Tully 2005:3). As diverse citizenship was exercised in the private sphere, since this group was initially denied access to the public sphere and as it was tied to their identities, this form of citizenship includes the private and the personal. Feminism is one example of an articulation of diverse citizenship.

Feminist theory appears to be more appropriate than traditional citizenship theory for an analysis of the complex convergence of the public and the private, the personal and the political. The public/private divide has been central to feminist thought. It has been argued that feminist challenges to the conventional way the boundaries between the public and the private have been drawn are one of the most important contributions of feminist thought to political theory (Elshtain 1981, Pateman 1983).<sup>9</sup> Pateman's work uncovered the successful integration of patriarchy in liberalism, which functions through the separation of the private and public sphere. She states that while in the first

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note however, as Crenshaw pointed out, that the interest in the separation between the private and public sphere as an "ideological justification for women's subordination" was central to Western feminism, which was constructed around the experiences of white women, and "offers little insight into the domination of *Black* women" (Crenshaw 2000:221). In addition, McEwan (2001) states that critiques from the global South against Western feminism have emphasised that the private realm is not merely a site of oppression, but a political space as well. McEwan quotes the activities of the Argentinean Mothers of the Disappeared and some Islamist feminists as instances where women "have sought an empowering 'private' function" in contrast to Western feminist conceptualisations of motherhood and home as oppressive elements (McEwan 2001:98).

instance liberal and patriarchal doctrines might seem opposed, since liberalism emphasises individualism and egalitarianism and patriarchalism advocates a natural hierarchy, the doctrines are reconciled through excluding women from citizenship and hence discounting them as free and equal beings (Pateman 1983). The division between the public and private sphere depends on an even more complex (sub-)division. When the state is viewed as public and civil society as private, civil society is subdivided again in a public (social, political) sphere and a private sphere of personal life (Pateman 1983, Squires 2004). As Squires puts it, “civil society is cast as private when opposed to the state and public when opposed to the personal” (Squires 2004:25). A third way to conceptualise the private is as the domestic sphere. Hence ‘private’ can denote civil society, the personal sphere or the domestic sphere (Squires 2004). Women’s association with the domestic sphere and their initial exclusion from the public sphere of the state, delegated them in multiple ways to the private sphere (Weintraub 1997, Squires 2004). The private sphere as the domestic sphere has often been imbued with a morality associated with love, relations, emotions, and altruism. In contrast, the public sphere (both in terms of the state and civil society) has been associated with an ethics of rationality, instrumentality, accountability and transparency (Benn and Gauss 1983).

The questioning of the binary public/private cannot be understood in isolation from debates over competing understandings of the ‘political’. This situates the practices of women who work for NGOs on women/gender issues in a complex relation to the public/private divide which merits further exploration.

One of the main struggles of feminism has been to make public and political the situations and experiences in the domestic sphere. Jean Elshtain, for example, claims that all different strands of feminism “share at least one overriding imperative: they would redefine the boundaries of the public and the private, *the personal and the political*” (Elshtain 1981:202 emphasis added). The famous radical feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’, coined in 1968 by civil rights and feminist activist Carol Hanish (Lee 2007:1), pointed to the fact that issues that were traditionally understood as ‘personal’, taking place in the private sphere, e.g. domestic abuse, were tightly connected to a public sphere in which women were devalued. The slogan encouraged a politicisation of these issues. Through interrogating the distinction between the private and public sphere feminist theory has redefined the notion of the political in liberal democracy (Lee 2007). Judith Squires even states that the feminist challenge to the dichotomy if taken to its extreme “would eliminate the boundaries of the political altogether” (Squires 2004:23). If politics is understood as the circulation of power, politics is not constrained to one sphere but is ubiquitous (Squires 2004).

Prokhovik (1998) argues for a citizenship that is more broadly understood than solely in terms of its political or socio-economic dimension, and stresses the moral dimension of citizenship. While in this claim her conception of the political still seems to rely on a narrow understanding of the political, her proposal for citizenship similarly challenges the public/private divide. She states that the ‘flourishing’ of citizenship is dependent on the “interconnexion between the public and the private”; the experience of caring for children for

example can and should inform the performance in the public sphere (Prokhovnik 1998:97).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has identified a number of problems prompted by feminist theory, post-colonial theory, global civil society/global citizenship theory and critical development theory relating to the specific position of women NGO workers. In addition, this chapter has outlined the main theoretical perspectives, which will underlie the analysis of the empirical data in this thesis. It has also clarified the ways in which the theories will be applied in the thesis. I have described the critical engagement of post-colonial theory with development practices. Post-colonial critique is here understood as meriting wider application beyond the ex-coloniser and colonised countries as it can trace the complex interplay of continuities and discontinuities between European colonisation and current globalisation. Post-colonial and Black feminism have problematised the position of white, middle-class women and their relation with women from the global South. In addition, it has contributed to an understanding of the power structures underlying this relationship and has offered suggestions for alternative ways of positioning and relating. Feminists who advocated for the inclusion of gender perspectives in development theory and NGO practices have remained critical of the ways in which gender has been incorporated. The engagement of women with (global) civil society and the association of 'altruistic' work with women and femininity are long-standing.

Recently, there has been a strong growth of NGO organisations with a global orientation in terms of numbers and influence. Theorists of civil society and citizenship have pointed to a range of important dilemmas, which arise when translating civil society and citizenship to a global level such as terms of inclusion, relations of responsibility and conditions of representation. Furthermore, in civil society/citizenship theories civil society and citizenship have both ambiguous relations to the public and private sphere. Feminist theory has been instrumental in highlighting these ambiguities and in investigating the implications of this divide. In addition, feminists have stressed the relation of private to the political and thereby problematised conventional notions of politics, which is instructive in understanding the complex positioning of the women NGO workers. The following chapter will elaborate the terminology used in this thesis and present how the problems generated by the respective theories have been translated into empirical approaches.

### **3 - Methodological Approaches**

#### **Introduction**

As has been outlined in the introduction, this research seeks to bring the critiques framed within feminist, postcolonial, global citizenship/civil society and critical development theories into dialogue with the lived experiences of NGO workers. This dialogue should enrich those critiques, in particular postcolonial theory and global citizenship/civil society theory that are normally situated at the abstract, structural and discursive level by inserting elements of the embodied, passionate, and every day practice. At the same time, for critical development/ NGO studies, which is more practice-oriented and theoretically 'thinner' as a body of thought, it emphasises the need for theoretical, critical depth. The dialogue reinforces the long-standing tradition and ambition of feminist theory to link theory and practice and to create spaces for women's voices.

Hence, while discourse analytical research has generated enlightening insights for the field of aid practices (see for example Biccum 2005), the methodology of in-depth interviewing was favoured in this particular research project as it provided the possibility for linking structural concerns with individual, emotive, moral agency. Alternatively, a combination of interviewing and participant observation could have been interesting to explore the tensions between 'narrated' and 'real' practice. However, the risk would be to set up the researcher as objective observer and ultimate judge of the gaps between 'what was done' and 'what was told'. More importantly, as this research is interested in women's ethical and political positioning at the nexus of four



critiques, and thus focuses on the women's process of making sense of one's practices and situatedness, in-depth interviewing is the single, most relevant methodology generating the richest material.

The research's focus on the reflections and experiences of women NGO workers has a number of methodological implications that I will outline below. First, the description of the sample and the process of sampling will be discussed. I will then further explain the choice of qualitative interviewing methods, the practice of interviewing, and the process of data analysis. The third section explains the application of intersectionality for the empirical analysis. The final section builds on the two previous sections about the practice of interviewing and intersectionality to discuss the engagement between the researcher and the research participants. Feminist research methodology will appear as a consistent thread throughout this chapter.

### **Sampling**

In 2007-2008 I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with women located in the global North, who worked on gendered issues for NGOs with a global orientation.<sup>10</sup> With 'global orientation' I refer to both organisations that have an international presence and 'target group' abroad and to those organisations that work on a national level with a target group that (originally) comes from the global South. Hence, within my sample there are two different spaces of intervention: some organisations engage with migrant groups nationally while

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<sup>10</sup> In addition, I conducted 1 pilot interview with Kim, a woman whose work for an NGO fitted the same criteria, except the focus on gender/women issues. Hence her interview account will not be used at all in Chapter Four, which focuses on the specific challenges related to feminisms. Interestingly, since the interview, while she has continued to work for the same organisation, she has changed job and now works solely with young women and girls.

others engage with women in the global South (see also Harcourt 2009:84 for arguments in favour of combining those relations and connections). Following common practice in post-colonial and critical development literature (Duffield 2001, Mohanty 2003, Goudge 2003, Heron 2007, Harcourt 2009) I use the terms ‘South’ and ‘North’ to indicate different spheres, with the first referring to the economically less prosperous and politically marginalised countries and the latter to the affluent, dominant nations, rather than referring to mere geographical location. Hence, Australia while geographically South becomes in this terminology part of the global North while parts of Eastern Europe are part of the South (see Harcourt 2009:29).

Most importantly, the terms North and South refer to a relationship involving both material and discursive power imbalances, indicating how global politics and economic globalisation function with these two poles (Goudge 2003). It also needs to be asserted that while this terminology has “certain political value” (Mohanty 2003:226), North and South are no fixed identities, and hence the terms should not be interpreted rigidly as an absolute binary without permeable borders. This permeability is reflected in the fact that the South is also present in the North (Heron 2007). Encounters between the ‘global North’ and the ‘global South’ can take place in multiple arenas as a result of different mobilities (see also Mohanty 2003) due to the relation between migration, colonialism and the aid industry (Duffield 2006).<sup>11</sup> As Ahmed expresses it: “The assumption of distance also involves a refusal to recognise the

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<sup>11</sup> The link between colonialism and processes of migration is captured well in the slogan “we are here because you were there!”.

relationships of proximity between women who are differently located in the world” (Ahmed 2000b:167).

Globalisation theorists like Appadurai (1990) have suggested that globalisation can no longer be understood in terms of simple core-periphery, or consumer-producer models. Appadurai (1990) uses the term ‘ethnoscape’, which he understands to be part of a range of other ‘scapes’ that define globalisation, as “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live”. These ethnoscares are thus equally ‘inhabited’ by asylum seekers, economic migrants, sex workers as by NGO workers, and development workers. In addition, as Appadurai (1990) stresses, these ‘landscapes’ are not just physical but also imagined worlds, “multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe”. This conceptualisation of ‘landscapes’ as imagined worlds underlines the significance of relations between women from the global North and the global South that are based on the images, memories of previous visits, and stories in addition to the ‘real’ physical encounters.

The selection of the interviewees was based on an assumption that this group would share a number of commonalities related to the specific intersection of post-colonialism, feminism and the helping imperative that is the focus of this research. This group of women all work for organisations that seek to improve the lives of women in and from the South and they share the privilege of being located in the global North. Most of the organisations can be classed as NGOs; however, on their websites a few organisations rather self-described as

platform, charity, non-profit organisation or network. The “deceptively short acronym” NGO itself already actually refers to a diverse sector, as it comprises highly professionalised organisations, small-scale volunteer organisations, with a broad range of political views (Naples 2002b:274, see also Silliman 1999, Smillie 2000). As Smillie points out: “It is possible that more energy has gone into unrequited efforts to name and rename [NGOs] than has been invested in understanding them” (Smillie 2002:22). Some of the organisations that the women I interviewed worked for were Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs). These latter organisations were not NGOs in the strict sense of the term; however, if one follows Hilhorst’s definition of NGO as “doing good for the development of others”, a definition which she calls the “most common use” of the term NGO, it is easy to see the relevant commonality of the organisations (Hilhorst 2003:7, see also Duffield’s definition of the aid industry 2009:3).

All of the women were located in the ‘global North’, more specifically the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Austria, Belgium (Brussels) and Switzerland (Geneva).<sup>12</sup> Some of these countries have a specific colonial past, notably the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium, while the other countries have benefited from the colonial past of Europe. Brussels and Geneva specifically were selected for their position as centres for the EU and UN, and hence as international/global spaces. The organisations based there concentrated much of their efforts on lobbying either or both of these institutions. The organisations the women worked for, either on a paid or voluntary basis,

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<sup>12</sup> The sample consisted of three people in the UK, two in the Netherlands, two in Sweden, two in Denmark, and two + one pilot interview in Austria, five in Belgium (Brussels), and four in Switzerland (Geneva).

ranged from smaller to larger organisations and their work was concentrated in different areas, such as health, development, refugees, and trafficking.

Relevant organisations were identified through Internet research, the use of Internet databases of global women organisations<sup>13</sup> and on the basis of information from mailings from similar organisations. Research participants were found using a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling when existing research participants suggested new potential other interviewees (Marshall 1996, Hesse Biber 2007). In addition, the sample was dependent on the women's availability and willingness to participate. I never received an outright refusal to participate, but around one-third of the organisations I contacted (often several times) either never replied or indicated that people were too busy or away during the period I was present in the country. The women I interviewed were located differently in the power structures of their organisation; 'power structures' of course takes on a different meaning within small-scale volunteer organisations than in large-scale highly professionalised organisations. Their job titles ranged from secretary general, interim director, policy director, to advocacy officer, technical officer, network officer, to research volunteer, social councillor and project worker, while a few women were the original founders of their (small-scale) organisations.

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<sup>13</sup> The following Internet databases were used: <http://www.distel.ca/womlist/womlist.html>, <http://www.wrc.org.uk/> and <http://www.womeninlondon.org.uk/wrc.htm>. I hereby want to express my gratitude to Denise Osted for voluntarily compiling the 'Global List of Women's Organisations' on <http://www.distel.ca/womlist/womlist.html>, which proved an invaluable source.

## **The Practice of Interviewing and Analysis**

Qualitative interviewing is often recommended as the most effective method for research on people's attitudes, interpretations, values, understandings, and "lived experiences" as the complexity of these cannot easily be grasped by questionnaires. In addition, interviewing holds specific appeal for feminist researchers for its focus on women's voices (Hesse-Biber 2007:118, see also Reinharz 1992, Mason 1996; Gerson and Horowitz 2002; Silverman 2006).

Qualitative interviewing is normally characterised by a thematic approach, in which topics rather than questions are listed and it includes the assumption that data is generated through the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Qualitative and in particular feminist qualitative interview approaches most often feature a rather informal conversational interviewing style with possible moments of self-disclosure by the researcher (Reinharz 1992, Mason 1996, Letherby 2003, Hesse-Biber 2007); hence interviewees are rather called participants than subjects (Reinharz 1992). The point that data is generated in the interaction with the interviewer, and, I would add, bound to the time and location, is accentuated by Denzin's statement that "there is no inner or deeper self that is accessed by the interview or narrative method. There are only different interpretative (...) versions of who the person is" (Denzin 2003: 68).

The experience as narrated by the research participant is itself an interpretation and subsequently needs to be interpreted by the researcher (Scott in: Brah 1996, Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002, Fonow and Cook 2005). These interpretations have to be informed by an account of relevant historical,

political and social processes and by how ideologies shape representation and signification (Brah 1996). This means that the researcher has to pay attention to how the subject is socially, culturally, and politically constructed and how she is giving meaning to and constructing the world around her, using the repertoires and discourses available (Brah 1996). The feminist elements in the process of interpretation can be recognised in the theoretical framework used and in the ethical and political ambition to engage with power relations (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002).

In this research, all interviews were digitally recorded and literally transcribed. Then, for the analysis of the data, selections were made from the transcripts according to themes suggested by the theoretical framework and subsequently these selections were coded by hand according to sub-themes emerging from the interviews. For the analysis of the sub-themes I returned to reading new literature from the theoretical framework. Hence, the coding was both based on the conceptual framework of the theory and at the same time provided space for themes emerging from the data itself. With regards to the latter, as feminist researchers have observed:

“the everyday world is already extensively organised and categorised in order to make the complexity of every day life manageable, and research subjects will draw on the categories and meanings familiar to them, even if they are unfamiliar to you, diverse and contradictory” (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002:160).

An example of this was the research participants' use of the notions of the private/public, professional and political as discussed in Chapter Six.

As Bryman (2001) points out, a semi-structured interview should allow the interviewee considerable freedom regarding how to interpret and reply to the questions. I adopted this approach as it permitted flexibility regarding the number, order and phrasing of the questions. While neither the order nor the particular formulation of the questions was fixed, over time I did develop a rough order and formulation. The interview guide was finalised after the pilot interview (Hesse-Biber 2007) and, based on the engagement with feminist, postcolonial, global citizenship and critical development literature, consisted of the following topics: a) the relation with clients/beneficiaries/target group; b) how they negotiated working at different (organisational) levels; c) what was experienced as discouraging in their work; d) how their own identity played out in the work; e) where their sense of responsibility came from; and f) their personal and professional development. Since the topics chosen were directly derived from the structural critiques informing this work, it was ensured that structural and institutional factors were strongly rooted in the interview guide alongside aspects of individual subjectivity. The interview quotes presented in the subsequent chapters intend to convey the richness and multiplicity of voices in the interviewees' stories (Reinharz 1992).

The focus of the interviews, which typically lasted between an hour and three hours, was on how individual women who work on women/gender issues in a global context negotiate their roles and their relations with the groups they



seek to support. After answering possible questions from the research participant about the research, I started every interview by asking the interviewees to introduce themselves and say something about their organisations, their own background and the role they had in the organisations. As is common in feminist research practice (Hesse-Biber 2007) at the end of every interview the research participant had the opportunity to ask me questions or still add something to the interview; some interviewees took this opportunity.

Prior to each interview, I established contact with the research participants by email<sup>14</sup> (sometimes also by telephone and regular mail) and, where possible, the interviews were conducted in person. As I was based in the UK during the research, I travelled to Brussels, Geneva, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Vienna and Amsterdam to meet the research participants. In line with feminist research practice, which argues that the participants might feel more comfortable and in control in their 'own' spaces (Letherby 2003), the specific location of the interview was chosen by the interviewees and varied from cafes, hotel bars, a fast food restaurant at a train station, their offices<sup>15</sup>, to their house, or even once my room in a youth hostel. On four occasions, interviews were conducted over the telephone when contact with the research participant was made after I had left the research field or when an interview had to be rescheduled due to illness. The interviews were one-off meetings and whilst I

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix 1 for sample email interview request

<sup>15</sup> The location of the office was interesting in this research, since it functioned in some instances as the most private space, when the person had her own office, while in other cases it was a semi-public space with colleagues sitting in hearing distance. In some instances I had the impression that the choice of location was an early indication of how 'open' the research participant had anticipated to be/was prepared to be.

prepared for each interview by reading about the specific organisation, I did not have insider knowledge of the specific organisations.

All the interviews were conducted in English, which was often not the first language of my interviewee (nor is it my own first language). However for many of the participants English was (one of the) the main working languages. The interviewees were all fluent in English and I did not have the impression that the communication between the interviewee and me was hindered by the fact that the interview was conducted in English. Another way in which language featured in the interviews was in the form of NGO jargon, especially with regards to those interviewees that worked closely with the EU and UN. These interviewees assumed a familiarity on my side with this jargon that initially I did not have, but which I did learn along the way. However, as this work focuses on the personal reflections of the women who worked for these organisations, this jargon does not feature excessively in this thesis. An important point to note is shared education: since members of transnational feminist networks are often “highly educated social scientists” (Moghadam 2005:102) many of the interviewees had university degrees in a social science subject. Hence we shared “a common intellectual language” (Puwar 1997:10.2).

Feminist researchers have generally identified three ways in which the researcher could hold more power in the research than the research participants; the researcher controls the research process, the researcher interprets and presents the data and often occupies a higher social status than

the research participants (Wolf 1996, Sprague 2005, Harding and Norberg 2005). In terms of the first two instances of power of the researcher, I have attempted to make myself as the researcher visible in the text using feminist stylistic conventions such as the use of the personal pronoun and using active rather than passive voice (Sprague 2005). One of the effects of the shared academic background between me and some of the research participants was that it reversed the way the power relation between researcher and researched is usually conceptualised, when interviewees would give me literature suggestions.

Before the interview started all research participants received an explanatory statement, which again described the research, so that they could sign the informed consent form (Hesse-Biber 2007, Thorne 2008).<sup>16</sup> On the consent form it was indicated that the interviewee could stop the interview, refuse to answer a specific question or discontinue their participation in the research at any time and without providing an explanation (Hesse-Biber 2007). The women interviewed, though selected on the basis of their affiliation to a certain organisation, indicated that they spoke in their personal capacity and not as representatives of their organisations.

I have agreed with all the research participants that the quotes used in the thesis will not be connected to their organisation and that their real names will not be used.<sup>17</sup> Inevitably, the need for confidentiality in relation to the

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<sup>16</sup> See Appendix 2 for consent form including the explanatory statement

<sup>17</sup> This is in line with the University of Nottingham '*Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics*' and the *ESRC Research Ethics Framework*, which states "the confidentiality of

research participants and their work places implied that compromises had to be made in terms of contextualising the women's reflections (Letherby 2003). While at some points it would have been interesting to delve deeper into the exact nature of the organisation, the type of work and the national context of the research participant, this was often not possible. The anonymity of the research participants was necessary in order to create a space where the women could be open about their experiences and their reflections on their work practices. For example, one woman told me after the interview that her anonymity was of utmost importance for her as she could lose her job if what she told me would be linked to her name<sup>18</sup>. This clearly raises issues of harm and I am concerned to protect the participants: full anonymity is therefore maintained throughout this thesis. Comparable studies with a similar focus on individual reflections as data (Heron 2007, Goudge 2003, Cook 2007, Hopgood 2006) have taken a similar approach to this issue. In Hopgood's study of Amnesty International, for example, he states: "Some readers might find the lack of context about the speakers off-putting. I can only sympathise and say that this was unavoidable" (Hopgood 2006:viii), while Goudge similarly refused to provide any details about her research participants' lives and jobs which could make identification easier (Goudge 2003:6:ftn.1, 43).

## **Intersectionality**

Like Avtar Brah, I work under the assumption that

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information supplied by research subjects and the anonymity of the respondents must be respected" (ESRC p. 1).

<sup>18</sup> As is common (see for example Letherby 2003), research participants differed in the degree of concern for confidentiality. However, as the sample size was very small in this particular research, I decided to maintain same level of confidentiality for all participants.

“members of dominant groups occupy ‘privileged’ positions within political and material practices that attend these social divisions although the precise interplay of this power in specific institutions or in interpersonal relations cannot be stipulated in advance, may be contradictory, and can be challenged” (Brah 1996:112, see also Razack 2001:161 or see Narayan’s term “mainstream Western women” 1997:100).

This implies in the particular case of this research, that while I assume a certain commonality between the women I also seek to pay attention to the internal diversity of this group in terms of nationality, age, ethnicity, and career trajectory. Naturally, the nature of the interviewees’ work meant that their experiences were not limited to the country they were based in; many were born in and had lived in many other countries and had worked in other countries. This meant that a few research participants even ‘covered’ three to four continents in the combination of their migration background and their international work experiences. Their experiences, positions and reflections thus displayed these commonalities and differences. Hence, an intersectional approach is indispensable to gain a deeper understanding of some of the complexities regarding their reflections on their work practices and on the relation with the women they seek to support.

Black feminists’ assertion that the experiences of black women could only insufficiently be theorised when analyses of ‘race’ and gender were separated, prompted calls for an approach that would be attentive to the interaction between different categories of subordination. In addition, black feminists

sought to challenge the notion of a unified category of ‘women’ present in Western feminism. Brah and Phoenix (2004) describe Sojourner Truth’s famous exclamation “ain’t I a woman?” as an early example of a challenge to this unified and universalised category of ‘woman’, by claiming womanhood while challenging conventional images of women associated with white middle class women. They claim that her speech signalled how identities are relational, and “processes constituted in and through power relations” rather than objects (Brah and Phoenix 2004:77). By the 1980s some feminists started to attempt to integrate other categories of class and ethnicity in gender analysis and vice versa, in response to these criticisms (Denis 2008).

Kimberley Crenshaw (2000) coined the term ‘intersectionality’ in 1989 in her article *‘Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex’* where she introduced her famous analogy with a black woman on a traffic intersection with discrimination flowing to and from the different lanes. If an accident happens to the woman standing on the cross roads, it could have been caused by one car, from any of the directions or from several cars at the same time coming from anywhere, which is similar to the situation of harm through discrimination where the source of the specific discrimination (racism or sexism) cannot always easily be identified and separated (Crenshaw 2000). Brah and Phoenix define ‘intersectionality’ as denoting

“the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation –economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential –intersect in historically specific contexts” (Brah and Phoenix 2004:76).

While Brah and Phoenix are careful to use the term ‘differentiation’ rather than ‘discrimination’, intersectional approaches have mostly been applied to study and describe the experiences of those that are facing an array of different types of oppression, like working-class black women. However, intersectional approaches can also be applied to groups that do not face multiple axes of discrimination, but rather occupy ‘mixed’ or advantaged positions (AWID 2004, Yuval-Davis 2006a, Verloo 2009a).

While intersectionality has been lauded as a very significant contribution by women’s studies, (McCall 2005, Davis 2008), intersectionality is also notoriously difficult to operationalise in empirical research. As Ludvig states: “Its implications for empirical analysis are, on the one hand, a seemingly insurmountable complexity and, on the other, a fixed notion of difference” (Ludvig 2006:246). The main difficulty in the operationalisation of intersectionality lies, as Ludvig hinted at, in the variety of interpretations of the idea of ‘categories’. McCall (2005) distinguishes between three kinds of intersectional approaches, which differ in their treatment of categories as fixed, constructed or structural and either reject or embrace categories (see also Prins 2006). The approach of intracategorical complexity, (which McCall situates between the two other approaches as it neither completely rejects nor strategically uses the categories), is most relevant for the current analysis. The main distinguishing feature of this approach is the focus on one specific social group (hence intracategorical) to get insight into the group members’ lived experiences and its complexities.

I will ‘perform’ an intersectional approach in two ways. Firstly, throughout the chapters I will be attentive to how different categories (such as gender and age) intersect in the lived experience of the women. I will discuss how identity categories are attributed different meanings (depending on the location and situation) and I will look at intersectionality in terms of the relational aspect of identity with reference to the relation of the women with those they seek to support. Secondly, the order and structure of the chapters, with each taking a different theoretical angle, should facilitate a reading that highlights the complexity of the positioning of the women. In this way I use intersectionality to combine the macrostructures of social division with the microstructure of subjective experiences and relationships and to explore the specific ways categories interact without reifying or disavowing them. Furthermore, through an intersectional approach the narratives will be situated in their historical context and location while moving away from a determinist additive model of oppression or domination.

### **Self and Other in Research**

The choice for the subject of the research follows Jenny Sharpe’s suggestion that “the problematic needs to be reversed so that we can explain not how European women transformed colonialism but how colonialism left its indelible mark on European women” (Sharpe 1993:94, see also Wolf 1996:36, Stoler and Cooper 1997, McEwan 2009). Kapoor (2008) states that representations of the Other tell us much more about the Self than about the Other. This research deliberately moves away from studying the Other to



understand global relations mediated through post-colonialism, feminism and the helping imperative. Hence, I have chosen not to interview those that would be labelled ‘the recipients’ of aid; this decision was made because I was particularly interested in (negotiations of) privilege, because interviewing the recipients would open up issues about the more obvious power differential between researcher and researched (Wolf 1996) and because I did not deem it constructive to use their judgements of the services and treatment received as some ultimate arbiter (see for this last point also Heron 2007:20).

Instead, this research turns the research ‘gaze’ back at those that could be considered to be in a more dominant and privileged position, one more similar to the researcher. Or, as Bridget Byrne puts it: “I have not chosen to research myself, but have chosen to research those who are quite like myself” (Byrne 2006:40, see also Chaudhuri and Strobel 1992:3). This has a few implications in line with an intersectional approach that understands identity as relational. Just like Frankenberg, who noticed in her interviews with white women about whiteness and race that her “ability to conduct interviews successfully involved a complex set of adjustments in self-presentation, but never a presentation of [her]self as neutral” (Frankenberg 1993:32), in each interview different parts of my own identity were fore-grounded to establish commonalities; I was ‘mainly’ someone who had also lived in different countries, ‘mainly’ someone with a similar academic background, ‘mainly’ Dutch, ‘mainly’ a friend of a friend, ‘mainly’ young, ‘mainly’ a woman, depending on who I was speaking to.

Feminist writing from the 1980s often emphasised that in contrast to mainstream research where the power differential between researcher and research participant was large, in feminist research with female researchers interviewing female participants, the setting was more relaxed, with less of a power gap. More recently, it has been acknowledged that it is too simplistic to attribute this 'cosiness' to shared gender and that rather this was the result of other shared positions, such as class and 'race' (Phoenix 1994, see also Puwar 1997, Byrne 2006). In addition, the notion that women interviewers and interviewees immediately established rapport also assumed that both had the same agendas, and that the interviewee would agree with the analysis of the interviewer (Byrne 2006). As one of the interview questions specifically addressed how identity played out in the women's work and as most of my interviewees can be categorised as 'white', some interviewees might have been more comfortable sharing with me how their identity as a white, Western women impacted on their work since I am also white, Western and a woman. I do not seek to imply here that this openness was necessarily better; rather it underlined my own complicity and the fact that data is produced in the interaction of the specific interview setting (Letherby 2003:109).

The reply of one of the interviewees to my question whether she thinks racism will be overcome soon as she seems to put quite a lot of faith in the younger generation, illustrates this: *"I don't know [silence]. I would hope that, you would hope that a better education and a greater understanding would breed a greater tolerance, but, when you look at incidents of racism in this country in Bradford, Leicester, Bristol, you get it in London, even in Suffolk, (...)*

*racism is rife there. So I would like the answer to be yes, but the answer is probably no, that we have got a long way to go before we are a really integrated society where skin colour does not matter. (...) I think it is really sad. But you get it all over Europe don't you? Because in Holland, 20 years ago, was it with the Indonesian population that there were race riots?''*. Grace mitigates the pessimistic account of racism in her own country with a reference to the fact that racism is widespread across Europe. Subsequently, she draws me into her musings by asking me about race riots in the Netherlands.

At the same time, inevitably, some of my identity markers were perceived as a barrier between the research participant and me. Interestingly, age or seniority was an issue that surfaced in the content of almost every interview despite the fact that none of my questions directly addressed this topic. Unsurprisingly, I had the impression that this concern with age and seniority was also mirrored in how the research participants related to me especially in relation to how open they chose to be about their own reflections on their work practice. The younger interviewees seemed to more closely identify with me which seemed to foster openness in relation to their doubts and hesitations, while many older interviewees tended to 'explain' to me how their work functioned, sometimes reversing the way the power relations between the feminist researcher and research participant are commonly conceived (see also Sprague 2005:59, Letherby 2003:115).

Another way in which the interviewees and myself were quite clearly set apart was in relation to the difference between our professions. While these women

had used their experience and their degrees to work for NGOs and IGOs, I had decided to build on my academic knowledge by ‘studying them’.

This tension is illustrated by the following exclamation by one of the interviewees: *“I think it is very easy to stand back and to research or look at issues second-hand from papers and from people who have done the research and from studies and figures and I think what is really difficult is trying to empathise with those issues. I mean, when I first came back [from volunteering abroad] I could not understand how people who perhaps say they are..., I mean your department is called ‘the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice’ and to be quite frank I don’t see, having met a few people who are researching there, professors and students, I don’t see the practice, I see the talking and the debates and the discussions, which are all important, but they are all generally held by academics, I don’t see the connection between the people that are doing that work and the things that are going on”*.

McEwan (2009) has identified a tension along quite similar lines between post-colonial theory and development studies. While post-colonial theory takes a critical deconstructive approach to development, it has been criticised by development studies for “being too abstract and of little relevance” and for “its alleged failure to connect critiques of discourse and representation to the realities of people’s lives” (McEwan 2009:1). In addition, Eyben mentions a range of critical literature on power in development, and states “its largely post-modernist perspective offered little help for those (...) seeking to improve development aid” (Eyben 2006:5). However, just as McEwan’s book relies on

the idea that post-colonial theory and development studies would develop through their mutual critical engagement (McEwan 2009:1, see also Eyben 2006, Duffield 2007), I have the hope that there would be a shared benefit in the dialogue between the NGO practitioners and academics. This hope is supported by the fact that many of the research participants (including those who showed some scepticism about academia) often expressed the view that academia and NGO work should work together more closely and had thus decided to participate in this project. Many asked to receive a copy of the final results.

Also, some critical research has been financed by NGOs themselves (see Eyben 2006:15, Koster 2008a). In addition, Eade's observation that "the danger of working in any kind of aid agency is that one begins to see the world through its eyes; [and that] it is increasingly difficult (...) to see ourselves as other see us" justifies the potential contribution of the relative outsider (Eade 2007:630). It is important to stress here that the intention of this work is neither to blame specific individuals nor to situate myself outside the unequal power structures referred to in this work. Rather my intention is first to contribute to our understanding of the complexities and contradictions in the positioning of women who engage in justice seeking practices related to gendered issues in a global context. Second, the intention of this work is to advance and enhance the reflexive and analytic practices of NGOs and their employees.

## **4 - Travelling through Feminism, ‘Racing to Innocence’**

### **Introduction**

Since this study is concerned with women who work or volunteer for organisations to support women in and from the global South and as this research takes the critique against Western feminism as one of its points of departure, it is important to situate the women NGO workers and their organisations in relation to feminism. The first section of this chapter will take a journey through different aspects of the women’s understandings of and approaches to feminism and the discussion subsequently puts this in relation to (the approaches of) their organisations. Western feminism has traditionally been subdivided into three different strands; liberal, radical and socialist feminism (Bulbeck 1998). Since the women’s narratives did not neatly follow the fault lines of these three types, I will focus on and highlight the diversity and contingencies present among the women as indicative of the eclecticism of feminism. I will argue that some of the major debates within feminism are reflected in the narratives of the women; namely the institutionalisation of the women’s movement in the academy, generational differences between second wave and ‘third wave’ feminists, (responses to) different backlashes against feminisms, essentialism and anti-essentialism, and separatism versus inclusion.

As has been outlined in Chapter Two, second wave Western feminism has been under severe criticism by black women who problematise the universalisation of a homogenous category of 'woman' (Lorde 1984, hooks 1981, 1986, Carby 1992, Lazreg 2000, Bhavnani and Coulson 2003). The Western feminist movement had to respond, for example, to black feminist activist Audre Lorde: "Today, there is a pretence to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word SISTERHOOD in the white women's movement" (Lorde 1984:116). Black feminists have pointed to the importance of looking at how the categories of gender, race, class and sexuality intersect in the creation and maintenance of power relations (see hooks 1981, Crenshaw 2000). Furthermore, black feminists have challenged white feminists to confront their own privileges and to understand their complicity in maintaining racism and systems of oppression (hooks 1981, 2000, Amos and Parmar 1984, Carby 1992). Carby, in a contribution tellingly called '*White Woman, Listen!*' calls white women "extraordinarily reluctant to see themselves in the situations of being oppressors" and attributes this to a fear that acknowledgement of their role as oppressors will distract from their oppressed position in terms of gender (Carby 1992:221). Frankenberg concluded from interviews with white women about race:

"one experience of marginality [did not lead] white women automatically towards empathy with other oppressed communities, nor [did] participation in one kind of liberatory movement –feminism, the 'Left' - le[a]d automatically to anti-racism" (Frankenberg 1993:20).

As was mentioned in Chapter One, one response to the need to interrogate engagements with Others in a context of unequal power structures has been the introduction of the notion of 'reflexivity' (Harding 1991, Haraway 1991). Advocating the 'situating of knowledges' meant that the researcher had to reflect on his or her own background, cultural baggage, and, importantly, the relation to the research subject studied. This required an interrogation of Self and Other that both paid attention to the power structures that influenced the research (e.g. sexist, racist, class structures) and to the relational aspects of (research) identity (e.g. the position of the researcher versus the researched might change depending on the research subject and context). Despite the fact that the notion of reflexivity in feminism is most used within the context of academic knowledge production (Adkins 2002; Harding 1991; Rose 1997), I would argue that it is equally relevant within justice seeking practices of NGOs as knowledge production plays an equally central role there. Harding's standpoint theory is on the one hand a response to the criticism of black feminists that their experiences are not sufficiently taken into account and that more attention should be paid to the multiplicity and diversity of the category 'woman' and on the other hand a response to the demands of conventional science in terms of truth and objectivity (Harding 1991).

Lorde (1984) made a significant contribution to the struggle within feminist theory and activism about differences among women by showing how difference is institutionalised as otherness. When 'different' people, for example black people, are made Others, it justifies exploitation and unwillingness to reach out across difference, as the 'radically other' cannot be



understood anyways (Lorde 1984). Hence she argues that differences itself do not divide women, “but our reluctance to recognise those differences and deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences” (Lorde 1984:122). Davis (2008), in her article ‘*Intersectionality as a Buzzword*’ relates part of the popularity of the concept in contemporary feminist studies to the fact that it appeals to the most pressing theoretical and normative concern of recognising difference between women. In addition, she holds that “it promises to address (and redress) the exclusions which have played such a distressing role in feminist scholarship” (Davis 2008:70) pointing again to the almost ‘traumatic’ experience of the challenge against white Western feminism.

To complement the journey through the feminisms of the women NGO workers, I will explore the currency of the term ‘sisterhood’ among the women. I will investigate how these women implicitly and explicitly respond to the criticism of black feminists regarding the assumption of universality of the experiences of white Western women. I will specifically refer to the shift from sisterhood to solidarity. In addition, the so-called ‘race to innocence’ as coined by Fellows and Razack (1998) will be traced in the narratives of the women in terms of the privileging of gender oppression over other types of subordination. In relation to the critique of black feminists I will look at two ways in which this ‘race to innocence’ can be challenged. Firstly, I will investigate how the theoretical notion of reflexivity as a way of recognising and making explicit one’s positionality plays out in the practice of women’s

NGO work. Secondly, I will explore the ways the role of gender is problematised by cross-cutting factors such as age, ethnicity and class.

### **Understandings of Feminism**

As Dean argues:

“While empirically it is undoubtedly the case that there have been divisive conflicts between different strands of feminism, the continued grip of this tripartite distinction has deleterious effects on the possibilities for critical and evaluative analysis of feminist practices” (Dean 2008:286).

Following Dean’s suggestion, I would also maintain here that it is not productive to ‘force’ the women NGO workers’ personal understandings of feminism exactly in one of the three categories. I did not ask the research participants whether or not they identified as feminists, but nonetheless most (3/4) did mention feminism and readily identified themselves as ‘feminist’. Of course, they did not all understand this term in the same way, but one recurrent theme that emerged from their accounts was a reference to the idea that ‘the personal is political’. One of the major contributions of feminism has been the realisation that experiences of women, e.g. of domestic violence, were not mere individual experiences, but that these reflected gender relations on a wider scale. Hence, personal experiences should not be addressed as individual problems but should form the basis for political organising as summarised in the slogan ‘the personal is political’. The influence of this notion that the personal is also political was clearly noticeable in some of the

accounts of the women NGO workers who described their route to feminism by reference to experiences they had had *as a woman* or that other women had gone through *because they were women*.

Stacey for example says the following: *"[My interest in inequalities] with respect to women, that came as I grew older and had my own experiences based on gender based violence and abuse and seeing things around myself, there was a shooting (...) where somebody killed only women, only women, just because they were women trying to be engineers. (...) And so as a woman and having gone through things that I only experienced as a woman, that definitely influenced things"*.

When Stacey continues, she touches upon one other major development of feminism: the institutionalisation of the women's movement through the establishment of women's studies departments in universities: *"But I'm not sure that I can say from the beginning that I was concerned with inequalities only with women, because that was really something that evolved throughout, probably I would say it sort of all came together when I was at university doing my undergraduate degree"*. Stacey's expression 'it sort of all came together' describes how her university studies helped her to synthesise her experiences with theories about gender oppression. From Stacey's narrative here it is not clear whether she experienced 'gender based violence' before she learned to put that label on it during her university degree or whether it came after when she was able to recognise it as such. Others also described how they had experienced some kind of feminist 'awakening', often during their late teens or early twenties. This awakening is often linked both to their

personal experiences as a woman and the formative time of university studies, the latter particularly for the younger women who went to university at a time when women studies and gender studies were first institutionalised.

Anna: *“During my university years when I was engaged with academic study of gender issues, I was very, very engaged with women and that being part of my identity, it was very much the Ani DiFranco<sup>19</sup> stage of my life as well and this was very much like ‘this is who I am’, and a lot of how I responded to life was filtered through my own perceptions of whether they were responding to me as a woman’.*

Sylvia says: *‘I was very involved in women’s issues when I was in university and in high school, mostly because reproductive rights was a very hot topic and it was something that at that point as a young woman it was an incredibly important issue for me in terms of being a politically active person in my youth’.*

At the same time Sylvia stresses that her experience of being a woman does not, for her, mean that a gender perspective comes naturally: *“Because you are a woman does not mean that you are constantly thinking about how to integrate gender into your programming or your project. Just like a man working on an issue, I need to have the same kind of ‘don’t forget the women!’ reminder”.* Sylvia differs from Stacey and Anna in the fact that rather than connecting her own experiences with the feminist theories she became familiar with at university, she considers herself part of the *“kind of the post-feminist*

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<sup>19</sup> Ani diFranco is a singer, guitarist and songwriter who is known for her political songs, which address sexism, racism and homophobia.

*generation where it is not quite as important to us anymore, (...) as far as gender parity in our own countries, that we have come so far that it is not quite as passionate an issue for us".* She hastens to add though that this speculation *"might be a gross generalisation not applicable to anyone else"*.

In contrast to Sylvia, who considers herself part of the post-feminist generation and for those women for whom their university experience was significant in their process of identification as a feminist, some of the older interviewees had a different narrative. Casey says: *"The gender orientation is something from my childhood and family upbringing"*, while Elisa says that *"I do think that for me my feminist identity was always out of the question, it was always something which was a part of me, in how I am and how I want a better world"*.

Casey's and Elisa's narratives which both stress how they have been oriented towards gender justice since they were young, is in marked contrast with the 'feminist awakening' accounts of those who came into contact with feminism at university. From the above accounts a picture emerges of the different generations of feminism linked to different experiences of women; the first group became conscious that their personal experiences were political through engaging with the women's movement, the second makes sense of their earlier experiences through the theories acquired at university, and the third, sometimes labelled the 'post-feminist' generation, sees the merit of the theories but cannot immediately synthesise these with personal experiences.

It has been asserted that while many young women refuse to call themselves feminists, they do support feminist issues (Aronson 2003, Valenti 2007:5-6). Aronson found that “young women’s development of a feminist perspective and identity is tied closely with institutions that support and nurture such a perspective –particularly women’s studies programs” (Aronson 2003:919). This resonates with the ‘awakening’ accounts above, in which many associated their ‘feminist awakening’ with their university years. Aronson (2003) notes that at the same time as feminism became institutionalised, other organisations and the media have communicated negative stereotypes of feminism, which have been internalised by some women.

When Catherine talks about a project her organisation had with young women, she supports the idea that young women simultaneously resist calling themselves feminist *and* support feminist issues. While noting that there are times when it seems easy to ‘win’ members for the feminist ‘camp’, she also identifies the strength of anti-feminist lobbyists. Catherine: “*We had a project about young women and it was 20 young women and none of them or maybe only 2 would call themselves feminists on the first day and all of them would call themselves feminists on the last day, so it is all a question of perception, and it is not, it does not seem so difficult to change but there is ongoing undermining work being done by (...) the enemies of feminism are getting more powerful, I think in the last years so that does not make the work easier, the conservative forces, the pro-life movement*”.

As mentioned above, the fact that many identified as feminists does not mean that they shared the same understanding of feminism. To gain an understanding of the type of feminism the women were advocating, it is instructive to have a closer look at how they described 'what they were not'. This sheds light on some of the ambivalences within feminism and on the backlashes experienced by feminism. While Sonia identifies as a feminist, she immediately hastens to add: *"But I am not a sort of feminist that 'oh I hope all men die', no, I am not that extremist. I believe we can improve the situations of women which at the same time will probably improve the situation for men, and that's great, but I am not any extremist, not at all"*.

Sonia's use of the word 'extremist' probably refers here to so-called radical feminism, which suggests that Sonia has a more liberal or socialist understanding of feminism linked to equal opportunities. Sonia's interpretation of feminism, which reveals a stereotype reminiscent of the idea of feminists as angry 'bra-burners', would not be shared by many of the other research participants.

Stacey and others, in contrast, qualify their feminism by stressing that their interest in gender inequality does not mean they are blind to other oppressions. Stacey is anticipating one other significant critique of feminism, namely as not sufficiently taking into account other categories than gender: *"So of course being a woman affects things, does that mean that I don't feel for the discrimination and the inequality and injustices that my cousin is faced in*

*fighting to marry his partner who is HIV positive? Of course not! Does it mean that I am not sensitive to other forms of inequalities? Of course not!”.*

This account reflects the influence of intersectional approaches coming out of Black feminism, which pay attention to the interplay of different axes of oppression. As Davis notes, in relation to gender and women’s studies, any scholar who nowadays does not pay sufficient attention to the intersection of multiple identities and oppressions, “runs the risk of having her work viewed as theoretically misguided, politically irrelevant, or simply fantastical” (Davis 2008:68). This critique by black feminists will be further explored in later sections in this chapter.

Sophie, whose work is in the field of reproductive rights, also partly defines her feminism negatively by acknowledging that she does *not* think of her feminist work as representing the opinions of all women: *“I have no imagination that I represent the will of all the women in the world, absolutely not. I represent a political idea and an ideology that some women share and some women don’t and that might be in Zambia or in Tanzania or in Sweden (...) but I think my role is also then to stand up for these rights irrespective of where I am in the world”*. Since sexuality is a highly contested topic, Sophie recognises the specific sensitivity of the issues she deals with. Nevertheless she indicates here that she believes in a set of universal values with regards to sexual rights that despite not being shared by all women, are worth advocating as these will eventually ‘objectively benefit’ people. This notion of universal rights, or a rights based approach, is indicative of a liberal approach to



feminism. Sophie also acknowledges the specific nature of her feminism when she states that she represents ‘a political idea and an ideology’.

Anna who was at some point in the ‘Ani DiFranco stage’ of her life where she analysed her experiences in life through a gender lens, explains how this has changed: *“So now I feel that yes, [gender] is an important part of my identity but no more or less so than it should be for anybody else, or for a man for that matter or for someone of both genders. For me it comes back again to choice, that who I am, I get to decide who I am. And my opportunities in life, my ‘what I do’ should never be determined by the sex that I am. But I have also grown a lot more flexible about that, from being the arch-feminist of women power is emancipation and the only way of emancipation is through getting women out of the house, out of the hearth and into the work force, more to settling down with choice and opportunities”*.

Anna says she has moved from a more ‘prescriptive’ idea of emancipation, which could only consist of women entering the work force to a more open approach of emancipation as choice, which means that emancipation could also lie in the choice to stay at home. Anna’s narrative of choice stands to some extent in direct contrast to Sophie’s universalist approach which is necessarily prescriptive as she chooses to advocate one ideology about sexuality. At the same time, liberal elements can easily be identified in Anna’s description as well. First, the idea that sex should never determine what one does is a liberal idea. This stands in contrast to the more radical feminist idea that women can also choose to be at home, as Anna also indirectly recognises

when she connects the liberal with the more radical assertion by saying ‘I have also grown a lot more flexible about that’. Secondly, the emphasis on choice/opportunities and the individual are normally indicative of a liberal ideology as well.

In addition, it is significant to note that there is another shift in Anna’s account, as she herself already indicates. Her first narrative, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, focussed on her experiences as a woman (‘a lot of how I responded to life was filtered through my own perceptions of whether they were responding to me as a woman’), while this narrative stresses gender experience as being equally relevant for men or for people of both genders. Anna’s shift echoes other important developments in feminist theory and practice, which are linked to the move from sex to gender or even performativity (Butler 1990). Similarly, in development policies a shift has been made from ‘women’s rights’ to gender mainstreaming and in academia from Women’s Studies to Gender Studies. Advocating the latter in favour of the former is associated with the depoliticisation of academic feminism, with “an endorsement of (...) post-structuralism [and against] material accounts of womanhood”, and finally, as a political and theoretical move towards building coalitions with the discipline of transgender and queer studies (Hemming 2008:272-274).

Catherine identifies an additional challenge to feminism and more specifically to how it defines itself, and who it includes: *“We have a big debate, for example with the International Lesbian and Gay Association because for*

*reasons that I understand from a political, moral and theoretical reason, they want more or less to get rid of the categories women and men for obvious reasons and we don't quite agree".*

This resonates with the academic debate mentioned earlier concerning the use of gender (studies) over the use of women ('s studies), in the light of a desire to build alliances with queer and trans-groups. Catherine alludes to a discussion in feminism about essentialist versus constructivist approaches to the category women; while on the one hand, feminism could be said to strive towards the transcending of gender categories, feminist politics 'needs' the category of women to make political claims. The debate over essentialism versus anti-essentialism mirrors a commonly made division between different feminist approaches, with radical and cultural feminism being associated with a pro-essentialist stance and post-modern, post-structuralist, post-colonial and Black feminism being associated with challenging essentialism (Alcoff 1988, Harris 1990, Spelman 1990, Jaggar 2005).

Fay's organisation had to negotiate whether, as a women's organisation, they would allow transgender employees: *"We are a women's organisation so it is clear we employ women, what about transgender women? (...) It was something you could start think about, so we are a women's organisation, that means we also define who is a woman"*. While her organisation did decide to employ transgender women, Fay's comment serves as a reminder that defining the category of 'woman' has implications and can be open for negotiation. Similar tensions can be identified when Sophie criticises other feminists for

denying transgender people a role in the movement when they claim that since gender as a category is constructed, it is not possible for someone to identify with another sex as if that is 'natural'. As early as 1990, Elizabeth Spelman identified the issue of defining women without excluding difference as "the paradox at the heart of feminism" (Spelman 1990:3). Spelman's observation was a response to the critique by black and lesbian feminists that they felt excluded from the category 'woman'. The challenge of transgender women follows the same line.

In a comparable manner, in Sarah's organisation there is a striking negotiation over the meaning of the category 'woman', which has ambivalent political implications. As her organisation works on peace and women, I ask her whether she (and her organisation) speak to the discourse that associates women with peacefulness. Sarah responds: *"You know, I hear it a lot, I don't subscribe to it. You know Roman mothers sent their sons to war and told their sons 'come back with your shield or on it'. I think it is a misperception, I think it is a perpetuation of misogyny! But it is something that initially some women are attracted to this organisation, 'I am a woman so I am more peaceful' (...) but on a personal basis I think it is a load of crap but it can be exploited for particular issues. For example the mother's day declaration is an anti-war declaration and in some places our members do mother's day anti-war events and are successful, it is attractive to media it plays into an understood role and so society understands things, so people are more likely to connect and not feel threatened by it (...) So it has its advantages and again, opening a*

*dialogue but it also has a disadvantage in pigeonholing and not being fully accurate”.*

While Sarah considers the link made between women and peace not only historically inaccurate but also misogynistic, at the same time she recognises the power of the stereotype both in terms of boosting membership and in attracting media attention. According to Pupavac, the connection between women and peace has existed since the Ancient times (Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*), featured also in the Old Testament (Ester and Ruth) and can be said to continue in current representations in international politics where “women are deemed peace promoters and men peace spoilers” (Pupavac 2008:1, see also Helms 2003). Eyben in her analysis of images of women in the information booklets produced by the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA), which later became DFID, finds that while the later booklets display fewer ‘myths’, at the same time “new ones [are] introduced, including women as peacemakers” (Eyben 2007a:74). Feminists as well have promoted the notion of women as peaceful. Robin Morgan for example, in her much lauded and criticised book *‘Sisterhood is Global’*, speaks about “the historical, cross-cultural opposition women express to war” (Morgan 1996:4).

While Sarah is very conscious about the ambivalence of perpetuating a stereotypical image of women, Elisa’s account, which evokes a similar stereotype, displays less reflexivity. Elisa speaks about women’s reliability in micro credit programmes: *“Because women involved in, especially on the grassroots level, micro credit, they are so incredibly reliable. They love to*

*give it to women because the repayment is almost 100%, if you give the loans to men you know what happens, alcohol, all kind of abuses involved but women are reliable and somehow on this level are the heart of the community and they are very concerned about their children. And even now in the credit [crunch] the issue emerged that there would have been fewer kind of [problems], if more women would have been involved; they even raised this concern at the World Forum”.*

Elisa presents a polarised picture in which men are necessarily unreliable because of, for example, alcohol abuse and women are naturally reliable as mothers and as the ‘heart of the community’. The image of men as selfish and competitive and of women as giving and caring has, as Elisa explains, been reinvigorated during the credit crisis (see for example Sunderland in: *The Guardian*, ‘After the crash, Icelandic women lead the rescue’, 22 February 2009).

Again, Eyben (2007) has found a comparable image of women in the publication material of the British ODA in the later 1980s when the message of the booklet was that the inclusion of women in development projects increased efficiency and effectiveness, making a specific reference to women accessing credit (see also Crewe and Harrison 1998:46, Smillie 2000:85). The images of women in gender and development policy as “productive bodies” show how these development policies are co-opted into a capitalist logic (Harcourt 2009:69, see also Spivak 1999, Eade 2007). While this efficiency argument is reminiscent of liberal feminism, the image of women as having

core characteristics, like being more reliable, more caring, less focussed on profit at all costs, relies on an essentialised picture of women that one could find in radical feminism. Gender and Development (GAD) programmes which aim to tackle women's subordination, work on the one hand under the assumption that ideas about gender are socially constructed, while on the other hand their policy proposals rely often on essentialised ideas of women, leading to a paradoxical situation (White 2003). Hence, these programmes run the risk of homogenising situations that are in fact very diverse, for example in assuming that "be it credit in Bangladesh, rural household food provision in Africa, (...) women are less selfish, [and] more responsible (...) than men" (White 2003:11).

In one of the most contested fields within feminism, sex work or prostitution and trafficking, some of the discussions have focussed on the use of stereotypes. When one reads both Sarah's example of the 'peaceful women' and Elisa's example of the 'reliable women' through the critical lens of the sex work approach to trafficking, one can more clearly see the inherent dangers in the reliance on stereotypes. As Doezeema observes, some feminist organisations, despite their recognition of the "inaccuracy and damaging effects of the stereotype" of the term 'trafficking in women', continue to use this term as a strategy to obtain funding and publicity (Doezeema 2000, see also Koster 2008b). However, she claims that

"attempts to combat the myth while using the terminology (...) are doomed by the limits to the discursive space imposed by the myth; [e]ach repetition (...) serves merely to reinforce the myth that campaigners are also attempting to

break down, thus turning this into a futile effort” (Doezema 2000, see also Kapur 2005:98 on the ‘victim subject’).

Hence the strategic use of the image of peaceful women might always lead to a backlash due to the power of the discourse that links peace and women together. This is exemplified when Sarah relates a story where in the context of a professional encounter with a high security specialist he immediately assumed that she has only come to talk to him about ‘soft security issues’. In her analysis of the myth around sex work and trafficking, Doezeema points to the traditional perception of “women’s role as bearers of their families’ and the nation’s honour”, which in a different context can be easily recovered from Elisa’s description of the reliable women (Doezeema 2000). The perceived ‘morality’ of women that might serve to obtain micro credits is at the same time a straight-jacket. Is it emancipatory when women’s ‘morality’ always serves the interest of the community and only men are ‘allowed’ to be immoral?

It is important to note that the feminism of the research participants should not be understood in isolation from the orientation of their organisations. In some cases the ideology of their organisations shaped the way the research participants could ‘act out’ their feminist convictions in their work. The work experiences in relation to feminism were different for those women who worked for specifically feminist organisations compared to those who worked for organisations with a wider remit with a dedicated gender unit/gender officer.



Kate compares her previous work with her current workplace: *“I presume for me working on gender is not so easy within..., I have been working in [a feminist network] before, so that is different when you are working within the women’s movement, women’s organisations, when you are working on gender in mainstream organisations you have the whole debates there and basically you have the same difficulties, debates, constraints as you have with doing your advocacy work in EU institutions, you have them also within your own organisation”*.

For Kate, in contrast to those who work for explicitly feminist organisations, there is not much difference between the politics in her organisation and the world of politics outside in terms of gender awareness. As she says, the struggles she experiences are very similar inside the organisation and within the EU. The contrast between her appointment as a gender officer and the hostility she perceives in relation to gender issues could be related to the fact that it is almost impossible nowadays for NGOs not to be committed to gender equality, at least on paper, while the political will to critically evaluate the workings of the organisation and to offer financial and social support is often absent (White 2003, Harcourt 2009). Smillie (2000:90) quotes a staff member of Oxfam’s Gender and Development Unit (GADU) remarking: “When GADU started, many people laughed; one or two called us lesbians, dikes; that is no longer acceptable. Now the most difficult problem is one of people pretending they agree” (see also Piálek 2008 about gender mainstreaming in Oxfam, Harcourt 2009). Dedicated gender experts in organisations with a wider remit experience often not only hostility and a lack of support in their

organisation, but also criticism from activists outside the mainstream institutions (Harcourt 2009).

‘Gender trainings’ often appear to be merely technical rather than feminist political interventions (White 2003). With the adoption of GAD policies, often female employees who had raised gender issues in their work before, were endowed the status of ‘women officers’; sometimes even wives of staff members were employed to become women or gender officers (White 2003). GAD work sometimes became known as “women’s work” with all the accompanying “negative associations for status this carried” (White 2003:4). Moreover, while ‘gender mainstreaming’ was originally developed from feminist ideas, many organisations that ‘do’ gender mainstreaming do not make any reference to feminism (Piálek 2008, see also Kothari 2005:440). Piálek’s analysis of Oxfam supports this idea that not only on the institutional level there is no direct mention of feminism (despite the adoption of gender mainstreaming and GAD approaches), but also on the staff levels. One of the employees he interviewed mentioned that he liked working for Oxfam as it addressed gender issues but was at the same time “not ‘one of those feminist organisations’” (Piálek 2008:289-290). Similarly Pupavac (2009) suggests that while gender approaches were initially introduced as more radical than women’s rights approaches, now gender policies are rather technocratic interventions, which can be implemented by both male and female staff without subscribing to a feminist ideology, in contrast to the political feminist approach associated with women’s rights. Menon, writing about the Indian context, argues that the increased availability of funding for gender issues means that more people are prepared to work on gender issues, also those that

lack the political conviction and “for whom feminism is often a temporary profession” (Menon 2004:220).

In Laura’s organisation working on gender issues is only a subsection of her wider remit. While she does specifically work on gender for her organisation, she identifies her feminism as almost an obstacle to her job: *“I mean for one thing being feminist, an outspoken feminist that is not a requirement for my job and I think that sometimes it is also a hindrance because I am less, I am not that very diplomatic lots of times, like I was telling you before about this situation where I had this man who was making comparisons to the animal world when I talked about men and women. For example in that particular situation I should have chosen to sort of not let myself be provoked by it [but] I did and I think if I had not been such a convinced feminist myself, if I would be more professional, or both I could just let it slide and I did not, I got really pissed and I yelled at him. This was not very strategic and it did not make his organisation change in any way and it did not make him change either”*.

Interestingly while Laura needs an understanding of gender (in)justice in order to be able to do her work (because gender is one of her focus areas in the job she was hired for) her feminism here is identified as a ‘hindrance’. Laura claims that if she were ‘less feminist’ or ‘more professional’, this situation with the man would not have escalated, as she would have been able to be more diplomatic. This implies that responding to sexism with feminist outrage is associated with being less professional. Here ‘professionalism as being strategic’ is juxtaposed ‘with ‘feminism as being emotional or out of

control'.<sup>20</sup> While Laura's understanding of gender power structures is key to her ability to do her work, she appears to think at the same time that the demands of professionalism force her to curtail her feminism. Piálek (2008) blames the failing of gender mainstreaming policies in Oxfam on the fact that the essentially political nature of the gender mainstreaming process is not sufficiently taken into account but only the technocratic elements. Quoting the words of a friend who worked for a development organisation, Piálek writes: "As it came to be that *the personal is political*, it must now be recognised that *the professional is political*" (Piálek 2008:295).

Catherine on the other hand explains that for those who work for her organisation there are some basic expectations with regards to their political convictions, "*it would be difficult to somebody who is against abortion (...) to work here, that would be impossible, the person would not even be employed I guess*". However, while it might be easier to find a consensus within a diverse group of feminists regarding abortion, other issues are still much more contentious.

Fay is disconcerted by the conflict among feminist organisations regarding the issue of sex work: "*Then you have these discussions with other women and feminist women and often you would agree with them on other issues and on this issue it is just such a terrible fight, really*". The phenomenon of the sale of sex has led to a split between feminists. On one side of the discussion are 'abolitionist' feminists, represented by the Coalition Against Trafficking in

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<sup>20</sup> In Chapter Six there will be a more extensive discussion on professionalism and the public/private divide in relation to NGO work

Women (CATW) who consider women who sell sex to be victims and who want to abolish prostitution. These people use the descriptor 'prostitute'. On the other side of the debate are feminists, who recognise the agency in this activity, and who emphasise that sex work is "legitimate labour" (Doezema 2001) and therefore seek alliances with trade unions; they tend to use the descriptor 'sex workers' (Augustín 2005). As Augustín points out, the choice of side is read as determining your identity "as good feminists or caring persons" (Augustín 2005). These examples demonstrate that the negotiation of the meaning of feminism(s) in relation to the organisations' work does not come without friction.

In a different way this is also observed by Catherine who recognises that the member organisations of her network would not all identify as feminist:

*"Some of them would not call themselves feminist which is quite funny".*

While Catherine here uses the word 'funny' to describe the refusal of women to identify as feminists, despite clearly advocating feminist ideals, the politicisation of the term feminism is again linked to the specific history of feminism as being associated with white Western middle class women, with colonialism and with capitalism. Women in post-socialist Eastern Europe, who are actively pursuing a politics of challenging gender relations prefer not to call themselves feminists as this is associated with "a specific western European version of women's emancipation" (Sperling et al. 2001:1168). Similarly, Alice Walker coined the term 'womanism' instead of Black feminism to mark it as an alternative approach to what was perceived as ethnocentric feminism (Walker 1984, see also hooks 2000). hooks (2000)

argues for an avoidance of the phrase “I am a feminist” in favour of “I advocate feminism”, claiming that this would stress feminism as a political struggle rather than a life style choice or identity. This would distract from the usual stereotypes associated with being a feminist and leaves open the possibility of supporting other political movements in addition to feminism (hooks 2000:31).

In sharp contrast with those organisations that had just one dedicated gender unit or officer without adopting a feminist framework, there are organisations, like Naomi’s, which chose to only have female staff as an explicit political choice. As Naomi says: *“I am still a big proponent of having also some spaces that are women’s spaces, not being in a mixed organisation and it is something that we are continually questioned about and have to justify but I do believe that no matter where you are in the world when you look in at the levels of violence in even what is considered the most developed of countries, the shocking levels of violence against women, that there is still need for supporting women to be empowered to you know, to be independent women, to be able to live a life in dignity and free of violence”*.

The deliberate decision for a women-only organisation has a radical feminist edge of separatism. NGO workers of other organisations indicated that they ‘involuntarily’ only employ women; all suitable job candidates had always been female. Some women working for these kinds of organisations still experience the fact that staff are all female as pleasant. Stacey however called

upon men to apply to their organisation as a rebuttal against the criticism they were facing as a women-only department.

Stacey: *“And you know, we hear it all the time, [our department] is like, the ‘girls club’ and we had to respond very strongly as to why that is and that we would be very happy to hire men if they were qualified. (...) And we don’t also do [this job] simply because we are women, it is not because I have a uterus that I am allowed to do this work, it is also because I have formal training in it and the assumption that people give when they say ‘it is just a group of girls that are doing something’ and literally that has been said, is a way of discrediting also what we do”.*

While Naomi is not prepared to give up the fact that her organisation exclusively employs women, her words similarly show the contentious position of women-only organisation when she points out that they ‘are continually questioned’. Stacey here uses the discourse of professionalisation, ‘I have a formal training in it’, with its associated value of neutrality, to counter accusations that they are just a (biased) ‘girls club’.

The above accounts have shown that the understandings and practices of feminism are shaped in the interaction between the NGO workers and their organisations. While it has been observed that individual organisations’ approaches to feminism impacted on the way the women NGO workers felt they could ‘act out’ their feminism, at the same time it could be argued that in some cases the women NGO workers shaped their organisations. Catherine’s

narrative is a good example of how different understandings of feminism circulate and are negotiated in a complex interplay between the employees of the organisation, the partner organisations, and the outside world. As Catherine works for an organisation formed by and for women, which specifically addresses gender equality, she always thought of it as feminist. However, some academic studies made her aware of the fact that her organisation's publicity material and website did not mention 'feminism' very often, which led her to *"push to introduce for example, together with colleagues the word 'feminism' more in the last years because it is true that it was not there very much"*.

Earlier in the interview, when I asked her whether she would call the organisation specifically feminist, she says: *"For me yes. Now it is quite funny for some we are too feminist, some call us communists, or socialists or whatever, and some others say that we are conservative. But in terms of the positioning that we have I think they are quite feminist, for me, but of course that is a very subjective point of view of 'what is feminism' and it is generational differences etc."*. Here Catherine points to the different 'readings' of the work of her organisation, with some finding the organisation 'too feminist' and others 'too little feminist'.

When I ask her why she calls the organisation feminist, she answers by reference to the goals of her organisation: *"[I would call the organisation feminist] because of the positions that it defends in relation to sexual rights, parity democracy, economic rights, pensions etc. For me what counts are the*



*ideas that we defend and not necessarily the methods. It is true that we are not an activist organisation going on the street and doing these kinds of very visible actions, which maybe we should do more often but that does not prevent us from being a committed organisation, I think”.*

So she notes that for some commentators, feminism is necessarily tied up with the ‘method’ of activism rather than lobbying mainstream institutions for change, which can be bureaucratic in nature. In addition, her defence that her organisation is committed despite their more bureaucratic methods shows that she recognises a discourse in which feminism must mean political activism against mainstream political institutions so that a ‘mainstream’ feminist NGO is an oxymoron (see Harcourt 2009). In the Australian context, feminists that are employed by the state to improve women’s position have been called ‘femocrats’ (Bulbeck 1998). Though Catherine is not employed by the state, she calls herself a ‘femocrat’ (in her case a mix of feminist and eurocrat) at some point as well acknowledging the fact that she advances a feminist agenda using bureaucratic, procedural methods. Bulbeck states that while femocrats are normally associated with advancing liberal feminist politics, their proposals for equality necessarily raise issues of sexual difference and hence their “liberal feminism has its radical edge” (Bulbeck 1998:6).

### **Sisterhood**

The history of (white) feminism is a history of the exclusion of the concerns of those women who did not fit the picture of a white middle-class, heterosexual woman. First wave feminism has been challenged (Caraway 1992) for

presenting Black feminism as marginal, just represented by a few exceptional figures like Sojourner Truth. In addition, first wave feminism has been criticised for the fact that white suffragists' fight for the vote only extended to white women and for using racist arguments to pursue the suffragist cause by claiming that white women should rather have the right to vote than black men. The critique of second wave feminism is levelled against the ethnocentric bias of feminism, which found expression in the notion of 'sisterhood' as based on a common experience of oppression.

According to hooks (2000), as sexism conceptualises femininity in terms of helplessness and victimhood, it is unwise for feminists to perpetuate this sexist idea of women by basing sisterhood on a notion of commonality in victimhood. There is an irony according to hooks, both in the fact that those who emphasised women's victimhood were often relatively privileged and in the fact that those who suffer substantial oppression and violence could psychologically not afford thinking of themselves as victims as they had to focus on survival (hooks 2000). This notion of victimhood allowed white women not to challenge and confront their own privilege and complicity in oppressing others: "they could abdicate responsibility for their role in the maintenance of sexism, racism, and classism" (hooks 2000:46). The term 'women' as used by white feminists served both to differentiate white women from the 'male oppressors' and to stress the alliance with black women masking the racism and classicism of white women (hooks 1981). Caraway (1992) uses the alternative term 'segregated sisterhood' to suggest the paradox entailed in the history of sisterhood and to stress its incoherence. "In the logic

of combining these two terms, each invalidates and cancels the other, rendering suspect the animating symbol –‘sisterhood’- of a profoundly transforming social movement” (Caraway 1992:3).

Given the significance of the term ‘sisterhood’ for Western feminism (especially radical feminism) and its contentiousness in the light of the criticism by black feminists, it is important to investigate how the women NGO workers relate to the notion of ‘sisterhood’ when situating their feminisms. In particular because the nature of their work on gender and women issues for women from elsewhere presupposed some relation between them and those other women. Casey’s narrative, without using the word, has a hint of sisterhood as common oppression. When asked where her feeling of responsibility comes from that prompts her to engage with the lives of women geographically far away from her, she says: *“Because it is part of my own upbringing to have a gender point of view, or gender experience to relate to. For me it is not so, it is the same kind of struggle just different environment”*.

As her work has a strong international dimension, which she has not touched upon when she emphasises her orientation on gender issues here, I enquired about the international orientation that is now present in her work. The idea of sisterhood based on common oppression is repeated when Casey says: *“The gender orientation is something from my childhood and family upbringing, I would have taken that anywhere. And you may also say that I am carrying out the same struggle just in another part of the world. The struggle that I have*

*with me from home here and I just recognise it everywhere else and act upon it. The international [dimension] would not [necessarily] have been there”.*

In a very similar vein, Sonia in response to my question whether it matters to her who she supports in her work, says *“No, I think I would say a woman in need is a woman in need, here in Switzerland, in Argentina, in Africa or whatever. I wanted to work with something that had to do with gender and that is probably because of where I come from, because of a very macho culture that we have”.*

Both Casey and Sonia emphasise the sameness of women’s struggles worldwide. While one of them has a European and the other a Latin-American background, both also implicitly compare their own experience of being a woman to the experiences of women around the globe. Spelman is highly critical of such notion of universal sisterhood and calls the phrase ‘as a woman’, “the Trojan horse of feminist ethnocentrism” (Spelman 1990:185). At the same time, similar to the discussion of the dilemma of essentialism in the previous section, Caraway notes that feminist thought needs generalising; “so, yes, all feminists are essentialists in this basic sense” (Caraway 1992:173, see also Mohanty 1992:76). The problem then does not necessarily lie in generalisation per se but in its “obstreperous cousin ethnocentrism” (Caraway 1992:173). When Casey and Sonia compare their experiences growing up as a woman in their own countries with the experiences of women worldwide, they make a similar move as Robin Morgan makes in her famous book *‘Sisterhood is Global’* which first appeared in 1984. Morgan compiled gender statistics

and women's stories of 70 countries about the situation for women in their countries and on that basis concluded that sisterhood is global (Morgan 1996). Chandra Mohanty in her sympathetic critique of *'Sisterhood is Global'* claims that while the homogeneity arrived at in Morgan's book is not based on biology, but on "the psychologisation of complex and contradictory historical and cultural realities", in the end the bond between women as conceived in the book derives from an assumption of sameness in oppression and struggle that is ahistorical (Mohanty 1992:80).

One of the women NGO workers I interviewed is one of the original contributors to *'Sisterhood is Global'* and, perhaps unsurprisingly, she talked with me about 'reviving sisterhood'. Speaking about the idea behind one of the projects initiated by her organisation, she says<sup>21</sup>: *"I wanted to (...) revive this concept of sisterhood, this kind of connection beyond borders you know, that we have something in common with (...) women all over the world (...) I think that this idea is somehow engrained in us, we feel it emotionally, (...) but it is something that we have to rediscover, it somehow got lost in transition, and this old concept of consciousness raising groups you know, (...) somehow it got lost, it is not there anymore and actually it was our strongest tool in the 70s, and it is a very good tool, as women are very curious and I wonder why we stopped asking questions, why we kind of were quite complacent"*.

The call here is for 'reviving sisterhood' rather than for reforming or revolutionising sisterhood, which could suggest that for her the much-

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<sup>21</sup> To ensure anonymity for this interviewee in the specific context of her contribution to the book *'Sisterhood is Global'*, I have here also not mentioned the name I have used for this interviewee in the other sections and chapters.

criticised notion of sisterhood is still left unblemished. The tension between a natural or biological notion of sisterhood and a political notion of sisterhood is interesting here as well. On the one hand, sisterhood is presented as something we feel and that is engrained while on the other hand it is something that has been lost and needs to be actively retrieved through participation in consciousness-raising groups. In addition, the interviewee uses the 'as women' phrase that Spelman called the 'Trojan horse of ethnocentrism'. hooks (2000) warns that the process of consciousness-raising, when women were encouraged to see their own experiences in the light of structures of sexism is just one step, and should not be the last step for feminism as a political movement. In the light of the beginning of the second feminist wave, when women were encouraged to take the personal as the starting point for thinking about women's rights, it is perhaps not surprising that middle-class white privileged women developed some blind spots with regards to the situation of other women (Verloo 2009b). hooks however, cautions against the tendency to see this ability to describe "their own woe [as] synonymous with developing a critical political consciousness" as a hindrance to the development of feminism as this means feminism would be based only on "incomplete perspectives" (hooks 2000:26). Hence, for hooks, the 'success' of the kind of consciousness-raising groups that the contributor to *'Sisterhood is Global'* wants to recover, would depend on the kinds of questions women would ask both themselves and each other.

Other women NGO workers interviewed qualified their belief in sisterhood more clearly. Naomi, for example, when asked whether she believes in global

sisterhood, replies: *“The whole thing has been pretty problematic but I believe we do share common sisterhood in, in many different ways, but in a general common struggle in being taken just as seriously as a man, wherever we are, we still a long way to go, no matter where we are in the world. I mean obviously many of us have huge privileges that most of the other women in the rest of the world don’t have, [don’t] enjoy”*.

Naomi’s awareness of a critique of sisterhood is shown when she says that ‘the whole thing has been pretty problematic’. By recognising the difference in privilege, Naomi acknowledges not only difference but also inequality, where “some women are better off in the economy and more securely placed in the dominant culture than others” (Bulbeck 1998:205). Mohanty (1992) extends her critique of Morgan’s book by indicating that the assumption of shared struggle against patriarchy and her proposal for ‘political transcendence’ of that male world masks the implication of women in practices of power like imperialism and ignores the real differences, material and ideological, between women. Following on Mohanty’s reading of Morgan, Naomi’s (at first sight qualified) account of sisterhood collapses again into the same idea of patriarchy as the most significant enemy of women worldwide ignoring the racism or classism that divides women (see also hooks 2000:27). In a similar vein, Spelman argues that ethnocentrism and class privilege can still remain intact despite on the surface taking difference into account, when we assume the woman part we have in common “is what we know from looking at the case of white middle-class women” (Spelman 1990:166).

Naomi's narrative featured another interesting theme in relation to sisterhood, which was evident in some other interview accounts, namely the idea that sisterhood or linkages are established through motherhood. Naomi: *"I think that the common bond of motherhood is also something that is very strong that I feel since having had children. Yeah, so I do feel that there is something that as women we have in common, we have a lot of common linkages, but I don't feel that we are a homogeneous group by any means. (...) Well, it is all part of patriarchy of trying to somehow insist that women agree on everything in order for us to move forward and of course that is impossible. So while I think that there are lots of things that bring us together, we are still individuals and have different needs and realities and we need to respect that, that there is no particular group of women who have all the answers on behalf of women"*.

The second part of this quote is consistent with the earlier statement in which she recognises differences, 'different realities and needs' and the force of patriarchy without too much explicit mention of the complicity of women in some of these inequalities. While the notion of sisterhood through motherhood could potentially be effective in bridging other, for example ethnic divides, it also potentially contains an element of exclusion as not all women can or want to be mothers.

Laura expresses an ambivalent relation with sisterhood, which is worth quoting in more detail: *"For me [the whole notion of sisterhood] has been a journey, it has been complicated for me, I was never part of sort of female groups or gatherings where you could feel that solidarity because we are women and for me it has more often than not been a question of competition*



*with other women. And I think that for me to feel this, it is one thing to want it in your head, like I want sisterhood so much, but then the other is to feel it immediately and I have worked a lot with that sort of try to feel... I felt it a lot in Colombia when it related to security, that became very obvious, that I felt more secure in any environment where there were women present. (...) I was in a really, really ugly robbery, an armed robbery with 5 guys and after that I got really scared and I almost could not continue working because I got really paranoid when I went out and it was really scary (...), but all the time in Colombia [I would] walk where women were walking, (...) that became a strategy of security, which has nothing to do with it really, except for the fact that most violence is conducted by men, also in Colombia but it was not really less likely that I was going to get mugged”.*

Laura talks here about her desire to ‘feel sisterhood’; a desire that arose from her feminism, but that was challenged in situations of competition rather than cooperation between women. The idea of patriarchy hindering the bonding of women or their mutual recognition as being part of the same ‘class’ is a well-known feminist argument (see Morgan 1996). Laura eventually finds some alternative form of sisterhood, one that is based on a (as she says herself ‘false’) feeling of safety. In this particular situation of fear of being a target of robbery, it is imaginable that Laura’s usual privilege in relation to other women in Colombia is reversed, as her whiteness and visible Western identity, signalling affluence, makes her a more likely target.

When I asked her to describe a situation when she would have wanted sisterhood but where it did not work out easily, Laura talks about another project she worked on in the Balkans where she worked directly together with women's organisations. Laura: *"I mean working in this [field] has to do with my values and I want to achieve but it is also important for me that I do it in a professional way meaning that if I would have to choose between solidarity and professionalism, (...) I would choose professionalism and I could feel that I had older colleagues in [my organisation] who had been there when it all started during the war that were driven totally by solidarity (...) and they could compromise a lot, almost anything just based on that solidarity and I found that very problematic because that also meant that you accepted things from all the female friends that you had been together with in the struggle, you accepted failures and flaws and lack of transparency, there where you would not do it with a newer partner organisation"*.

Laura's understanding of professionalism here relates to being impartial, clear and transparent, which conflicted with the attitude she encounters which she relates to sisterhood. hooks recognises this version of sisterhood which "dictated that sisters were to 'unconditionally' love one another, that they were to avoid conflict and minimise disagreement; that they were not to criticise each other, especially in public" (hooks 2000:46-47); needless to say this is not a sisterhood hooks evaluated positively. However, Laura's equation of professionalism with neutrality in contrast to the sisterhood she encountered incorporates risks as well. As Iris Marion Young (1985) has noted, the dominant assumption in modern ethics is that moral reason should be impartial

and that reason and desire are opposite values. A consequence of this assumption, as she argues, is that moral decisions based on caring, empathy, and the realisation of the different needs of different people are labelled non-rational, subjective and sentimental (Young 1985). Since women are often associated with those values, they are consequently “excluded from moral rationality” (Young 1985:386). Hence Laura’s understanding of professionalism in relation to moral issues potentially underlines this modern morality, which rules out those seen as ‘deviant’ from the norm of the rational man and undermines feminist suggestions to include care and sympathy in moral decisions.<sup>22</sup>

In both narratives Laura slips from ‘sisterhood’ to ‘solidarity’ without differentiating between these concepts as stemming from different ideological views. Caraway proposes solidarity among feminists as an alternative to sisterhood as a “sign of our political maturity” (Caraway 1992:201). Solidarity, in contrast to sisterhood, “allow[s] for greater differentiations [of] the roots of oppression” and should be created through the practice of political struggles rather than being taken as natural and pre-given (Wieringa 2009). According to Saskia Wieringa (2009), after sisterhood and solidarity, now proposals are voiced that want to base feminist politics on affinity. The politics of affinity is based on Haraway’s suggestion to consider the possibilities of building coalitions based on affinity concerning one specific issue or project. As Wieringa defines it: “It is thus not the commonality of the

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<sup>22</sup> Notions of professionalism linked to assumptions about types of morality will be discussed in much more detail in Chapter Six.

‘us’ that binds the affinity group, but rather the fight against a common, or at least a commonly defined enemy” (Wieringa 2009:32).

While none of the research participants explicitly mentioned the term affinity politics, some of their organisations arguably work in international coalitions on the basis of affinity rather than shared identity. Ruth’s organisation for example often works with other women’s organisations but also sometimes finds allies in for example young people’s organisations. It is clear from her account that she does not take a shared approach among women immediately for granted, when she says: *“It’s a tremendous fight for everybody, so everybody does it in their own way and sometimes you can find a common ground on which you want to work together and it is really nice”*.

In Caraway’s reading of Lorde, it is possible for women to find and share common experiences; however, we need to be constantly aware that we cannot take for granted commonality or consensus, but rather that we need to negotiate these experiences with each other (Caraway 1992). Sarah’s account of how the international unit of her organisation works together with the national sections is a powerful example of such negotiated sisterhood, or solidarity.

Sarah: *“I think, yes, it is challenging, the challenges though are also opportunities and strengths because while it is challenging that we have varying opinions, it also means that we pick critical looks at what it is that we are doing. And when we do come to consensus, that consensus includes so*

*many different perspectives, that we know it is a well-thought impressive consensus. (...) A lot of times we don't get there, and we continue debates and discussions for years before we can achieve a consensus. And that too, because we are exposed to all these different opinions, it informs the work that we are doing and makes that work more holistic. [W]hen we issue statements from the international level, we are very clear that it is, that we have consulted quite broadly and we have consensus on those decisions. So it makes them, I think as opposed to the UN where you get the lowest common denominator, because of the challenges we put to one another, we are more often challenging each other to make a stronger and more powerful statement”.*

In Sarah's narrative, sisterhood has become intensive, challenging, time-consuming, but ultimately rewarding. Even when no consensus is found in the short-term, the mere exposure to alternative viewpoints becomes (self-) transformative. Spelman aptly calls a shared viewpoint, “a difficult political achievement” (Spelman 1990:13) in contrast to what is often assumed, it being an automatic given. hooks (1986) claims that a real commitment to feminism as a political struggle entails a preparedness to productively engage with conflict in order to develop our understanding of each other.

The notion of sisterhood was present in many of the narratives of the women I interviewed; while sometimes I prompted the women to talk about sisterhood, other times it was introduced spontaneously by the interviewee and I was surprised to notice that ‘sisterhood’ still had such currency. It was equally striking to notice the frequency with which the interviewed women referred

with admiration and pleasure to their contact with women from all over the world. While these comments were often made in relation to the question what motivated them in their work, rather than in relation to sisterhood, glimpses of an alternative form of sisterhood, one based on inspiring one another, could possibly be found here. Ruth for example says *“I must say that I am thrilled with all the wonderful and the remarkable women that I met through the last 10 years”*.

Catherine finds it motivating to meet the members of her organisation, *“because it is great to have feminists, for most part, from all over Europe, from all ages, meeting and sharing and that is quite motivating”*.

Sophie, finds her motivation for her work in that *“you meet wonderful persons in this work, people that struggle and that have political fights and do service delivery in countries where it is really impossible and they sacrifice a lot in their work, so I guess the motivation comes from the people that work in countries that are so much more difficult than Sweden”*.

Naomi says: *“Working with women from all over the world is just a really fantastic and really enriching experience”*.

hooks as well, despite her critique of a specific shallow form of sisterhood does not reject sisterhood altogether and emphasises the importance of sisterhood: “We are mistaken if we allow these distortions or the women who created them (...) to lead us to devalue sisterhood” (hooks 2000:45).

## **Race to Innocence**

As discussed above, hooks (2000) identified a link between sisterhood as victimhood and the refusal of white middle-class women to take responsibility for their implication in racism, imperialism and classism. The idea of a universal, shared identity neatly separated white women from the oppressions by men and masked the divisions between black and white women (hooks 2000). Fellows and Razack call the phenomenon where women believe that their sexist oppression is the most significant and where they deny their complicity in other oppressions “the race to innocence” (Fellows and Razack 1998:335). Noticing the frequent occurrence of the ‘race to innocence’ among feminists, they attempted to trace the reasons of why we are led into the “trap of competing marginalities” (Fellows and Razack 1998:339), where we compare oppressions and privilege ‘our’ oppressed position. Furthermore, they wanted to know why, despite the intellectual theoretical understanding of multiple oppressions, it proves so hard to acknowledge our complicity.

Fellows and Razack identify three reasons; 1) if not privileging the oppression we experience we feel we “risk erasure”, 2) focussing on the oppression we experience is the first liberating step, “a productive defensive response to oppression”, 3) when we are in a dominant position, we tend to belittle the narratives of those who are oppressed as our own oppression does not make us immune to Othering (Fellows and Razack 1998:339-340). Carby’s observation (1992) that white women were reluctant to admit their complicity (fearing it would divert attention from gender oppression) supports the first reason suggested by Fellows and Razack. Frankenberg’s (1993) interviews with white

women about race also led her to conclude, in line with the third reason suggested, that white women's experience of discrimination did not lead them to compassion with other subordinated groups.

In the interviews, I asked all women how they thought their identity played out in their work. While some interviewees included both dominant and subordinate elements of their identity in their answers, the 'race to innocence' can be traced in some of the silences concerning whiteness, nationality, class etc. When I asked Casey about how her identity played out in her work and specifically mentioned her nationality, her whiteness and her gender, she replies: *"The gender part of it is strong. The academic training I have undertaken, my education has played a strong role, it is very, it has been a contributing factor that, or rather maybe I should say, the difficulties I have faced have been related to my gender but also to my profession, having a non-technical education. This field in development has always been dominated by men in mainly technical positions, and very little respect has been paid to the work of sociologists, and it is still a very difficult position I think"*.

Casey chooses to focus in her answer on her gender and her education leaving out her nationality and her whiteness despite specific prompting from my side. Interestingly, she mentions her specific academic education as an obstacle, due to the bias in her field towards technical studies without reflecting on the privilege of academic education. Frankenberg (1993) experienced difficulties at the start of research in finding white women who were prepared to talk about race. She relates the resistance she encountered when introducing her



research to the fact that for white women the only apparent options concerning their attitude towards race was “either one does not have anything to say about race, or one is apt to be deemed ‘racist’ simply by virtue of having something to say” (Frankenberg 1993:33). Casey’s experiences with gender discrimination in her work, lead her to refer to a form of sisterhood again.

Casey: *“In general it is not an advantage to be a woman, because most of the management positions are being held by men (...). And they have only [recently] grown to realise that sometimes you send out women here with influence and resources which they need to take seriously. So it is only because you have the power that you are recognised. But no, over the years it has not become easier being a woman, only if you have other women to relate to”.*

When I asked Elisa the same question about the impact of her identity on her work she focuses firstly on her identity as a feminist. After I ask a second question related to whether her identity could sometimes be a barrier in terms of relating to others, she continues to talk about her feminist identity. To my next question which specifically asks her whether she thinks her nationality, coming from the West, her whiteness, and her age, also impact her work, she replies: *“Oh, that is very beneficial, Vienna is a destination, especially for the women from the Middle East to reach without problems, visa problems we can take care of, it is not an issue for them to come here”* and then jumps to the impact of her feminist identity again.

Fellows and Razack (1998), drawing on Lugones's work, point out that those of the dominant identity category, white people, heterosexual people, men, middle-class people, do not need to define themselves in terms of the category, do not need to label themselves as 'white' or 'heterosexual'. Identity thus "comes to bear an intrinsic relation to subordination" while "to be the unmarked or unnamed is to belong to the dominant group" (Fellows and Razack 1998:341). This would explain the silences regarding the dominant categories of the women's identities. The term 'identity' in my question triggered a reflection on those categories linked to subordination rather than to domination.

Joan Cocks offers an alternative insight: that to expect people from subordinate groups (like women/feminists) to be wholly innocent and always ethical in their behaviour is not a sign of respect but conversely implies that subordinate groups are not complex in their thoughts and wants (in Caraway 1992). Imagining feminists as always moral and correct, as Caraway phrases it, "serve[s] to flatten out our messiness, gloss over the truly interesting and paradoxical ways we don't get things right in our thoughts, motives, and action" (Caraway 1992:187). This complexity and messiness in thought and action is nicely illustrated in Laura's reflection on her blindness to other categories of subordination than gender: *"When it comes to gender I think I am fairly good, and for me that is a reaction, an immediate reaction, 'ok, there are no women here', (...) but for example with class it is different because I am really [a] comfortable middle-class academic, and I can easily get caught up in discussions and just afterwards realise 'wait a minute, but all the people*

*I talked to they were university students, academics, middle class people' and not having that class consciousness at all in the same way".*

While Laura is very reflective about her own blind spots, and wants to and attempts to take notice of other types of marginalisation, she also falls in the "trap of competing marginalities" (Fellows and Razack 1998:339). When I ask her why gender rather than other structures of subordination is at the forefront of her mind, she says: *"First of all I think it is important because I think it is absolutely fundamental to change as a power structure I see that it is more fundamental than other power structures. And it is also, it is very personal, it is a power structure that I relate to personally every day and the difficulties related to it, the way I don't do with... (...) In the gender structure that is where I am in a disadvantaged position, but it is almost the only one, I mean age-wise I am in my 30s, which is a fairly good age to be in, it is better than being 23 for example and of course also it is not that obvious in Sweden, but I know that had I been in Colombia now the fact that I have 2 kids is also an authority in itself, being middle class, ethnically white, those are all advantaged positions".*

And later in the interview, she says: *"I am not sure but sometimes I get the feeling that gender in that way is so much more deeply rooted because we are forced to produce and reproduce gender roles all the time, you can find settings that are fairly homogenous in other ways with class or ethnicity (...) But I mean in almost any environment, in each family you have men and women, so you have this constant low intensive reproduction of roles that is really hard to get at because so much of it is perceived as private, still".*

Laura wavers between an acknowledgement that her own experience of gender oppression might lead her to prioritise gender and an attempt to find theoretical explanations for gender as a more deeply rooted structure embedded in the private sphere. This, as Fellows and Razack (1998) suggested, could indeed stem from the anxiety to stress gender oppression as a category that should not be forgotten. Spelman (1990) observed that when racism and sexism are discussed and compared, this often culminates in a debate on which of these structures of domination is primary, more basic. As she would argue the different reasons that are produced to either advocate that race, sex or class is more fundamental are ultimately irrelevant, as the entire idea of a ‘competition’ between oppressions is not constructive. However, the argument that gender discrimination is of a different nature than other types of discrimination is still not uncommon. In response to a *‘European Commission consultation on a possible new initiative to prevent and combat discrimination outside employment’*, the European Women’s Lobby (EWL), which is the largest platform of women’s organisations in the EU argued in 2007:

“Gender-based discrimination is about the structural unequal distribution of power and resources between women and men belonging to all groups in society and thus should be distinguished from discrimination on other bases such as ethnicity, disability and so on. Furthermore, women as a category can be distinguished from other major oppressed groups in that they represent a numerical majority and it is imperative that they are regarded as a basic unit of analysis of social life and experiences and in relation to all other forms of discrimination” (EWL website 2007).

Crenshaw argued in 1991 already that anti-discrimination policies, which either focus on sex or on racial discrimination without looking at the combined effects of subordination “cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which black women are subordinated” (Crenshaw 2000:209). However, here arguments are raised again to separate gender discrimination from other types of discrimination. When the EWL states that ‘gender-based discrimination is about the structural unequal distribution of power and resources between women and men *belonging to all groups of society* and thus should be distinguished from discrimination on other bases’ (emphasis added), it seems that the underlying assumption is that gender affects all while e.g. ethnicity does not. It implies that only some of us have an ethnicity, while all of us have a gender. Another contemporary example of the belief that gender oppression is more essential and widespread than racism would be Robin Morgan’s call to vote for Hillary Clinton during the US election primaries between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama (2008). Morgan, whose book ‘*Sisterhood is Global*’ has been discussed above, states in ‘*Goodbye to all that (#2)*’ for example that: “A few non-racist countries may exist—but sexism is everywhere”.

When Sweden in 2009 replaced its separate acts of legislation, including the gender equality act, with one Discrimination Act and also introduced a new Equality Enforcement Body, which merged the 4 separate equality enforcement bodies on gender, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation, only JämO (the gender equality body) was against this measure, while all

other equality bodies were in favour of this change (Freidenvall 2009 and the Equality Ombudsman website 2009). The latter equality bodies argued that merging the equality bodies into one would lead to “greater efficiency, more possibilities to tackle more than one ground of discrimination” and felt that it would “‘upgrade’ the importance of ‘their’ discrimination ground”. In contrast, JämO argued that “the different inequality strands are not similar, that the category ‘women’ cannot be compared to ‘minorities’”, and feared a “loss of expertise” and a “downgrading of gender” (Freidenvall 2009). As Squires (2007) notes in relation to the mainstreaming of different equality strands, some feminists are worried that the demands of different equality lobbies might be incompatible, and that the inclusion of other categories in the mainstreaming process is an indication of a decreasing concern with gender.

Laura’s narrative might also display the ‘blindness’ that comes from being inside the dominant group in her analysis of class and ethnicity. Laura argues that she is more aware and sensitive to gender oppression than to other oppressions, which she explains through the fact that gender is the only part of her identity where she is in a disadvantaged position. While Ruth Frankenberg concludes that being subjected to one type of marginalisation, e.g. sexism, does not necessarily lead to empathy and awareness of other subordinations, Frankenberg also recognises that “liberatory movements” could provide some women with “specific tools” that helped them finding antiracist approaches (Frankenberg 1993:20). Laura is very aware of how her focus on gender in her work and in her private life is linked to her own experience of gender oppression and her relative privilege on other accounts. She says that she

*“sometimes do[es] the exercise to translate [her ideas about gender structures] into one of the other power structures”* where she is in the dominant position.

She gives the example of sessions on masculinity that she facilitates as part of her job and which she thinks should be compulsory for all boys and men. She later realised that her ideas applied to other power structures, imply that she should also be compelled to participate in sessions on racism. Laura: *“Does that mean that I also think that I should be in groups with white people talking about racism and whiteness and how we reproduce these power structures? And of course it does, that would be a logical way of dealing with it if I expect that from men then I should also expect that from myself and I don’t. And I could always say ‘yeah, but I have chosen, I focus on working with gender and feminism’ but that is also my easiest choice, that is my disadvantaged position that is also where I have something to gain. For me working with my whiteness is a lot less rewarding, so of course I am no better than someone else”*.

Speaking directly to Laura’s acknowledgment of her own false excuse, ‘and I could always say, ‘yeah, but I have chosen to focus on working with gender and feminism’, Fellows and Razack pertinently urge us to ask ourselves the questions “where have we positioned other women within our strategies for achieving social justice? What do we gain from this positioning?” (Fellows and Razack 1998:352). These questions are particularly urgent in the context of NGO work, which has a commitment to forms of social and/or global

justice and which naturally at the same time can display blind spots in the lack of acknowledgement of other systems of power.

Recognising this hesitation to fully engage with other political struggles against subordination, they argue that as all structures of subordination are interconnected and interdependent, fighting just one type of marginalisation might give us “a toehold on respectability”, but never real liberation (Fellows and Razack 1998:350). They draw on examples of subordinated groups dependent for their status on the even lower position of others (e.g. white women with black maids, black maids looking down on prostitutes) to show how complicity in other oppressions served to maintain respectability by drawing boundaries between us and them (Fellows and Razack 1998). The recurrent conflict between our theoretical and political understanding of multiple oppressions and our emotional response to maintain our innocence, points to our anxiety to acknowledge the “permeability of the boundaries” between us and them (Fellows and Razack 1998:343). While Fellows and Razack’s call to attend to other subordinations almost has an instrumental dimension in their argument that only recognising the interconnectedness of the structures of subordination can lead to true liberation (see also Matsuda 1991), other black feminists rather appeal to morality. Lorde, in the aptly called section ‘*Uses of Anger*’, asks:

“What woman here is so enamoured of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman’s face? What woman’s terms of oppression have become precious and necessary to her as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny?” (Lorde 1984:132).



Laura's awareness and questioning of her own privilege and the acknowledgement of her 'race to innocence', shows however that she is not 'so enamoured of her own oppression' that she shies away from critical self-scrutiny. Sandra Harding, in her famous account of feminist standpoint theory, advocates a "strong reflexivity" (Harding 1991:163).

This "would require that the objects of inquiry be conceptualised as gazing back in all their cultural particularity and that the researcher, through theory and methods, stand behind them, gazing back at his [sic] own socially situated research project in all its cultural particularity and its relationship to other projects of his [sic] culture" (Harding 1991:163).

While Harding's standpoint theory stresses the importance of knowledge being produced by oppressed groups, she also writes against the tendency of over-advantaged groups, men, white feminists, heterosexuals to retreat to a passive attitude of guilt in which they feel that they cannot say or claim anything anymore (Harding 1991). She calls upon these over-advantaged groups to critically reflect on their privileged position and its relation to the oppression of other groups as a way to take responsibility (Harding 1991). At the same time she acknowledges the inevitable and necessary painfulness of these reflexive processes; she says, "it can't be entirely a pleasure to discover the unintentionally racist assumptions that have guided so many of my thoughts and practices" (Harding 1991:293).

In Laura's narrative discussed above, it is possible to see glimpses of this reflexivity. In response to my question about how her identity plays out in her work she says: *"I don't think there is a moment in my work where my identity does not matter of course. And I think I sometimes manage to be conscious and to do a good job anyways, but I also think I slip all the time, I forget things, (...) I am really prejudiced sometimes about lots of things, but at least I think I am fairly honest with myself and I can see it"*.

In this example 'identity' is not solely associated with categories of subordination but also with domination and privilege, in contrast to the silences on dominance displayed earlier in the narratives of Elisa and Casey. Here Laura stresses the importance of recognising and making explicit her own position and identity. At the same time she realises that while she attempts to recognise her position and the prejudices she holds, she 'slips' all the time. She cannot reach a perfect position where her recognition of her prejudices is complete and finished, where she does not make the mistake again. Both Rose (1997) and Maxey (1999) point to the risk of the use of reflexivity as 'transparent', as they call it, as a flight to certainty. This transparency happens when researchers think that after doing a short reflexive exercise in the beginning of their study their knowledge is objective and universal again, when they think that the process of reflexivity can be completed, and that by being reflexive they are able to know everything about their and the Other's position. Rather Rose (1997) argues for the productiveness of and the significance of the uncertainties in reflexivity, that neither the Self nor the Other can ever be completely known and understood.

When Laura says ‘I think I am fairly honest with myself and I can see it’, this seems to verge on the transparent reflexivity that Rose warns against, the idea that the Self is ultimately transparent and knowable. At the same time, the ‘honesty’ is one step towards taking the responsibility that Harding advocates. She argues that to take responsibility for one’s position of privilege means “learning how I am connected to other whites and to people of colour; by learning what the consequences of my beliefs and behaviours as a European American woman will be” (Harding 1991:283). hooks similarly argues that the ‘forging’ of sisterhood that goes beyond false assumptions of universal oppression, has to start with “the individual woman’s acceptance that American [read: Western here] women, without exception, are socialised to be racist, classist and sexist, in varying degrees” (hooks 1981:157). Following Harding’s suggestion however, this goes beyond mere ‘honesty’ and would mean that when Laura asks whether she ‘should be in groups with white people talking about racism and whiteness and how we reproduce these power structures’, the answer should be ‘yes!’. However, hooks rightly warns against ‘unlearning racism workshops’ that entail mainly therapeutic individualised acknowledgements of prejudice instead of focussing on the need for change in political practices (hooks 1986). As hooks aptly expresses it, awareness and acknowledgement of complicity in racism is only meaningful when it results in a transformation; “a woman (...) who learns to acknowledge that she is racist is no less a threat than one who does not” (hooks 1986:133).

As has been discussed above, one other response to the privileging of white women's experiences and the related phenomenon of the privileging of gender over other categories such as race and class in the 'race to innocence' has been the introduction of the term 'intersectionality'. Black feminists' assertion that the experiences of black women could only insufficiently be theorised when analyses of 'race' and gender were separated, prompted calls for an approach that would be attentive to the interaction between different categories of subordination.<sup>23</sup> An intersectional analysis could work against the 'race to innocence' in three different ways: First, by showing how gender functions in conjunction with other categories like race, it destabilises 'gender' as a fixed category and hence it becomes almost impossible to argue that oppression occurs solely on the basis of gender without attention to other categories. Secondly, while intersectional approaches have mostly been applied to study and describe the experiences of those that are facing an array of different types of oppression, intersectional approaches can also be applied to groups that do not face multiple axes of discrimination, but rather occupy 'mixed' or advantaged positions (see Yuval-Davis 2006a). Hence an intersectional analysis situates people in a more complex way, which can give insight into how people can be both oppressed and oppressors, complicit in the subordination of others. Thirdly, an intersectional analysis can show how different systems of oppression are dependent on one another and it thereby reminds us of Fellows' and Razack's claim (1998) that only by addressing all

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<sup>23</sup> While intersectionality as a term was only introduced into feminist theory in the 1990s, Verloo (2009b) interestingly argues that the earlier debates between radical, liberal and socialist feminism can be said to have been equally centred around how gender and other categories (in this case mostly class and ethnicity to some extent) intersect or stand alone.

these systems of oppression together we can have true liberation. Elsewhere, Razack frames it as follows:

“By understanding the connections between systems of oppression, geographical regions and various groups of women, we might better come to see why it has been so difficult for each one of us to see our privilege at the same time as our penalty. An interlocking analysis reminds us of the ease with which we slip into positions of subordination (for example, the sexually vulnerable woman, the woman with sole responsibility for child care, or the woman without access to managerial positions) without seeing how this very subordinate location simultaneously reflects and upholds race and class privilege” (Razack 2001:14).

One example of how gender functions in conjunction with other categories could be found in the fact that both gender and age were very frequently mentioned as playing a major role in the work experiences of the women NGO workers. I will argue that the intersection of the categories of gender and age produced a specific effect that cannot be theorised by considering both categories separately. Indeed, as Yuval-Davis asserts, the “point of intersectional analysis is not (...) to reinscribe the additive model of oppression” but to “analyse the differential ways in which different social divisions are concretely enmeshed and constituted by each other” (2006a:205).

When I ask Sarah to give me some examples of how her identity plays a role in her work, she tells me what she calls ‘an anecdote’ of a situation in which she met with a Middle Eastern government official to discuss disarmament.

She tells me that after the first introduction and greetings, *“he said ‘so what is this young woman, young lovely woman doing, what can I help you with? We are improving our maternal health programmes, (...) we are really taking care of our young ones’ and I looked at him and said ‘I think that’s great, I am glad that you said that, but no, I am actually here to talk to you about the chemical weapons convention’”*.

While arguably, his statements about the maternal health programmes and ‘the young ones’ can be read as a response solely to her gender, his form of address ‘young lovely woman’ points to an image that is co-produced and strengthened through the intersection of sexism and ageism. Being young coupled with being a woman is read as either not very serious and competent – just ‘lovely’ - while the combination of youth with male could potentially be read as a sign of ambition and strength.

Sonia who works to support women in Africa, relates how in her encounter with those women, she feels that *“they won’t treat you as equals or as colleagues, but you will always be sort of the little girl, the assistant”*. While Sonia makes this statement in her relation to what she perceives as a ‘culture of seniority’, the image she evokes, is that of a ‘little girl’; the figure of youth is immediately gendered. This example very clearly illustrates that difference, between old and young, male and female, cannot be thought without considering power relations (see Ludvig 2006).

Stacey's complaints about the recurrent and regular sexist behaviour she encounters in her work place flow seamlessly from sexist to ageist behaviour. Stacey: *"At one point there was somebody who thought it was appropriate in the mornings to kiss me on the forehead to say hello, as a grandfather with his granddaughter"*. In this example age and gender are intertwined to the extent that it is impossible to separate whether gender hierarchies here are expressed through an age-related image of grandfather versus granddaughter or age/seniority power relations through gender. As Stacey emphasises, while she deviates from the 'norm' in more than one respect, because of her religion, because of her ethnicity, her social class, still *"being a young woman I would say is perhaps the identity that is the hardest to deal with here"*.

She observes that working for the international organisation she now works for *"it is no longer the challenge of being the brown girl"*. Stacey: *"So I mean, that is the wonderful thing about working in an international organisation, that everyone is from everywhere else. But that does not mean that there are not assumptions about my identity, there are assumptions that automatically brown means Indian, brown can usually never mean Canadian or [where my parents come from]"*.

Hence, while the intersecting identity categories have real material consequences for the lived experiences and are shaped by structural forms of discrimination, the intersecting categories take on their specific meaning within particular locations and times. This implies moreover, that the meaning of categories shifts according to the context in which they are interpreted.

Thus, it is important that Brah and Phoenix in their above quoted definition of intersectionality stress the intersection of categories “in historically specific contexts” (Brah and Phoenix 2004:76). Stacey’s brown skin is ‘read’ differently and took on different meanings depending on the context she is positioned in. Sara Ahmed (1997) uses an autobiographical narrative to illustrate the multiple shifting of readings of her body in an encounter she had as a 14 year old in Australia with the police. In their short meeting, her bare feet combined with her brown skin are first read as a deviant Aboriginal and hence as a threat to the safety of the neighbourhood, then when she tells them which school she goes to, as a middle-class white woman with a sexy sun tan. Neither interpretation does justice to her ‘real’ origin. Again, the brown skin is read *in conjunction with* gender producing the ‘sexy’ tan. As Ahmed asserts elsewhere, black feminists in their work have drawn attention to “the processes of identification which produce contradictory and unstable subject positions, where subjects are addressed or ‘hailed’ in many different ways” (Ahmed 2000a:112, see also Mohanty 2003: chapter 5).

Pauline’s description of her experience as a woman working in Bangladesh shows how gender functions in conjunction with her whiteness: *“I was interacting and socially interacting and professionally interacting, apart from the interviews, with men (...) and that was quite difficult, really. Because I knew that had I been a Bangladeshi woman I would have been eating dinner with the women there, but because I was a white woman who had come to visit, I was granted a special kind of status like an honorary man basically and I was eating with the men and interacting with the men and it was quite*



*uncomfortable I think on both sides, because they are not used to interacting in a public gathering with women and obviously there are issues of power and things like that”.*

Pauline’s whiteness, in this situation, makes her categorised differently from the Bangladeshi women. Pauline’s story is similar to that identified by Barbara Heron in her research about white Canadian development workers in Africa, who uses the same term ‘honorary men’ to describe how whiteness served to overwrite their gender and endowed them with a status normally not bestowed on the non-white women (Heron 2007, see also White 2003, Cook 2007:182). In this instance, Pauline resists the temptation to merely “slip into positions of subordination” (Razack 2001:14) as instead of focussing on how her gender put her in a vulnerable position, she realises how her whiteness produced her as 'honorary man' with access to the men's dinner table.

Similarly, Kate challenges the idea that her gender produces one stable effect and instead draws attention to the way in which the context shapes the way her gender is read. In addition, she points to the difference between sex and gender, with gender being a ‘performance’ rather than a fixed identity. Her interpretation of gender also challenges easy notions of sisterhood through shared gender. I asked her whether she thinks that when she visits women in partner organisations in the global South some of the differences are bridged because of her being a woman.

Kate replies: *“It creates boundaries and it may ease others, with a women I might have less [boundaries] but it does not have to be (...). What you mentioned before is a bit old school, so there is a woman and therefore there is the [connection?]. I think that’s not anymore true, if it ever has been true, presumably not, but it might not anymore be so helpful. (...) I can nowadays or at least in NGOs (...) I can take as a woman I can take a gender role that is masculine or feminine”.*

Kate continues to suggest that it is possible that within the global South there is less flexibility and fluidity concerning gender roles and what status you have on the basis of these. She then says: *“Whereas in those countries, they still face fierce opposition. But if you are for example a woman whose children are big, then you have quite a lot of status as well, so it also changes according to age, I am not sure, it would be interesting to compare a young woman, middle-aged, professionally active and an older woman in developing country A with one here in our countries. It could also be that at some point it is more equal and then perhaps you are in a better status when you are an older woman in a developing country than in ours”.*

Hence, she relativises the difference between the global North and the global South which she first suggested there to be, with reference to other examples from the global South where gender does not unequivocally determine position and status but functions in a more complex interplay with other factors.

Sylvia's reflections on how being a woman affects her work on gender issues also traverses between the different meanings attributed to her gender depending on the context. In addition, similar to Kate she differentiates between her sex and gender and recognises that as a woman she sometimes plays a more masculine role than at other times. As she explains: *"Eh, that gets a bit difficult sometimes, being a woman and working with gender issues sometimes, where there is a certain type of frustration as it is generally very much white women who do things. I find going into a room and seeing a whole bunch of people who look like me is just depressing and gets a bit frustrating, I mean frustrating and disheartening in terms of what are we actually accomplishing. If it is just the same people talking to the same people then we are never actually moving anywhere. And in that sense there it is a bit, the identity issue is even, because [when] it is more likely to be with people from the same background and other women [then] my identity as a woman seems less important because we are all women. Whereas I think my identity as a woman working in a post-conflict situation where 9 times out of 10 I was the only woman then it became much more important, because then I had to assert certain things, there I had to be almost like the representative woman. And there was a lot more stress of feeling I guess of having to make sure that the women view comes in, but also there is more of a reason sometimes to be less of a woman and be one of the guys in order to fit in. That being a woman becomes more an issue, not dealing with gender issues"*.

In this short extract, being a woman who works with gender issues takes on many different meanings. First, her professional meetings with other women

from similar backgrounds to talk about gender equality make Sylvia conscious of her whiteness in relation to the overwhelming presence of whiteness in such meetings. In addition, she feels that her identity as a woman needs to be asserted less in all-women or all-feminist company. In contrast, in relation to her work in conflict zones, she notices that she is often the only woman and hence feels a pressure to be 'the representative woman' who is supposed to give a gender analysis or the 'women's view'. At the same time, being in predominantly male environment she feels the need to adopt a 'masculine' attitude in order to fit in the group, and be 'one of the guys'.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have situated the different understandings of feminism professed by the women NGO workers. The understandings of feminism expressed in the interviews cannot be neatly categorised according to the traditional tripartite division of liberal, radical and socialist feminism. Instead I have argued that the narratives of the women NGO workers about their feminisms displayed the major themes and debates within feminism, such as the institutionalisation of feminism, the different backlashes against feminisms, essentialist versus anti-essentialist approaches and separatist and inclusive tendencies. The feminist identities of the NGO workers are often linked to a very personal moment of feminist political awakening followed by consolidation in education or the women's movement and for the 'post-feminist generation' by a re-evaluating of experiences on the basis of theories encountered at the university. In addition, their personal understandings of feminism were often phrased in opposition to other discourses critical of

feminism; for example the famous 'feminists as man haters' or feminists as blind to other oppressions than gender oppression following the black feminists' critique. Furthermore, the process of negotiating the category of women (who is included and what features do women share?) is central to the practices of the women NGO workers and can lead to contentious and ambivalent moments. Lastly, the interaction between the organisation's understanding of gender oppression and the women NGO workers' understanding of feminism influenced and shaped the extent to which 'personal feminism' and professional tasks related to gender issues are aligned or in conflict.

Western feminism has been challenged for assuming universality in the experiences of women while basing itself on the situation of white, middle-class women. The notion of sisterhood as connoting shared victimhood therefore has a controversial history. The narratives of the women NGO workers show the wide currency of sisterhood as a way to understand connections between women on a global scale. While some women's understandings of sisterhood resembled the much critiqued assumption of universality of experience, others problematised sisterhood in response to the critique by black feminists. The desire to maintain a notion of sisterhood combined with the need to rework the idea as a struggle rather than a given, moving towards solidarity, as prevalent in the work of hooks (1986), gained empirical shape in the accounts of some of the women NGO workers. The assumption of sisterhood as shared victimhood has been linked to what Fellows and Razack call, the 'race to innocence'. The 'race to innocence' both

encompasses the belief that gender oppression is the most fundamental oppression and the refusal for critical self-scrutiny in relation to how feminists are implicated in other structures of subordination. I have argued that this 'race to innocence' can indeed be encountered in the reflections of women NGO workers on the relation between their identity and their work practices.

At the same time, critical self-reflection can lead to an identification and awareness of one's 'race to innocence'. However, critical reflexivity has the risk to turn 'transparent' when it is assumed that one has accomplished one's 'reflexive duty' by merely naming implications in oppression. Hence, critical reflexivity is only the first step in a process of taking responsibility and should be followed by real transformation in practice. As is evident from Fellows and Razack's observation that while "many feminists have gained an intellectual understanding of complicity (...) many of us find it difficult to take actions built on the recognition that we are both oppressors and oppressed" (Fellows and Razack 1998:337), this is not an easy demand.

In addition to critical reflexivity, I have argued that an intersectional approach can challenge the 'race to innocence' by destabilising gender, by paying attention to the combination of both dominant and subordinate positions and by showing how different systems of oppression are connected. I have argued that gender functions in conjunction with other categories like ethnicity and age, generating, for example, the image (with a particular set of connotations) of the 'young woman'. Hence, the production of the 'young woman' or the female 'honorary man' shows that 'gender' should not be understood as

determining experiences in one fixed way; rather gender takes shape in specific contexts and in combination with other structures of inequality, which position the women NGO workers in subordinate as well as dominant positions.

## **5 - Post-colonial Tendencies, Cultural Challenges**

### **Introduction**

Post-colonial theorists have revealed the continuation of colonial mechanisms and tendencies, both material and discursive, in our present post-colonial times. In recognising the continuities of colonialism after the official decolonisation process, they assert that there is no radical break between colonial and post-colonial times as post-colonial times still feature similar tendencies albeit in a different form or shape (see Ahmed 2000b). The field of aid and development is in particular often singled out for its post-colonial continuities, both in its continuation of imperialist intervention and in its ‘civilising mission’ (Stoler and Cooper 1997, Spivak 1999, Smillie 2000, Cook 2006, Kothari 2006b, Eyben 2007b, Duffield 2007). Some critical development theorists however also question simplistic arguments that development is just “colonialism by other means” and argue that the history of development as a concept shows that it has both been used to further colonial aims and has been mobilised to deflect these (Cooper and Packard 1997:30, see also White 2002).

This chapter provides a post-colonial reading of the narratives of the women NGO workers. While the work of the research participants concerned a wider range of issues that goes beyond ‘development’ narrowly conceived, the helping imperative present in their work and their operation along a North/South axis justifies a post-colonial approach. As Maria Eriksson Baaz



emphasises, placing the identities of development workers in relation to the post-colonial “does not mean that these identities should be seen as an articulation of already constituted identities drawn directly from the ‘colonial library’” but rather that the “colonial library” is used to make sense of and to give meaning to situations that arise in the context of development (Baaz 2005:72). Moreover, it is important to note that people engage in complex ways, which cannot be reduced to simple dichotomies of “acquiescence or resistance” (Cooper and Packard 1997:30). By tracing post-colonial tendencies in the interview accounts I at the same time acknowledge my own complicity in these discourses as a white woman located in the west, which is for example exemplified by the openness of the interviewees regarding their views of women in the South; hence these examples are not intended to serve as a scapegoat, but rather to stress the ‘stubbornness’ of these post-colonial mechanisms, to assert the need for vigilance to these mechanisms and to explore possibilities of resisting these tendencies.

This chapter will first look at some direct references in the interview narratives about (involvement in) the colonial history, both in relation to their own position and in relation to their organisation. In the second section of this chapter, the post-colonial critique will extend to the reading of discourses of ‘race’ and culture as understood by the research participants. As a preamble to this discussion, the interviewees’ understanding of racism will be discussed and alternative understandings of racism, which go beyond the individualised psychological approach, will be proposed. I will explore the use of notions of ‘culture’ as a proxy for ‘race’ in relation to the ideas of ‘radical difference’,

cultural relativism, and imperialism as a civilising mission. In addition, I will pay special attention to the way ‘culture’ is introduced in relation to women from the global South. As Ghandi argues, while in some way feminism and post-colonialism have a potential for a productive unity, there are three areas where they clash: one, the discussion about the analytic category of the ‘third world woman’, two, the history of feminists as imperialists with the Western women liberated at the cost of the ‘third world woman’ and third, “the colonialist deployment of ‘feminist criteria’ to bolster the appeal of the civilising mission” (Ghandi 1998:83). Especially the first and the third area of contestation are of relevance in the accounts of some of the women NGO workers.

Many post-colonial theorists have argued (e.g. Bhabha 2005, Mohanty 1984) that the process of defining the cultural/ethnic/‘racial’ difference of the Other, should be understood in relation to the need to define the Self in contrast to the Other. Mohanty (1984) more specifically addresses the way Western feminists need the female Other in order to define themselves as liberated in contrast to the oppressed Southern women. Hence the third section of this chapter will discuss how the NGO workers defined the Self through the otherness of the beneficiaries of their projects. While on the one hand the number and variety of the examples in this chapter shows the persistence of the ‘race’/culture discourse and the persistence of (post-) colonial images in the narratives, this does not mean that this is true for all research participants, which should also become apparent from the examples in the discussion below. Many would have disagreed with the specific language some other interviewees used, while

others would probably have disagreed with the assumptions and generalisations made.

As Kothari argues, it is important to explore issues of whiteness and one's own positionality in the post-colonial process instead of externalising racism, in order to gain an understanding and an acknowledgement of one's complicity, which "may assist in the realignment of forms of engagement in development in a racially cognisant manner that resists inequalities of power" (Kothari 2006a:15). Hence in the final section of this chapter I will look at ways these colonial and racial discourses can be challenged and resisted using Spivak's notions of "constructive complicity" (Spivak 1999) and "privilege as a loss" (Spivak 1990).

### **Colonialism**

While most of this chapter will concentrate on those instances where post-colonial tendencies can be traced but are not specifically named as such, there were situations in which interviewees made specific reference to (post-) colonial times. Interestingly, while some of these references directly acknowledge the colonial past and its lasting influence, other remarks emphasised the distancing from colonialism or situating it firmly in the past. Taking pains to stress that colonialism is not an issue (anymore) at the same time paradoxically establishes and confirms it as an issue, especially when the remark came without prompting from my side. Some examples may help to illuminate this:

Elisa first talks about her organisation's aim to work *with* other women in the global South, rather than *for* other women in their projects.<sup>24</sup> When I ask her whether she thinks power differences still play a role which would make it difficult to claim to be really working *with* the women, she replies: *"I think it is difficult not so much from our, how we frame the problems, but it is sometimes then difficult how you are perceived, because the women [in the global South] have less access to funds, money, media whatever, and they obviously want to do something to develop. And in the world there is so much inequality that they (...) At the same time we are not in the year of colonialism, we go there twice and we give back a little bit (...)"*.

What is interesting about this quote here is that on the one hand, my question about power differences prompts Elisa to reflect on inequalities and colonialism. On the other hand, she places colonialism in the past when she stresses 'we are not in the year of colonialism'. This is a striking contradiction, because the fact that her pondering on inequality leads her to colonialism would suggest that she recognises the post-colonial impact of colonial relations, while the next part of her narrative insists on a closure of colonial times.

Sonia who works with women in Africa, when asked whether she thinks her identity has an impact on her work, says: *"Yes, I would think so, but I maybe don't know how to explain it, but I guess the fact of being Latin American that does not make me European, so that does not make me a coloniser"*. When I

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<sup>24</sup> The concept of partnership will be discussed more extensively in Chapter Seven.

ask her whether the women she works with in Africa make references to the colonial process (to explore whether that was the reason for her to foreground the non-coloniser identity), she told me that they had not made such references. If her reference to colonialism is indeed as she says neither prompted by the women she works with nor by me, what is it then that makes this so important? It could of course be a general acknowledgement of the power of colonial discourse. It could also be the case that her stressing of her non-coloniser identity may be read as a way to take attention away from her other identity markers, i.e. her education, possibly class, and her whiteness, where she would have needed to reflect on her position of dominance. Sonia's argument about the importance of a non-coloniser identity in aid relations resonates with arguments made in Ireland about the Irish empathic disposition towards developing countries due to their shared history of being colonised (Kevlihan 2001).

In answer to the same question, Naomi says: *"And coming from Canada, which has a fairly mixed up culture in terms of it is not like a European culture you know, the people who settled in Canada are not the original people in Canada, so I guess I also have that respect for being in, living in someone else's country and being mindful of that, and being mindful of the history of how my country was set up by effectively displacing the original people there, and also where I came from (...) in Canada, the French were there first and then the British kicked them out. So and I think that sadly that kind of thing keeps going on and on in the world and we are not learning from history"*.

Similarly to Sonia she understands colonialism as an identity rather than as a relationship and differentiates her identity from a European one. Again this differentiation is also based on the colonial process; however she rather stresses the difference between Canada as a settler country and Europe as a coloniser. The notion that Canada takes a particular role in the international arena is expressed by many sources, in particular in relation to peacekeeping:

“Canadian culture inherently includes being a global citizen. Canada embraces multiculturalism, immigration, and cross-cultural understanding. Canada is recognized internationally as a peace-keeping nation” (411 Initiative for Change 2007, see also Whitworth 2005).

Also, interestingly, Naomi relates the painful element of building a nation through displacement of other peoples to the idea that that history has given her a special respect, which others with a different history do not have. This seems similar to arguments often made by ex-coloniser countries, which state that they have a special responsibility towards the ex-colonies and other developing countries.<sup>25</sup> Tom Hampson for example argued in the Fabian Society publication ‘2025: *What next for the Make Poverty History generation*’:

“We need to ask ourselves why it was the British (...) who, of all Western peoples, felt the moral certainty last year [in the Make Poverty History campaign] to intervene and proselytise” and “We need to recognise that our

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<sup>25</sup> Similar arguments have been voiced by the perpetrator countries in relation to WW2: in Germany some politicians compared the massacres of the Serbs with the extermination of the Jews in the Second World War, to point to Germany’s responsibility to intervene in the Kosovo war (Probst 2003).

role must draw on the benefits of our history of empire (...) [and that] we have wisdom in our experience and the responsibility that comes with it” (Hampson 2006:12).

There is an inherent danger however, in justifying intervention, either military or through other ways like development aid, by reference to the damage of past intervention. In addition, in the extract there is a tension between on the one hand the personal understanding of lessons learnt from the past, as the past of her country makes her more mindful and on the other hand saying that ‘we are not learning from history’ as the displacement of peoples continues.

Gill refers to that continuation of the intervention of Northern people in the lives of the people from the South when she describes an encounter with women from an organisation from the South. These women expressed their dissatisfaction with the work of Gill’s organisation; according to Gill they felt that *“it is again the Western European imperialists that are telling us what to do”*.

While there are certainly a number of NGOs and government foreign aid institutions that originated in colonial times and were a direct offspring of the circumstances of that time (see Kothari 2006b, Duffield 2007), only one of the interviewees mentioned something along these lines with reference to the organisation she is working for. Naomi explained about her own organisation which is inspired by Christian principles: *“You know there are many [national associations of my organisation] that got started in the mid to late 1800s so it was really already by the turn of the last century that the [organisation] was*

*in quite a number of countries already so that global nature was something that caught on. Now of course, you know, Britain being a colonial power at the time certainly helped in its development in other places, and certainly India and South Asia, there are a number of [national/local associations] that date back to late 1800s you know, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, (...), and then with the partition, you also had Pakistan and then finally Bangladesh. But there is certainly a link there to colonial times, where you had British women who had started [national/local associations] who were overseas. (...) As the Empire crumbled, there is also very much a strong push for the [national/local associations] to be run by the women of their countries, so that they are run by indigenous women if you will”.*

Here the organisation’s global status and the legitimacy it gets through its alliances with all the local associations are directly linked to the status of Britain as a (former) imperial power. Though the organisation is open to women from all different faiths, the Christian dimension of the organisation in countries that are not predominantly Christian recalls colonial and missionary times. For Spivak, the term ‘global’ is not innocent here but carries the connotation of imperialism; the global is tied to the imposition of the capitalist system of exchange on a global scale, on controlling and dominating the globe (Spivak 2003a). In a similar vein, she uses the notion of the coloniser “worlding the world” (Spivak 1999:212) denoting that the assumption that only the coloniser’s entry and presence inscribes the colonised space which before that was supposedly ‘empty’.



I was interested in hearing more about the process of transferring the governance of the organisations from the British women who were the original founders to the ‘indigenous women’ and hence asked Naomi whether it had in some cases been a challenging process. She replied: *“We are talking now what, 50 years ago, or more so I don’t think... It is not an issue anymore. You know I think during the whole period during the 40s, 50s, 60s when the whole colonial structure was being dismantled, well, the official colonial structure was being dismantled, and countries were turned back into the hands of the people, rather than being run by colonial powers, [the national/local organisations] were certainly within that period of the 40s through the 70s certainly being run then by women of the country and not by colonial women”*.

Here Naomi’s account displays a similar tension to the one identified in relation to Canada as a settler’s country, namely that on the one hand the colonial times and the decolonisation process are firmly situated in the past (‘it is not an issue anymore’) while at the same time, qualifying her argument (‘well, the official colonial structure was being dismantled’) this is disrupted (see Cannadine 2001). She defends her organisation (against my suggestion that it could have been ‘challenging’?) by stressing that the handover of power in her organisations was conducted earlier than the handover of power by national governments.

Grace’s reflections on colonialism do not refer to her organisation but to her own memories of growing up in a country that was a colonial power. She recalls: *“Probably not for your generation, but certainly for our generation, Africa, you know all Africans wore grass skirts, they lived in mud huts and*

*they carried spears, those were the images that you had of Africa that was what you had in the books. I suppose my attitude over the years must have changed but it has been quite... I have not noticed the change. (...) We were certainly brought up to believe, (...), that Americans and on the whole Europeans were seen as equals. Whereas these other people, I believe the term that was used in this country was 'natives', wasn't it? The 'natives' or have you not come across that? And if you are native then you are slightly lower, whereas you might not like the Americans, or the Germans or the French, or whoever you are picking a fight with at the moment but they were perceived as having the same standards as us. Whereas the others were 'natives'".*

Lazreg (2000) wonders what kind of impact it has on one's psyche to live in a country defined as advanced and developed. What was the impact on Grace to grow up with images of Africa in which 'all Africans wore grass skirts, they lived in mud huts and they carried spears'? Grace's description is very powerful as it shows not only the extremity of the colonial images in circulation, but also the fact that these images are still from relatively recent times. Grace contrasts the 'equals', Americans and Europeans, with the so-called 'natives', the Africans. The terms 'native', 'tribe', indigenous' and 'local' always stand in a hierarchical relation to the 'global'.<sup>26</sup> In Grace's narrative, she realises that it is not necessarily stereotypes or images of other countries or peoples in themselves that are problematic, but the hierarchy associated with these images; 'if you are a native you are slightly lower'. Crewe and Fernando differentiate between

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<sup>26</sup> For a discussion on the 'global citizen', see Chapter Six.

“a) those representations that are no more than simplifications about cultural differences between groups and that have no insidious effect, and b) prejudices that become translated into policies that result in cultural aggression or the systematic discrimination against, exclusion or oppression of people based on their racial identity” (Crewe and Fernando 2006:41).

However, as Barker (1981) points out, in the context of debates about immigration policies and the multicultural society, increasingly a discourse has developed where mere cultural difference (also if not associated with a hierarchy) is used to justify xenophobic standpoints by reference to the need to maintain a homogeneous and ‘pure’ British nation.

When I asked her why some differences, such as skin colour, are seen as ‘significant’ and others, such as colour of shoes not, Grace started reflecting on an encounter with American students where differences were also noticed and named but without the associated hierarchy: *“You see, last week we had three American students staying with us for the week and you tend to think because we all speak English that there be no problem but it was interesting the cultural difference when we really sat down and talked, I thought, ‘where are you guys, what planet are you from?’ It is interesting, now if I said that about a black person I would have been accused of being racist but because I was saying it about Americans it was acceptable”*.

Again Grace’s statement can be understood in Crewe and Fernando’s terms when they state: “The perception of racism implies a power difference. Non-

white people are rarely labelled racist when expressing sweeping and negative judgements about white people” (Crewe and Fernando 2006:41-42).

### **‘Race’/ Culture**

In the theoretical engagement with race in development practices (which I will here extend to wider NGO practices and to encounters between those working on a national level with migrants), there is a strong sense that ‘race’ in development is undertheorised (see Crewe and Fernando 2006). White (2003) compares the attention given to gender in development with the (lack of) attention granted to race issues and claims that official publications make almost no mention of ‘race’ (see also Goudge 2003 and Kothari 2006a). She notices that the “international etiquette” no longer allows one to express a simplistic worldview in which the Western countries need to save the uncivilised, traditional, passive and backward developing world (White 2002:418). However, this view “nevertheless lurks within the ‘discursive *bricolage*’ of development” (White 2002:418).

Her observation implies two things; one, while assumptions about people from Third World countries are often not expressed anymore in the crude terms (such as in the example of Grace where Africans were presented as living in mud huts with spears), the underlying assumptions will still find their expression in different terms. Second, the term ‘bricolage’ points to the fact that this racialised or imperial/post-colonial discourse is not unified and consistent, but rather consists of a range of different discourses that could often be conflicting.

The silence on 'race' in development discourse can be linked to the current taboo on racism. As Essed states: "Today many Whites condemn more blatant forms of racism and are often motivated to maintain non-discriminating self-concepts" (Essed 1991:5-6, see also Byrne 2006). Two understandings of racism circulate most prominently; one where racism is understood as the expression of extreme right-wing ideology and, to a lesser extent, one where racism is understood to be an inevitable, inherent response of all (white) people (Lasch-Quinn 2001). Both accounts of racism are highly psychologised and individualised and logically prompt responses of denial. This section will first provide two examples of such understandings of racism before discussing examples of how 'race' (presented as culture) appears in some of the narratives of the women NGO workers. Such discussion about the understanding of racism is important to understand what the possible obstacles are for an engagement with both the racist structures that underlie some of the power relations NGOs encounter and with one's own implication in the colonial and racial libraries that give meaning to encounters with the Other.

The following narrative by Kim serves to explore some complexities in relation to understanding and acknowledging racism. Kim<sup>27</sup> works in the country where she grew up with asylum seekers, providing counselling but also arranging financial issues, which the government delegated to the NGO she works for. In the light of the general silence regarding racism, Kim already breaks a taboo by narrating the following encounter during the interview. She

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<sup>27</sup> The interview with Kim was a pilot interview. Kim's work fitted the same criteria as the other NGO workers, except the focus on gender/women issues.

tells me that there were ‘clients’ who told her she was a racist. When I asked her why this happened, she says: *“I think it is just the frustration. Like if you tell people sometimes ‘sorry I cannot pay you the money’, for sure for them this is a negative message and maybe their way to react is the frustration and then maybe they even try to get you at a weak point and to say ‘but you are a racist, this is only because I am black’ and whatever. For me it is clear I am not a racist and that’s why I don’t feel insulted with this because also I think I have so much experience that I know that sometimes things that are said are not meant in that way but also out of a situation of frustration or out of an emotional, I don’t know ...”*.

In the narrative, Kim emphasises that she is not a racist. While she initially says here that she did not feel insulted, when the conversation continues, she does say that she felt hurt when accused of being racist. In the encounter that Kim narrates she is personally accused of racism, rather than that her organisation or the government policies that they execute are called racist. Moreover, as racism is often associated with extreme right-wing ideologies and with conscious, individual behaviour, it is not surprising that Kim defends herself against the charge of racism. This dominant understanding of racism might however stand in the way of a critical engagement with the context, which resulted in the charge of racism. Kim acknowledges that the accusation of racism comes out of a frustration with the system the woman is dependent on (e.g. payment from the government). In the context of immigration that Kim works in, it would not be surprising if the woman felt faced with racist policies and regulations. In the United Kingdom for example, in the 1970s the

notion of ‘institutional racism’ was introduced, which described the racism of schools, prisons, the police and other public institutions (Peters 2005).<sup>28</sup>

Subsequently I asked Kim: *“So, it does not make you doubt? You are not like ‘Maybe I am a racist’?”*

Kim replies: *“No I can be clear about that, that I am not a racist. I think sometimes it does hurt. Once for example, a woman was saying this to me and it was so not true, because it was even one of my clients that I really liked so much and I made so many exceptions for her which I was not allowed to do and I did so much for her, because I thought she was so nice and then (...) she said ‘you are doing this just because you don’t like me, you are always doing something, like you make obstacles in my life’. And I tried to explain her, ‘no, these are the rules that are coming from the government and I am just executing them’ (...) Then she said also I am a racist, and all these things and I was really hurt. I did not doubt I was a racist, I was sure I was not and I am sure I am not, but I was so hurt, because I liked her so much”.*

Again Kim’s narrative shows how sensitive the issue of racism is, both through Kim’s reference to feeling hurt (also in the light of her more personal, closer relation with this woman) and to her stressing that she is certain she is not a racist. Here the defensive response might admittedly have been reinforced by my second question.

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<sup>28</sup> However, as Füredi (2007) notes, the notion of ‘institutionalised racism’ which gained wide currency in the UK with the 1999 MacPherson report that evaluated the police’s response to the murder of Stephen Lawrence, was defined in the report as a psychological response. Hence again, racism was individualised and psychologised.

Grace's comments underline the taboo on racism: *"I think a lot of people, your more liberal minded people would be quite horrified if you suggest that maybe within us there is a degree of latent racism that is almost inbred"*. Grace's account is different from Karin's in suggesting that everyone might be (latently) racist implying a different understanding of racism. Interestingly Grace is using the term 'inbred' rather than 'learned' thus implying a natural rather than a historical reason for racism (see Barker 1981:4-21 on the discourse of the "naturalness of xenophobia" or "pseudo-biological racism").

Kim's defence against charges of racism, which consists of stressing how much she had actually liked the woman and how often she had done her favours despite regulations that forbade her doing so, is instructive in further emphasising that the dominant understanding of racism is individualised. If one would move away from a personalised/individualised understanding of racism, where racism is understood as a more complex phenomenon it is perfectly possible for racism and being nice to coexist. As Mohanty argues: "Even if we think we are not personally racist or sexist, we are clearly marked by the burdens and privileges of our histories and locations" (Mohanty 2003:191, see also Razack 2001). Kim's position, or the fact that the role of her and the woman are as they are rather than being easily reversed, is embedded in unequal structures of capitalism, colonialism and racism. As Essed (1991) suggests one of the major problems with earlier studies on racism has been the sharp distinction between individual and institutional racism.



This “places the individual outside the institutional, thereby severing rules, regulations and procedures from the people who make and enact them, as if it concerned qualitatively different racism rather than different positions and relations through which racism operates” (Essed 1991:36).

Furthermore she argues that racism is never just personal and individual but rather always reflects wider processes of domination (Essed 1991). Essed’s highly relevant intervention highlights the complexity of processes of racism and could eventually serve to encourage the recognition of racist structures, which is the prerequisite for challenging these processes. Challenging and resisting racism should hence not take place on the level of the individual but on a wider societal and structural level (Essed 1991).

After the Second World War (Malik 1996, Füredi 1998), with decolonisation (Duffield 2006), with the current discourse on multiculturalism<sup>29</sup> (Malik 1996, Byrne 2006, Heron 2007), and national discourses of the ‘tolerant nation’ (Essed 1991) it has become more acceptable to refer to cultural differences than to ‘race’ in order to discuss social differences. The fact that nowadays it is more often stressed, in post-modern approaches and in mainstream discourse that ‘race’ is a construction and not a biological category might also partly explain why the conflation between ‘race’ and ‘culture’ is more easily made (Mohanty 1992). Byrne for example noticed in her interviews with white

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<sup>29</sup> According to Malik (1996) the concept of the plural or multicultural society originated in colonial societies, as the idea of cultural differences served to justify the inequalities. While in the interwar time, the concept of the plural society was only applied to colonised places, after the Second World War it started being applied to Western societies and started to be incorporated in social and political discourse.

mothers in London that ‘colour’, ‘culture’ and ‘race’ were often used interchangeably (Byrne 2006).

The replacement of ‘race’ by ‘culture’ or ‘ethnicity’ linked to the taboo on explicit expressions of ‘racial’ assumptions has been called the shift from a “biological to a sociocultural idiom” (Duffield 2006:70) and the “culturalisation of difference” (Razack 2001:17). This shift leads to a new form of racism, “culturalised racism” (Razack 2001:60), “sociocultural racism” (Duffield 2006:71) or “ethnicism” (Essed 1991:6), which targets both migrants and non-Western societies abroad (Malik 1996, Duffield 2006). Essed defines “ethnicism” as an “ideology that explicitly proclaims the existence of ‘multiethnic’ equality but implicitly presupposes an ethnic or cultural hierarchical order” (Essed 1991:6). Razack (2001) goes one step further by arguing that the effect of the discourse about the tolerance of ethnic and cultural diversity in a multicultural society has the effect of denying (responsibility for) racism. Similarly, Malik states that the multicultural society, rather than representing a society of equals, is a society “where equality has given way to the toleration of difference, and indeed of inequality” (Malik 1996:170, see also Füredi 1998:224).

However, it is important to note, as Crewe and Harrison point out, when race is replaced by culture there is a particular understanding of culture at stake: “Culture is often reified as a collection of rituals and customs exhibited principally by the less evolved, at times to be celebrated and at other times to be overcome” (Crewe and Harrison 1998:25, see also Malik 1996 about the relation between race and ethnicity). This means that on the one hand culture

is homogenised, and on the other hand that culture is often only ascribed to some, and not to others; in Crewe and Harrison's words: "'they' have cultural barriers while 'Westerners' are guided by modern rationality" (Crewe and Harrison 1998:133). Rather than understanding every practice to be embedded in 'culture' and treating culture as changing and heterogeneous, practices are ascribed to one culture without differentiation.

This can be recognised in the following reflections by Kim: *"Because there is also a difference for the different groups, for example people from India they have a very strong community, they help each other a lot, I have the feeling they have a great sense for each other which in other cultures you cannot find it so easily. For example with Chinese people it is very difficult, I also don't know a lot about Chinese culture, it is very difficult because sometimes there are people coming from China and they are living several years here not speaking one word of German"*.

Kim makes sense of her experience with different groups of migrants by attributing the differences to culture. While she attempts to understand her encounters with different migrant groups, she resorts to generalised statements about how culture makes people function. At the same time, while she makes these statements, she claims not to know much about the cultures involved. Just like Crewe and Harrison stated, culture is seen as a barrier for communication, with language as an ideology rather than a means for communication, which needs to be overcome for the work to be successful. This idea of culture as a barrier to overcome is present in the account below.

Again, Kim emphasises that her ideas about different cultures are just her ‘personal opinion’ to stress the tentative nature of her assertions. On the other hand, the fact that these images of the different cultures are recognisable to a wider audience indicates that they are not so ‘personal’ after all but rather circulate within different groups and institutions.

Kim: *“So it is impossible to talk with [the Chinese] at all without somebody translating so either they have to bring a friend or we have somebody to translate but it is very, very difficult. But still with some of them I have the feeling after 3 years I made it! Especially with 2 women from China, (...) one had a very big problem with her health, like she had to go to the gynaecologist (...) and imagine this without somebody translating and she would not even ask me for this, but she would bring the letter and [say] ‘what shall I do?’. And she had already [had] an operation and it did not turn out well and it was very complicated so I arranged with someone to go with her to the doctor and translate there. And I think since then she has the feeling she can come and tell me things, because maybe she was not used to this is the culture (...) But I think this is a just personal opinion now, well, that the Chinese people do not connect so much, like the Indian people that if there was someone new coming telling ‘ok you need this paper, you need this paper and then you go there and get your appointment’”.*

Since the contrast that is drawn here between Chinese and Indian people and their ability to build a community and find their way in the country of arrival, is explained mainly by reference to ‘culture’, it negates differences in

(English) language skills. For Indians, English language skills are, due to the colonial history, also a cultural-historical attribute rather than only an educational or class attribute as is the case with the Chinese. The meaning of ‘culture’ shifts within Kim’s narrative, held together under the umbrella of ‘communication’; in the first instance, Kim refers to the *language* problem of the Chinese women, then to the ‘cultural taboo’ of talking about physical, sexual health issues (*norms and values*), and finally about culture as ‘connecting’ or being part of a (information) network (*culture as embeddedness*). Interestingly, while on the one hand, culture is presented as fixed and homogeneous, on the other hand in these reflections there seems to be some space for ‘negotiating’ between different cultures.

Veronica for example tells me that the migrant women she works with “*know that Dutch people are not really touching each other so, while African women they touch each other all the time, but we discuss that, also in trainings, ‘how would you like to be, if you come in the training room, what would you like me to do, shall I give you a hand, what would you like me to do?’*”. The physical behaviour of people is presented as radically different in the different cultures, with the quite typical distinction between one specific Western country versus the whole African continent. On the other hand, following a more participatory approach, for Veronica it is possible to come to an agreement, almost to develop a new ‘culture’ within the mixed group, where everyone will have to make some concessions.

The language of ‘culture’, ‘indigenous’, ‘local’, ‘tradition’ which has replaced explicit racial terms makes it more difficult to pinpoint to the racialisation of the discourse (Kothari 2006a). Kothari (2006a) argues that cultural differences have replaced biological explanations “as the main reason why some people who had more power were more ‘developed’ than others” (Kothari 2006a:11, see also Razack 2001:19). As Kothari observes this shift from race to culture had the additional effect that people could be ‘blamed’ for being different as they chose to ‘stick to their culture’, whereas when ‘race’ was assumed to be a natural category, people were seen as helpless to be different (see also Narayan 1997). If, in contrast to race, which was ‘natural’ and based in biology, culture was learned it could be unlearned as well. “The difference was that cultural change seemed open to the individual, but Africans who chose not to make the transition were seen as wilfully obstructionist rather than quaintly backward” (Cooper in Kothari 2006a:11). This is apparent in some aspects of Sonia’s reflections on the relations with the women she seeks to assist. I ask her how she maintains a link with these women despite the geographical distance between them (she is located in the global North while the beneficiaries of her projects are generally located in the global South).

Sonia: *“So sometimes it is difficult, sometimes, I don’t know, I think that you have to help them a lot, you have to really guide them, you have to be there for very silly things (...). But many times (...) I think that you really need to be there and reminding them of the things and being very, very pushy and then you get the results, but you have to be behind them”.*

Interviewer: *“And why do you think that is”?*

Sonia: *“I don’t know, I don’t know. I think it maybe it’s the way they are used to doing things”*

Interviewer: *“Is there a moment that you think you would just give up; I don’t want to push anymore, because they don’t want to do it maybe?”*

Sonia: *“No, it is not they don’t want to do it, (...) it is just that sometimes they are used for people doing the things for them, so they don’t take the responsibility they would rather have you doing the things”.*

Baaz identified that specifically in the context of NGOs who work towards empowering the Other in a partnership, there is a “contradiction between the message of partnership and donor images that oppose a superior, active, innovative Self to an inferior, passive, unreliable ‘partner’” (Baaz 2005:147). Sonia’s organisation actually has a real commitment towards facilitating political representation rather than as an organisation representing the women they work with, which Sonia also repeatedly stresses. Hence on the one hand, she relies on an understanding of the women in the South as autonomous while at the same time when contentious situations arise, images of the Other as passive can creep up again.

With my question above I attempted to suggest that the women might not have wanted to cooperate with her organisation so that rather than just being passive, they were actively resisting working with them. For Sonia however, this is not an option, ‘no, it is not they don’t want to do it’ and she asserts again that the explanation of their behaviour must lie in a culture difference. She does not interrogate how (images of) the attitude of passivity and reliance

on assistance from the North have originated. Baaz in her research also finds examples “of how ‘resistance’ –or advice not taken- is interpreted in terms of passivity” (Baaz 2005:76). Related to this notion of the passive Other is the image of the Other as dependent which features strongly here despite being caught in a paradox since the language of partnership suggests cooperation with an independent/autonomous being. I also asked Sonia what kind of ‘silly things’ she has to help them with. She replied by giving an example about a group of women from Africa for whom she had to arrange visas and flights, who were supposed to come for a visit to the global North to represent themselves politically. As she had previous experience with visa problems, she had arranged all the relevant documents for them and had stressed numerous times to the women the importance of arranging the visa in time. Her story is worth quoting in some detail:

Sonia: *“So at the end of the day, I think they were supposed to travel on a Saturday, and Friday is a holiday there, so they don’t work on Friday and Saturday. So on Thursday someone called me and said ‘Oh, but my visa is not ready, and I am like ‘what do you mean your visa is not ready?’, ‘oh yes, I went there and they did not have it’ and I am like ‘I have your ticket for Saturday’, so I started calling all of them, none of them have a visa! I called the embassy and they [said] ‘they did not fill out their papers properly plus they show up late’. And I was like, ‘people come on, I am trying to help you, please help me too’! So I was with the embassy on the phone, they did not get it, I had to change all the tickets, so I felt like ‘ok, I am trying to help you, I am trying to get everything ready, I tell you in advance, I plan everything in*



*advance to make my life easier, you don't do your part, now I have to change everything', because I have to change all the tickets, all the hotels, move everything 2 days. (...) And so in that sense sometimes it is frustrating, it is like I am trying to help you and I am only asking you some silly thing to go to the embassy and get your visa and you don't do it".*

This analysis does not seek to belittle the problems that arose because of the issue with the visas - the organisation lost a substantial amount of money as the flights and hotels had to be rearranged – however, it is more interesting here to look at the underlying assumptions of Sonia's reflection that she leaves unquestioned. The account above is even a stronger reflection of what Baaz describes in terms of the conflicting messages of partnership requiring an active equal partner and of aid with the colonial image of the passive Southern individual. None of the women Sonia worked with in the example above had her visa ready for the journey. Yet, Sonia situates the problem mostly with the women rather than exploring other reasons for this situation, this "complex emergency" (Duffield 1994:44) to have arisen. She does not question whether the women were interested in travelling to this meeting in the first place or whether there were other reasons why arranging the visa might not have been the main priority at that point in their lives, even though the fact that the women come from a conflict ridden area could have prompted that question. She could have considered whether the difference in social location might have meant that the women had other responsibilities or caring duties that they could not leave behind.

The situation could have prompted Sonia to ask even larger questions about the way the relation between her and the women is embedded in colonial and racial structures. However, as Razack points out, the dominant understanding of culture understands culture as values, traditions, knowledge “exist[ing] in a timeless and unchangeable vacuum outside of patriarchy, racism, imperialism and colonialism” (Razack 2001:58); presenting culture then as *the* reason for the developments in the project has the effect of forestalling thinking about the effects of imperialism, patriarchy and racism. In addition, Sonia does neither question her own role in the problems with the arrangement of the visa nor does she question whether the embassy might possibly be more responsive to her, calling from an important organisation in the North than to the women from the country. As Crewe and Harrison hold in relation to the development context: “[T]he notion of ‘cultural barriers’ [does not only] simplif[y] complexity [but] also serves to situate the ‘failure’ of their technology within rural communities” (Crewe and Harrison 1998:146). They insist on the complexity of ‘failure’ and the fact that failure has different meanings for different people depending on the context and their notion of success (Crewe and Harrison 1998).

Later in the interview when she reflects Sonia says that she has learned to book more flexible tickets and that “*next time I will phone them every single day and that’s it*”. However, while that indicates a willingness to admit that she can improve her performance, it still relies on an assumption of inadequacy not on her, but on the other side. This is also reflected in her response when I ask her whether she was still feeling disappointed or angry

when the women finally came. She replied: *“No, but I think my little revenge was not to give them a single second for free, I had them working all the time”*. The idea of revenge denotes that the women had failed her, not that she had failed them possibly and also signals again the power relation where she can ‘make them work’ despite for example being their junior, not having been to their country etc. Sonia’s description displays a number of stereotypes resonating with colonial images. Firstly, the narrative entails a presentation of the NGO worker as rational and organised versus the Southern chaos and irrationality. Linked to that image, there are recurrent assumptions about lack of proper time keeping (see also Baaz 2005), ‘they did not fill out their papers properly plus they show up late’, with Western methods of time keeping and punctuality as the ultimate measure; the lack of time keeping is also often interpreted as lack of commitment (see also Essed 1991 on Dutch views on Surinamese culture in the context of time keeping). It is interesting to note that the stereotype of the lack of time keeping coexists with the image of the reliable women who guarantee a timely repayment of micro credit, discussed in Chapter Four.

For Veronica who works directly with migrant women in her own home country, time is also an important issue. The context in which she mentions time is slightly different as it comes out of a reflection on how her values and prejudices impact on her work, so she situates ‘time’ not as an objective measure but as a culturally subjective value. At the same time, possibly paradoxically, she insists on the women ‘learning’ time keeping, so placing her values of time keeping as superior. Veronica: *“I think you always have*

*something with your own prejudice and your own norms and your values with you at work because sometimes I don't understand why they are doing what they are doing. So I think of course I will bring them also into my work, I hope to think I won't, but I think I do, yeah, I think I do. I really hate, I really, really hate it that they are late, really, I hate it, and I always tell them, I always reprimand them if they are late and sometimes I find that, I think to myself, I am not their mother, they have to learn themselves but yeah, that is really what I find very important, so I tell them all the time".* So while Veronica mentions time keeping as a subjective value, her comment that they are always late implies again an understanding of time and lateness as a neutral and impartial value.

Secondly, Sonia presents the women as dependent, immature, possibly even child like in their failure to do even the most 'silly things'. Veronica clearly attempts to consciously resist the idea of the women as 'children' by telling herself 'I am not their mother'. In addition, she is aware that her view is part of her own prejudices and norms, which she makes explicit here. At the same time, the fact that the image of the mother appears to her is still suggestive of the strength of the discursive colonial representation of the colonised as childlike (Noxolo 2000). Both Sonia's and Veronica's accounts show that the partnership discourse complicates this image as there needs to be space for 'the child to mature and grow up him/herself', as Sonia describes "*as I said they are always expecting people to do their things. But there comes a time when they have to do the things themselves, I cannot take the plane to go all the way there to take the passport to the [embassy]*".

As Koster (2008a) observed in the context of a national organisation working with female migrants, staff of the organisation might present themselves as a representatives of a homogenous set of national cultural values, which have to be conferred to the migrant. The result of taking this position is that staff are cast in the role of the teacher and the migrant in the role of the student reinforcing power differences. This tendency is indeed noticeable in Veronica's narrative and surfaced as well in the interviews with some other women working for national organisations with female migrants.

Sonia's repeated invocation of the notion of 'helping' is not only rare in its explicitness of using the word 'helping', but also interesting in its ambivalent use. The way Sonia expresses 'helping' denotes both her merely assisting with the process of arranging things and the larger project of 'helping the women from Africa'. When she says *"I am trying to help you, please help me too"*, on the one hand this could be understood as a reciprocal relation in which if you give someone help you also expect help back in other situations. On the other hand, the circumstances of their relation and the way Sonia understands that relation make it clear, that the 'helping' is not reciprocal; rather there is an assumption that the women should be grateful with Sonia's support and aid and hence can be expected to deliver on her terms. As Kothari suggests, 'race' in the development discourse functions to imply who is developed and who is underdeveloped and hence who is in the position to help and who should receive this help with gratitude (2006a). The women are cast as helpless and hopeless, reinforcing Sonia's role of responsibility.

## **Self versus Other**

The complexity of mechanisms of identification with the Other (because of a shared identity as women or as human beings) and at the same time distance and differentiation from the Other (with religion, race, culture as a barrier) makes it imperative not to reduce the analysis of the Self-Other relation to a simple interpretation. Rather as Bhabha repeatedly points out in his analysis of colonisation the coloniser has an ambivalent relation with the colonised, one characterised by “conflict of pleasure/unpleasure, mastery/defence, knowledge/disavowal, absence/presence” (Bhabha 2005:107). The Other is the object both of “desire and derision” (Bhabha 2005:96).

For Sonia the Other as the culturally radically different is both exciting and frustrating, as she describes here in one breath: *“I think that the cultural differences are sometimes very challenging and sometimes in a way very rewarding to be able to discover them. I think that I am very lucky that I am able to see many things that a lot of people don't, that just always live in the same place. So sometimes it is difficult, sometimes, I don't know, I think that you have to help them a lot, you have to really guide them, you have to be there for very silly things...”*.

And similarly: *“I find it challenging [to relate to other people from different cultures], because I am talking to them and let's say I have all my culture that they don't know, particularly when I say I am from Argentina, it is like 'where?', ...what? So I know I have a lot of things inside me that they don't*

*know and that they probably would not understand and at the same time they have the same thing, they have their culture that comprises a lot of things I might not know and not understand, but we can still talk to each other and do something together, I think that is great. I am sorry I am going to be your most naïve person, but I think that is great”.*

It is interesting in this account that, for Sonia, culture is also central to her own understanding of Self, which is in contrast to Crewe and Harrison’s (1998) previously quoted claim that culture is often only ascribed to the Other and not to the Self. In this latter narrative, there is no obvious hierarchy of cultures present anymore but rather a celebration of multiculturalism. A potential danger of this particular understanding of cultural diversity is that cultures are still seen as stable ‘possessions’. To learn about cultures is “not to create a more rich and universal culture, but to imprison us more effectively in a human zoo of differences” (Malik 1996:150).

Spivak and Suleri take Bhabha’s idea of the Other as an object of desire a step further by drawing attention to what Spivak calls ‘reverse racism’ or ‘reverse ethnocentrism’ (see Spivak in Keenan 2002), the uncritical celebration of the subaltern, “elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor of the good” (Suleri 1992:759). Strikingly, Suleri specifically refers to the *female* voice begging the question about whether reverse racism operates only when femininity intersects with race. Naomi encountered such ‘reverse racism’ in her work: *“When I came as intern (...) my colleague [intern] was from Uganda and so very often we did things together and I was really struck by, I don’t know what you would label it as, maybe it is a little bit of racism, maybe*

*there is a little bit of interest in the 'exotic' which you know is a bit racist. But you know we would go somewhere, (...) and somebody was interested in my African friend, because she was really different, I mean I am sure if I would have come there (...) by myself, you know, people would have been interested in exploring the difference between Germany and Canada, but it is not nearly that different as someone who is coming from Uganda, you know what I mean, and it was not the only time that that happened. But I was really struck by that and found it very interesting”.*

Bhabha's understanding of colonial stereotypes underlines the complexity of the stereotype, stressing that it is not a mere one-dimensional image of somebody/something. He emphasises the ambivalence and instability of the colonial discourse and states that precisely because of this ambivalence the stereotype is 'needed' to reaffirm a certain image, to fix the Other who escapes easy classification (Bhabha 2005). Moreover, closer analysis shows that stereotypes themselves contradict each other and crush the unified image of the Other, as for example with the stereotype of the black man as being aggressive and sexually active and promiscuous existing alongside the image of the black man's passiveness and servitude (Bhabha 2005). According to Bhabha,

“[i]t is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency, ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; (...) produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always be in excess of what can be empirically proven or logically constructed” (Bhabha 2005:95).



He continues arguing that more work is still to be done to trace the way ambivalence functions as a strategy of discrimination (Bhabha 2005). The accounts above highlight elements of that ambivalence, e.g. the women as partners and as ‘children’. This was linked to the ambivalent understanding of ‘helping’ as both reciprocal and as one-way aid. I have attempted to follow Bhabha’s suggestion that the critical analysis should move from merely identifying stereotypes as positive or negative “to an understanding of *processes of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse” (Bhabha 2005:95).

One extremely powerful example of Bhabha’s ambivalence of the stereotype can be traced in how Vita discusses the veil or headscarf when she reflects on her work with migrant women in her own country. While I did not necessarily steer the interview towards a discussion about the headscarf nor discussed the headscarf in any detail with other interviewees, the ‘scarf’ keeps reappearing in her reflections. The first time the ‘veil’ appears in the interview is when Vita expresses her strong disapproval of a political campaign by an extreme right wing party in her country that uses an image of a female judge in an all-encompassing burka as a way to generate anti-Islam sentiments. Vita displays similar awareness of the topicality of the head scarf when she tells me that there are journalists who come to her organisation and ask her “*can you find [me] someone with a scarf [to interview]?*”.

The scarf surfaces again when Vita describes a woman who she helped through her organisation: *“She has a scarf and she is a Muslim and I don’t know, I can see it when they have a scarf, otherwise I hardly ask, unless it is important and she tells me: ‘in our culture, Vita’, -[we] are talking about [the fact that] she has children and she is divorced and this husband he sees the children and he helps her- and it appears that in their culture, they are not allowed at all to see their ex-husband. And I am thinking ‘Jesus!’, it is 180 degrees different from what our legislation is trying and what is common in Denmark; the more the parents meet and are together with the children, the better. And she wants it because she can see it is good for the children. [But] her parents, her family, their friends they don’t want it and they could even go in a fight about it, and I am thinking ‘what is she going to do?’”*.

While on the one hand, Vita stresses that she is not necessarily interested in the religion of the women she supports, she does not only notice ‘the scarf’ but also immediately uses it as the main descriptive category of the woman. Later in the interview it is used in a similar descriptive way as one of the main identity markers about someone else: *“She wears a scarf and she is divorced and her husband wants her to come back not to live I don’t think, but to marry”*. Through the image of the ‘woman with the scarf’, a story with a clear ‘us’ (the host community) and ‘them’ (‘her culture’) is constructed with the ‘woman with the scarf’ caught in the middle. The same ambiguity of professing disinterest in the headscarf while at the same time showing its importance through her repeated mentioning reappears when I ask her how she would define ‘success’ in her work. *“I would define it when the women get on*

*with their lives when they stand on their own two feet, maybe they don't take off their scarf tomorrow, I don't really care, I must say, I hardly ever discuss it with them".*

The final manifestation of 'the scarf' appears in Vita's narrative of a migrant woman engaged with her organisation about whom Vita is worried: "*Because I keep thinking where she is and how they are. And then she came and her scarf became more and more dark and sort of really black*". When the woman appeared at the centre the next time "*she came and she was dark and we were talking and talking and we had a nice sort of... she was fragile and I said to her 'could I ask you something, you had this very nice blue scarf on when you first came and now you are so black?'. And she says 'in our culture, when people die we dress in black' and there had just been bombs in her home country. And what we see as extreme is culture and I came to think of my friend when she lost her girlfriend, she shaved all her head and she dressed black (...) and I got so much more wise, because that is what they do and I can understand that instead of thinking 'aaah'. And when the women ask me and we talk about [the head scarf], I say 'it will offend many people, [but] it is a choice'*".

The scarf in Vita's reflections and stories is both a symbol of the political and media obsession with Islam, possibly as a threat to Western values or perhaps to feminist values, as in the right-wing political campaign, which featured the fully veiled judge. For Vita, as a response to that, it is important for her self-identity as a tolerant liberal woman as opposed to the political parties and the

media to consider the scarf ‘unimportant’. Yet as a symbol of her tolerance it becomes immensely important and hence resurfaces every time again in her descriptions. In Vita’s narrative the headscarf often symbolises difference and otherness, while at another moment she can incorporate it again in a discourse of similarity through the image of her mourning friend who shaved her head. The scarf emerges as a symbol for perceived oppression, while at the same time it is a sign of political agency, ‘a choice’, even with the power to ‘offend’. According to Bhabha:

“Stereotyping is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjections, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, overdetermination, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of ‘official’ and phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse” (Bhabha 2005:117).

In Cook’s study of Western Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) volunteers in Gilgat, Pakistan, clothing plays also a central role for the Western volunteers in situating themselves in relation to the women in Pakistan (Cook 2005).

Dwyer similarly recognises the importance attributed to the veil as an “overdetermined marker of identity” and insists in her study of young British Muslim women on the diversity of motivations to wear the veil and on the “historical dynamism” of the meaning of the veil (Dwyer 1999:6-7). The veil has been a contentious issue for feminists both in the global South and in the global North and there is no consensus around its interpretation even among those whose arguments follow a similar line. In her famous essay ‘*Under*

*Western Eyes*', Mohanty (1984) criticises simplistic readings of veiling as oppressive and calls for a contextualised and subtle understanding of the different meanings of the gesture of veiling as a politically more productive strategy. While Razack (2001) makes the same point about the homogenising and essentialist features of the critique of the veil, she does explicitly stress her viewpoint that the practice of veiling is definitely oppressing women. In her view it is more important to stress the function of the veil as a "marker of difference" which designates African and Asian women "as bodies to be saved by benevolent and more civilised Europeans" (Razack 2001:6-7).

The above examples have already provided a glimpse of how constructions of the Other are very closely connected to constructions of the Self (see also Baaz 2005). Sonia's depiction of the women in Africa as disorganised, chaotic and unreliable is dependent on her own portrayal as organised and consistent and vice versa. As will be discussed now, Elisa's story has some similar underlying assumptions. In addition, building on the earlier discussion of the use of (a homogeneous and essentialist account of) culture to "render intelligible everything that otherwise remains puzzling (...) while preserving their foreignness" (Narayan 1997:103-104), it will be argued that culture is specifically often invoked in relation to women in the South. One of the main paradigms in the relation between feminists of the North and the South is the women as "victims of culture model" (Lazreg 2000:7).

After the Tsunami happened, Elisa discovered some statistical evidence that stated that the death toll of the Tsunami was proportionally much higher for

women than for men (see for example Oxfam briefing note March 2005). Subsequently, after a sleepless night over this discovery, she liaised with Indian NGOs on the ground and decided to visit the affected area to find out the reasons for the number of women casualties. Elisa: *“What we found on the ground in the South Indian region, that the women, nobody had a chance in the tidal waves, because of the status of women in society, which is defined as being immobile, not very active, (...) the whole relation to the body is such that they would never go out of their way and run like mad or whatever, you see. They would never undress, even in the situation of danger, they were just swept away even if they would have the chance, you know but in the sari they could not move. The men were climbing on the trees, they would not, they were just frozen in time, it was incredible, incredible, so many women drowned. And then we thought we had to do something, that something was that we came up with [a] swimming (...) project (...) and this was in time with a new development, a new stage of the organisation, we felt we have to leave mainstream, we have to look into areas that are constantly overlooked and pose the questions in those corners where others don’t even go into, because they are kind of messy and untidy”.*

While the explanation in this narrative can sound initially quite seductive, at least to me when I first heard it, it is important to take a closer look at the way the problem and the intervention of Elisa’s organisation are framed. When Crewe and Harrison (1998:43) write about the persistency of the idea in the development industry that traditions “hold[...] people back”, their statement gets an almost literal meaning in Elisa’s description of the Indian women as

being immobile in the face of the floods due to the requirements of their tradition. In Elisa's story, *all* Indian women, or at least *all* South Indian women are immobile and inactive and have an uneasy relation with their body that requires them to '*never* go out of their way' and '*never* undress'. When Elisa continues to describe 'they would not, they were just frozen in time, it was incredible, incredible, so many women drowned', her explanation almost sounds as the account of an eye witness in its vividness despite the fact that Elisa has not been there at the time and obviously has not been able to speak with the women casualties. Elisa describes the women as both constrained by the role imposed on them by society and quite literally by their clothes, 'in the sari they could not move'. Her description however also turns the women into passive victims, as there is no account of struggle or resistance, not in the particular situation of the floods nor to the more general perceived oppression within society. Quite clearly, there is an underlying assumption that women in the West are mobile as opposed to the immobile women of India; both in the sense that there is an assumption that Western women would have managed to escape the floods and in terms of the Western pro-active women flying to India, discovering the cause of the high death toll, setting up a project for their immobile Indian female beneficiaries.

Pigg, writing in the context of development work, argues that the important step by anthropologists<sup>30</sup> to take 'culture' into consideration in development

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<sup>30</sup> As Malik points out, anthropology has an ambiguous relation to race. One of the key figures in the history of anthropology, Franz Boaz for example on the one hand undermined scientific biological racism with his cultural explanations for human differences, while on the other hand reasserting the differences, "rearticulat[ing] the themes of racial theory in a different guise" (Malik 1996:151). Similarly, he argues that the other major figure in anthropology, Lévi Strauss, stressed the significance of cultural difference over racial difference, but at the same

policies to counteract policies that treated local communities as “empty vessels”, has resulted in the implementation of very simplified notions of culture in development thinking, which does not take account of variety within groups, and sees culture as fixed and outside context, time and space (Pigg 1997:263-264). In the specific context of gender analysis, a similar mechanism can be identified; while culture was introduced into gender analysis to resist gender essentialism, the result has often been cultural essentialism with an implied hierarchy of civilised versus uncivilised (Kapur 2005).

An additional problem of an analysis that exaggerates the explanatory value of ‘culture’ is that not sufficient attention is paid to additional factors, such as the damaging effects of some forms of modernisation (Narayan 1997). The Oxfam report and other newspaper articles that refer to the report do suggest as one of the reasons for the high number of female deaths the fact that they could not swim well or could not climb in the trees (see for example Oxfam briefing note 2005). It is unclear what the relation is between Elisa’s organisation and Oxfam, which raises questions about the relation between her organisation’s research and theirs and the ‘uniqueness’ of her findings.

What is more important however, is that a number of other reasons are mentioned in the sources, which move away from using ‘culture’ as the sole explanatory tool. For example, women were at the beach waiting for their husbands who were on sea fishing as the women also play a major part in the fishing industry (on sea the violence of the Tsunami was less strong than at the

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time regards cultural differences in a such a rigid, static way that it collapses back into racial theories (Malik 1996).



beach) or that the women were bathing in the sea or at home with their children as it was a weekend day (see Oxfam briefing note 2005, BBC News Asia-Pacific March 2005, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development 2005). It also remains questionable if knowing how to swim would be enough if one lacks the muscle strength to swim against a Tsunami and whether women and children in the West would have survived such disaster. In addition, one could question whether in cases of similar disasters in Western countries, culture is similarly introduced as the explanatory concept (do women there also suffer “death by culture”?) (Narayan 1997:84).

It is important to stress that other research participants were more conscious of the differentiated nature of ‘culture’. Sometimes this became clear through the absence of ‘cultural explanations’ for complex encounters in the interview narratives. In the interview with Gill, she more explicitly addresses how her visit to Uganda opened her eyes to the diversity within ‘a culture’. She differentiates culture, across Africa, between towns and cities, and between people positioned differently in society: *“When I went to Uganda they were like ‘yeah, there is some conflict in Uganda’. So you are wondering (I was going to the capital) ‘will I experience something, will it be unsafe, what will happen there?’ , You come there and then you see that what is happening in that part of the region is really not impacting on anything in the capital. And also throughout my contacts, maybe people don’t have that much experience, they think Africa, they don’t think that in Uganda there is a difference from Kenya, and also culturally there is some difference and economically, and also in Uganda you then have the capital and you have the smaller towns and then you have the villages and then you have people in the societies that are*

*really being discriminated and some that are [better educated], that have more access to resources, you see all these differentiations”.*

Another interesting element in relation to Elisa’s story about their Tsunami intervention is why certain issues ‘cross’ national borders and receive the attention of Western media and what the agenda is behind the difference in visibility between different disasters or practices (Narayan 1997). Stacey seems to be aware of this discourse which fetishises malpractices against women in the global South when she, in another context says: *“you turn on the news and you see that little girls are being buried and that women are hacked up by their partners and burned and thrown away no matter in what country”*. Had Stacey followed the mainstream discourse you would have expected her sentence to finish with ‘in Africa’ or in the global South. However, she makes the important point of adding, ‘no matter in what country’ and thereby shows a more critical engagement with cultural explanations.

Lastly, it is important to investigate the role of Elisa’s organisation as the one who ‘discovers’ the reasons for the number of fatalities and as the one who set up a project to ‘fix’ the problem with a swimming project that had both a practical side in terms of providing swimming lessons and an advocacy side. The story about the women in India who died in the Tsunami very quickly turns into a story about the development of the Western organisation. Elisa presents her organisation’s intervention as exceptional, as going away from the mainstream through asking about otherwise unaddressed areas. It should

be stressed that it is very important that her organisation specifically addresses the gender dimension of the Tsunami disaster and indeed the immediate relief work has the tendency to overlook the specific needs of women as a vulnerable group (see report Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development 2005). In addition as Crewe and Harrison (1998) hold one area in which development organisations often chose not to interfere with ‘culture’ as they understand it, is in the area of traditions concerning gender relations. However, was Elisa’s organisation the only one who asked questions about the high number of female victims of the Tsunami and were they indeed the only one to find this answer, if it is the only answer? It is contentious to reconcile the assertion that these are the messy and untidy corners no other organisation wants to engage with, with the fact that within one visit to the field the solution to the riddle of the high number of women casualties was solved by this Western organisation. Hence, this is not merely an issue about whether Elisa’s organisation was necessary or justified but also about the centrality of Western knowledge production as a post-colonial phenomenon. Pauline stresses her awareness of this when she says: *“There is still a number of areas in the world where you walk in and you are the white woman or the white man, and you are here to impart knowledge”*.

In the discussion of this narrative, I do not wish to downplay the importance of incorporating culture into understandings of development aid, to insist on a gender analysis, or to deny the potentially empowering aspect to learning to swim; however, I concur with Narayan who insists that the “good intentions” of Western feminists need to be complemented “by care and attentiveness to

avoiding the ‘colonialist stance’” when analysing patriarchy in other countries (Narayan 1997:60). Bhavnani and Coulson (2003:83) have for example suggested the ‘Women, culture and development’ (WCD) framework (following the WID, WAD and GAD approaches) in which they propose to take cultural differences in account while combining a structural and local/particular analysis in order to avoid “seeing women as in need to rescue from their culture” and without agency.

Kate for example stresses the agency of women in relation to work in sweatshops: *“There is a clear position from most of the women working in this way in India, in Bangladesh in export processing zones, they want to work in there, they want that bit of cash which gives them more economic independence”*. Hence, while the garment industry is equally embedded in cultural expectations about racial and gender roles, with Asian women being seen as docile, disciplined workers, with “nimble fingers” (Harcourt 2009:734) Kate explores multiple angles of intervention instead of only focussing on culture: *“perhaps in opening up that situation, not trying to find one response but support wherever you can for them to be empowered, be stronger, legal, political, economic, trade-unions, employment conditions. Or from the other side you can start from here on conditions for investment, obligations for investors in-country to respect any kind of standard, you can work on the legal system with human rights”*.

Cook observed in her ethnographic case study on Western development workers in Gilgit, Pakistan, that the female research participants, when asked

to describe themselves, characterised themselves as free and autonomous *in opposition to* the oppressed local women (Cook 2006). While in Elisa's account the contrast between the mobile Western women and the immobile Indian women was more implicit though clearly present, in Grace's reflections this juxtaposition is made more explicitly. Grace speaks here of her experiences with a group of migrant women from Somalia.

Grace: *"Their opportunities for studying English are very limited because the culture dictates that the man takes priority and the woman's job is to stay at home with the children and I find it quite hard actually, because, it is something that I find quite difficult to take onboard, because it is so different to the European culture, isn't it, where I have my right to go out and have my own job (...). And to understand these women's acceptance of the role imposed, I would say imposed, they would see it as normal, I see it as a role imposed on them and they are far more difficult people to get to know, partly because of the lack of English and partly because they are not encouraged to integrate with the English community"*.

Grace contrasts the culture of Somalia with the 'European culture' and at the same time also directly transfers this to herself versus them, 'where I have my right to go out and have my own job'. She includes me as the interviewer in the 'us' by seeking confirmation for her statement in the 'isn't it?' making me complicit with this discourse. The women Grace describes are quite literally made 'speechless' and passive through the language barrier. At the same time she leaves little room for the possibility of resistance on the side of the

women, by asserting that the women 'accept' their role in the household and that 'they see it as normal'. By contrasting her understanding of the role of the women as 'imposed' with the assumed 'acceptance' from the side of the women involved, the gap between 'us' and 'them' is widened further; it is not only that the lives of women there and here are radically different, it is even that their desires in life are constructed as radically different. Due to her recourse to a cultural understanding of difference, Grace fails to see connections with mothers who stay at home in Western cultures, like the so-called 'yummy-mummies' whose choice to stay at home is perceived and discussed very differently. In addition, the cultural explanation leaves little room for alternative explanations such as the costs of professional childcare or the lack of social networks providing informal childcare.

According to Mohanty, feminist discourse exercises power through this homogenisation of the diverse group of women in the Third World. Mohanty here identifies the very significant theme of Other as the reverse image of the Self, the dependence on an image of otherness as 'oppressed' in order for the self to be 'liberated'. Mohanty speaks about a Western feminist self-presentation and a Western feminist re-presentation of Third World women:

"Universal images of 'the third world woman' (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the 'third world difference' to 'sexual difference' are predicated upon (...) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives. This is not to suggest that Western women *are* secular liberated and have control over

their own lives. I am referring to *discursive* self-presentation, not necessarily material reality” (Mohanty 1984:335, see also Ghandi 1998, Lazreg 2000).

I was interested to hear whether Grace had ever expressed her concerns about the women she worked with to the women themselves. She replied that as the language barrier restricted the conversation, she had never talked to the women about ‘their role’. When I asked her whether she ever met their husbands, she told me that as they brought the women to the group, ‘deposit them’, she had met them and that they were more proficient in the language of the host country.

Grace: *“I don’t feel that I could question the blokes as to why they take this attitude, because I think they would perceive it as intrusive and possibly racist because you are questioning their traditions and their standards and their code of practice and their faith almost. So I find that quite tricky, it is one that I never worked out how to handle. I don’t know, I don’t know how you do it, because you want to say ‘for goodness sake, you are living in England now, if your wife is got to have a life here, she has got to learn English for the sake of your children, (...) And it must be very isolating for these mothers if the kids speak English and they do not know what the kids are talking about”.*

She continues: *“Before challenging it, before talking to the men, to their husbands, their fathers, I would need to know a lot more about the culture, about the background and about the particular area they came from. It is not an area I know enough about to challenge, you have to be careful, haven’t you, that you don’t offend people by challenging in a situation that you don’t*

*know enough about because you can say the wrong thing out of ignorance almost”.*

Culture here is presented as something that is mysterious at first but ultimately ‘knowable’; similar to Vita’s sudden understanding of the ‘blackness of the scarf’ as a sign of mourning and Elisa’s realisation that ‘culture’ played a role in the high number of women that died in the Tsunami. Spivak challenges this notion of culture as knowable: “In the meantime I remain a consensus breaker among metropolitan activists, who feel they can know everything in a non-vague way if only they have enough information” (Spivak 2003b:204-205). Grace’s assumption that her intervention could possibly be understood as racist very clearly shows the conflation of ‘race’ with culture and religion as discussed before.

It is striking to see how the Somali women concerned have not only become ‘speechless’ in the sense that they are excluded from the discussion as they could not communicate in the language of the host country, but that they also have disappeared completely but as mothers and as wives. Grace expresses how she would want to tell the husbands that the women should have a life and learn the language ‘for the sake of the children’. At the same time she is concerned about the isolating effect the lack of language skills will have on the women, but even that isolation is passive, by virtue of the children learning the new language and thereby excluding the mothers. Grace defends her choice not to intervene and talk to the husbands by reference to a hesitation to



‘offend’ the men, specifically in the context of not knowing enough about ‘the culture’.

Underlying Grace’s story there is a juxtaposition of assumed options; either confronting the husbands and possibly offending them versus leaving the women in their ‘imposed role’. However, her choice for non-interference seems hard to explain merely by reference to a fear to offend. For Bhabha, “[liberal democracy] is a recognition of cultural *diversity* within the conventional totalising, knowing frame of Western rationality. It is not an appreciation of serious cultural *difference*”. The latter, he argues, is a matter of living with the “insurmountable ambivalence which accompanies the question of ‘knowing’ other cultures within the framework of still-dominant host culture” (Bhabha quoted and summarised in: McLennan 2003:76). Hence there is a tension between the multicultural celebration of difference at the level of the symbolic versus the understanding of socio-cultural substantial differences. Spivak, in the context of the initial response by the British colonisers to the phenomenon of ‘*sati*’ (widow burning) in India, speaks of an “interested use of cultural relativism” (Spivak 1999:297). Grace uses a form of cultural relativism to justify her non-intervention (see Ahmed 2000b:166) while at the same time she does not, as Bhabha suggests ‘appreciate serious cultural difference’.

Vita works with migrant women directly by providing a meeting and information space. She would like the migrant women who come to the space that the organisation provides, to be members of the organisation as, according

to her, is usual in her country. Her account displays similar tensions between respecting different circumstances and scepticism about these same circumstances, which are measured according to universal Western standards.

Vita: *“But I have not been strict enough about [requiring membership] and I don’t want to scare the foreign women from coming. I think they are, I see so many similarities for women, half a generation older than mine, for me too, but I am sort of in the next generation, but for many years [they] have had little money, it goes to the children, the husband, the house, the family and then the women. So when they have to sort of say ‘I need to pay this’, maybe they would themselves think, ‘no’ or maybe the family would say ‘what is that about?’ . Now there are 2 women being married to men from Denmark happily coming here [and] after years I say ‘should you not be a member?’, ‘my husband does not think so’ and it is men from Denmark [whispers] ...Jesus, Jesus!”*

Implicit in this account is a notion that the women are in a ‘backward’ position as they are being compared to Vita (who is middle-aged) and to women half a generation older in the host community. At the same time, Vita recognises that the position of the women, which prevents them from paying the membership contribution (their needs being served last, after those of the husband and children) is actually common among those migrant women with husbands from the host community, so from Vita’s own country. Her initial assumption that the men from the host community should be more emancipated is severely challenged by this instance, which she expresses in her silent cursing.

Kate on the other hand, problematises the fact that Islam or other cultures are often seen as the site of oppression using a gender perspective: *“What is interesting is that for example (...) there are two things, the one is that Islamophobia is basically identified as ‘they oppress women’, whereas Islamist extremists would say the same thing ‘they are exploiting women in the West, sexual exploitation’, so both would use the gender identity to challenge the other”*. At another point she similarly challenges the ‘us versus them’ divide: *“More people will lose out in globalisation, increasingly in our prosperous societies (...) and in the South you might have more rich people as well. So this clear divide is [reduced] and I think from the gender [perspective], it could be an advantage, because you understand it is not them and us, [but] that [it] keeps changing”*.

This is a significant comment as it stresses again that it would be a mistake to believe that the North and the South are homogeneous categories without differences and inequalities within these areas. The fact that around half of the NGO workers I interviewed were active within their own countries (not abroad) and supported women from the global South with a migration background underlines this point as well. It is important to note that while my research concentrates on those women NGO workers that are located in the global North and the relative privilege they are endowed with through their roles and their locations, it should not be assumed that all the interviewees were born or their parents born in those countries that are associated with the prosperous West. Hence, the relationship between those research participants

with a migrant background with the women they supported follows more complex patterns of simultaneous identification and differentiation. I now want to turn to the intersubjective element of the intersectionality of social divisions, or, in other words, to the way identities are understood within relationships and through relationships.

Kim, who has a migrant background herself and now works with migrants, notices: *“There are so many paths, sequences of integration, that I see there are people that really assimilate to the point that people that stay like they are in their culture and try to survive somehow with this and [then] something in the middle”*. When I subsequently ask her whether the fact that she and her family made a choice for a certain model of integration has consequences for who she identifies with more in her work, she says: *“No, because as I am born in Austria at one point it was clear my life is here (...) , maybe I miss it a bit too that I have nothing from the culture from my parents, I miss this part and I think sometimes I like to see that people can manage to handle both of it, because I have the feeling I did not handle both [cultures], I just adopted one. (...) It was maybe easier to integrate, it was easier for me to adapt to the language because I had no choice. With whom should I speak a different language?”* While the meaning of culture is still quite static in the narrative, Kim’s experience of her own assimilation makes her respectful of those who manage to straddle two different cultures. She rejects my idea that she would more readily identify with those migrants that have chosen the same path of assimilation. This indicates that for her it is the dilemma of how to bridge (or

not bridge) different cultures that she recognises rather than that identification is based on similarities regarding the chosen form of integration.

Fay shares the same migrant background with some of the women she supports. The women Fay supports are in a very marginalised position and hence the recognition of sharing the same national background with those women has a very different effect from meeting another compatriot at work conferences, which “*would be very light and it would be, what are all the opportunities that we have, look at what we have here!*”. However, when she meets marginalised women that she supports through her work who are from her country the encounter is more complex.

Fay: “*She is relating her story to me and I understand because there are a lot of structural and other barriers, first there was the communist system, you could not leave your country and then you have European migratory restrictions you cannot enter the country. Yes, it is women my age who want to travel, they want to have jobs, they want to do something and there are just (...) no opportunities. And this generates anger also [in me] and even more so if then they tell me of experiences that they have had of discrimination here, because it is a discriminating and racist society. And you are aware that you are living in the same society and some experiences you have also had and you share and others not because you are privileged in some way. Then there is the question, how do you look at them and at yourself? And at the beginning it was difficult for me because I felt guilty also for having had, or for having*

*certain privileges because I thought the starting point was the same for us and why is it possible for me to be here and for her to be here?''.*

This narrative underlines once more that while our analysis should pay attention to the structural barriers shaping people's lives, categories of identity, like nationality and gender should not be read as universally determining the experiences of people. In the words of Sotelo, "political and economic transformations may set the stage for migration, but they do not write the script" (Sotelo quoted in: McCall 2005:1782: fn.15). Fay experiences in this encounter both identification of commonalities and differentiation through what she calls 'her privileges'. Nancy Fraser uses the notion of "cross-pulls of (...) various affiliations" to point to the conflicting ways in which people can be positioned in relation to others (Fraser 2003:26). Fay's narrative of her encounter illustrates the relational aspect of her positionality as a woman NGO worker with a migration background. As Brah and Phoenix point out, the idea of the significance of intersectionality has not only opened spaces to think differently about the complexity and variety of power relations but also of "emotional investments" (Brah and Phoenix 2004:82). Hence, while on the one hand Fay is situated more comfortably than the women she supports, which could put her in a dominant power position, her emotional investment in challenging a discriminating and racist society stems also from her identification with these women and her own similar experiences. It would be too simplistic to argue that women from migrant backgrounds cannot be racist or are always and by necessity more reflective about their position. However, they can draw on their own experience of being

in multiple positions, which might generate an increased awareness of the complexity of other people's situations.

### **Challenges and Resistances**

Goudge stresses in *'The Whiteness of Power: Racism in Third World Development and Aid'*, a study of development workers based on interviews and her own experiences as a development worker in Nicaragua that she is not interested in establishing a "blame culture" in which she would hold aid workers solely responsible for "racialised approaches" to the global South (Goudge 2003:43). In line with the aforementioned acknowledgement that racism should not be understood as a psychological and individual phenomenon, I concur with Goudge's refusal to merely blame individuals or a specific group. This does not mean however, that the women NGO workers do not carry a responsibility for the perpetuation of those images and practices. As Goudge (2003) points out indeed their practices will be influenced by 'racial' images, and hence their practices in turn will inevitably influence other practices and reinforce racialised discourses. Hence, building on the discussion above which traced 'race as culture', 'radical difference', cultural relativism, imperialism as a civilising mission and defining Self through otherness in the reflexive accounts of the women NGO workers, I will now more specifically focus on how these racial and colonial discourses can be challenged and resisted.

Grace, who first told me how she grew up with images of Africans walking around with spears and living in mud huts, also mentions that her perception

of African people must have changed over time, though she has not consciously experienced this change happening. This already hints at a concern that these images of her youth, though at first sight outdated, are more pervasive than she would like. This concern comes to the fore more strongly in what she says afterwards: *“You know I was brought up, really that my background was totally white and black people, it was the very much the sort of slave mentality, where they were second class citizens and that was what I was brought up with and I do sometimes wonder if push came to shovel whether...this attitude that I was brought up with is more deep rooted than I think it is and whether it could bubble up to the surface at times, and I think if you are honest, I think you have to say ‘yeah, I think it could, and I have to guard against it’. I don’t know whether I should say this when I am working with [migrants], but I am sure it is true”*.

There is a tension here between what Grace identifies as a need for an acknowledgement that she still carries these images she has been brought up with, which despite attempting to suppress them ‘could still bubble up to the surface’ and the taboo associated with this acknowledgement discussed in the first section of this chapter. There is a sense of (political) correctness and professionalism, ‘I am not sure whether I should say this...’ that might form a barrier to a critical reflection on latent racism. Sereny (2003) stresses that we all have to recognise our reaction towards otherness before we can fight it. When we are in denial about our racism and think of ourselves as innocent of these kinds of feelings, “we need to remember that this innocence is only as real as our capacity to maintain denial” (Sereny 2003:250).



Gayatri Spivak (1999:370:n79) argues for a responsibility that is articulated through an acknowledgement of complicity (see also Razack 2001). Spivak expresses the hope that we may discover “a constructive rather than a disabling complicity” despite the fact that indeed “there often seems no choice between excuses and accusation, the muddy stream and mudslinging” (Spivak 1999:3-4). As Grace refers mostly to the way she has been brought up with racist images, situating it in the past rather than the present, the question remains whether her vigilance against ‘old racist intuitions’ goes as far as the constructive complicity suggested by Spivak, which takes account of how one is still embedded in a racist or otherwise unjust system. I asked Grace what one’s response should be in these kinds of situations and how she thought you could guard against racism.

Grace replied: *“I don’t know, it is hard to say isn’t it, unless you know a particular circumstance, I think you have to examine your conscience and to think when you make judgements about people, ‘am I being fair, have I taken into account everything that happened to these people, do I know enough about them to be standing in judgement on them’? I don’t know. Don’t know, I would hope I would not be racist, but I think maybe if you are aware that you could be, that that is fairly good guard against being racist if you are aware that... Maybe I am wrong, maybe there are people who could not be racist, but... A lot you tend to hear is about institutionalised racism (...), and you do think when you look at the fact that African boys don’t achieve as much as they ought to: ‘Is this expectations from the school, do we quite*

*subconsciously not expect enough from our black pupils, or is it poverty because poverty has a huge impact on achievement?’ I don’t know, I thought a lot about institutional racism, and I don’t really understand it, which is a bit scary. Because when you have been teaching, teaching is one of these areas that is accused of having this institutionalised racist attitude, and do I fall into that trap without knowing it? And if you don’t know, you don’t know if you have done it”.*

In this narrative Grace suggests that everyone is racist ‘maybe I am wrong, maybe there are people who could not be racist, but...’. At the same time her understanding of ‘guarding against racism’ is relatively individualised and psychologised as it refers to examining one’s conscience and the impossibility of making proper judgements. The other striking feature of the quote is the repetition of ‘I don’t know’, which does imply that Grace does not seek easy closure on the question on racism. This resonates with Spivak’s account of constructive complicity, in which the acknowledgement of complicity should never result in a new “moral confidence”; rather this acknowledgement of complicity can “never be complete” (Keenan 2002:192).

Whereas the earlier discussion mainly concerned individual racism due to upbringing, Grace now addresses institutional racism. As Grace has been a teacher in the recent past, she now more clearly shows an understanding of how she is also currently embedded in racist structures, rather than relegating it to the past. In addition, when she refers to poverty she looks beyond racist explanations to structural material reasons for underachievement among black

boys. This last move goes further into the direction of what Razack calls a politics of “accountability” (Razack 2001:10) or Spivak a constructive acknowledgement of complicity (Spivak 1999), by which they mean an acknowledgment of how one is embedded in structures of domination and how we are produced by these systems and reinforce those systems with our ‘knowledge’ about others. Spivak considers her greatest task in teaching her privileged students at Columbia University to “unlearn [their] privilege as a loss” (Spivak 1990:9). The privileges of these students hinder them in the first instance to see other people’s perspectives (see also Minh-ha 1991) and as their feeling of superiority is ‘learned’, one should attempt to ‘unlearn’ it and through that gain access to a wider range of experiences.

Both Sylvia and Sarah make a conscious effort to point out the very visible identity markers that can pose an obstacle in the relation between them and others. In addition, they attempt to address the stereotypes that arise on both sides. Sylvia: *“When I am in the South I usually find ways of identifying the things that make me different from wherever I am and then pointing it out in a funny way first, so it is like ‘I know what you are thinking, I am assuming this is what is going through your mind’ so let me just address it and let you know that I am aware of it too and then we move on from that (...) I think more often it is the differences that become the defining things in your identity in relation to the people you are around and so to try and go through things without acknowledging that difference ends up creating this false sense of who you are and in relation to them because then that is where any kind of stereotypes are going to come in (...) that is going to be in the differences. So to be able to just*

*throw that out at the very beginning and acknowledge that it is there, it kind of makes it a bit easier to then look past them”.*

Sylvia’s emphasis on acknowledging ‘differences’, and not just differences, but the differences that have been made significant through colonial discourses, racism, sexism etc. might go some way towards a constructive acknowledgement of complicity. At the same time, in the final sentence, which expresses the idea that one can ‘throw that out at the very beginning’ which ‘makes it a bit easier to look past them’, an assumption seems to surface that these differences are transparent (easy to find and pinpoint) and possible to transcend. Also, the notion of ‘difference’ fails to name the potential power inequalities that might be at stake in the relationship. Sarah has a more explicit acknowledgment of the challenge related to discussing the assumptions that are made about each other in relation to different cultural codes of what can be discussed and what should be left out. At the same time, her reflection seems to imply that only ‘culture’ can be a barrier for an open discussion, which can be mitigated by diplomatic strategies. Sarah also uses the phrase “[to] have a strong work relationship *beyond* that”, with which again is implied that there is a potential to get beyond the differences. Almost literally similar to Sylvia’s “throw that out at the very beginning, Sarah talks about “get[ting] rid of those assumptions”.

Sarah: *“Or there are assumptions made, ‘you have had this kind of background and have had these kind of experience’, and I find that if I notice myself that I am making assumptions I ask questions and sometimes this can*

*be very difficult culturally in different situations because again some things to ask in some cultures there are some things you ask and some things you don't. And because I am trying to work and do this in a multi-cultural environment, again it goes back to this diplomacy to be very delicate in situations and also to really be considerate and attentive to body language to also the frequency and level of response. (...) because I know if I might be making assumptions then the other person might be making assumptions about me so by me asking I am offering the right to asking back so to get rid of those assumptions. And again one of the primary things is to develop a core relationship with someone from there, to know a person on a person's sense, 'do you have a family, (...) what have you done professionally?', have a strong work relationship beyond that, those are the relationships that carry. And it is time, it can be quite time intensive".*

As Kapoor points out, in Spivak's understanding of "unlearning privilege as a loss", "it is not enough to try and efface oneself, to benevolently try and step down from one's position of authority; in fact, as Spivak has reminded us, this gesture is often a reinforcement of privilege, not a disavowal of it" (Kapoor 2008:55-56). Instead, 'unlearning privilege as a loss' means tracing the origin and route of one's preconceptions and discriminatory habits (Kapoor 2008). Sarah and Sylvia both attempt to indeed act according to the latter, by making explicit the stereotypes and assumptions that arise from colonial, racist and sexist discourses. Minh-ha argues that Westerners also have a duty in attempting to 'rename' themselves as something different than merely Western, a category that they have helped to construct and by which virtue

they have enjoyed privileges. Comparing it to the role of men in the feminist struggle, she stresses that

“we are not dealing here with a situation of equal power relationship, and in that sense, we cannot really talk about ‘the Other of the Other’ (...) but people from the West do, indeed, need to liberate themselves from their own privileged status” (Minh-ha 1996:16).

Sarah’s account clearly shows that the question of identity and difference cannot be separated from the issue of power and knowledge. Her approach to the national sections of her organisation, which consists of stressing that they are more knowledgeable than she is in their national context is initially hindered by their expectations of her in her role as secretary-general. Speaking of her engagement with the national sections of her organisation while she herself is situated in the international headquarters: *“it is again not being so self-deprecating that is sounds foolish but also really putting yourself in the situation to recognise that there is specific knowledge, like I can’t know everything and there is a certain humbling. I think the international to national connection is a very good example of it, where I don’t know the national situation very well, I have a perspective, but I need the expertise there and it is like I have a pool of experts that I go to on specific issues and they are like ‘oh, but you are the secretary-general, you should know all this’. ‘No, the reality is I need your knowledge, I need your guidance to be able to do this’”.*

Spivak, in her concern with privilege, calls for a “suspending oneself in the text of the other. For this, the first condition and effect is suspension of the conviction that I am necessarily better, I am necessarily indispensable, I am necessarily the one to right wrongs, I am necessarily the end-product for which history happened” (Spivak 2003c:181). When Sophie reflects on how her identity affects her work she first says: *“It means that I can...of course it means something. It means I represent money, I can access a lot of people that I would not access if I was born in Zambia. But I come and I have a lot of power coming to Zambia”*. Immediately, however, she continues: *“But it also means that I am someone that can’t understand the situation in Zambia. I feel that they think, I mean I have friends in Zambia that I have known for several years and I always feel that they have so far to get an equal relationship still. Because even when I think I sort of grasp the situation, they would never say, they will always say ‘but this is Swedish’ or ‘you don’t understand Zambian culture’. And it is probably true sometimes. Sometimes I don’t think it is true. But I think it is very difficult because of class, (...) but also that I am white, that I come from Europe, it makes it difficult to be honest, it is not something that I like, but it makes it difficult to have equal friendships or friendships that are based on equality from both perspectives probably”*.

As Sophie realises, her privilege, in terms of money and access to power, that comes with her identity, is immediately also turned into a ‘loss’ in the context of her engagement with Zambia and her Zambian friends. Her privilege means that ‘she can’t understand the situation in Zambia’ and even more significantly, it means that her Zambian friends deny her the possibility of that

understanding turning the power imbalance upside down. While she thinks at some points she does manage to ‘sort of grasp the situation’, they perceive her as locked in her own cultural understanding. Minh-ha might take a similar perspective to the Zambian friends who insist that Sophie does not “understand Zambian culture” when she states:

“[the master’s] privileged position hasn’t allowed him to benefit from that double vision inherent in any dominated person (...) There are exceptions naturally: sensitive, non-coded, mobile beings have always existed.” (Minh-ha 1991:123).

Spivak has commented in her later work on the popularity of her idea of ‘unlearning privilege as a loss’ and has chosen to revise this statement. As she writes: “I became aware of the sheer narcissism of the practical politics of unlearning one’s privilege, I quietly changed it to ‘learning to learn from below’, but nobody paid much attention” (Spivak 2000:121). Spivak’s revision is significant in her rightful warning against the risk of navel gazing (and reverting again to a psychologised and individualist understanding of discrimination) in the process of reflecting on one’s own privilege. In addition, her assertion that we have to *learn to* learn from below is an important corrective on popularised alternative development theories, which stress bottom-up over top-down approaches without engaging with the difficulty of learning from below (see Duffield 2007:233, Kapoor 2008). Sarah’s narrative while working with this notion of “learning to learn from below” when she talks about ‘a certain humbling’, at the same time shows the complexity of this strategy in a context where power structures shape relationships, when she



recalls how the national organisations expect her to know everything because she is the secretary-general. It is important to note that in the context of Sarah's work and the context of many NGOs who operate from Northern capital cities, the learning from below is often a learning from 'somewhere in the middle', the national partners, the Southern NGOs, rather than a learning from the really marginalised communities, or the beneficiaries; the latter would even be infinitely more challenging.

## **Conclusion**

Post-colonial theory has emphasised how colonial tendencies have persisted, albeit under a different guise, in our current 'post-' colonial times.

Development work is one example of the perpetuation of the 'civilising mission'. However, it would be too simplistic to merely situate development work as 'colonialism continued' since some development work has also been set up to counter the effects of the post-colonial system of inequalities. The recurrent discussion about the 'post-' in post-colonialism among post-colonial theorists who try to emphasise that it should not be read as a simple 'after' and 'beyond', is mirrored in the ambivalent way the women NGO workers talk about colonial times. While some directly refer to colonial times and the continuities they recognise, most often colonialism is mentioned as something firmly situated in the past. However, the fact that colonialism still needs to be mentioned affirms the opposite; colonialism is still there in its post-colonial guise and has not disappeared, is not just of the past, but still resonates in our current times.

While in colonial times, intervention could be justified on the basis of 'race', in which the Western race was perceived to be superior to other 'races', the notion of race is not acceptable in current parlance. However, the fact that 'race' is not explicitly talked about and named as such does not mean that the assumptions of racial superiority and difference have vanished. As Kothari (2005) has pointed out, 'race' seems to be replaced by notions of culture, traditions, and rituals. While it was an important contribution of anthropology to insert 'culture' into the development discourse as a dimension of life and to show how 'cultural difference' influenced interactions between 'the West and the Rest', merely 'adding in culture' does not immediately lead to a nuanced understanding of how culture functions, and shapes lives in ever changing ways. On the contrary, ideas about culture are often reified and homogenised. In addition, the hierarchy inherent in ideas about 'race' is often translated to a hierarchy between cultures or alternatively could lead to a cultural relativism.

Some of the women NGO workers persistently used the term culture to make sense of their work experiences and encounters with the Other (see also Baaz 2005). Some of those narratives feature generalisations about the Other in which culture is used to understand radical difference. I have here not argued against an approach that considers culture as an important element, which shapes people's lives but against a reified view of culture as rigid, consistent and homogenous instead of fluid, changeable and diverse. A further risk associated with this use of culture as an explanatory construct is that it downplays and flattens out the significance of power differences (Razack 2001). In addition, the cultural images that some of the women NGO workers

sketched displayed many similarities with colonial images of the native. Culture was not only used to describe difference per se, but often also indicated a hierarchy. Hence, while culture had replaced 'race', these narratives show how racism and post-colonialism still shape some of the women's understandings of their encounters with the women they seek to support.

'Culture' was also used to make sense of the relation between the Self and the Other. Here the hierarchical relation between Self and Other, Western culture and native other culture featured strongly. More specifically this is significant in the relation between women, in which as Mohanty has claimed, images of oppressed, home-bound victimised Southern women are used to depict Northern women as liberated, mobile, and free agents. Hence, since assumptions about the Other are tied to ideas about the Self, an important question that needs to be asked when resorting to cultural explanations is, as Razack suggests: "What do I gain from understanding something in this way?" (Razack 2001:20). Furthermore, perceived difference in culture has become strong currency for a political left liberalism that wants to present itself as tolerant, and in favour of multiculturalism. Ultimately, however, this liberal tolerance still relies on culture as fixed and with clearly marked boundaries. However, while 'othering' was prevalent in the narratives of some of the research participants it is crucial not to lose sight of the internal heterogeneity of the research participants and the differences in position. While among some women, cultural stereotypes featured strongly with a range of risky implications, as has been shown, other women NGO workers consciously

challenged one-dimensional accounts of the Other by pointing to contradictions, diversity and ambivalences. In addition, I argued that the process of 'othering' is complicated in those cases where the women interviewed have an migrant background, as their encounters with the Other indeed include differentiation but also identification of a partly common history.

Rather than merely establishing and recognising the racial and colonial discourse that shapes the experiences of the women NGO workers, it is important to think about how to challenge and resist this discourse. I have attempted to find practised, lived forms of "constructive complicity" (Spivak 1999), in which responsibility should be articulated through an (ever incomplete) acknowledgement of one's embeddedness in structural injustice, in the narratives of women NGO workers. While it is possible to catch glimpses of Spivak's intended responsibility, there remains a danger that after a short reflexive moment there is easy 'closure' on the complicity question. In addition, I have argued that "unlearning privilege as a loss" (Spivak 1990) can be a useful tool for recognising structural privilege and acknowledge how this privilege, rather than solely providing advantages, can bring the disadvantage of forming a barrier between the Self and the Other. Some of the narratives of the women interviewed indeed show traces of this realisation of privilege as a loss. However, I would concur with Spivak's rectification of her statement and the subsequent change to "learning to learn from below" (Spivak 2000:121) to avoid the unlearning of privilege as a loss to become a mere narcissistic exercise. In the context of the women's work it becomes clear that the power

difference and the actual distance (the implications of which will be discussed more extensively in Chapter Six) to those who are in fact 'below' are barriers in establishing this ethical relationship.

## **6 - Performing Global Citizenship**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will use different theories about global civil society and global citizenship to analyse the reflections of women NGO workers on their work. The debates in global civil society theory and global citizenship theory are instructive in highlighting and analysing issues of representation, the public/private divide and (global) responsibility in particular. These three main themes form the basis of much contestation in the literature on global civil society and global citizenship. The public/private divide features strongly in both global citizenship and in global civil society theory and together these bodies of theory help to uncover a number of contradictions related to the public/private divide. At the same time, the civil society theory and global citizenship theory respectively draw attention to some distinct issues. While the framework of civil society theory sheds light on particular challenges faced by the women NGO workers in relation to representation, global citizenship theory is useful in the analysis of notions of (global) responsibility expressed by the research participants.

The reason for combining the debates on global citizenship and global civil society is that these are intertwined and at some points even overlap due to a similar historical development. In some perspectives, 'global civil society' and 'global citizenship' are presented as the same (for example Carter 2001:93 and Carter 2001:83), while in other perspectives, global civil society is said to play

a key part in the *formation* of global citizenship (Desforges 2004). Armstrong makes this confusion about the relation between global citizenship and global civil society very explicit by stating:

“There is an odd slippage in the literature, however, on the question whether global civil society *expresses* the emergence of global citizenship, or in fact *engineers* that emergence. Here prominent accounts of global civil society become somewhat circular” (Armstrong 2006:352).

In the first section of this chapter I will discuss the critique of the representative role NGOs take in relation to the women NGOs workers’ narratives. I will show that the women NGO workers displayed an awareness of the problems associated with practices of representation, both in terms of the conflict between presenting an ideology and representing a constituency, and in relation to the heterogeneity of the group to be represented. As a response to critiques of representation, some organisations have attempted to take on a facilitative rather than representative role; however, closer examination of this attractive alternative reveals that the pitfalls of this facilitative role are similar to those of the representative position. The section finishes with a discussion of the relation between the two meanings of representing – *darstellen* and *vertreten*. The second section builds on the themes of inequality between NGO workers and target group and the potential career benefits of the representative role, by providing a closer analysis of the women’s narratives about responsibility. I will argue that a sense of global responsibility is often explained with reference to the opportunities that the women have enjoyed, but that at the same time the NGO work itself provides

the women with new opportunities. I will continue to discuss the narratives about the 'benefits' NGO work offers, in relation to the discourse that is critical of 'NGOisation', and the possibility to make a career out of activism.

While the public/private divide is a central defining feature of the concepts of citizenship and civil society, different theoretical frameworks show that this relation is ambiguous as well. Civil society has both been conceptualised as situated in the public and in the private sphere, by respectively republican and liberal theories. More recently, the rethinking of citizenship has challenged its relation to the public and private spheres. Feminist theory has a long-standing engagement with the public/private divide. More specifically it has attempted to make the separation of spheres explicit in order to counter the invisibility of the private (domestic) sphere and has challenged the current rigid divide. The notion of the 'political' is intertwined with the debate on the different conceptions of public and private. Politics can be variably understood as linked to a certain kind of morality (e.g. linked to the idea of a public instrumental morality or personal passion) or to either the state (public) or civil society (public or private). Hence, women NGO workers are in a range of ways implicated in the public/private divide, as will be discussed in the third section. This final section will describe understandings of the political in relation to the private/public divide.

### **Global Civil Society and Representation**

Kaldor's classical interpretation of global civil society identifies "a role for global civil society in the representation of marginalised global constituencies



and in providing internationalised spaces for a world-wide public to deliberate in” (Kaldor quoted in: Baker and Chandler 2005:6). With global civil society being conventionally perceived as playing a role in the representation of marginalised groups and with NGOs currently having access to almost all UN conferences and committees<sup>31</sup> (Hahn and Holzscheiter 2005, Eade 2007) questions need to be asked about the who, what and how of representation. The issue of representation, who *can* represent and *who/what is being represented* in the context of NGOs with a women/gender dimension centres around a few contentious issues.

Chesters observes that actors in the political arena use the normative connotation of ‘global civil society’, “as a version of the good society stretched to the end of the earth”, for its strategic and rhetorical effect (Chesters 2004:323). Chandhoke (2005) problematises the representative role of global civil society by questioning its representativeness and accountability. She wonders which and whose norms are selected by civil society actors as worthy of being pursued. Anderson and Rieff (2004) criticise the ambition of global civil society to act as representatives and intermediaries while lacking the democratic setting of the ballot box that national civil society is situated in. Alvarez, writing in the context of Latin America, problematises this further in relation to feminist NGOs when she states:

“Even when feminist NGOs explicitly deny that they represent the women’s movement, they are too often conveniently viewed as doing so by elected

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<sup>31</sup> According to Eade “the list of NGOs with consultative status runs to 60 pages, each with about 40 entries –that’s one NGO a day for six and a half years” (Eade 2007:632).

officials and policy makers who can thereby claim to have ‘consulted civil society’” (Alvarez 1998: 313, see also Squires 2007).

In order to highlight the contentiousness of NGOs taking on representative roles, Anderson and Rieff (2004) suggest that the work of NGOs should rather be understood as modern missionary work, an attempt to spread a series of values, notably the universal declaration of human rights. They maintain that NGOs’ reluctance to accept that alternative label stems from their unwillingness to give up the moral hegemony they have achieved under the banner of ‘global civil society’ (Anderson and Rieff 2004; Roy 2004 calls NGOs the “secular missionaries of the modern world”). Some others point to the dangerous implications of NGOs’ image of moral immunity (Stirrat and Henkel 1997, Hilhorst 2003, Hahn and Holzscheiter 2005).

NGOs were conventionally defined as non-governmental, non-profit and non-violent (Willetts 2002) and derived their moral position from these features. However, these three dimensions became questioned with NGOs increased reliance on state donor funding and involvement in global governance, with the aid sector becoming industries where aid workers work as moral entrepreneurs and also with NGOs supporting Western military (humanitarian) interventions (Petras 1997, Van Rooy and Robinson 1998, Duffield 2001, Vaux 2001, Nederveen Pieterse 2006, Duffield 2007). Amore and Langley (2004) argue that the normative connotation of global civil society downplays the very power struggles within global civil society about issues of representation and resistance. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’, they propose that global civil society should be considered

as a site of government, “as a place where the global political economy is shaped, regulated or deregulated, disciplined or sustained”, rather than a site outside government/the state (Amoore and Langley 2004:100). This new conceptualisation would open up a space for debate on the ambiguity of global civil society (Amoore and Langley 2004).

Corry (2006) however, counters Anderson and Rieff by accusing them of using a very narrow notion of legitimacy when that is necessarily connected to the ballot box. While their understanding of representation is dependent on democratic accountability of the representatives, an alternative interpretation of representation makes the identity of the representatives a crucial element of their representative position (Squires 2001). I agree with Corry that legitimacy should be more broadly defined than the ballot box, but I would also argue that Anderson and Rieff’s criticism opens up an important discussion on moral hegemony. As long as global civil society is perceived as representing ‘all the people’ and its work is equated with ‘morally good work’, there is little room for discussion about representation and the underlying notions of morality implicit in the relief and advocacy work. While the term ‘missionary’ carries specific connotations of colonialism, it is useful for its subtext of ideology and converting others to this ideology.

The essential distinction that comes out of Anderson and Rieff’s work is between representing an ideology and representing a particular group of people. Their point is that representing an ideology does not need to be dismissed per se; however, the ideological dimension should be made explicit

rather than clouded in the moral hegemony derived from claiming to be representative of a particular community. From the perspective of Anderson and Rieff Sophie's work would be an example of this modern missionary work. While Sophie is indeed here unambiguous about her agenda, the question remains whether her organisation, in order to gain credibility and legitimacy, relies on an assumption of representability. When I ask Sophie how she responds when women who are supposed to be beneficiaries of her organisation's projects disagree with her concerning the agenda of her organisation, she says: *"What they often do [disagreeing]! No, I have no imagination that I represent the will of all the women in the world, absolutely not. I represent a political idea and an ideology that some women share and some women don't and that might be in Zambia or in Tanzania or in Sweden"*.

Chandhoke, stressing the fact that access to global civil society is often restricted to privileged groups, asks the critical question "are citizens of countries of the South and their needs *represented* in global civil society, or are citizens as well as their needs *constructed* by practices of representation?" (Chandhoke 2005:362). The relevance of Chandhoke's intervention becomes clear when Doezema (2001) accuses Western feminist activists of imposing their Western idea of sexuality and victimhood on Third World sex-workers/prostitutes, who might not at all agree with what is advocated on their behalf. Beth works for an organisation on women and aids, in which most staff members are also HIV-infected. Beth however is an exception in her organisation and hence in her position, representation is a contentious issue. In the interview, Beth recalls an instance in which practices of representation inevitably fabricated the needs of those concerned. Beth argues that not all the

HIV-infected women her organisation works with are necessarily politically conscious about the issue of Aids and that her organisation therefore delivers workshops to women in which they attempt to educate and politicise them. Beth recognises however that through this practice they run the risk of being charged with indoctrination.

The problematisation of the representational role of civil society organisations stems not only from critical global civil society approaches, but has been articulated in key feminist approaches as well. These feminist approaches (see for example Harding 1991) have privileged personal experience in theorising women's oppression and strategies for overcoming that oppression and have questioned the capacity of women in privileged, dominant positions to speak on behalf of the oppressed (see also Chapter Three on sisterhood and its critiques). Hence for women working within this critical feminist tradition, their position as women speaking on behalf of other women and other oppressed groups is delegitimised. Beth's story illustrates this feminist emphasis on personal experiences in theorising women's oppression. She tells me that when a situation occurs in which she is asked to represent the voices of the women she lobbies on behalf of, she would always phone some people who are HIV infected to hear about their needs. However, at the same time Beth realises that inevitably, her representation can never be 'pure' as it is never the case that person A and B who grew up in the same place with the same circumstances want exactly the same things. Hence, in Beth's view it is the organisation's task to assume a political standpoint while at the same time trying to connect to the women's experiences. Interestingly, Beth specifically

mentions that she insists on not playing the representative without consultation despite the fact that career-wise it would have been advantageous to present herself as a representative.

Fay's account displays similarities with both Beth's and Sophie's reflections when she wonders whether representation is possible when there is internal diversity in the represented group. With Beth, she points to the political dimension of deciding how the representation will be constructed. Fay:

*"Sometimes we do special things, a workshop or something when we really want to have space to talk with the women because something is coming up or so and we really want to know 'what would you say to this?' but in the end we make a decision, (...) because every woman has a different opinion or a different thing that she finds good or not and when you have 10 [women] from 10 contexts they would come up with different things. (...) We have to make a decision, we have to draw from all these inputs and elements and with our background, and where we position ourselves as an organisation".* Following on from Chandhoke (2005), it appears as if representation is always and inevitably mediated and constructed.

While Fay emphasises that it is important for her own organisation to decide on one political position rather than representing the true multiplicity of the needs and desires of her beneficiaries, it also happens that the demand for a univocal account comes from the negotiating partners of the NGOs. Catherine, discussing how her broad-based advocacy organisation tries to incorporate the different needs and perspectives of women in their policy recommendations,

remarks: *“It makes it more complex, also because the policy makers don’t necessarily think in those terms, they already don’t really think in terms of integrating women, but then when you go a step further, and say, ‘well, not only integrating women, but women are not a homogenous group, and you have to go further than this’, then of course it gets even more complicated”.*

Catherine’s perception of how policy makers respond to complexity, is supported by Eyben’s observation, based on her 30 year experience with aid work, that politicians want “to keep issues simple” (Eyben 2007b:37, see also Squires 2007:153).

Fay however specifically criticises those organisations that display the kind of tendency described by Anderson and Rieff, when she says: *“We allow of course for contradictions in this or for others who have another position but I know another organisation, they always say when they go somewhere ‘the women they say and the women they tell us’ so they try to make themselves invisible, so we do not exist, we only tell you what the women say. This is not what we do. Because we have a position as an organisation and we also have to tell the women, you know, what our position actually is”.*

Ultimately however, similar to Chandhoke’s view that it is problematic that only a privileged few have access to a representative role, Fay realises that some of the problems associated with representation will only be resolved once the women she works with, represent themselves. This would mean, as Squires describes Phillip’s terminology, a move away from a “politics of ideas” focussing on accountability as a measure of fair representation to a

“politics of presence” based on the identity of the messengers (Squires 2001:16-17). Fay: *“Lately I have been thinking about this and of course there are considerations like it is your job and it is also money and so, but I think if there would be [women] who would come up and say ‘I want to do this myself’ it would be great really”*.

In this statement, like in Beth’s, it becomes clear that not only is the power to represent subject to a certain privilege, but also that the representative role itself has the potential to reinforce privilege in terms of providing a career. Moreover, this illustrates the key paradox that many research participants recognised, namely that successful representation or success in empowering women to represent themselves, leads potentially to redundancy of the role of the women NGO workers interviewed. This clashes with the usual concern of NGOs with their own legitimacy, as identified by Hilhorst, who states that “NGO actions are geared towards legitimization, which means that in order to find clients and supportive stakeholders, NGOs have to convince others of their appropriateness” (Hilhorst 2003:4). Beth recalls that once at a job interview she said that the ultimate aim of the organisation should be to make itself redundant, a comment that she says was met by surprise. This contradiction has been observed in other places as well: “Despite the aid industry’s ethos of transience and working itself out of a job, the UN’s Yei [South Sudan] compound had been built to last” (Duffield 2009:21).

Pauline puts the dilemma of redundancy this way: *“Part of the experience from Bangladesh really challenged me about what I wanted to do, because if*



*you are really serious about development work then your job might not exist in a few years and it should not. And to be honest, I have a lot of faith in using a system where you recruit nationals from the countries working in NGOs because I think they know a lot better than shipping in Western staff who have to get used to a culture, have to understand it, won't speak the language or it will take a long time".*

Anna similarly, after a meeting with people from the region she is representing, had to think hard about her own role. Anna: *"I had to make sure for myself, that it was really something I was adding to as opposed to just being in a job where I just get a good pay check and that was enough to justify"*. Kapoor argues that Spivak's notion of 'working without guarantees' implies that one has to be both conscious of the limits of one's own knowledge and "representational systems" in the short term, and of the "long-term logic of our profession: enabling the subaltern while working ourselves out of our jobs" (Kapoor 2008:58).

This paradox of making oneself redundant through good work is particularly challenging for people who are very passionate about their work and who can often not imagine doing other work outside the NGO sector. Anna adds a more positive note on the idea of forging your own redundancy: *"And I think it is based in the fact that the people you are standing before have the knowledge, (...) so it is just a matter of pulling it out, and empowering them to use it, which is I think very special in a way, if you can do that right, you do make*

*yourself redundant in a way. (...) I mean what an amazing accomplishment to actually say 'our work here is done'".*

Anna's statement follows Kapoor's argument that in working with no guarantees, failure (to be a true representative) should be seen as success (Kapoor 2008). From the above accounts it becomes clear that most of the women NGO workers interviewed were aware of the problems associated with representation as suggested by Chandhoke (2005), Anderson and Rieff (2004) or by feminist theorists such as Harding (1991).

Consultation with those that are represented can also put a burden on the represented group. This becomes clear when Catherine says: *"We also want to be able to represent the views of migrant women and the challenge here is that migrant women are not enough organised, so they are not very present in the migrant organisations, or anti-racist organisations, they are not always very present in women's organisations. So it is really something that needs to be done to give migrant women a space, to input in policies"*.

In Catherine's account, her organisation wants to consult with migrant women before they feel they can adequately represent them. However, the ambition to include the ideas of migrant women turns into a demand on those women when they are subsequently found not to be 'enough organised'. So Catherine's organisation needs them to be organised as a migrant women group as that would give easiest access to THE voice of migrant women. Through this, Catherine's project runs the risk of "conflat[ing] social position

and identity with political position and opinion” (Verloo 2006:222-223). Just because migrant women would share a social position does not necessarily guarantee a shared political view. Furthermore, Catherine relates the fact that this project of inclusion has been challenging due to the lack of organisation on the side of the migrant women rather than on the side of her own organisation, or anti-racist or migrant organisations for not having sufficiently included migrant women in the first place.

Pauline struggles with exactly that realisation that consultation of women or collecting their experiences might turn into a burden on those that are supposed to benefit. She says: *“I think there is great opportunity for Western researchers and Western development workers to be a burden (...). I wanted to go and interview the women who have faced the worst human rights issues, (...) [but] actually when you go there you are going to have a crowd, because you are the white woman, the staff is coming with you, you are going in a car. (...) You have to talk through a translator who was male, you are perhaps embarrassing her, but you won’t be able to tell because of the translation issues. You are dealing with someone who perhaps had little or no education and maybe does not understand your questions and you are forcing someone to relive a painful area of their life”.*

Pauline here identifies a number of complexities related to her collecting women’s experiences, some of which are practical (translation issues) and some more structural (lack of ‘common language’ through educational differences, impact of being a white woman). From the mid-1990s, NGOs and

development organisations made a more explicit effort to involve their target group in their interventions and to hear about their experiences and their needs. Robert Chambers, as a response to the shortcomings he identified in NGOs' field visits<sup>32</sup>, formulated the Participatory Rural Appraisal approach (PRA), which suggested strategies for consulting and empowering the poor. In the interview Pauline made clear that she is aware of Chambers' critique of field visits and his participatory approaches and she told me that she was a 'fan' of his approach. However, her observation that Western researchers and development workers can easily become a burden also chimes with some of the critiques of the PRA approach itself. Kapoor criticises the PRA approach for naively believing that the subaltern voice can transparently be heard and represented and for ignoring what he calls the "knowledge/power problem", in which every production of knowledge creates power relations (Kapoor 2008:50). Kapoor's observation that "women whom PRA purportedly takes great care to include in the public space, can feel intimidated (and *be* intimidated) when speaking in public, especially on such sensitive issues as sex, rape and violence" is very apt in the context sketched by Pauline (Kapoor 2008:50). Kapoor's critique goes a step further than Pauline's comments here when he argues that the supposedly participatory safe space works as a panopticon in which the person who is 'empowered to speak' is/feels monitored and under pressure to express him/herself in a certain way. In addition, he emphasises that the power/knowledge problem persists beyond the specific speech act, as the narrative of the subaltern is co-opted and interpreted in a specific institutional framework (Kapoor 2008).

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<sup>32</sup> Chambers' critical approach to field visits will be further discussed in Chapter Seven.

Some organisations take a conscious step away from representation to the creation of a platform for other women to express their opinions and to facilitate dialogue. One interviewee, Sonia, who works to include African women in decision-making processes, specifically expresses that she does not want to represent other women but that she wants to give them the opportunity to speak for themselves. It is necessary however to remain vigilant and critical of attempts of NGOs to move from a representative to a facilitating role according to the logic of participation. The process of facilitation brings to the fore the same recurrent issue that has been identified in relation to representation, namely the internal diversity of the group.

Sonia recognises that it is hard to let a diverse group of women express their needs with one voice: *“There is a lot of politics and a lot of differences, but (...) I mean we want them to be women, not to be South Darfuri, North Darfuri, West Darfuri, (...) if you go to the (...) negotiation table, (...) we want you to represent women, nothing else, you have to forget all the other. But of course, I mean, one thing is saying it and the other thing is actually doing it”*.

In Sonia’s narrative it remains unclear whether the push for including women in the decision-making process is motivated by the ambition to introduce feminist ideas, or the interests of women or gender equality (Squires 2007). In Sonia’s organisation in contrast to Catherine’s, the emphasis is on facilitating women to speak for themselves rather than representing them. If one takes a closer look at this facilitation of self-representation however, the demands on

the women are actually quite similar as in the case of Catherine's organisation wanting to represent migrant women's ideas. While Sonia acknowledges the gap between theory and practice and the difficulty in bracketing out other parts of one's identity (their regional background in this case) in order to speak as women of Sudan, she still requests from the women to only foreground their gender and national perspective. This points to an interesting conflict since deciding not to speak for others and letting others speak can lead to imposing a burden on others by demanding a simplified, essentialised (re)presentation which "may structurally disadvantage some gendered identities while privileging others" (Squires 2007:155). So there is an engagement with the women in relation to the role they can perform at the peace negotiation table, while there is less space for engaging with the individual's perceptions of her identity, which is made up of a complex range of components, and multiple perspectives. Sonia's conception of identity is essentialist as it assumes a stable experience of being a member of a particular group independent of time, history, social location or personal situation (Razack 2001).

In the context of the reception of Third World women's writers Amireh and Majaj talk of a "collapsing of writer and text" into one (Amireh and Majaj 2000:16), and they argue that this 'reading' is particularly present when the stories are appreciated for their authenticity. What happens with the Sudanese women seems similar to what happens in literature. The women are expected to present the authentic voice (see also Spivak 1999:60); what they say is what/who they are, even though their identity and thus their perspectives might be more complex. By expecting the women to foreground their identity

as women rather than as black or specifically geopolitically situated, it is also assumed that women's exclusion from the negotiation table is only dependent on their gender and not on their race, class, ethnicity, or geo-political location.

In relation to the notion of consultation of the target group it is interesting to explore what happens if one provides a platform for Southern women to speak and subsequently the women demand something different than what has been expected. One interviewee, Stacey, narrated that when she talked to women in India about plans to build a school in their community, it appeared that many of the women did not want to send their daughters to school as long as the patriarchal system that subsequently would force them to move in with their husbands, have children and cook was still in place. They told her that they did not want to revive the hope in the daughters of a professional future when in practice this was not probable within the current system.

Stacey then reflects: *"So that for me at that time and at that stage of my own career and my own life I was very surprised to hear, you know, if you got a school that is going to be built there, why would you not send your kids there. For me I could not figure out the logic, but their logic makes a lot of sense at the same time, so I was surprised by that, but I was not disappointed by taking off the recommendation to build a school in the village, because in the end it was not really mine, it is not about what I want, it is about what they want and how they can use me as a tool basically to ensure it"*.

Stacey here emphasises how she should be ‘used as a tool’, which very much reflects the facilitating role. Despite her knowledge about the positive relation between education and health, she decides to take off the recommendation to build a school as the women tell her that within the current system the chances their daughters will actually attend the school are slim. I find it interesting here that she emphasises that in a dialogue with the other women she came to understand their ‘logic’ and that once she had understood this logic it was easier to accept to do (or rather ‘not do’ in this context) something that was initially counterintuitive for her. Stacey seems to follow Spivak’s call on the academic feminist to “learn from them, to speak to them, to suspect that their access to the political and sexual science is not merely to be *corrected* by our superior theory and enlightened compassion” (Spivak quoted in: Young 1990:166-167) or the earlier mentioned idea of “working with no guarantees”, recognising the limits of your own knowledge system (Kapoor 2008:58). In Stacey’s account the image of the Southern Other not ‘able’ to speak for themselves is also problematised, when the mothers she speaks to appear very capable of voicing their concerns.

Stacey later remarks: *“Very rarely do you need to convince women of their own rights, I have found that they know what they need, (...) they know exactly why they are not getting it and they know what they need to get it. (...) They don’t need to be told by anyone else what they need; they certainly do not need to be told by me”*. This fragment runs counter to assumptions of a ‘false consciousness’ of Southern women who, because of their oppressed position, would neither know ‘what is good for them’ nor be able to voice their needs.



Spivak's notorious article '*Can the Subaltern Speak?*' (Spivak 1998) is of particular relevance here. Spivak discusses the paradoxical way in which the subaltern Indian woman is cast in the practice of *sati* (widow sacrifice) by both colonialism and traditional patriarchy. She states: "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernisation" (Spivak 1998:306). In Stacey's example above, it is easily conceivable that the women's resistance to the school being built would be simplistically read as a sign of their 'backwardness' and unwillingness to provide chances to their daughters to be educated instead of the more complex reading Stacey narrates.

In the article Spivak also tells and reclaims the story of a young female activist, Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, who kills herself during her menstruation to show that her suicide is a political act and not, as the suicides of young women were conventionally understood, an act of desperation of a woman pregnant from an illegitimate relationship. While Spivak has been criticised for negating the agency of the subaltern by claiming that she cannot speak, Spivak intended to stress that the subaltern when attempting to communicate, is not heard (see McEwan 2009:69-70). In the reworked version of the article in the book '*A Critique of Post-colonial Reason*', Spivak states this last point more clearly: "[I] think it is important to acknowledge our complicity in the muting, in order precisely to be more effective in the long run" (Spivak 1999:309).

Pauline encountered a particularly challenging situation in which it appeared as if the realisation of ‘the subaltern’ that she would not be heard, meant a seeming reversion to a call for a traditional, almost colonial form of representation. Pauline: *“I had a group of women in one village ask me to speak for them, and that is the first time anyone has ever said that to me in my life and I did not know how to react because 1) I did not know what I could do, [and] 2) the way our concepts work and the way our views on debate and rights I think in the West is that people should speak for themselves and I have always kind of believed that. But then I thought ‘oh, actually, these women are so vulnerable, they are so remote, they are so deep in this power structure of this community, that actually, they can’t [speak for themselves]’”*.

Spivak has repeatedly alluded to the fact that ‘to represent’ should always be understood as having the double meaning of *vertreten* (as in: political representation) and *darstellen* (as in: to depict, to portray) (Spivak 1990:108, see also Spivak 1998). Therefore, if Pauline would decide to represent the women in the political sense of speaking on behalf of them, she cannot escape also ‘portraying’ the women and herself, similar to Chandhoke’s earlier mentioned statement that “citizens as well as their needs [are] constructed by practices of representation” (Chandhoke 2005:362). It is, according to Spivak, necessary to be conscious of the “complicity between these two things” as “there can be a great deal of political harm” if the necessary and inevitable but contentious relation between those two types of representing is not understood (Spivak 1990:109). Pauline, in giving a political voice, would at the same time

paint a picture of the women of this village, which implies a second burden of responsibility in addition to attempting to represent them well. The risks implied in this *darstellen* can be exemplified by Mohanty's critique of the way women of the Third World have been portrayed in Western feminist research as the "average third world woman" as discussed in Chapter Five (Mohanty 1984:337).

When I ask Pauline how she responded to this request to speak for the women and to tell others about the situation the women were facing, she replies first that this request was particularly poignant as it came from a group of women who were also marginalised because of their religion. She then continues: "*So basically having been put on the spot, I first of all explained, as I had before anyways, who I was and why I was there and I said that while my project would be taken to [my organisation] and while I would tell people [back home] about what I had seen and what the issues were, I could not promise that any results would come from that and that was, that was really hard as well, (...) because the women there expected me because of how I looked and that I arrived in a car that I had some power and I guess in a way I obviously did compared to them, any time I could have got a plane home if anything had happened but I did not have the power to influence funds or anything like that and yeah, it was really hard*".

When I ask Pauline how they responded to that reply, she said: "*They just sort of accepted that. Now I don't know if they accepted it because I was a white person and I spoke and that's the end, that's the answer or whether they were*

*ok with that, or whether they were frightened to say anything else". At the very end of the interview when I asked her whether there is anything else she would like to say, Pauline returns to the issue of representation and says: "It is also very difficult to retell it and make sense of it yourself (...) I think that is the difficult thing because if you are going to accept that perhaps women in those situations can't represent themselves to the level of the people debating in the West, because they are never going to have that connection then you need to be able to do it, not on behalf of them, but... in a way that you think they would be happy with. And I think in that sense it is never going to be a consistent position, it is always going to be full of contradictions, and full of different issues, and full of misunderstandings, and full of things that you don't know".*

This last statement of Pauline's resonates with the ethical position advocated by Spivak (1999) who argues in *'The Critique of Post-colonial Reason'* for a responsibility that is articulated through an acknowledgement of complicity. Again, this acknowledgement of complicity should never result in a new "moral confidence"; rather this acknowledgement can "never be complete" (Keenan 2002:192). Ingrid Hoofd, with reference to the Dutch translation of the word 'complicity' which is composed of 'with' and 'duty'/'responsibility' concludes that "the rendering explicit of an activism's complicities therefore also shows which kind of responsibilities and activism carries forth; indeed as if it were its duty to do so" (Hoofd 2005:5). This is consistent with Spivak's original critique in *'Can the Subaltern Speak?'* which argues both for the impossibility of recovering the voice of the subaltern and for the ethical

obligation to try (see also McEwan 2009:70). One has to try, rather than be silent, since the decision not to speak altogether in order to avoid speaking for others is some kind of cultural relativism that turns into solipsism, since it re-centres the one who refuses to speak; “I can only speak about myself, or I can only speak about the impossibility of my speaking” (Ahmed 2000b:166). As Spivak states in the last sentence of the original piece: “Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish” (Spivak 1998:308).

### **Global Citizenship and Responsibility**

In the previous section, the discussion on the complexities of representation introduced notions of responsibility, the inequality between the one representing and the one being represented and the potential career benefits of the representative role. This section will further discuss the notion of responsibility taking the ambiguities in global citizenship theory as its starting point.

The notion of global citizenship involves paradoxes and ambiguities at a number of junctures. The first complication occurs over the idea of responsibility as global citizenship appears not to be a mere geographical extension of national citizenship, but is rather imbued with highly normative and aspirational notions of global justice (see e.g. Falk 1994 and Oxfam 1997, Duffield 2007:233 on “international citizenship”). Falk for example maintains that despite the fact that the global business elite might regard themselves as global citizens as they are citizens of the globe rather than tied to one specific

country, they do not deserve that label as they lack a sense of global responsibility (Falk 1994). He contrasts traditional and global citizenship by arguing that the first functions across space, while the latter operates across time:

“reaching out to a future to-be-created, and making of such a person ‘a citizen pilgrim’, that is, someone on a journey to ‘a country’ to be established in the future in accordance with more idealistic and normatively rich conceptions of political community” (Falk 1994:139).

Moreover, he suggests that the notion of global citizenship implies a normative and utopian shift in the spirit of politics from “*an axis of feasibility* to an *axis of aspiration*”, rooted in the pragmatic realisation that “what is currently taken to be realistic is not sustainable” (Falk 1994:140). Hutchings (2004) traces three forms in which the individual is manifest in cosmopolitan normative theories. First, as a *subject* subjected to power structures of state and non-state institutions, second, as a *citizen* who can influence these institutional structures and whose rights protect him/her from mistreatment and third, as *pilgrim*, who acts according to ideals (e.g. of universal freedom) that transcend the current political structure. Citizenship should then be understood as “the middle term that holds the moments of both subjection and pilgrimage within it”, hence the citizen is neither completely autonomous nor entirely passive (Hutchings 2004:2). Hutchings claims that Falk’s account of global citizenship sketches a too bright picture of the potential of the global citizen “which effectively collapses citizenship into pilgrimage and sets the ‘citizen-pilgrim’ up as the ‘truth’ that will challenge and overturn the ‘power’

of global subjection” (Hutchings 2004:2). Using a Foucauldian analysis she shows that the global citizen is not a “heroic outsider” or “deus ex machina” speaking from a neutral position outside power, but that s/he is produced by and (re)produces power relations (Hutchings 2004:10). Since for Foucault knowledge, truth and power are inextricably intertwined the language of human rights can never be a pure truth uncontaminated by power; this does not mean that human rights are good or bad, just that they are not ‘ultimately’ or universally true (Hutchings 2004).

Hutchings’ ‘moral’ conclusion resonates with what I perceive to be the merit of Anderson and Rieff’s (2004) notion of ‘modern missionary work’, namely that it renders visible the underlying construction of values upon which global citizens act. However, in one of Hutchings’ final comments, problematically, agency seems to disappear, which makes it difficult to find an opening to promote better practice:

“When, in contrast, all political interventions are understood to *be both uncontrollable by their authors* and always already politically loaded, then there is always need to worry about their effects and to expect that these effects may well be multiple and normatively ambivalent” (Hutchings 2004:13, emphasis added).

The emphasis on the normative dimension of global civil society and global citizenship should be considered an important shift away from the mere rights and duties associated with national citizenship to a notion of responsibility. Yet this responsibility seems to be based on an implicit assumption that there

is an 'elite' of global citizens, e.g. NGO workers, development workers, activists who care for the 'weaker' Other, the 'non-global citizen', rather than that all are global citizens with a reciprocal responsibility (see Duffield 2007:233 on "rights and aid solidarity" versus "global solidarity"). Indeed, the second ambiguity in the notion of global citizenship concerns the relation between global citizenship and alterity. On the one hand, global citizenship is seen as an extension of national citizenship (Falk 1994). It hence carries the traditional connotation, associated with national citizenship, that it can only exist in opposition to an Other. National citizenship implies to be a member of an in-group that is part of a clearly delineated area, which differentiates itself from outsiders that are excluded by these borders. Bowden (2003) even goes as far as suggesting that universal global citizenship is impossible in the absence of an outsider to contrast itself with. On the other hand, the notion of 'global' could indicate that it equally applies to all citizens of the world without exclusion. Dower for example holds that "all human beings are global citizens in virtue of rights and duties which we all have as human beings" (Dower 2002:40).

Hence the notion of global citizenship is on the one hand inscribed with the idea of *exclusion* (as 'citizenship' is dependent on others being non-citizens) and on the other hand (as 'global' potentially includes all) with a notion of *inclusion*. Hutchings (2005) indeed argues that the global citizenship debate has overlooked the fact that citizenship has always been a privilege and has always been dependent on coercive powers, which were both enabling and restricting (see also Werbner and Yuval Davis 1999). The notion of



responsibility of the global citizen similarly turns out to be articulated simultaneously through otherness and sameness; the global citizen is responsible for others both in virtue of his or her *sameness* of sharing the same globe and in virtue of his or her *difference* of not being the one in need of help and of being in a comparatively privileged position to be able to act as a global citizen.

This can be identified in a story that Anna told me about the connection she feels with the people her project supports. Anna works to improve the opportunities for women's governance abroad. Anna had the impression that for most 'Western' people she met while she was on holidays in a Southern country, their holiday was a refuge from work that they did not want to go back to. Anna, however, contrasts herself with these people by saying that she realised while enjoying herself in the water and on the beach, that what she experienced during her holidays made her actually realise she could not wait to get back to her work.

Anna: *"Because there, you know, I mean I am very lucky that I got these opportunities and the fact is that I wanted everyone that I met, men or women, to have that opportunity as well: to swim in the water, to have a vacation, for women to walk around, the possibility that life can be enjoyable as opposed to that life is drudgery and just waiting to get to the end of it. And so this is the only way I can explain it, that sort of makes me connected to sort of everybody and so that everyone has these opportunities"*.

So, Anna explains her motivation for her work and her connection to the people who benefit from her work simultaneously through sameness -all people would like to have vacation, to enjoy life- and through difference -she has these opportunities, while the people she wants to help do not have these opportunities (yet). At the same time her assumptions of differences and sameness are also based on assumptions of homogeneity. She wanted everyone she met to get the same opportunities as well assuming that none of these people had had that opportunity yet. This is also reflected in the binary contrast she sketches between enjoyable life on the one hand (the reality for her) and drudgery on the other hand (reality for the people she meets in India). In addition, while at other points in the interview she explicitly expressed that she is concerned with providing people with opportunities and choices rather than dictating what they should do, what 'their way to development' is, at this moment she assumes that what is attractive for her as a way of relaxation and holidays, lying on the beach and swimming in the water, is wanted by all. So while Anna's recognition of difference between her and the women she meets on her holidays serves as a motivating force for her to do her work, it lacks acknowledgement of the diversity and complexity of women's lives in the South.

Anna emphasises her opportunities as the basis for her feeling of global responsibility elsewhere again. Anna: *"Because I have had these opportunities I would wish that others have these opportunities. And one way to do that is to focus on projects where I feel that through these processes, at the end of a very, very long road and with other projects focussing on all kind of different*

*things, there is the opportunity that there will be the possibility that these people have these opportunities; not because they got lucky but because of their constitutions, because of their legislations”.*

Anna was not alone in basing her sense of responsibility for others on the opportunities she had enjoyed. When I asked Sophie why she cared about others far away, she for example responds: *“Why would I care? Why would I not care? I have energy and every opportunity in life that I can use I guess”.*

Sylvia’s story, without using the term ‘opportunity’ reflects a similar line of thought. A professor in Sylvia’s university involved her and other students in a research project in a hosiery factory in a rural area close to the university. Sylvia interviewed the people working there who told her that they did not have enough money to send their children to university. Sylvia: *“And my professor made the link to say that these people are all paying taxes and all this tax money is going for my education, so effectively they are paying for me to go to university when they can’t pay for their own kids to go. And so, what she said was that because we are given this privilege just by accident of birth, that you have a responsibility to not waste that. And that does not mean... I mean you can go off and be a business man, making lots of money and also continue to be someone who does service in the community (...) and that is still giving back or you can be out in townships in Bolivia feeding the poor and that is another way of doing it. (...) That I was given the fortune to grow up in a stable family and go to university and always have enough to eat, it is*

*really just because of where I happened to be born and that not everybody is that lucky. So I can't waste it by doing nothing".*

In all three narratives the link that is established between having opportunities and being responsible for global others, relies on the liberal assumption that opportunities can be increased for all without having consequences for other people's (or their own) opportunities. So Sylvia's response to observing the poverty of those people that support her university studies is not to give them the money 'back' or to rally against an inadequate redistributive tax system. Rather the realisation that others 'suffer' for her to do her degree makes her conscious of a responsibility to do 'something' for global justice. In research on gap year student volunteers, a similar tendency to "ascribe some form of lotto logic" to the inequalities they are faced with is identified in the students (Simpson 2004:689, see also Heron 2007:42). Simpson (2004) implies that the students understand the inequalities through differences in luck (for example in location of birth) rather than through structural phenomena such as colonialism, racism, or capitalism, which they are themselves complicit in. Alternative views would emphasise the relational dimension to privilege, and point out that privilege is dependent on the underprivileged circumstances of other people. Crewe and Harrison ask the question whether it is actually "possible for some to be empowered without disempowering others" in the light of the relationality of power differences in an unequal world (Crewe and Harrison 1998:562, see also Razack 2001:23). Hutchings uses the language of global citizenship when she states

“the capacity to identify oneself, be recognised and act as a global citizen is parasitic on the dramatically undemocratic and inequalitarian nature of the global order in general, both institutionally and normatively” (Hutchings 2005:97, see also Mohanty 1997:5 on the citizen-consumer).

A telling example of such global citizenship and the implication of NGOs is the Body Shop’s marketing strategy in which mostly Western women are encouraged to buy products inspired by ‘beauty secrets’ from the non-Western world, “who can in addition feel better by buying the soap (recommended by UNICEF) to do their bit to stop violence against children” (Harcourt 2009:134).

Another example of a relational approach to global responsibility is Iris Marion Young’s social connection model of responsibility (Young 2006). Young (2006) dismisses the idea that responsibility is connected to membership of a nation-state or well-defined political community alone and suggests that the classical liability model of responsibility is not sufficient in a global context for assigning responsibility. Instead, she proposes a social connection model of responsibility, which is grounded in an interconnected world in which one is participating in diverse processes that create structural injustice (Young 2006). In contrast to the liability model, the social connection model is not isolating specific agents as liable, recognises shared responsibility, and judges the background conditions for injustice rather than taking these for neutral and acceptable. It is more forward than backward looking, and responsibility is only discharged through collective action to change the unjust situation. Young (2006) argues that one’s position in the

structures that produce injustices, in terms of power, privilege, interest and collective ability, determines the degree of one's responsibility, which injustices need to be addressed and how that should be done. This last point of Young however, does resonate with the interviewees who feel that *because* of their privilege they carry increased responsibility.

In the discussion on representation above, I noted the power to represent is not only reliant on a certain privilege, but also that the representative role itself has the potential to reinforce privilege in terms of providing a career. A similar thing can be said about the responsibility and the privilege of being in the position to 'practice' this responsibility in NGO work. So while doing the work itself was often justified on the basis of a feeling of responsibility because of the opportunities enjoyed in life, the work itself also appeared to give opportunities of various kinds.

Sonia for example said: *"I know I can have a job where I can do something good for someone else and that is the reward beside my salary. In fact I worked for 6 months without being paid, and I still love it. So that's the reward, to be doing what I always wanted to do (...) This might sound stupid (...) I was in New York because of this job, and we were walking by (...) a Sephora store [large and luxurious make-up shop] and there were some women working to get things off boxes and I remembered, I passed by and I thought 'Oh my god, I am so lucky', there is nothing bad with that job, but I would not like to have to do that. I am so lucky, I am working in what I want, (...) and being paid and even travelling and meeting all these people and*

*having all these interesting things to do. So I guess that's my commitment, I realise that I am so blessed to be able to, the same way maybe you with doing a PhD, like your commitment to write your thesis, like 'oh my god I have this great opportunity, why would I let it go?'".*

Sonia describes her love for her job and the commitment to her job simultaneously in terms of the opportunities she received to actually be able to get the job and the opportunities the job itself gave her, in terms of being able to travel, 'do interesting things' and meeting new people. Cook (2007) in her research on female volunteers for Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) noticed that one reason to take the volunteer placement was for career advancement. The women were able to have authority and responsibilities that they would not have had in a job in their home countries (see also Goudge 2003). The 'gain' in doing the job does not necessarily have to be financial -and many might say that in NGO work it is unlikely that the gain is financial- but can vary from career opportunities, to travel, to meeting people, to 'leaving a legacy'. If one moves away from highly idealised accounts of the global citizen as a moral figure, one can see that Ahmed's figure of the (global) citizen-consumer displays similarities with the women NGO workers, when she states: "The production of Western women as consumers involves a form of global nomadic citizenship predicated on the ability to inhabit the globe, travelling within it, and 'finding' differences that are always elsewhere" (Ahmed 2000b:170).

It has been observed in different geographical contexts that the proliferation of NGOs has also impacted the women's movement. As Lang (1997) notices in the German context, these structural, ideological and personal changes have shifted the focus to professionalisation. This entails "a conviction that voluntary work and engagement should be replaced by paid labour" (Lang 1997:114) which potentially results in political commitment being replaced by a commitment to sustain the organisation merely as employer (de Alwis 2009). At the same time, more recently, other voices have also commented on the fact that women's organisations have lost much of its subsidies in the last 15 years, which had the effect of little job security for feminists who are often forced to work for the women's movement on a voluntary basis outside normal paid work (Wieringa 2009). Roy (2009), in the context of Indian feminist groups, points to a discourse in which the 'career feminist' is very negatively evaluated by the, often older, generation of feminist activists (Lang 1997, Menon 2004, de Alwis 2009). She notices a feeling of nostalgia for times when feminist activism was practised after regular work, in the evenings on a voluntary basis.

Dean similarly argues that there is "often a sense of what we might call post-second wave melancholia, in which the acknowledgement of that institutionalisation has brought certain gains is offset by a sense of loss of the early radicalism and autonomy of the movement" (Dean 2008:285). The critique of professionalisation of women NGOs is closely linked to the critique of the representative function of such NGOs as discussed in the last section, which is for example expressed in the questions Silliman raises: "Who [do]



such professionalized groups represent, who [do] advocacy networks include and exclude, to whom [are] they ultimately accountable [?]" (Silliman 1999:40). Similar discourses are very strong in the NGO sector in general, where from the 1970s a specific personal comportment, in terms of self-effacement, restraint in consumption patterns, ethical living, acceptance of low salary with long working hours, came to be expected from NGO workers as a token of their commitment to their work (Hopgood 2006, Duffield 2007, Duffield 2009).

It is only possible to understand how the women NGO workers presented their motivation for their work and their sense of responsibility for global others in relation to this persistent discourse in which activism and altruism are presented as incompatible with, what is seen as selfish, career choices. Some of the following examples will illustrate this idea.

Pauline says: *"Obviously part of my motivation is my own career development as well, and I'll be quite honest about that, while I do really care about making a difference, I obviously also care about developing my career and developing my experiences broadly too"*.

Veronica states: *"I only can do these things, this sounds very egoistic, this sounds selfish, if I get something back from it, with my voluntary job, I learned how to write proposals, project proposals, how to get money for an organisation, how to be an own independent foundation so that, all those things I learned. So in that way, I mainly saw it as helping myself"*.

Kate similarly expresses this: *“Motivation to do the work, (...) I am earning money here and I have an interesting job, in these NGOs you have perhaps also more flexibility than in some other organisations and you work on issues that I do believe in”*.

It is striking that in both Pauline’s and Veronica’s narratives a justificatory tone appears. This can be identified in the phrases ‘I’ll be quite honest about that’, denoting that it is normally a taboo to mention this and ‘this sounds very egoistic and selfish’, which anticipates a negative response from the interviewer. At the same time, Kate’s response at the time seemed deliberately provocative to counter the romanticised discourse in which justice work cannot be combined with career strategies. And indeed, while my response was not negative, in retrospect I realise that initially I had not anticipated that kind of response, as I similarly operated under an unreflective assumption that NGO work and careerist instrumentalism was incompatible. Or put more starkly, unconsciously I had associated the first with altruism and the second with selfishness.

The fact that the opportunities gained should not be conceptualised as purely economical or careerist is reflected in some other examples, in which an explicit emphasis is put on the idea of ‘leaving a legacy’. When I asked Sarah where her sense of global responsibility comes from, she says: *“It is a moral obligation in a lot of ways, and I don’t quite know where that comes from or what it grows out of, but I do, I can’t imagine not doing this. Even for a short time when I did not work in this field and I was the most dissatisfied person in the world, [I asked myself] what is this leading to, what is my legacy? I say*

*there is some ego, what is the legacy I leave for the future, have I made a difference, have I made the world a little bit better than the world I came into? ”. Again, the word ‘ego’ is used that seemed to stand in contrast to the altruism.*

Ruth displays a similar concern with leaving a legacy: *“So, I think part of it is that it gives me great satisfaction to be able to do something that adds to more than just me. And I guess that is something that most people feel. I don’t know. And of course what it gives me personally is that I have an interesting life and very diverse. I mean it is very challenging (...) and that is something that I like”.*

However, the dominance of the critical discourse about combining careerism with altruism can also be noticed when interviewees explicitly defended themselves. While I, as the interviewer, neither hinted that financial or other gains might be a motivation to do the job nor expressed judgment either way, many of the interviewees responded as if these assumptions had been made. That is not only visible in Pauline’s and Veronica’s statements above, but also in Stacey’s response: *“The motivation for doing this work [are] (...) my own personal social convictions to equality and to justice, and specifically with respect to women, (...), because my motivation for doing this work is not financial, it is not based on professional aspirations, it is really based on a personal commitment to ensuring (...) opportunities for equality for women in various settings. (...) My personal responsibility, I think is, I can’t imagine*

*doing anything else, so in that sense the personal responsibility I feel is, I am not quite sure what I would do if I did not have this personal responsibility”.*

Stacey’s account is not only exemplary in reflecting the prevalence of the discourse of professionalisation, in stating specifically that ‘it is not financial, it is not based on professional aspirations’. The other main theme that runs through this extract, which is that she cannot imagine doing something else, linked to a sense that it is this sense of responsibility that defines her as a person, was present in a number of the research participants’ narratives.

Some of the encounters with the women NGO workers and their reflections on their feeling of responsibility coupled with notions of personal gain challenged my unquestioned assumptions that some forms of motivation are more or less ‘ethical’. Similarly, Sophie displays some doubt concerning the importance of the right motivation, arguably moving from a Kantian ethics to a more utilitarian view. When I asked her why she cared about others far away after answering the question, she says: *“I assume your next question will be ‘does it make me feel good?’”*. She continues to say that she becomes angry and is quite tired of encountering people who *“are in it for...that they become very ‘good people’”*. However, Sophie continues thinking aloud: *“I am thinking about that a lot, and maybe that’s ok, I have been switching, who cares about the reason...if they do the work”*. When I ask her why it makes her angry, she replies: *“It just annoyed me a bit, because if that’s the case, they are not doing enough, the world sucks so...and it is not fair sort of, to do it for that reason. But they are doing it, so why not? We need more people that do it”*.

The beginning of this section argued that global citizenship is articulated simultaneously through sameness and through difference, with the difference being that one is in the position to 'do' the helping. Subsequently, I noted not only that a sense of global responsibility is often articulated through a reference to opportunities that the women have enjoyed, but also that the NGO work itself provides the women with new opportunities. This idea of gaining something from the work, in terms of travelling, meeting people and creating a legacy was conceptualised as part of a (reaction to) a discourse which is critical of 'NGOisation', or the possibility to make a career out of activism. The following account of Veronica however would be a challenge to the assumption that work to 'help' others should not contain an element of self-interest. Veronica coordinates a buddy project for 'vulnerable' women and in that role she is also present at the application interviews of prospective buddies.

Veronica: *"If they come to the intake, to the first interview, I also ask them 'ok, what, why this group?' and if they say 'oh, I saw a movie on television about trafficking and I thought oh, wow, what an excitement what happened', then I don't think you are a good buddy. But also when they say, 'oh, I really want to help these women', then they really have to convince me that they would be....because it is not equal, but we try to do it as equal as possible this relationship. But actually a lot of women, a lot of volunteers say, 'well, I live in (...) a multicultural city but I don't have any coloured person in my social network so I would like to learn from another culture' (...) or 'I am also new*

*in Amsterdam (...) so I need to [get to] know the city as well, maybe we can explore it together'''.*

Here Veronica displays an awareness of the way in which some helping impulses are reliant on the denigration of those helped. As has been discussed in previous chapters, post-colonial feminism has criticised the construction of the poor victimised Third World subject. In particular, feminist critics of the victims discourse on trafficking (which is also persistent within feminist circles) have spoken out against the victim stereotype (see Doezema 2001, Agustín 2005). While it might be counterintuitive, given the current critical discourse against selfishness and instrumentalism in NGO work, in Veronica's project those prospective volunteers that motivate their interest in the project solely on an 'altruistic' basis, are actually deemed unsuitable for the project. Veronica acknowledges that the relationship can never be completely equal, but she aspires to make it 'as equal as possible'. She attempts to establish this maximum level of equality by encouraging volunteers to consider what they can gain themselves from their role as a buddy. Personal gain is presented here as an example to narrow the power gap between the person in need and those supporting. In addition, it has been suggested in the context of social work that a cool and professional approach can "make compassion work"; making the discomfort of the inequality more bearable (Sennett 2003:20). Veronica's example unsettles the idea that personal gain in the helping role is morally questionable and that gaining something automatically widens the gap between the 'helper' and those 'helped' through increasing privilege. At the same time it is imperative to acknowledge that a stronger challenge against

notions of benevolence could lie in the acknowledgement of complicity in global inequalities; following this recognition, one would realise that the less privileged are owed support rather than that it is benevolently bestowed on them.

## **Global Citizenship and Global Civil Society –The Public/Private**

### **Divide**

In the previous section some interview narratives have been discussed which emphasised the passions of the NGO workers for their work and the way their feeling of responsibility was linked to their sense of personhood. This section will further explore the notions of the public/private, professional and personal. The significance of the public/private theme was noticeable in two ways: first in explicit comments by the interviewees on the difficulty of separating the two spheres, but also implicitly when the interviewees chose to talk about their personal life and experiences while being asked about their work as I will show below. I will argue that notions of professional versus personal approaches appeared to rely on a similar distinction as the private and public sphere, in which the first denotes a different morality than the latter. I will argue here that despite the charge against NGO workers concerning their (uncommitted) professionalism as discussed in the previous section, the narratives of the NGO workers show the significance of the private and personal sphere for their work practices. I will also maintain that the women NGO workers were in various ways engaged with setting or trying to maintain the boundaries between private and public, personal and political. The setting of the boundaries happened in response to a range of challenges that the

women faced when their work life spilled over into their private life and when their personal life impacted on their work. In this context, the feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’ seems to be extended to ‘the political is personal’.

The logic of civil society theory and citizenship theory in some ways suggests that the work of the women NGO workers takes place in the public realm. It is interesting to note that there were at least three people who could be said to ‘personify’ the organisation they were working for<sup>33</sup>. Signs of this ‘personification’ of the organisation could be detected in various forms. For example, one interviewee told me that jokes had been made about changing the name of the organisation to her own name. Another research participant was asked very personal and intimate questions based on assumptions about the personal life of the NGO worker in relation to the working remit of the organisation. Fay puts it as follows and links this personification with the emotional, which is conventionally associated with the private sphere: “*As I said [my organisation] is a self organisation (...) so the fact that the organisation exists, in itself is very emotional*”. As Gal confirms “political acts conventionally categorised as public are frequently shaped by sentiment and emotion” (Gal 2004:262).

However, as became evident from the interviews, it was significant across the entire group of research participants that the nature of the job combined with the commitment of the interviewees towards their work makes it hard for most of the interviewees to separate work from their private life. As Catherine

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<sup>33</sup> The cases are too particular to elaborate much further here as this would easily lead to the identification of the research participants.



comments: *“It is sometimes difficult to be so much in [the work], because it has an impact on... I cannot read anything or I can't watch TV, or see any movie without looking at it from a gender perspective (...). When I see anything I always count the number of women (...), so sometimes I have to stop myself because it is getting a bit too much. That is also why I can't really see myself being extremely active in another organisation in my free time. I mean I could do environment or I could do human rights or animals or Tibet or whatever in my free time, but I am usually not doing women, because that would be too much”.*

At the same time the interviews displayed conflicting understandings of ‘the political’ and ‘politics’, which were tied to understandings of private and public. I was surprised for example when Catherine said: *“I would not like to be in politics because that is really too much, but I am doing politics in a different way”.* When I remarked: *“I was thinking I would even say that you are in politics?”.* She replied: *“No, but in an electoral position, because I think that is really hard. I mean my job is eating on my private life in my head, I am not talking about time, this is more a different issue. But if you are in political life, in terms of being an elected person it (...) does not seem that you can be at the same time an elected person and a normal person anymore, it is a bit like being a rock star or something”.*

Catherine's understanding of the ‘political’ is firstly connected to the state and hence in the first instance she defines her NGO work, associated with civil society, as not being politics. The state is defined as ‘public’ in both liberal

and the republican accounts. Interestingly, as a consequence, Catherine then considers being an elected politician as more intrusive of your private life than her current work, which does ‘eat on her private life in her head’, because one’s private life is negated by being a ‘*public persona*’. Sperling et al. (2001) observed that though civic activism is political, the participants of civic activism often did not define it as political. As institutional, state politics is male-dominated, and as this is often the only sphere conventionally defined as political, they conclude that “politics itself is defined on a gendered basis” (Sperling et al. 2001:1170, see also Ferree and McClurg Mueller 2004). Fay, on the other hand, considers her organisation and her work very political. This rather corresponds with a republican understanding of politics as taking place in the sphere of civil society. She even says: “*I do not see myself as helping others, as I said the spine of this whole thing is the political*”. She initially seems to follow Catherine’s intuition that politics is linked to the public rather than the private sphere when she says: “*I am passionate about being political but at the same time it is also very personal for me*”. However, if one does not read the ‘*but*’ in ‘but at the same time it is also very personal’ as a strong juxtaposition with the political dimension mentioned, this phrase could also be read as indicative of a broader feminist understanding of what the political is, according to the slogan ‘the personal is political’.

Sarah’s story is similarly exemplary in its approach to the relation between private and professional life: “*Yes, it is very difficult to separate [the private and the professional life] and I think it is something that I think is an ongoing challenge. It is also work that is done a lot of times by volunteers, so it is a big*

*part of somebody's life and I think, not only for me, but also for a number of others that I talk to, the separation is almost impossible. And it drives people..., I have seen it burn people out as well, which is rather unfortunate but it happens".*

These examples clearly indicate that the separation between private life and working professional life is seen as impossible and as necessary for one's sanity at the same time. Sarah's account corresponds to Moghadam's observation that a lot of the work of women's organisations is still based on "labour of love" and that as a result of this, there is a "tendency toward overwork on the part of a core of members, sometimes leading to burn-out" (Moghadam 2005:95-96, see also Vaux 2001 on Oxfam and Hopgood 2006 on Amnesty International). As Duffield observes in relation to work within the field in Sudan, the separation of professional life and private life is there similarly fragile; strikingly, the division is attempted to be enforced in a spatial way with the fortified aid compound as "a place of refuge" for a shower, a beer and some television (Duffield 2009:21).

Sarah's narrative is worth following a bit further as it touches on a range of issues, which other interviewees also connected to the public/private, personal/professional divide. In addition, the quote reiterates some of the points made in the previous section about the critical discourse on careerism in NGOs and the interviewees' awareness of and reaction to this discourse. At some point in our discussion on this issue, I said to Sarah: *"I actually don't even know if I was thinking about this theme before I started doing the*

*interviews but having talked to people this is just a theme that comes up every time. Yeah, and then of course if morality is a very personal thing as well, it is very interesting”.*

*Sarah replies: “Oh yeah, and I would say, probably as you go through you will find this is something that will come up almost every time. (...) You know, a lot of people and myself included live what you call ‘hand to mouth’. And so we are not doing it for monetary gain we are doing it because we are following a passion. We are not doing it because we have a lack of skills or intelligence but because we are driven by a passion and once you are driven by a passion it is hard for it to not to become everything. And so you know that is difficult, it can be quite difficult to balance. Those who are in this field who work professionally, who have children, I know some people -not a lot of people too be perfectly honest- who do, but I do know some and they had to take breaks from their professional careers for a few years because they can’t balance, manage the separation”.*

Sarah’s narrative includes a reference to combining family life with a career in NGOs, which was a theme that persisted in many of the interviews. When commenting on the challenge of combining a career in NGO work with having a family, some interviewees sketched an image of a hard working, career-minded female NGO worker who all of a sudden in her 40s finds herself without children, and often without a partner as well; often this image was used as a reminder to themselves that they did not want to find themselves in that situation. Roth’s research (2008) on humanitarian aid workers supports

the impression that the nature of some NGO work, for example when it includes frequent relocation, can have an impact of real and perceived possibilities for having children (see also Hopgood 2006). In addition, she identified a gendered dimension to this finding as well, claiming that women NGO workers can be less likely to find long-term partners willing to move around with them than their male counter parts (Roth 2008).

For Ruth, having a family is instrumental to maintaining some boundary between her private and professional life: *“I mean I think it is very connected, but I have now since a couple of years, I have a family, I have 2 kids and that is my private life and I take time for it and I enjoy it and it is important. And I have also friends that are not connected at all to this world and what I am doing and it is very important to have also another view on life from other people”*.

However, while Ruth mentions this opportunity to separate private life from work through spending time with her family as a positive change, unfortunately this separation is not always regarded as positive in high-level NGO and political jobs. Cynthia Enloe (1989) observed the gendered (masculine) nature of UN work; women tend to be overrepresented at the lower end of the job scale, and gender stereotypes prevent them from being recruited to top-level jobs. When the Ad Hoc Group on Equal Rights for Women in the UN lobbied in the 1980s to appoint more women to senior positions, UN member governments replied:

“Women can’t be put on their own in a world where late-night meetings and cocktail parties are *de rigueur* [and that] single women’s presence in such an environment could produce embarrassments, while married women do not enjoy the mobility so essential for UN work; they are likely to get pregnant; they are *diverted by family responsibilities*” (Enloe 1989:121 emphasis added).

While the narratives above serve to illustrate the prevalence, poignancy and the interrelatedness of the themes private/public, professional/personal and the political, it is important to make sense of these seemingly contradictory understandings. Susan Gal makes a very enlightening contribution when she suggests understanding the distinction between the public and the private as a “communicative phenomenon –a product of semiotic processes” (Gal 2004:261). She follows the conclusion drawn by feminist theorists that “the public/private distinction is an ideological one, hence not susceptible to empirical counter evidence” (Gal 2004:262). Gal’s proposal is an interesting response to the observation made by many theorists, that, when analysing how the terms public/private are used, the distinction seems to be both contradictory and blurred. She holds that if one takes a semiotic approach to the usage of the public/private divide, it becomes clear that there is in fact a discernable logic attached to the pair and that the distinction is not blurred (Gal 2004). This semiotic approach implies a rejection of the idea that the public and private are certain places, practices or institutions (Gal 2004). Rather, for Gal public and private are 1) “co-constitutive cultural categories”, 2) “indexical signs that are always relative, dependent for part of their referential meaning on the interactional context” and 3) a “fractal distinction”

(Gal 2004:264-265). This latter characteristic refers to the fact that the private and the public in itself can be constantly subdivided or submerged in broader categorisations (Gal 2004).<sup>34</sup>

Gal's suggestion to understand the distinction between the public and the private as a 'communicative phenomenon' first resonates with one particular type of exchange that I had a few times during the interviews. When asking a question, for example about the experience of work 'on the ground' or their feeling of responsibility, the interview participants would very explicitly draw a distinction between their personal and professional view. When I asked Pauline for example "*And how did you like it when you were there?*", she replies with "*Personally [or] professionally?*". Because it was hard to make sense of the distinction outside the context and their particular narrative and because I was curious about the distinction the interviewees made, I would normally reply: "*Both!*". Gal's proposal for a semantic approach is however most relevant when looking more broadly at how the women NGO workers attempted to (re)draw the boundaries of the public and private sphere. Gal's suggestion avoids the conclusion that the boundaries of the private and public are meaningless as they are unstable or that the categories of the private and the public collapse into one another. Rather it stresses how the categories are used in discourse to create meaning (Gal 2004).

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<sup>34</sup> As an example Gal (2004) introduces the distinction between outside the house and the house/home, where the outside would classically be categorised as public and the home as private; however, within the house, a subdivision could be made with the living room as public and the bedroom as private space. Similarly, the street, though often labelled as public, can have a private element to it, for example when it is the street in front of the house for which one is privately responsible when it needs to be cleared of snow.

In hindsight, some of the narratives above can be read in the way Gal proposes. Catherine indicates that she feels her work life penetrates into her private life when she finds herself analysing her leisure time activities from a gender perspective as well. Hence, she explains, it would be ‘too much’ to also engage in other gender activism in her ‘private time’ while she can imagine working on other issues, e.g. environmentalism. So, within her private time, a subdivision is potentially made between a ‘public’ part where she maintains her gender perspective, and a ‘private’ part where she engages with justice issues in a different field. Indeed, Catherine’s case, displays features of the third characteristic Gal defined, the ‘fractal distinction’: “The public/private distinction is reapplied and now divides into public and private what was, from another perspective, entirely ‘private’ space” (Gal 2004:265).

Sarah knows that work, as a public sphere, is normally associated with monetary gain, and careerism, and through stating that her work is not fixed in the public sphere, but very private as well, she can foreground passion over money. Her assertions only ‘work’ when one takes into considerations the assumptions that underlie the pair public/private. For Ruth, time outside regular working hours, which conventionally could be labelled private, was still occupied with work. However, since she has had children, she feels that the distinction between work and private time is clearer, as she has recreated a space, the domestic, within the larger category of ‘private time’, for her children. On a more general level, Gal’s contribution helps to understand that the naming of public/private is a meaningful, meaning-giving practice, which



turns out to be vital in the self-presentation and self-understanding of the interviewees.

Sarah's reply also included a reference to volunteers, for whom, according to her, it might be even harder to separate the work from their private life, as 'it is a big part of somebody's life'. It is interesting here to look at two instances where the task of volunteers from the project consisted of 'befriending' the intended beneficiaries of the project. In both cases the people involved in the project, in one case the volunteer coordinator, in the other case the volunteer herself, talked about 'drawing boundaries'. When I ask Grace, the volunteer, 'where befriending stops' and shared with her that to me it seemed as if this befriending task was partly something professional and partly more personal, she replies: *"Once they start telling you their stories, and they tell you their struggles and talk to you about their problems, you cross that line of being somebody who helps and volunteers to run the session; you befriend them.(...) So I find keeping that sort of 'me and them' very hard, that sort of separating. And I don't think I would try to be honest; whether that is right or not I don't know, probably not"*.

As there is an interesting tension here between saying that she would not try to keep the separation and saying that this is probably 'not right', I asked her:

*"Why do you think, probably not?"*.

Grace replies: *"A lot of people would say that if you are in a volunteer role, that you have to keep your boundaries. And my response to that would be that*

*I have my boundaries and I know what my boundaries are, and that being friends with people does not cross my boundaries”.*

It is telling that in a situation where the boundaries between the professional and the personal are potentially less clear, -both because the work is voluntary and unpaid and because of the nature of the work, befriending- the response of the outside world is a warning to ‘keep your boundaries’. As Gal notes, both republican and liberal accounts of the private/public divide contain “narratives about the dangers of mutual contamination by public and private spheres” (Gal 2004: 261).

I suggested to Grace that she might set her boundaries in different ways, for example in not disclosing personal information in the beginning and she answered: *“Initially you would not ask people up to your house. It is only when you get to know people you invite people into your home, and that has nothing to do with colour, has it? This has nothing to do with colour or race or anything. Sometimes you do invite people in. But on the whole you ask people in when you know them, because your home is your space, isn’t it? It is your space. No, I have no problems having them in the house”.*

Apart from the recurring themes of mentioning something (colour) while asserting it is not important and of the fear of being accused of racism, which have been discussed in Chapter Five, this narrative shows a redrawing of the private/public divide. The home is classed as ‘private’ and the right to be invited into the home is only reserved for those women in the project with

whom a 'real friendship', a personal over a professional relation, has been formed.

In the specific circumstances of Grace's project however, with a lack of funding for continuation of the project, Grace was forced to consider if and how these friendships forged in the public setting mediated through her organisation will continue in her private life once the project is over. At the same time, the inequality that led her to be in the role of the 'befriending volunteer' and the other women in the role of 'being befriended' of course persist beyond the project. Hence even if the friendships will be carried over to the private, personal sphere, Grace feels: *"I think it is going to be me that is going to have to do it, because I am the person with the car, I am the person who can afford to say 'let's go out for a cup of coffee', they can't"*.

I asked Grace if she had discussed with the paid coordinator of the project if and how the friendships could be continued after the funding of the project stopped and suggested it might be different as she was in a paid position.

Grace: *"She is paid, she is paid, so she has to toe the 'party line' a bit more than I do, I can do what I like because I am a volunteer. Even though I am answerable, obviously [to the organisation]"*. Here Grace's narrative suggests that being unpaid implies more freedom as a paid position is associated with accountability. This neatly maps onto what Benn and Gauss define as the 'agency' dimension of the public/private divide, in which the public is distinguished from the private depending on whether the agent acted on his own accord, or publicly (Benn and Gauss 1983:7). As they put it, "a public

official has special duties, (...) which greatly circumscribe his [sic] freedom of action in comparison with a private citizen. He [sic] can be accountable in ways in which a private citizen cannot” (Benn and Gauss 1983:10).

Veronica coordinates a ‘buddy project’ in which volunteers provide additional support to the client, which cannot be offered by formal organisations, which could include going to the cinema, exploring the city, cooking together or accompanying the client to a service. While the organisation itself presents the buddies as providing support in these instances ‘where professional workers must draw a line’, Veronica persistently stresses the importance of drawing boundaries for the buddies: *“We train the buddies also in mainly setting boundaries for yourself, what can you do as a buddy and what can you not do as a buddy and what do they have to tell us and me or my colleagues if something happens. Well, we try to make the lines very clear, what the project is and what they cannot do with them and the lines are crossed sometimes, because we always have some volunteers who think they are becoming friends”*.

In Veronica’s account it is the paid, professional staff that is responsible for drawing and maintaining ‘the boundaries’ in the relation between buddy and ‘client’; in case of ‘trespassing’, the professional staff need to be consulted. It is also striking that in this narrative, ‘professionalism’ seems to entail a capacity to judge whether there is a ‘real friendship’ or not.

This thread continues when she says: *“They say they are friends but I think that it is very, that is really for discussion because how can you be friends if the relationship is not neutral [and equal] because it is not”*.

She then recalls one exception: *“But there is one couple which I met, [within 4 months the client called and said ‘I really like [my assigned buddy] and we have such good contact, it does not feel right to be in the buddy project anymore, because we are really becoming friends’. So I called the buddy and she also said this was true, so they stepped out of the project and they still see each other as a matter of fact, but that won’t happen much”*.

While here, again, the professional needed to ‘license’ the friendship, more or less formally checking with both parties that there was an ‘authentic’ friendship developing, here both buddy and ‘client’ explicitly engaged with the boundaries and redrew them in ways that they felt most appropriate. When the project was first started, the organisation drew a boundary between their other work and the activities of the buddies, with the first being public, the latter private. However, some incidences, specifically related to money lending, prompted them to ‘redraw’ the boundaries, create clear rules, and define the ‘public’ (here: ‘accountable’) nature of the buddy project. The participants that Veronica tells me about, however, resisted the drawing of these boundaries by the organisation and decided to drag the relation into their private sphere. Here, it is not a question of “unstable or fuzzy boundaries”, “rather, the intertwining public and private is created by practices that participants understand as re-creations of the dichotomy” (Gal 2004: 267). The fact that they were conscious of these boundaries is expressed in ‘it does not

feel right to be in the buddy project anymore'. The buddies were defined as 'public' agents with accountability, but because they are also private subjects who have their own moral conscience, "what they perceive as the duties of their office may conflict with the demands of their private morality" (Benn and Gauss 1983:10). The interviewees appeared to understand a professional approach as neutral and disembodied in contrast to the personal, emotionally engaged friendship that was developing, mirroring indeed the private/public division. Benn states that in liberal understandings of morality, "all morality must be in principle public; it cannot have the private standing of 'gut feelings'", meaning that it must be a rationally defensible approach, which can be universally shared and agreed (Benn 1983:155).

This last issue of private versus public morality speaks to the third and final strand in Sarah's account, when she stated that the public and private are difficult to separate as people do the work 'out of a passion' and not for 'monetary gain'. Sarah's account also touched upon the 'passion' or commitment associated with the work as a reason for the blurred boundaries between the work and private life. Sylvia's story speaks to this commitment in even stronger language.

I ask her: *"How was it for you this balancing act between the personal and your professional life, because I have the feeling this is for many people an issue?"*.

She replies: *"Extremely difficult. It is definitely easier now. I think when I was in this [humanitarian] mission there was a lot of restrictions on movement, so*

*to be honest, you could work or you could go home and you could read books and that kind of thing was what you were trying to do. But the volume of work was really quite intense so I failed miserably at work-life balance at least the first year that I was there. Here it is a bit easier, (...) I think since moving to a place that has restaurants and rock climbing clubs and a nice park there is a lot more motivation to leave the office, also because the kind of work that we are doing (...) we are not saving lives here, it is not as if there is a whole lot of things that are really justifying, you know, killing yourself in the office”.*

While Sylvia is located in a capital city in Europe at the point I interviewed her, where she did work that could be labelled ‘more bureaucratic’, her former work was on the ground in a conflict zone where she did ‘hands-on work’. In the contrast that she sketches, it becomes very clear that both the nature and the location of her work have had clear impact on her ability to separate her working life and commitment from her personal free time. The metaphor of ‘killing yourself’ in her work to ‘save lives’ of others, is not only quite poetic, but has immense explanatory force in showing how far the boundaries can potentially be pushed. If one feels that responsibility on one’s shoulders, there is very little leeway to claim ‘private’ space.

Prokhovnik’s proposal for a reformulation of citizenship argues for adding a moral dimension based on the “non-instrumental” experiences in what is normally conceived as the private sphere (Prokhovnik 1998:85). As Kleinman observed, “the model of the professional is that of ‘rational man’” in contrast to the emotional woman, much in the same way as the public sphere is occupied by rational man and the private realm by emotional woman

(Kleinman 2002:277). Squires notes that one of the critiques levelled against the liberal approach concerns the liberal account of subjectivity; the idea of human beings as “equal, unattached, rational individuals” (Squires 2004:27). In addition, she holds, like Prokhovnik, that there is a different morality at stake in the domestic sphere than in public life, with the emphasis in the first on “empathy, relationality and caring” and in the latter on “autonomy, individuality and justice” (Squires 2004:28). In line with Prokhovnik, one interviewee, Anna, made clear that for her the separation between her work and her personal sphere was actually undesirable if this was attached to a separation of different types of morality. She feels that the work she does can be a *“sort of philosophy for my life”*. She says: *“And I guess, I like the fact that the work I do is also something that I want to live my life by”*.

While in Sylvia’s narrative, being passionate and committed appears necessarily linked to the notion of a moral responsibility to fight for justice, Ruth’s account gives a different picture. She gives an alternative twist to Sarah’s use of the word ‘passion’ and chooses to understand the term in a much broader sense, when she specifically rejects what I suggest to her in the interview. Interviewer: *“Because you are concerned with justice, it is also a very personal thing and not just a professional thing it seems”*.

Ruth: *“I don’t know, (...) I don’t know if that is true, because I think it has to do more with the fact that I am the one who is running the organisation and somebody who has their own company even if it is not about justice, would also be.... or even if it is about art, which is not always about justice but I think it depends on how... some people are just not very good at separating*



*their private lives from their professional lives and that is because they do what they passionately care about, but that does not need to be justice based. (...) I know a lot of people in NGOs that just really do their job and get paid for it and there is a lot of NGOs that work for justice but actually that have become so much part of this, this funding, foundation, money that they are, that a lot of the work that they do is based on where you can get money from and not what needs to be done”.*

While the specific question about grounds for commitments to global justice was the concern of the previous section, at this point it is important to notice the apparent contrast between Sarah’s and Sylvia’s accounts and Ruth’s narrative. Sarah and Sylvia understand the morality associated with NGO work as instrumental in making their work personal/private, while Ruth stresses that some ‘just really do their job and get paid for it’ implying that the commitment is strategic and calculated, which is a type of morality conventionally associated with the public sphere. Ruth’s comment is certainly resonating with other experiences from the field, which has been discussed in the previous section, for example in Menon’s work (2004) who warns against the ‘professionalisation’ of the feminist movement (see also de Alwis 2009, Lang 1997). Menon indeed states: “Freely available funds also attract people with no great political commitment, for whom feminism is often a temporary profession” (Menon 2004:220).

Without discrediting the important claim that there has been a NGOisation of the feminist movement and that this NGOisation has a number of questionable

consequences, the interviews with the women NGO workers reinforced the idea that the commitment and passion the women experienced in relation to their work had a significant effect on the way the women could or rather could not separate the personal/private from the public/professional sphere (see also Moghadam 2005 and Wieringa 2009). Furthermore, because the private sphere is commonly associated with a morality of “empathy, relationality and caring” and ‘real’ feminist commitment in contrast to the “individualism” (Squires 2004:28) and the careerism of the public sphere (see Menon 2004, de Alwis 2009), the women NGO workers are under pressure to ‘prove’ their commitment to their work by situating it in the personal sphere and letting work encroach on their private lives. However, due to the professionalism associated with the public sphere, linked to values of impartiality, rationality and accountability (Benn and Gauss 1983, Kleinman 2002, Squires 2004), the women NGO workers are at the same time encouraged to position their work in the public, professional sphere. This public/private ‘double bind’ underlines the relevance of Gal’s (2004) understanding of the private/public distinction as a communicative and meaning-making strategy.<sup>35</sup>

In order to shed new light on the criticism that feminist NGOs are increasingly professionalised leading to a stronger separation between the public and private, the criticism can also be reversed; it is possible to see the situation in which work commitment invades the private life, as the research participants

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<sup>35</sup> This ‘double bind’ was already exemplified in Chapter Four in Laura’s narrative in which she contrasted her emotional reaction based on her feminist convictions with professionalism. Laura: *“For example in that particular situation I should have chosen to sort of not let myself be provoked by it [but] I did and I think if I had not been such a convinced feminist myself if I would be more professional or both I could just let it slide and I did not, I got really pissed and I yelled at him”*.

described, as problematic as well. Sylvia's narrative, which continues after she has said that during her time in the conflict zone she constantly worked since she felt responsible for the lives of others, is interesting in this respect: "*When you are young and you don't have a lot of experience yet and someone puts you in a position where it is slightly beyond what you been doing and slightly beyond your capabilities for instance there is a lot of pressure to really not screw up. And I was definitely in that situation of feeling like I needed to prove myself as well*". Strikingly, here the theme of 'age' and the junior position that comes with it, pop up again (see also Chapter Four).

When I suggest that it might then be strategic to put these kinds of people in such situations, she says: "*Oh, completely, yeah. I mean from the hiring point of view when you have people like that you know that they are going to work themselves to the point of exhaustion. I mean when you are starting up a mission, you want people who are going to really work hard. And I think, and this might be one of my prejudices that I developed there, you also see a lot of people who are very comfortable working for a big organisation, or a UN agency or something like that, where they are quite comfortable in their job security and then end up actually not really doing much. And I think that people who are working on the kind of projects we were working on, they would rather have a young person with lots of energy who they know is going to do the work than someone perhaps with a bit more experience who they worry might not actually do the kind of work that is necessary*".

Sylvia's narrative again echoes some of the concerns underlined by Menon (2004) that an increase in funding could either attract a less committed group of people to work for NGOs or make current employees complacent. However, I read Sylvia's account and the earlier account of Sarah who spoke about the burn-out of her colleagues also as an important warning against the romanticisation of the underpaid, activist work that leaves no personal/private space intact. This inclination to overwork is also a "drawback to [feminist] nonprofessionalised organisations" (Moghadam 2005:95, see also Hopgood 2006). While Sylvia ends her statement on a milder tone, emphasising the necessity of finding someone 'that does the kind of work that is necessary', her strong language about hiring people who work themselves to the point of exhaustion, points the potential merits of a position as a "nine-to-five feminist" (de Alwis 2009:86). While the NGOisation of the feminist movement and the subsequent professionalisation have been associated with neoliberal developments of depoliticisation and the NGOs as service providers on behalf of a retreating state (Alvarez 1998), it could also be suggested that when NGO work is not sufficiently seen as a job but as a vocation, this can equally lead to exploitative situations.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has engaged with the critique of the representative role of NGOs. I have argued here that some NGOs could indeed better be described as advocating a certain ideology rather than representing a constituency. This in itself does not need to be seen as problematic, as long as NGOs are explicit about their position and unless NGOs claim a moral legitimacy under the

pretence of representative status. It is important to note however, that those NGOs that attempt to present a more nuanced picture of the needs of their target group to policy makers and governments are under pressure to provide a simplified summary of the demands. Policy makers are, if willing to listen at all to demands of marginalised groups, still less willing to engage with the real complexity at stake. Furthermore, processes of formal consultation to gauge the views and ideas of the group represented can in multiple ways place a burden on those consulted in terms of expectations of authenticity, of 'proper' organisation/accessibility as a constituency and pressure to retell and relive painful experiences.

Representation itself reveals something about the power differential at stake in NGO work when exploring who is in the position to represent and who needs to be represented. The women NGO workers are in a comparatively advantaged position compared to those they represent and this gap is potentially widened since occupying the representative role can bring additional career advantages. The women NGO workers who were critical of the role their NGOs played as representatives in the lobbying process, at the same time felt ambivalent about giving up their position in favour of a representative, which would come out of the target group itself. Spivak (1998) leaves a similar ambivalence in her famous critique of representation arguing that in the current system representation cannot simply be discarded while at the same time stressing the need to acknowledge our own complicity in silencing the subaltern.

The theories about global citizenship contain a number of contradictions relating to 1) responsibility and alterity and 2) responsibility and privilege. It could be argued that underlying these contradictions is the idea that the responsibility of the global citizen is premised on her being both similar to the one being 'helped', e.g. because of a shared humanity, and different, in the sense of having the opportunities to help. In the narratives of the women NGO workers this strand of thought indeed emerged; most specifically it was expressed when the women said that they felt responsible because they themselves had enjoyed so many opportunities. I have argued that their expressed desire to let others enjoy these opportunities as well is based on an assumption that opportunities of disadvantaged groups can be raised without impacting the advantages of the privileged, which disregards the global relation between privilege and marginalisation. Contradictory, similar to the representative role, the very work of increasing opportunities of others provides the women NGO workers themselves with a range of new opportunities. These opportunities and advantages need not be financial, but could involve meeting other people, making a career, or, least tangible but very prevalent, 'leaving a legacy'. Within the women's movement and in relation to a general NGOisation of social movements, there is a persistent critique of the professionalisation of NGO work in which careerism is seen to be incompatible with altruistic values. The narratives of the women NGO workers clearly show an awareness of this discourse, either through supporting this discourse, through challenging it, or through justifying their position in response to this discourse. While the incompatibility of altruism and careerism is commonly assumed, it can be challenged with reference to the fact that

arguably, NGO workers driven by 'selfish' motives are on a more equal par with those they seek to support as the latter are not dependent on their 'benevolence'.

I have argued here that the boundaries between the public and private in the narratives of the women NGO workers are shifting. This does not mean that the public/private divide is meaningless, rather the opposite is the case; women NGO workers are constantly engaging in redrawing and redefining the boundaries between the public and the private, the professional and the personal. As Gal has argued, the public/private division in the discourse should be understood as a "communicative phenomenon" (Gal 2004:261). This act of setting the boundaries gives meaning to the work practices of the women NGO workers and is vital for their self-understanding and self-representation. Through drawing and redrawing those boundaries, the women NGO workers make sense of the situation in which work often spills over to their private time and in which the relation between work and home, including relationships with partners and children, needs to be negotiated. While on the one hand, work is often conceptualised as part of the private sphere as it is linked to a non-instrumental morality associated with that sphere (work as a vocation rather than a job), on the other hand work is sometimes categorised as public in order to counter the stress of constant engagement with work outside working hours and to stress professionalism. I have called these contradictory pressures the private/public 'double bind'.

In relation to the public/private distinction I have introduced the volunteer as a particularly interesting case to illustrate the point that the public/private divide should not be treated as fixed categories but rather as negotiable terms; despite the fact that the volunteer is seemingly firmly based in the private sphere due to the unpaid, informal nature of her work, volunteers are negotiating the private and public as well. Against the romanticisation of 'moral work', I have argued that the conceptualisation of 'moral work' as being a vocation rather than a job, and as linked to a private morality carries a potential danger of exploitation.



## **7 - The Relation to the Other: Negotiations**

### **Across Space**

#### **Introduction**

The few recent studies that have explored the role of individuals within NGOs and their reflections on their work practices have mostly concentrated on the subject positions of people in close geographical proximity to the receivers of support (Baaz 2005, Cook 2007, Charlés 2007, Heron 2007). Moreover, in these particular studies the close geographical proximity was based on the mobility of the aid workers, development practitioners and volunteers rather than on the mobility of the Other. In my research however, most of the relations between the women NGO workers and the women they supported are articulated across spatial distance, in the case of NGOs based in Brussels, Geneva or other Northern capital cities. In the other cases where there was spatial proximity, this was often based on the mobility of the Other as migrants to a Western country.<sup>36</sup> Hence I became interested in how the women NGO workers negotiate their relation with the beneficiaries across distance in cases where the women are working far away from those who are eventually supposed to benefit from the lobbying, the advocacy and the project work of the NGOs. This question of how the women NGO workers ‘negotiated

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<sup>36</sup> The term mobility here might potentially mask the difference between the mobility of aid workers to the global South and the mobility of Southern migrants to the North. As Duffield points out, “the irony of this fantastic international space of flows is that the beneficiaries that aid workers encounter cannot move, at least not legally; they are stationary subjects” (Duffield 2009:7). In the case of the engagement of national organisations with female migrants in this research it is clear that the women benefiting from the projects crossed borders; indeed though, this was often done through illegal routes.

distance' encompasses not just the physical bridging of the distance (which the women could 'explain away' with reference to the institutional structures of communication/organisation which were in place) but also the psychological and emotional aspects of reaching across distance.

There are a number of (moral) assumptions regarding space and distance in relation to NGO work: there is a strong theme of romanticising field work over more bureaucratic work, which is linked to the idea of 'getting your hands dirty' instead of 'staying high and dry'. Related to this, grassroots organisations are often presented as "unproblematically good" and international institutions, such as the World Bank, or the International Planned Parenthood Federation as "unproblematically evil" (Waterman 1993:10, see also Mindry 2001). Moreover, it is often questioned whether one can claim to know the needs of the people one is supposed to support when one does not witness their particular circumstances. Hahn and Holzscheiter for example draw this link between representation and distance: "First of all, there is the risk that NGOs may perceive the interests of their constituency wrongly. Large international NGOs are far away from those people whose interests they claim to represent" (Hahn and Holzscheiter 2005:8). The growing lack of field experience among the younger generation of development workers, who instead received academic training in development studies, is associated with the increasing technocratic approach in NGOs (Duffield 2007).

On the other hand, there is an explicit critique of development workers on the ground as intrusive (Goudge 2003). In addition, many argue that those

development workers who live in the place where they work, often occupy safer and better housing, (sometimes former colonial houses), live in expatriate neighbourhoods or even “fortified aid compounds” (Duffield 2009:1). Hence they are isolated from the group they support in their work, only communicating with them during short carefully monitored visits or through satellite phone (Duffield 2007). Cornwall and Fujita (2007) for example regard the former and latter groups as potentially similarly distant from the ‘reality on the ground’ despite the latter group’s geographical closeness. They state that the World Bank Report ‘*Consultations with the Poor*’, which used poor people’s testimonies,

“brought some glimpse of reality of ordinary people’s lives into the field of view of the kind of development actors who live at such a remove from every day life in the countries where their work is focussed, that they are in need of reminding of what is happening ‘out there’ –or indeed, in some cases, in the worlds that surround the expatriate enclaves and air-conditioned meeting rooms in five-star hotels where donors spend much of their time” (Cornwall and Fujita 2007:51).

However, while space and place and the related (moral) assumptions are clearly important themes in the NGO world itself, Duffield (2009) claims that the ‘spatial turn’ in research in the social sciences and humanities, has been remarkably absent in development studies. Hence, in contrast to the previous chapters, which took feminist, postcolonial and global citizenship/global civil society theory as the structuring frames for analysis, this chapter is organised around the theme of ‘negotiations across space’. It does, however, draw

heavily on contributions from critical development/critical NGO studies, particularly on discussions about NGO partnerships. At the same time it insists on the analytical and theoretical depth that feminist theory, postcolonial theory and global citizenship/civil society theory have offered to critical development/critical NGO studies, over the rather solution-oriented, reductionist approach, which is also often a feature of this field.

Distance, space and the relation between the local and the global have also been prevalent themes in feminist theory and practice when conceptualising the relation between women globally (see also Chapter Four). The term ‘global feminism’, which “conventionally (...) has stood for a kind of Western cultural imperialism” and which had simplistically assumed global sisterhood through universal oppression, was replaced by the term ‘transnational feminism’ (Grewal and Kaplan 1994:17). A transnational feminism should emphasise the relation between the local, national and the global, deconstruct the unified category of gender, and take account of the variety within and the overlaps between different forms of oppression (Grewal and Kaplan 1994). The women’s movement and feminist NGOs have engaged transnationally in different forums, such as the UN conferences during the UN International Women’s Decade and through transnational feminist networks (TFNs), where organisations come together around a thematic focus. Similar to the development/NGO discourse, in debates about space and location the site of the grassroots is often romanticised as more authentic (Naples 2002a, Desai 2002, Moghadam 2005). On a different level, feminists have engaged with spatiality in relation to knowledge production, advocating a ‘politics of

location', which should explicitly recognise the subjectivity and situatedness of knowledge (Grewal and Kaplan 1994). Critical feminist approaches, however, also emphasise the relationality between women in a global capitalist system beyond spatial distance. Ahmed argued:

“The assumption of distance also involves a refusal to recognise the relationships of proximity between women who are differently located in the world. Western feminists are already in relationships with ‘third world women’ given our implication in an international division of labour (...) Women in different nation spaces, within a globalised economy of difference, cannot not encounter each other, what is at stake is *how*, rather than *whether*, the encounters take place” (Ahmed 2000b:167, see also Mohanty 2003).

It is important here to interpret distance in a broader sense than merely geographical distance. It would be naïve to assume that women NGO workers who work on a national level or who work in the field with the women they support always have much direct contact with them. In fact for them, the burdens of writing funding applications, managing projects, and administrative work also increase the ‘distance’ to the women they work with. Laura said for example: *“When I worked in Colombia I had the same feelings sitting in Bogota where I had a coordinating job (...) it was the same there, I also got caught up in administration and dealing with economics and stuff”*.

Vita, who works for a national organisation directly with the women who she supports rather complains about the effect of the funding competition on other organisations than her own: *“I don’t like this project industry; those that can*

*make the applications get the money and many of them never themselves meet a foreigner if that is the issue [they are working on]”.*

This chapter seeks to explore how the women negotiated their relation with the women they supported across distance. I commence by exploring the work on myths and stereotypes (e.g. Cornwall et al. 2007) and Chambers’ (2006) work on fieldtrips in the first section of this chapter in relation to the accounts of the research participants as potential ways to ‘deal with distance’. In the present global times, both the women’s movement and the NGO sector function through transnational partnerships, in which governments, NGOs, social movements and funding bodies are connected linking the local, national and global levels. Though the different organisations and bodies are linked by a common theme, this does not imply that the styles, interests and agendas of the separate organisations in the partnership are always in line with each other (Silliman 1999).

In the second section of this chapter, I will suggest that the partner organisations, who are the intermediaries between international NGOs located the global North and the ‘people on the ground’, serve both as a ‘bridge’ and as a ‘replacement’ for the final target group. I will look at some examples of how this replacement strategy plays out and problematise some elements of this relationship. I will trace the notion of partnership in the interview accounts paying particular attention to the funding relation, the donor’s power to select, the burden on partners and the ambivalences of participation. Finally, in the last section I will explore how decisions related to distance or proximity

were explained and justified by the women I interviewed. So whereas the first sections will focus on the ‘strategies’ to bridge the distance, the last section will focus on negotiating distance and justifications of positions taken.

### **Myths, Stories and Field Work Experiences**

I asked Sophie how she manages to maintain a link with the people whose situation she seeks to improve while she does not see these people on a daily basis.<sup>37</sup> She responds at first by saying that this is the main problem in her work because she works on a very abstract level with human rights documents. Then she continues: *“I deal with it by trying to meet with our international programme staff, and I try to get their stories, that is of course only their stories and then I, when I am in the countries in the developing world I try to get as many ‘stories’ as possible”*.

While Cornwall et al. (2007) mainly focus on the production of myths in terms of the effects in fundraising many elements resonate with my own fieldwork and with Sophie’s account. Cornwall et al.’s use of the term ‘myth’ does not imply that the stories are necessarily untrue; rather what makes stories myths are “the way in which they encode the ways of that world in a form that resonates with the things that people would like to believe, that gives them the power to affect action” (Cornwall et al. 2007:5). Women of the global South appear in these myths, slogans and fables of the development discourse “as abject victims, the passive subjects of development’s rescue, and as splendid heroines, whose unsung virtues and whose contribution to development need

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<sup>37</sup> In retrospect, I can recognise more consciously that my interview question displayed similar assumptions about the ‘problem of distance’ to those outlined in the introduction.

to be heeded” (Cornwall et al. 2007:4, see also Chapter Four on stereotypes). Sophie uses the term ‘stories’ rather than ‘myths’ as she is referring to what people in the countries of the developing world have told her about their lives, their needs, and their circumstances. Interestingly, often the ‘stories’ Sophie uses are mediated as she also ‘collects’ the stories from her colleagues, the international programme staff, who are presumably more often in contact with what happens on the ground; in this process stories might take the form of ‘myths’. When I asked how she maintained a link with the people whose lives she seeks to ameliorate, I was initially interested in hearing from Sophie how she motivates herself when she is so far away from the target group. Sophie, however, indicates that when she calls this distance ‘the main problem of my work’, her concern is only partly about her (lack of) motivation when dealing with abstract documents rather than with the ‘real people’.

Sophie: *“But I think my worry is more that I am not telling the truth basically. For example when we talk about the access to condoms and we say there is a lack of access to condoms and then I met a guy from Uganda and he said ‘there is no lack of access to condoms’, his experience, in his community ‘we have condoms everywhere’, like now we say there is a lack of access to condoms, don’t go around and spread that. So that of course is like how do I know that I communicate the reality? That is a problem. Absolutely!”*

Here Sophie seems to recognise the danger that the passing on of stories by colleagues could result in a ‘Chinese whispering’ situation where the ‘real meaning’ of the testimony and the intention of the informant get lost (Hahn



and Holzscheiter 2005), and the ‘truth’ on the ground is misrepresented, “created in the image of the grievance we understand” (Kennedy 2004:xxiii) or “construct[ed as] a world of fantasy that suits politicians” (Eyben 2007b:38). In addition, the ‘story tellers’ on the ground function only as informants, rather than as partners who share their own analysis and perceptions (Eade 2007). This interview fragment evokes the question how often (and on what basis) Sophie will update her stories. Indeed, she asks herself that question explicitly immediately after telling me about the refutation of the ‘lack of access to condoms story’.

However, the phrase ‘don’t go around and spread that’<sup>38</sup> [there is no lack of access to condoms], can be understood as a silencing of alternative messages that would undermine the message her organisation seeks to disseminate. Here we might identify a resistance towards updating the stories if conflicting accounts do not sit nicely with the stated goals of an organisation; the testimonies are needed to give the organisation legitimacy. Hence, “the use of particular representations of those whom development seeks to assist are worked into ‘story-lines’ that come not only to frame, but also to legitimise particular kinds of intervention and forms of knowledge” (Cornwall et al. 2007:6). At the same time, it rightly or wrongly implies that her organisation has better knowledge about the real situation on the ground than the people themselves, whose stories function as mere illustration. In contrast to Sophie’s informal collecting of stories, in the 1990s the World Bank made a structured

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<sup>38</sup> Sophie’s phrase ‘don’t go around and spread that [there is no lack of access to condoms]’ might have raised an ethical dilemma for me in writing about this example; however, in the context of the interview, it was clear that this phrase was not addressed to me but to herself or, in an imaginary conversation, to the guy who told her that there was sufficient access to condoms.

attempt to collect testimonies of ‘the poor’ worldwide (published as ‘*Consultations with the Poor*’ in 1999). Despite the differences in scale and methodology, the criticisms related to this endeavour touch upon exactly those points that arise from Sophie’s narrative; the instrumental use of testimonies to gain moral authority and to give legitimacy to predefined policies and goals, the power relations shaping the framing of the testimonies (Pender 2001, Cornwall and Fujita 2007).

Sophie’s reliance on ‘selected’ stories can on the other hand be justified for its strategic use, as policy makers are “likely to be more easily influenced by sound-bite-style headlines, which pressures NGO workers into providing those catchy quotes” (Cornwall and Fujita 2007:51). Spivak (1990) advocated a ‘strategic essentialism’<sup>39</sup>, which could be understood as a strategic form of identity politics that entails a simplification and homogenisation of reality in order to achieve a desired goal, e.g. representation (see also Chapter Four on the strategic use of gender stereotypes and Chapter Six on representation). Sophie also recognises this when she says: “*Since I work with advocacy my work is very much linked to hitting emotions of people and then personal stories become very vital. If I want decision makers to focus more on sexual and reproductive health I need to talk about that taxi driver that I mentioned or the young people that I meet*”.

One of the research participants, who worked closely with refugees, also emphasised how face-to-face contact and personal stories had a very different

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<sup>39</sup> Spivak has since decided not to use the term ‘strategic essentialism’ anymore as to her surprise it quickly became a widely adopted phrase, serving merely as “the union ticket for essentialism” instead of serving as a strategy (Spivak 1993:35).

and much stronger effect than images on television. She explains how her work actually narrowed the distance between them and her, which again underlines the significance of distance in NGO work. Grace: *“You know about refugees broadly, don’t you, (...) but your image of refugees is more television viewing, you have seen these vast refugee camps in Sudan or Pakistan (...), people that fled across the border and it is only when you get involved with them individually that you realise the horror of what they have gone through. When you see it collectively, it is grim and it is awful, but it is not personal. And once you get involved (...), getting to know people (...) you realise the suffering that these people had and I think that’s what has changed for me, the understanding of loss that these people have had”*.

Chambers’ (2006) discussion on fieldwork provides another way to understand possibilities for relating to Others across space. It also gives insight into the circumstances under which stories are often collected. Chambers argues that “rural development tourism”, by which he means field visits, provides the main source of information, “perceptions and misperceptions” about poor people for many development professionals (Chambers 2006:11). He identifies a number of “traps” related to rural field visits of development practitioners, notably what he used to call the “urban trap” and what he now calls “the headquarters and capital traps” (Chambers 2006:8). He argues that the effect of the international career system with its incentive schemes is that successful development professionals are promoted to urban and international centres away from rural areas. These urban and international spaces do not only offer better career prospects, but also better accommodation, schools,

hospitals, shops, and other facilities and fulfil the increasingly stringent requirements of insurance, safety and security (Chambers 2006, Duffield 2009). The result is that those who ‘end up’ high in the hierarchies of development organisations’ often base their policies and visions on past experiences in the field, which potentially means that those in the most powerful positions are also most out of touch with the ‘reality’ of the field today.

Many of the women I interviewed had had more extensive experience working in the field prior to taking up their current position. I will discuss this more extensively when exploring in the third section why these women chose a position where they were geographically removed from the beneficiaries despite the difficulties they identified with that position. An ‘urban trap’ emerges as destinations of the field visits are often relatively urban due to the logistical limitations. For example, Beth told me that she always ends up going to the same places in the global South; the capital cities, where she is familiar with the café on the corner of the hotel, without knowing and seeing the rest of the country. She experiences a stark contrast between her current work’s field visits and her previous work as a volunteer for another organisation when she lived for two years in the community she worked in, learned the language, and made friends there.

One research participant, Pauline, who specifically expressed her familiarity with and admiration for Chambers’ work felt that her experiences and commitments resonated with his ideas: *“So that for me, is one of the*

*interesting things that he really advocates people to go out and they do, I hate the term 'field work', they do and...because you know, the field can be someone from the UN in Geneva going to Dhaka, that's the field, but it is not, that's a capital city, with air-con and you might see a few slums, but you are not seeing what the country is like. But I really find him interesting because he talks about how people should be in the situation and it should not be just a flying visit of 2 hours to see what the poor people are doing, it should be real genuine attempt to understanding. (...) One thing that was always going back to my mind was this what he said, because I know that in Mongolia this was always what I was trying to do (...) so it was always in the back of my mind that I really needed to genuinely attempt to understand these women and genuinely attempt to understand these community leaders that I interviewed as well. And I guess I was still trying to be my own worst critic, because I think that is important to go 'ok, that's fine I have done this research, but really have I seen it?'".*

Pauline clearly refers here to the 'urban trap' that Chambers identified, making a distinction between 'doing the research' and actually 'seeing' and understanding the situation on the ground. In addition, she comments that 'she hates the term field work', which reveals that after her encounter with Chambers' and possibly other critical approaches to development work, the term 'field work' has become an ideologically laden term. She is keen to point out that she is critical of it and therefore does not want to use it in an unproblematic way. Many of the research participants had a university background related to their current work, with degrees in women's studies,

politics or development, and it is clear that they often reflected on their experiences through the theories that they had learned about. Pauline's statement here is the most explicit example of the possibility of dialogue between theory and practice. Pauline talks about a certain ambition to 'genuinely attempt to understand', a commitment that she has derived from Chambers' theory. However, it is also possible that Chambers' theory might have appealed to her in the first place because it resonated with her experiences and her disposition to her work already.

Most of the research participants stressed the importance of field trips for their work. Kate, for example says: *"It is certainly, it is clear that if you work at a level like here, you getting pretty far from reality (...) if I am travelling and have that [situation of being closer to concrete contexts] from time to time, it makes it a huge difference in the way you can learn and can perceive the situation or reconsider or get insights and a better understanding and hear yourself, it depends on how open you are, but if you are there you can perhaps hear much more that you were told or see other things which have not been communicated to you because you are in the situation"*.

Kate stresses the value of field visits mainly in terms of the extra information one can extract when one is on the ground, which prevents one from getting too far removed from reality and which prompts to reconsider certain viewpoints. At the same time, she states *"you don't have to be everywhere all the time"*; rather *"you need to get in touch with a reality you are working with from time to time"*. Her stress on 'a reality' rather than 'the reality' seems to

imply her awareness that her view remains partial and incomplete even when visiting the field. It could also imply that she considers most circumstances on the ground similar enough to be comparable.

Casey echoes Kate's account when she answers my question whether field visits are important for her work by saying: *"Mmh, yeah, because otherwise it becomes too administrative here. And because we have good discussions on what works, what doesn't work (...) So I think it is important to be in the country and sit and discuss because in the meeting you give a lot of ideas it is not the same by email. It is quite important"*.

Also similarly to Kate she stresses that there are certain things she will not be told when she is far away from the project in her main office: *"They don't describe the full development in their reports to us so it is important to come there"*.

However, Casey is also aware that even when coming to the country she is perceived as *"very much a donor, but I feel that I get a good discussion, because I have so much experience as I have. So I am very familiar, very experienced in the development administration, but they can also feel that I have a relatively good understanding on what to do when we discuss it. But there is no doubt that my visits are seen as donor visits. (...) I am the one issuing the money, so they will try to...they will sketch a favourable picture of their progress"*.

Here Casey identifies what Chambers calls the “project bias” of field visits; the fact that donors are often taken to “the nicely groomed pet project or model village” where the successes of a particular project are clearly visible (Chambers 2008:34). Chambers illustrates the problems he identifies with field visits and the pressure on those visited to give the ‘right’ message by sketching an imaginary field visit:

“A self-conscious group (...) dressed in their best clothes, are seen and spoken to. They nervously respond in ways which they hope will bring benefits and avoid penalties. There are tensions between the visitor’s questions and curiosity, the officials’ desire to select what is to be seen, and the mixed motives of different rural groups and individuals who have to live with the officials and with each other after the visitor has left” (Chambers 2006:16).

It is interesting in the above narrative that Casey counterbalances what she perceives as a lack of honesty about the real state of the project (‘sketching a favourable picture’) because of her power position as a donor with her experience and knowledge about the field (‘I get a good discussion, because I have so much experience’). One could also imagine that her experience and her good understanding might add to her power position, and hence increase the power imbalance, which might lead to even less open dialogue. Heron (2005), in an article on social worker’s reflexivity about subjectivity and subject position (as they are as well in a power position of ‘helping’ someone) uses a Foucauldian framework to emphasise how in power relations subjects are constituted. She argues that “the constitutive effects of being in a structured position of power over other people would need to be examined”, in



other words “what does this to her sense of self”, and what kind of investment someone has in maintaining a certain self-image (Heron 2005:348).

Casey’s recurrent emphasis on being experienced, which returns in a statement quoted below, might betray her investment in a self-image as a very experienced NGO worker. This might in turn, when left acknowledged or unquestioned, prevent her from critically interrogating her behaviour and position. The acknowledgment that she is in a donor position and that this will have an effect on the interaction still situates the power dynamics as ‘external’ to her. It situates them in the organisation she is working for that happens to be a donor organisation, rather than in herself. Rather, her own qualities (being experienced) are presented as compensating for the external situation.

Casey also feels that the difficulties she sometimes encounters as a donor when the partners tend to sketch a too favourable picture of the project are partly resolved when she can deal with partners in the South who she identifies as similar to her.

Casey: *“In some of these projects I have the advantage of dealing with women managers and they are more or less the same age as me and it makes it easier. Personality wise, we are quite similar even though it is so different circumstances. [T]hey have taken part in these discussions for so many years. We are at the same phase more or less, they have been developing in their organisations, had a lot of exposure to European countries, it is quite easy I feel”*. This fragment shows the importance of partners in relation to field visits

specifically and in bridging the distance more generally, as will be discussed in the next section.

Both Kate and Casey are in a position where they can choose which field visits they would wish to make. Casey stresses: *“I am a very experienced consultant so I decide myself what kind of visits should I go on. Should I go and see the target group, should I focus on capacity building at the partners or how do I involve the embassy? Because of my experience I have the freedom to do what I like and I find that very interesting, sometimes I do this and sometimes I do that”*.

From this account it becomes clearer that with experience comes the power of selecting who and what to see and do on a field visit; this power of selection will be further discussed in the next section of this chapter. These ‘targeted visits’ might indeed be more productive but could potentially contain the risk of overlooking those fields, those projects that are not on the radar of the donor organisation, or of the specific representative.

Not everyone finds it essential, though, to make field trips to the regions that feature in their work. Sonia who works with women in Africa had never been to Africa before she started working for the organisation. During the time she has been working for the organisation she has visited African countries, so I asked whether that changed her perception of her work or of the women she is working with. She says: *“No, from the moment I started having responsibility here, I started being committed. I am a very responsible person and because I*

*really like what I do I am very committed and it does not change the fact that I see the people or that I don't see them. It is better now that I know them and now that I see the project moving forward but it doesn't change anything".*

It is noticeable that she understands my question to be indicative of some mistrust on my side concerning her commitment, as she immediately stresses her dedication. It is remarkable that she stresses very clearly that it does not matter in her work whether she has ever met the people she is working with and for, while at the same time she states 'it is better now that I know them'.

Later in the interview, Sonia indicates she would now like to visit the particular conflict-ridden region for which she coordinates projects. She explains that initially she did not want to visit the region as she was afraid of the violence, *"but I would like to go, to see the things that I am working on, that I have heard of because of these women, but that I have not seen with my own eyes"*.

When I ask her whether a visit would be important for her work, Sonia says: *"Yes, for my work, but also for me as a person. To see how a human being can treat another human being, how terrible things people can do, but how still there are people that have hope"*.

So whereas on the one hand, she now does acknowledge that seeing the situation on the ground could possibly be beneficial for her work practices, on the other hand, she seems to consider the visit more important as a 'life lesson' for herself. As she does not elaborate on how it could be important for her

work, she does not mention the use of the field visit to gather information or to establish relations with the women she supports. For Sonia, the field visit is not central to her credibility as a committed NGO worker; rather it is seen as enabling her to gain more experiences for self-development (see Chapter Six for a more extensive discussion on the personal and career development of NGO workers through their work).

As mentioned previously, Chambers also observed the use of ‘old’ experiences in the field for current practices. Gill feels that she can tap into her experiences from a previous job. When I ask her whether she meets the women in the South that she has described to me earlier in the interview, she responds: *“Yes, although I have to say, this is also an office where we have a lot of things on our plate, so we don’t always have the time to go into depth with someone, there are limitations to that, but I think it helped me that I before joining this organisation, in my previous youth organisation, the international one, I have done some conferences, for instance organising one in India, co-organising one in Uganda and I made a lot of contacts there and also some friends, so I know more of these regions and I have an idea how it works there, and I have been there, that also helps”*.

While she suggests that the work pressure in her organisation does not allow her much contact with people on the ground, Gill does not problematise basing work on past experiences in a different organisation. However, later in the interview she stresses: *“If you are working on North-South relations, you should have had some time in the South. Because otherwise I don’t think you*

*can be an efficient policy officer in the North*". She indicates that if she continues working in the area of development, she feels that she will have to go and work in the South as well: *"I would need this experience for me, I think, morally, I would need it to justify that I work in that area"*.

For Gill, in contrast to Sonia, experience in the global South is tied to her own sense of integrity and credibility in her NGO work. Here, it appears as though she recognised that her past experiences have an 'expiry date'; for now, she feels it is justifiable to base her work on previous rather than current contacts and on memories of the field but in the long term this would be 'morally' untenable. Similarly, Laura speaks of the 'freshness' of experiences, which passes after a while. *"I think all of us working in this department have past experiences of working in the field and I think somehow you rely on that, but that's fresh, it is something that goes away, the feeling of it goes away so you have to renew it and we know that, we know that we have to travel otherwise we will become bitter and depressed"*.

For her, the experience of being closer to what happens on the ground is important for motivation, as she feels that 'change' is more easily observed there. Laura's personal circumstances (getting pregnant since she started the job and now caring for two young children) have prevented her from 'renewing' this experience. Interestingly, she compensates for her lack of opportunities to witness positive change on the ground abroad with experiences much closer to home: *"But I think also for me personally I also have, I work in a women's shelter here as a volunteer and I think that has*

*proven to be very helpful for me because that is very, very practical and it is sort of the kind of work where I can see, I meet the actual women that have been raped or beaten up and I can sort of see, meet someone that is changing, so sometimes I feel that I get that there when I don't get it in my work".*

Laura emphasises how her volunteer work gives her very practical face-to-face contact and proximity to change, which is lacking in her formal employment. I would argue that this is a very powerful 'replacement strategy': it shifts the focus from the distant Other, addresses the lack of practical 'hands-on' field work, lack of direct contact with the beneficiaries of the projects, and lack of visibility for those based in Western NGOs in capital cities close to centres of national governments, the EU or the UN. This will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

### **Partner Organisations: Bridge and Replacement**

As I suggested in the previous section, another 'strategy' –and I would suggest here that this was the most dominant approach among the research participants– for bridging the distance is that partner organisations (the intermediaries between those NGOs in Brussels, Geneva, Stockholm and Copenhagen and the 'people on the ground') serve both as a 'bridge' to and as a 'replacement' for the beneficiaries or target group. While the focus of this section is on the *perceptions* of the women NGO workers of the role of their partners in reaching out across distance, it is imperative to provide a structural context of the functioning of partnerships. Stirrat and Henkel (1997) maintain that nowadays many Northern NGOs have no direct contact anymore with

their beneficiaries but relate to them only through a chain of Southern NGOs, who are described as ‘partners’. Since a possible task of partner organisations can be the “receiving and entertaining” of visiting representatives of Northern NGOs and the provision of “stories and pictures” (Eade 2007:636), there is a clear link between field visits, stories and partnerships (Hudock 1999:9).

The notion of ‘partnership’ suggests a more equal relationship, rather than the asymmetric relationship of giver and receiver of funding. However, with many other critics, Stirrat and Henkel note that “partnership is a peculiarly ambiguous concept” (Stirrat and Henkel 1997:75, see also Hudock 1999), while Smillie claims that the notion of partnership can mask “the same paternalism the South started to know when Portuguese navigators first sailed down the coast of West Africa” (Smillie 2000:185). On the one hand ‘partnership’ can denote a shared identity, while on the other hand it masks the differences between the NGOs due to the remaining asymmetry of power between givers and receivers (Stirrat and Henkel 1997, Noxolo 2000). Moreover, Stirrat and Henkel (1997) note that partnership as a shared identity serves the Northern NGOs well as it provides them with certain legitimacy when they can claim to represent the authentic needs and desires of Southern people.

One way in which the asymmetry of power between Northern NGO and Southern partner is expressed is that the donating Northern NGOs are in the position to choose their partners, which logically results in a choice of partners with similar aims and goals (Smillie 2000). Implications of the power of

Northern NGOs to select their partners (“donor ‘cherry-picking’, treating NGOs like a buffet lunch, taking what they like and leaving the rest”) means that Southern NGOs have to spend considerable time writing funding proposals, that they cannot be certain of long term continuation of funding or coverage of overhead costs, and that they have to survive delays in decision-making and money transferring processes (Smillie 2000:185). The result of this structure is a weakening rather than a strengthening of Southern NGOs (Smillie 2000:185). However, as Eyben (2006) points out, it is important to realise that the binary of donor-recipient obscures the fact that many organisations, (including some of the Northern organisations the women NGO workers that I interviewed worked for), both receive and donate money.

Having provided a sense of the significance of the relations with the partner organisations, I will now trace the notion of partnership in the interview accounts paying particular attention to the funding relation, the donor’s power to select, the burden on partners and the ambivalences of participation. Many of the research participants stated that their main contact was with the partner organisations rather than with the beneficiaries of their projects. For example, when I ask Stacey whether she has contact with the people who eventually benefit from the projects of her organisation, she says: *“Do I have a direct contact with them? Do I have direct connection? Yes, sometimes. In a mission there is always opportunity for direct contact. The people that I meet though on mission tend to be other partners”*. Casey states: *“Right now I am working with other NGO partners, (...) and I relate to them, to the partners, not*



*necessarily to the target group in the streets of Uganda or in a hilly environment in Vietnam”.*

Laura reacts thus: *“Not that much, no. I mean our primary strategy, what we are interested in is effects in the target groups and in the partner organisations. The whole focus of [my organisation] is to work with civil society organisations but of course at the end of the day what concerns us is that it has some effect on the target group. But we have chosen here to work mainly through the [national] organisations and their partner organisations, which means that our team, we sort of rely on a chain that works, we are not sure all the time how well it works but we rely on that somehow to work”.*

Laura’s response betrays some doubts and insecurity about whether the long ‘chain’ from her organisation, to national organisations, to partners and finally to beneficiaries always functions. However, at the same time, as she says, she also needs to rely on this chain to work. The image of a ‘chain’ might not adequately describe the irregularities within the partnership due to the power differences and the different contexts. Eyben suggests the idea of a “web” instead of a chain to capture “the diversity and complexity of networks and connections of power” between different organisations that are partnered in the aid system (Eyben 2006:2). Anna’s account similarly betrays some discomfort about the lack of direct relation with the beneficiaries of the project.

*Anna: “And I think on that note, I am just trying to think about whether I feel... I feel responsibility towards [my organisation], I feel less responsibility for the..., I can’t believe I am admitting this, but I feel less responsibility for the recipients of the project. But I feel responsibility towards the national partners, and so I feel that somehow I feel responsibility towards them, and they in some way they take on the mantel of responsibility towards the people. Because I think on just some level, it is just impossible for me to feel connected to each recipient”.*

For Anna, the question of the relation between her and the ‘recipients’ (as she calls them) is not only a question of whether her work has still any effect when it is mediated through so many different parties (as in Laura’s account) but it is one of responsibility. She states that she feels more responsibility towards the national partners, and while she tells me this, she feels quite uncomfortable about that as well, which is expressed in her hesitations and her insertion of ‘I can’t believe I am admitting this’. At the same time, Anna justifies her lack of feeling of responsibility towards the people on the ground by saying that she thinks it is just impossible for her to still feel connected across such a distance to people she might either never meet or only fleetingly. Anna, after telling me what is quoted above, continued questioning herself and her choice to work in a place far removed from ‘the field’ and notices that she must feel a degree of guilt about it as she otherwise would not try so hard to explain ‘why I do what I do’. I will return to Anna’s feeling of guilt and to reasons why the research participants decided to work and to be based in Northern capital cities despite the clear discomfort they experienced in the next section of this chapter.

Casey is quite confident about her own dealings with the partners due to her experience: *“I am quite familiar with NGO partners in Africa, in Asia. Not these particular partners but in general, so I have so many communications, relationships with this type of partners, (...) it does not mean that I know them deep at heart, but I am quite familiar with this working relationship”*.

Interestingly, she perceives her partners not necessarily in terms of their specific identity but rather in terms of their common identity as partners.

Casey emphasises the nature of the working relationship, which she feels is very familiar to her now due to her experience, over the aims or the quality of the partner organisation itself.

She continues however also to problematise this relation: *“Basically, because there is a constant schism within development work, because you are at the same time a donor with a strong employer identity, but you are also a political partner in development work as such. And this conflict is the main conflict in this type of work”*. So on the one hand, Casey identifies the asymmetric power dimension in the relation with the partners as she remains the donor, while on the other hand, politically, she views the partner organisations as allies in a common struggle. She even calls this the ‘main conflict’ in the work. This resonates very closely with Stirrat and Henkel’s idea that ‘the gift’ is central to the inequality in the relation between Northern (donor) organisations and Southern organisations on the receiving end. They state:

“The gift creates a series of problematic relations, frequently ambiguous in terms of their meaning and often paradoxical in terms of their implications. Most notably, while the gift is given in ways that attempt to deny difference and assert identity between the rich giver and the poor receiver, a gift in practice reinforces or even reinvents these differences” (Stirrat and Henkel 1997:69, see also Eyben 2007b).

Whereas with the term ‘partners’ the ambiguity of the power relation can be maintained, the term ‘donor’ leaves no doubt about who is at the giving end of the relation. Maria Erikson Baaz argues that the language of partnership instead of that of donors and receivers, “does not, of course, imply a reversal of the economic conditions characteristic of the aid relationship” (Baaz 2005:75).

Kate is similarly aware of how money disrupts the partner relationship and influences the power dynamic. Hence, she feels fortunate that in her work she does not decide on the funding for partners: *“Now, I am in a bit of a privileged position because we are not giving money to any of the partners we are dealing with, so the funding issue is out [of that relationship]. Because I would say, as soon as you have money and funds, it is clear that you have a difference of position and the demanding partner can be quite self confident and know what to do but as a matter of fact the imbalance is there, because of the dependency on that money. (...) So what I see with colleagues who are in the position of doing funding, they are in a privileged position because they are important, because they have the money, so you have to credit them, so a*

*partner will relate differently to someone who is their funding relating partner than someone else”.*

Significantly, Kate attributes the word ‘privilege’ to both the position of not having to give out funding and to the position where one does give out funding. She seems to deliberately have chosen to use the word ‘privileged’ in the first instance in a counter intuitive way, being privileged because you have less power and hence less of a power imbalance. However, her second use of the word ‘privilege’ slips back in the conventional use of the term to indicate power and status. She continues to explain that her lack of funding power makes it possible for her to “*perhaps engage in a more frank dialogue*” with her partners as they are not forced to take her suggestions on board, which they would have been if there was money at stake. Also, the lack of money means that the outcome of their cooperation is not dictated in advance.

Elisa mentioned that her organisation “*always look[s] for strong partners in the region*”. By ‘strong’ she means that the partner is experienced and well-connected both with the mainstream and the grassroots level. Because her organisation is in the position to give the partner organisation some money, they have decided that if a Southern partner receives money from them “*they must get involved in fundraising [in their country], there is no reason why the countries should not be interested in these issues so they should be targeted and when they see, when they realise that there is co-sponsor, is it an important process, an empowerment process and whenever you do projects*

*now everyone asks for co-funding now, this is the new world, nobody will give you the full amount anymore”.*

Here one can observe that the discourses of dependency and independence are simultaneously articulated. On the one hand, it is only by virtue of dependency on their funding that the Northern NGO can compel the Southern partner to also seek funding within their own country. On the other hand this is clouded in the language of empowerment; partners should be empowered to get additional funding. This capacity building, empowering the Southern organisation to do their own fundraising does not address the power difference between Northern and Southern organisations, which is essentially the root of the issue (Hudock 1999). Strikingly, the countries’ ‘interest in these issues’ is equated with giving out funding. Finally, when Elisa says ‘that this is the new world’ in which nobody gets full funding anymore, she diminishes the difference in position between the Northern and Southern organisations. This is also expressed in her idea that ‘there should be no reason’ why countries in the South should not be interested in the proposed projects which ignores the specific local situations.

In contrast, Ruth’s organisation, because of its radical agenda, does not get any structural governmental funding but is rather dependent on private funding and is not in a donor position. Similar to Kate’s ambivalent use of the term ‘privilege’, Ruth uses ‘luck’ in a contradictory way to indicate that the positive feature of not getting funding is that their organisation is positioned outside the funding competition among NGOs. Ruth: *“Well, we are lucky in that sense*

*that it is really hard to get funding, well, it is not lucky, I mean of course we are not lucky but government funding we never got and we will never have because it is much too controversial what we are doing”.*

As a consequence of their own weak financial situation and the fact that they do not donate money, the relation between Ruth’s organisation and their partner organisations is different. Rather than *demanding* from their partner organisations to do their own fundraising (like Elisa’s organisation), they *help* their partner organisations to fundraise, diminishing the financial dependency power relation between the Northern and the Southern organisation.

Ruth: *“I am not giving them my money (...) and that is nice because they don’t have to pay responsibility to me, you know they have to do it to the funders and not to me and I help them; I know the funders so I can. (...) And that makes it more equal as well, they don’t have to say ‘you gave us 10 000 dollars this is what we did with it’, no, I don’t care as long as we have an agreement; this is your responsibility to pay for that, that’s our responsibility to pay for this”.*

While the notions of partnerships and capacity building of Southern organisations originated from a left-wing political tradition, nowadays it is often used to advance a “neo-liberal ‘pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps’ (...) economic and political agenda” (Eade 2007:632). It is important for NGOs who use this partnership rhetoric to be conscious of how these competing agendas play out (Eade 2007) and for them to realise that the

problems that occur in the relationship between Southern and Northern NGOs are “essentially political, not organisational” (Hudock 1999:31). Moreover, the procedures and criteria for selecting partners or members of a network used by powerful organisations, like Elisa’s organisation, are not without criticism.

The European Women’s Lobby (EWL), the largest umbrella organisation of women’s associations in the European Union and first point of call for the EU in relation to women’s issues, has for example been criticised by Czech women NGOs for taking an “exclusive and monopolistic” position, which they can only afford due to their powerful status (Hašková 2005:1103). They argued that the EWL with its ‘power to select’ excluded feminist organisations with a different perspective on prostitution while allowing organisations in their network who were in fact marginal players in the Czech context and therefore not representative of the Czech women’s movement. Despite their criticism, however, as one of the women from the Czech women’s NGOs pointed out, due to the EWL’s powerful position they also decided to sign up for membership: “We are a bit sceptical about the organisation, but we want to be members from the practical point of view. It is better to be in than to be out” (Hašková 2005: 1103). It is therefore necessary to imagine this ‘other side of the story’ when reading the women NGO workers’ narratives about the selection of partners for their own networks.

Like Elisa, Sonia links the issue of working through partners with selecting partners: *“I think that it is true that this organisation does not fully, directly*



*work with grassroots women maybe we work with women through the women that we have selected first”.*

*She then continues: “I think that is also because it is for them to be able to talk to each other better, I think. Like maybe we are at a level because of probably our education that we can talk directly to these women that we have invited and all those things but maybe it would be more difficult for us to talk to the others [at the grassroots], so it is through the [women we invite] that we have to reach the others”*

*Interviewer: “So the people you are talking to are some kind of mediators almost?”*

*Sonia: “Yes, yes. There are people you know that can talk to the grassroots level and at the same time can come here and talk to [highly placed politicians]”*

*Kate similarly argues: “Because in the lobbying advocacy process you need people, who need to be both; they have to be part of, and distinguished from their group to be really able to say something valuable or new here. Because if they would only be very closely linked to their context or their broader group and then you put them here in the context [and] you have a policy discussion or debate and there is a particular question which is new to the person, [because] they have different policy debates back home, you would need a person (Interviewer: “that can travel both contexts”), yes, they can reflect for themselves and think and give the appropriate answer”.*

Firstly, Sonia's account shows a homogenising of the people placed in the Southern country, which is reflected in Sonia's use of the word 'them'. At the same time, Sonia divides this group in those who are not educated and those who are, arguing that those who are educated and who have a professional career have the capacity to communicate both to the 'uneducated in the South' and to the 'educated in the North' and represent the South politically. What is interesting is that education is presented here as both enabling, (because the women from the South who are partners and presumably educated have an increased mobility) and also as disabling for the people who work in the North (because according to Sonia it posits barriers to understanding).

Southern NGOs have become increasingly important in the development process due to assumptions that "they are 'closer to the people' and share a common culture with those who are to benefit from the activities supported by Northern NGOs" (Stirrat and Henkel 1997:74). Thus ideas of affiliation are here based on 'sameness' of identity rather than on, for example, shared political goals. While Sonia recognises the qualities of the Southern women they work with and the difficulties for her organisation to communicate directly with grassroots women, she also defends the existence of her organisation by asserting that the 'women on the ground' do not have the tools to report back to donors, to design and implement projects, to lobby the UN (as they lack consultative status) and that they do not have stable structures.

However, if Northern NGOs continue advocating on behalf of the Southern partners, the danger is that the capacities of the Southern partners are

diminished and that they are not empowered to speak on their own terms (Eade 2007). This is reinforced by the fact that Northern NGOs, aided by their good connections and cultural capital, often continue to be seen as the most reliable providers of knowledge about the situation in the global South (Hahn and Holzscheiter 2005). As Kothari (2005:428) argues, the “intellectual distance between donor and recipient” is sustained and the status of donors and expatriate development consultants is maintained through (the constant re-invention of) cultural capital, such as forms of professionalism, awareness of new fashions in development (such as participatory approaches), and new techniques (see also Hahn and Holzscheiter 2005).

Sonia’s account is also still centred on the unquestioned assumption of the centrality of the organisation she works for, for whom ‘issues of communication’ need to be resolved. She does not question *why* her organisation can demand to work with partners that can ‘translate’ between the two levels. This is problematic. In Kate’s account we can see the same thing; in order to be regarded as ‘contributing something valuable’, partners are required to both ‘be part of, and distinguished from their group’. This means that they carry a double burden, which organisations in the North do not carry. This signals a wider issue of the demands placed upon partner organisations in the South, which in many cases are very short staffed and have few resources. It reflects a peculiar relation in which the Northern organisations are often dependent on partner organisations in the South for credibility, ‘translating’ between grassroots women and Northern organisations, while at the same time their power (sometimes directly expressed in financial power of the Northern

organisation) means that they can demand cooperation, including reporting and accountability from their Southern partners (see Smillie 2000).

For example, Catherine talks about the contact between her organisation and its national partners: *“The big problem is that they are very busy, so they work at the national level and then we come to ask them for more work. It is really, like we send papers and ask them to comment or ask them to send amendments and that is really a lot of work so that can be really difficult and you have to go back to people several times and respect the fact that they have a lot to do and have little resources etcetera, so that can be challenging sometimes”*.

Gill is even more specific than Catherine in her evaluation of her demands and the burden that it puts on the partner organisations in the South: *“I mean, it is very easy for me to get a little bit frustrated at home, ‘I need this information now from my volunteer in the South, and why doesn’t he deliver or why do I get it in a way that I don’t understand?’ without really having an understanding of the kind of struggles he or she has to deal with and the difficulties of living there. I mean I know a little bit of this picture, but I think I will need more of this picture to really understand how it is for them to really work in this situation, what are the struggles really and then it is more easier I think to assist them or to collaborate with them in a North-South relation”*.

Kate stresses the need for flexibility in the relation with partners: *“If it is a new partner, (...) you have to learn about the person, how that person is setting a situation and how flexible they are, and how ideological maybe, or*

*how non-political, what is their mandate or their internal constraints, how far they can go. And I think the better one is understanding the realities of the different actors and accepting perhaps that there are different constraints and different flexibilities, the more easy you can construct or do something together”.*

All three narratives quoted here show an awareness of the difficult circumstances and the restrictions the Southern partner organisations are faced with. Research in 1992 among Kenyan and Zimbabwean NGOs about their reflections on their relations with their Northern NGO partners found however that there was a discrepancy between the way the Northern and the Southern organisations viewed the relationship, with the Southern organisations being much less happy than presented by the organisations in the North (research by Carmen Malena quoted in: Smillie 2000). It is important that in this process of consultation with the Southern NGOs, Northern NGOs also feel a responsibility for accounting back to the Southern partner (Eade 2007). The accounts of Catherine and Gill both suggest some discomfort in having to ask the partners to do certain jobs. However, the fact that Southern organisations do not always immediately ‘deliver’ (due to for example their financial limitations, their shortage of staff) also discloses the dependency of the Northern organisations on the Southern organisations, e.g. the non-delivery causes ‘frustrations’, ‘problems’, it is ‘really difficult’ and ‘challenging’.

It is important to keep in mind that not all Northern NGOs choose their partner organisations in the same way. As Naomi explains, NGOs that are

membership organisations work with their members as partners: “[It is also] challenging to support (...) member associations. You know we are different from many global humanitarian organisations or global NGOs who basically pick and choose who their country level partners are, you know the Oxfams of this world decide who they want to work with, so they choose the best of the bunch and if for some reason they are not meeting their reporting standards of whatever they can just drop them and move on to someone else. Whereas we work with our member associations so that gives a different set of challenges you know. You have to work with the women who are running these associations, (...) and we don’t have authority to be able to say ‘this is mother world [organisation’s name omitted] talking, and you know you must do this’ (...). And I guess also, we also can’t control how responsive the [national member organisations] are (...) they may not have the capacity or they may not have the desire to want to do that, (...) I mean obviously we negotiate, we talk, we do what we can do, but ultimately at the end of the day it is up to them”. Naomi explicitly contrasts her experience of her cooperation and partnership with the situation for ‘the Oxfams of this world’ and also talks about the challenge of ‘supporting them’ rather than just receiving their support in terms of information and moral legitimacy.

Gill works in a secretariat that is the focal point of a worldwide network. She speaks about the importance of the partners in legitimising the actions and policy proposals of the secretariat: “because as a network you can do much more than as a secretariat and I mean especially in advocacy work of course if you don’t have organisations in the South fighting against Free trade

*agreement, who are we? It is of course good to have Northern NGOs say also 'yeah, that is really bad', but you need the South, that's as simple as that".*

As Gill points out, they need the Southern organisations to legitimise their work; this is much more than just needing information from the ground. In the mid-1980s Northern development NGOs faced an “identity crisis” when the intervention of Northern development workers on the ground was questioned, which resulted in the fact that since the 1990s most Northern NGOs have worked with Southern partners, introducing new concepts such as accountability and participation (Smillie 2000). In addition, it has become clear from the above accounts that partnerships are not only essential for the legitimacy of the organisation, but are also important as sources of information and motivation for the women NGO workers, in other words, for bridging the distance between the ‘office’ and the ‘field’ (see also Hudock 1999). Sizoo (1996) points to the fact that Northern donors also have an interest in providing money both on an organisational level as it justifies the existence of the organisation and on a personal level where it brings job satisfaction and new relations.

At the same time, for some reason this clearly *mutual* dependency does not seem to result in a real equality between the organisations. Is that because money transfers from the Northern to the Southern organisations are often prior to the work delivered so that the Northern organisations can still demand delivery from a Southern organisation that ‘owes’ them something? If the relation is perceived that way, it is conceptualised as ‘reciprocal’ rather than

‘mutual’, with the first one implying the return of a favour, “action-reaction”, while the latter implies “independent action from both sides” (Sizoo 1996:197:ftn.7). The recognition of mutuality in the relation through the recognition of the value of non-material contributions could alter the understanding of partnerships between the global North and the South (Sizoo 1996). If the partnership is conceptualised as a common journey that both organisations embark on, the fact that “[the Northern NGOs] paid to fill up the tank does not give [them] the right to determine the route” (Eade 2007:637). However, as Kapoor recognises “self-constitution is (...) integral to the gift” as the donor invests not only in another organisation but also in its own status and identity (Kapoor 2008:77). As long as NGOs and NGO workers are not willing to relinquish this, partnerships will remain contaminated by money.

It is worth following Gill’s reflections on partner organisations a bit further as her account betrays exactly the kind of contradictions in partnership that Stirrat and Henkel (1997) address. The contradictions of her account on partnership arise at two different levels. First, Gill presents partner organisations as equal in power and contrasts this relation to the relation with other organisations that are outside the partner network. She describes a particularly painful and challenging encounter with a Southern organisation and expresses her belief that this situation would have been resolved if there had been a partnership between the organisations. On the second level, however, as will become clear, later in the interview she identifies some insecurities and a lack of confidence on the side of the partners that do show that there are still inequalities also in that relationship.



Gill says: *“I feel like the women we are working with, they are so empowered and so strong and so capable, I mean, yes, it is good sometimes to enable them to go to meetings and offer financial support and it is good for us to have them at our conferences, but I definitely don’t feel, I mean we are helping each other, it is not like we are helping them, it is from both ways. So I don’t feel there is an [Interviewer: “unequal relationship”], yeah”.*

Unfortunately, I have interrupted Gill here and suggested the term ‘unequal relationship’ which she confirms with her ‘yeah’ but in her own words she says that ‘we are helping each other’ denoting a relationship of reciprocity. It is interesting to see how she describes the women as empowered, strong and capable, which raises the questions: ‘are others less capable?’ and ‘is this a measure of equality or inequality?’ Additionally, the term ‘empowering’ still denotes a position prior to the empowerment that was inferior and/or victim-like. Do we all need to be empowered or is this term only applicable to some of us?

I asked Gill whether there were ever situations in which a Southern organisation challenged the position of her secretariat. She then recalls an example of a ‘group of women that were from Africa’, not partners, who were introduced to them by another organisation. This group told them that they felt Gill’s organisation should work on a certain policy issue, which Gill’s organisation had decided not to regard as one of their main priorities: *“And they were like ‘yeah, but Africa is not really prioritised’ you could kind of feel*

*like 'we are being marginalised again', that kind of atmosphere. We tried to kind of, you know, be polite and also be open to say 'ok we will try if you have issues we will pass them on to [a certain] working group and you are always welcome to contact us and if you have issues please let us know.' And this is then how you try to resolve it. But sometimes it is difficult if you don't really have the time to go into depth, to really explain from your perspective that they understand it and for them not to feel 'ok we are being marginalised' or 'ok, it is again the Western European imperialists that are telling us what to do', because sometimes you feel this kind of tension and they also said something in that direction".*

It becomes clear from this narrative, as has been discussed in the fifth chapter, that current relations between Northern and Southern organisations are still mediated through the history of colonialism and racist discourses. Gill explains that she personally 'did not lie' awake over this situation but that a colleague found the situation very challenging. What is interesting is that this exchange does not seem to have prompted her to reconsider the position of her organisation; rather, she focussed on making the group of African women understand why they made a certain strategic decision. So the ones that misunderstand the situation are the African women, not her secretariat in the North.

As she indicates that there 'was [no] time to go into depth', I asked her whether she thought that with more time this issue would have been resolved. This is where she introduces partnership as a way to establish an equal

relationship: *“In one meeting you don’t resolve this, this is really something you resolve through a partnership, and even then I heard stories from people and even then if organisations are not really open to discuss their initial ideas, even then it cannot be resolved, so...”*.

Further in the interview she repeats this idea: *“What also makes a network strong is that you work with people, you try to build enduring relations, with the people in the network, because they all share the same political vision, they work on the same issues, I think you can then create a collective identity. So then -I mean I don’t know what they have thought before they entered that process- but definitely then they see [my organisation] also just as partner and not in this North-South division”*.

Gill’s narrative is exemplary of the tendency of Northern NGOs who can select their own partners to select those organisations with which they share a common agenda so that the relation can be more easily based on mutual trust and equality. However, in the context of differences in power, a common agenda does not automatically lead to mutual accountability. While Gill points out the importance of taking time to build a relationship with partner organisations, institutional pressures can result in trying to establish a relation with the partner organisations during “two-hour meetings around a bargaining table”, which is not conducive to good partner relationships (Smillie 2000:194).

When I suggest that another reason why they could not discuss this tension openly might have been the formality of the meeting, Gill says: *“I don’t feel*

*this was because of the formality of meeting but more if people have these engrained ideas (...), that they are being the poor South, and the people in the EU are not listening to them, and the NGOs are also much stronger than them and they have this perspective. I think sometimes it takes much more time to change that, maybe if they have the chance to live here for a month and work in this kind of organisation, that maybe helps to change their mind but there is not that... or maybe even if they keep exchanging with their partners they would change their mind, I don't know".*

Again, the source of the tension is attributed to some misunderstanding on the side of the African women. Elsewhere, Gill does indicate that she also identified her own prejudices when she travelled to Uganda and in that sense she sees the holding of prejudices as something that is common to everyone. On the other hand though, she implies that mobility, experience in other countries and contact with other cultures take away these prejudices. She recognises that the average person from the South has a smaller chance to be able to travel abroad than a person in the North and concludes that therefore for them it is even harder to rid themselves of their prejudice. So while on the one hand, she seems to believe that people from the South cannot help holding prejudices (as they have less opportunity to have the myths they hold about others challenged through travelling), she also holds them responsible for the uncomfortable atmosphere in the meeting. So the burden of overcoming this tension is mainly on the side of the African women. In addition, she dismisses the claims of the women that they were not being prioritised linking these to

‘engrained ideas’ or prejudices rather than as being rooted in real historical practices and material realities.

We could see above that Gill suggested that partnership was a way to overcome North-South divisions, which could initially be present in encounters between her organisation and a Southern organisation. She stressed how ‘strong and empowered’ the Southern partners are and how the helping relation is mutual. Later in our conversation, however, she tells me that one of the main challenges she would like to address in her work is to encourage the partner organisations to take and have more ‘ownership’ of the network, for example, by being involved with making the annual plans. When I ask her what the current obstacles are to this involvement, she says: *“Of course time is an issue, also that they feel there is a competence here, that they don’t feel maybe that their ideas will be that good or that they will be that competent to really contribute or also that they are not the persons that will really do the implementation”*.

This means that the same women who she called capable, strong and empowered at the same time display an insecurity concerning their competence to contribute. Rather than attributing this contradiction to Gill’s personal account as simply incoherent, I would argue that this contradiction is indicative of the ambivalent discourse on partnerships between Northern and Southern organisations as being equal and unequal at the same time. A contradictory relationship like this one explains other apparent contradictions, like ‘being forced to be empowered through own fundraising’, and ‘being forced to be an equal participating partner’.

Anna similarly notices that the ideal of a participatory approach in her work has not always translated easily into practice: *“I mean there are downsides as well, the downsides I would say are when you focus very much on the sort of participatory approach (...) you sometimes can get project proposals which sort of just mirror the language that [my organisation] would use and it is hard to know where the national partners’ real thoughts are, because what they are putting in there is more a reflection of what [my organisation] is putting out there from the start”*.

Here it is clear that the partners still feel under pressure to produce what they expect the Northern funding organisation would like to hear from them, implying that the process of participation is very much influenced by the power dynamics at stake. Baaz (2005) similarly observed that donor organisations working with the idea of partnership *present themselves* as open to the ideas of the partner organisations and as seeking to strengthen the partners’ position in expressing their needs. As she states:

“In this way the partners are urged to articulate their needs and goals as if there were no stakes involved. This is, of course, not the case. There are stakes involved, which, among other things, concern access to, or potential access to, economic resources” (Baaz 2005:74, see also Noxolo 2000).

Charles Elliott describes the ‘dialogue’ between partners, between the donors and Southern organisations, as “a dialogue of the unequal” which is characterised by a “reality (...) that the donor can do to the recipient what the

recipient cannot do to the donor” (Elliott 1987:65, see also Sizoo 1996). He also stresses with the term “well-intentioned dialogue” (Elliott 1987:65) that this is not necessarily a question of bad intentions on the side of the donor organisation; rather the power inequality is so deeply embedded that good intentions cannot eradicate this. Elliott (1987) also observes that many Southern partner organisations have developed strategies to deal with the demands of the donor without fundamentally changing their own way of working. This would include using the ‘right’ language by saying what donors want to hear and by making changes that the donor demands in ways that are only seemingly effective, as they do not address the real concerns.

These ambivalent discourses also have an impact on Pauline’s work. The organisation that arranged the volunteer placement for Pauline asked its partners to do a needs assessment to determine what skills they would like the volunteers to bring to them. The engagement between the Northern volunteer and the Southern partner organisation should be based on the ‘skill-sharing’ of the volunteer.

Pauline reflects: *“It is a really good idea to get the organisation to say what needs they have, and find people to deal with these things, but it is very difficult for an organisation that can’t think long-term and can’t strategically plan long-term to sit there and go ‘well, this year I think we need a public health educator, and next year we have this, and next year we have that...’”*.

Hence the idea of her Northern organisation responsible for the volunteer placement to give the Southern organisation more independence resulted in an

extra burden on the organisation. In addition, the request for initiative from the Southern organisation is still premised on the decision on the appropriate procedure from the Northern organisation.

Pauline found herself torn between the demands of the organisation that sent her abroad and the organisation she volunteered for: *“And it was difficult sometimes, in terms of, sometimes the organisation wanted me to just do the job, sometimes they wanted me just to write the project proposal, and I had to do discussions and do certain, think about certain methods that I could do to get them involved because to me, one of the agendas of [my Northern organisation] was skills sharing, so it is difficult to think about these kind of things and how that affects you”*.

Her loyalty seems to lie eventually with the Northern organisation that selected her as a volunteer, but at the same time she seems to display some discomfort or at least experiences a challenge in ‘forcing’ the Southern organisation into a participatory relationship of ‘skill sharing’ which seemed counter to the demands of the particular organisation at that time. Stirrat and Henkel contrast the ‘gifts’ in relief work, which are normally tangible material goods, with the gift in other development work, which normally takes the form of empowerment programmes. They describe “a certain embarrassment” in foreign NGO workers when they give out goods (as it very openly shows dependency) while “persuading the poor to form groups, to participate, to empower themselves” is seen as “proper development” (Stirrat and Henkel 1997:73).



### **Negotiating Distance**

The accounts above, in some way or another, always maintain a division between the organisation in the North, the partner organisation in the South and the final beneficiaries on the ground. Stacey, however, challenged that split and claimed adamantly that the dominant assumption that those are neatly separated is wrong. When she describes that indeed she often meets the partners rather than the designated beneficiaries of the projects, she says: *“I think often you know there is an automatic assumption that when we work on gender that people that are working in gender are not affected by gender relations, which is completely not true (...) Inevitably the people that I meet along the way who are in what some would consider positions of power in their own communities are still very much affected by gender inequality, still live the, you know norms, roles and relations that affect everyone and not simply marginalised groups. (...) So for me the women that we work with in that sense are very much also a part of my target audience, it is not only the women that are coming to health centres for services but it is also women who are making decisions as to how these health centres work whether they be members of government whether they be members of another agency or fellow staff members (...) they are also part of it”*.

In this account, Stacey collapses the distinction made between partners and target group saying that the partners *are* effectively her target group. She justifies this both by pointing to the obstacles the partners are facing due to gendered power structures and to the fact that her organisation’s mandate

states a responsibility towards the partners. So, in contrast to some of the above accounts (where partner organisations are perceived as the bridge between the Northern organisations and the eventual beneficiaries, or where the partner organisations even become the main focus), for Stacey, the distinction between these different groups is not very meaningful. She speaks of an 'organisational blindness' towards these women who are part of her own organisation or partners of her organisation in the sense that these women are often perceived as standing outside the gender inequalities that they seek to address worldwide. There is a dominant assumption, and one that I arguably also made in the interview with her, that the women who are working in her field are an 'emancipated' elite with very different experiences compared to those 'on the ground'. Stacey however emphasises the continuity between the gender struggles of all women wherever they are positioned, in the sense that all face similar structural inequalities, or as she puts it 'norms, roles and relations that affect everyone and not simply marginalised groups'. Whereas the above account is more focussed on the idea of partners in the South as target group, later in the interview Stacey also speaks of herself and her colleagues in the North as being equally implicated in gender struggles and inequalities. As this extract has a real poignancy, it is worth quoting at greater length.

Stacey: *"Going back to something I said before that people assume that those of us that work in international institutions that work on gender equality and women's empowerment that we don't have to deal with these issues ourselves. That assumption is very, very clear and that has played out, that, for example*

*once someone asked me to review footage of some film clips that they were planning on showing in last year's international women's year event which was around ending impunity for violence against women in emergency and conflict settings, and there was no warning that the material I was about to open was very graphic, very difficult. No warning as to what the content would be at all, so that I could choose to open it or that I could not open it. No support provided, no thought. (...) And the fact that that had not been thought through that not only the women also the men might have gone through something just as traumatic, may have experienced gender based violence in their own life, whether through physically experiencing it or through supporting someone else through it (...), that that was not thought about, I was quite shocked about. And that aspect of my identity, in terms of being not only somebody that works on an issue but somebody that can also have experienced an issue is often ignored, (...) but I think it is important for institutions [like ours] to think about”.*

This quote very powerfully describes the impact of the assumption that the women working for Stacey's organisation are not facing any of the issues they are working on. It shows very clearly why Stacey feels that the battle she fights for gender equality worldwide really means 'at home' *and* abroad. Hence, even though she is located in the North, she does not see the people who benefit from her work as far removed from her. Rather it is people like her, her counterparts abroad and her colleagues in the North who are part of the same gender struggle. With a similar logic, albeit in a different field, Smillie claims that Northern and Southern organisations in the field of human

rights often have a better relation with one another than those in the field of development as they “share more intellectual common ground” (Smillie 2000:194). While it is important to remain vigilant against resorting to a notion of global sisterhood in universal oppression (see Chapter Four), Stacey’s account can be a productive way to rethink the relation between donors, partners and final beneficiaries.

As became clear in the previous sections some of the interviewees seemed to struggle with negotiating the distance between themselves and the beneficiaries of their work. In addition, they seemed to be aware of the discourse in which proximity to the target group is often equated with ‘better’ or more courageous work and hence often seemed to feel the need to defend their choice to remain in one of the Northern capital cities. I will now explore how this decision was explained and justified by the women I interviewed.

In the previous section Anna had explained how she feels more responsibility towards the national partners than towards the beneficiaries and that she thinks it is impossible for her to feel connected to each recipient when she only meets some of them shortly on field visits. She continues: *“I mean that, I can hardly say that I work at a grassroots level, I just don’t, if I visit that town for a few days, a visit, that is just not the work that I do. Although I guess there is, as I am trying to explain this to you, there must be a certain amount of guilt that I feel towards not being able to say I work at a grassroots level, which is why I am trying so hard to explain why I do what I do”*.

The fact that Anna mentions a feeling of guilt links directly with the discourse in which field work is more positively valued than more bureaucratic work in capital cities.

When I prompt her: “*So do you feel some guilt?*” she replies: “*Yes, I think that I feel a certain amount of guilt and again I think the guilt is related to the fact that (...) to a certain extent I do like the academic path, I do like intellectual work, not that it is necessarily...they are not mutually incompatible, you can do both, but in order to do a job that is both personally satisfying and that I feel can be of benefit of others, I feel that the work I do at this moment combines both elements (...). But I guess more generally in the type of rhetoric that we hear, about NGO work or civil society work, ‘this NGO work is good and that NGO work is bad’. I guess the other thing you get used to in Brussels, (...) I mean it is the centre of advocacy and policy, (...) You might visit the site for a week or something like that but in another way you are totally disconnected from these people and you get used to using the language of like ‘oh, I am not a field person, I am a Head office person’, and it is accepted in Brussels in a way that perhaps in other milieus people would just automatically say, ‘what the hell are you talking about, you are a head office person, you are not a field person, what does that mean?’, but we don’t always pose these questions to ourselves because Brussels is such a unique environment”.*

Anna, as well as some other interviewees, justifies being located in Brussels in two ways: first, by stating that this is the ‘kind of work that she likes’ and

second, by arguing that this is the way she can make herself most ‘useful’.

Anna describes directly what she calls the ‘rhetoric’ in which NGO work is seen as ‘good’ or as ‘bad’. At the same time she indicates that being in Brussels to some extent ‘sanctions’ the focus on the policy and advocacy level as that is the dominant strand of NGO work there. In a similar way, Naomi stresses the importance of the contact with her member organisations in order to still be connected to ‘reality’ as *“Geneva is not such a, in your face kind of place, it is a very nice environment”*. The division between ‘field persons’ and ‘HQ persons’ that Anna describes in Brussels, was also noticed by Sylvia who told me that *“there is a certain tension (...) between the people who are very much EU institution focussed and the people who have more field operations and that are more field focussed”*. The binary presented by Anna and Sylvia is contrasting those working in the ‘field’ and those in advocacy/policy positions in capital cities. It is not so surprising that the work of local or national NGOs in the North who work directly with people from the South is left out, since career paths mainly go between the first and latter rather than taking the ‘side turn’ of working for smaller national organisations.

The narrative of Fay, who works for such a smaller national organisation but who is also familiar with the larger lobbying platforms, can however also be placed in the discourse, identified by Anna, which evaluates distance negatively. Fay: *“I understand that on an international level there is much on the agenda (...) and you are trying to influence decision making on a very high level (...) but it is a huge spectacle, a theatre play. (...) Of course there have been also results sometimes, sure, I mean I believe that all the UN women’s*

*conferences and all this have been important and valuable things (...). It is very interesting work, yes it is very 'wow, you travel to a lot of places, meet a lot of interesting people and so on', but I don't know if you can do just that and still be passionate about something. Because what would it be? Or where would it be, if you have no kind of home base? Or if you work within the UN, even worse, because what would you then be passionate about if your organisation is not something that has this emotional connection to you?''.*

While Anna has described herself as a 'Head Quarters person' in the face of possible criticism relating to her distance to the women she seeks to support, other interviewees that I talked to were less convinced that their strengths came out better at the policy and advocacy level and they had rather made the decisions out of practical reasons, such as needing to 'put down roots' or having to leave the stress of living in a conflict zone. Sylvia's narrative can be contrasted to Anna's when she says: *"When you are used to being able to be working on the ground with beneficiaries and seeing the impact of your work, really at the level where it is most needed, then to make that transition to the Brussels level, advocacy where you are talking about 'toolkits' and 'communications' and 'conclusions' and things like that, you do get a certain amount of frustration, of 'well, this is good, but what does it actually mean for people on the ground?'. "*

Sylvia expressed her frustration with the abstract advocacy vocabulary, which seems to bear very little relation to what happens on the ground. The abstractness of the vocabulary has been exacerbated by the professionalisation

of the NGO sector (see Chapter Six) as it is now “common for humanitarian purposes to be overtaken by the institutions and professional practices which express them” (Kennedy 2004:xx). Sylvia continues using the two arguments Anna mentioned - ‘working where your strength lies/where you can be most beneficial and where you like the work best’ - to explain why she wants to move back to a job where she can work in the field again: *“I don’t think [this institutional work] is the kind of thing that I need to be doing or it is not where my strengths are. So I think I would be better suited for going back out to the field for a while. (...) I don’t think I am bad at it, but in terms of where my enjoyment is, I like being in developing countries, I like being able to have as part of my work, visits to schools (...), to meet with communities to see the impact on the ground. That is what I need to feel like I am accomplishing something”*.

So while Sylvia and Anna use the same set of arguments to justify their positions, their final decisions of where they are ‘best placed’ are different. Sylvia points out that to foster her motivation she really needs to see changes ‘on the ground’. Some of the NGO workers who have moved away from the field to capitals to do project based work where they manage funding, lobby and work on policies “have [experienced] alienation from the values with which they came into development and a loss of sense of purpose” (Eyben 2006:46).

Throughout the interview Stacy has described to me how important it is for her to be in close contact with the women whose lives her projects seek to



improve and she has explained that the work she did previously was much more grassroots and community based. It is striking to notice that ‘distance’ still seems to matter, despite Stacey’s insistence that the distinctions between her, the partners and the final beneficiaries are overstated. When I ask Stacey why she still chose to work for this large international organisation that operates on a higher level further removed from ‘the field’, she describes how until then she had been annoyed and puzzled with how organisations like the UN functioned. She told me that she evaluated its practices very negatively but at the same time felt incapable of ‘taking it on’ as she did not understand sufficiently how it operated.

She says, when she describes how she initially took on a short-term contract with the organisation: *“And I thought to myself [in] 11 months I can at least figure out, I literally thought of it as going into the belly of the beast and I thought I will figure out what is happening for myself, not for any other grandiose reason but just for myself. It was like there was a tension within myself, coming from political science, and believing in political structures and believing in the overall goals of the UN and at the same time being so severely disappointed in the results and outcomes, I could not overcome it myself and felt like I am at a crossroads now, I can continue what I am doing and feeling that I am making piecemeal progress towards something that I believe in, but I do not have the ear of the government and I do not have the position even to represent the groups I was working with to go to the government. Certainly not as a young woman, certainly not as young brown woman in certain contexts, and so on a personal level it was important for me to understand*

*how the UN worked and to understand why there was such a disconnect and not with any grandiose notions of changing the world but how can I position myself better to contribute to what I want to do, which was to ensure better living conditions for women and girls”.*

‘Going into the belly of the beast’, as Stacey describes it, is a powerful metaphor for an attempt to engage in a productively complicit way with an institution that is very firmly embedded in the unequal power structures that she seeks to address. However, rather than turning her back on the organisation as she recognises the harmful outcomes of its actions, Stacey, similar to some other interviewees, decides to engage with it and work through it because she recognises the power of the institution and its strategic position. This act is, though operating on a very different level, similar to Spivak’s suggestion in *‘The Critique of Post-colonial Reason’* where she introduces ‘constructive complicity’ (see also Chapter Five): “Our sense of critique is too thoroughly determined by Kant, Hegel and Marx for us to be able to reject them as ‘motivated imperialists’, although this is too often the vain gesture performed by the critics of imperialism” (Spivak 1999:6-7). Hence, just as in the Humanities, Kant, Hegel and Marx cannot be simply dismissed (because of their role in the colonial process of universalising the experience of the West but should invite a critical -for Spivak deconstructive- reading precisely because of their immense influence), Stacey cannot reject the UN without engaging critically with it. Or as Kapoor expresses it in his reading of Spivak:

“Thus, for instance, the World Bank and IMF may well be ‘imperialistic’ organisations, but they are too important and powerful to turn our backs on;

instead, we can engage them unrelentingly from all sides to try to make them accountable to the subaltern” (Kapoor 2008:55).

Stacey does not let the tension be ‘paralysing’ but rather works through it. Stacey speaks of a very clear goal ‘ensuring better living conditions for women and girls’ and subsequently analyses the power of a global institution like the UN and also her own position as a woman, as being young and being ‘brown’ and decides that given these conditions she needs to position herself within this international organisation.

Stacey’s emphasis on her specific positionality as young, female and ‘brown’ deserves some further attention here. Following a constructionist instead of a structural approach to intersectionality I would stress that rather than understanding the women to be “passive bearers of the meanings of social categories”, processes of subject construction are simultaneously ‘subjecting’ individuals *and* constituting them as subjects (Prins 2006:280). Stacey is not a passive recipient of her identity, but also the agent, which can be shown through her narrative in which she describes her decision to work for her organisation based on her careful evaluation of her positionality as a ‘young, brown woman’.

Stacey worked previously for a smaller grassroots organisation, while her current large organisation is associated to the UN. She justifies her move to her current organisation, against which she initially had and continues to have significant reservations, by referring to her realisation that ‘I d[id] not have the position even to represent the groups I was working with to go to the

government; certainly not as a young woman, certainly not as young brown woman in certain contexts'. This Foucauldian reading of identity categories as both constitutive and oppressive means as Haraway expresses it: "To be a subject with a sense of self in complex complicity with and resistance to the matrix of forces that made one possible" (quoted in Caraway 1992:2). Similarly, Stacey's move can be both interpreted as in 'complex complicity with' and 'resistance to' the identity structures that shape her. To continue with the metaphor of going into the belly of the beast, Stacey recognises that she has become part of the beast as well, functioning according to the logic of the beast; she for example realises that there are certain things she cannot say as a 'bureaucrat' which she would have expressed when she was still an activist. However, Stacey expresses that while constantly weighing up the benefits and the disadvantages of the work she feels the balance is still positive enough to remain in her position away from her former work in the field.

## **Conclusion**

In order to answer the question of how women NGO workers relate to their target group when they are at a (spatial) distance from the beneficiaries of their projects, I have first investigated whether and how myths, stories and field trips feature in this relation. I have argued that especially in lobbying work, NGO workers in capital cities in the North sometimes rely on 'stories' that they have been told about their target group in their work. The risk of working with 'stories' is that they might not always be adequate, as they are mediated and they might present an overly simplified version of reality. However, it

could be argued that strategically the lobbying process always builds on simplified and reductionist images in order to bring their message across. Potentially, as Spivak has argued, a 'strategic essentialism' could be a constructive approach when conscious of the dangers involved. More commonly, NGO workers referred to their field visits or field experiences (which also function as sites for the collection of 'stories') in earlier jobs as a significant way to remain connected with those whose lives they seek to ameliorate. However, those memories of earlier fieldwork might not correspond very neatly with the current target group the NGO workers are working for, as the geographical location and the nature of the beneficiaries might be different. As Chambers (2006) has importantly pointed out, field visits contain a number of 'traps', one of which is the 'urban trap' which entails that field visits might often be confined to visiting urban areas. Furthermore, encounters between the Northern NGO worker and the beneficiaries or Southern NGO partners during such a field visit are mediated through power structures, which might compel the latter to present a more favourable picture of the progress of a certain project (see also Chambers 2006).

I have argued here that in order to understand how the physical and arguably 'imaginary' distance between women NGO workers in the North and their final beneficiaries is bridged, it is essential to look into the role partner organisations play in the conceptualisation of that relation. While at some points, partners are described as bridging the geographical divide, in some instances we can see that they almost replace the final beneficiaries in that the

latter become (or stay) invisible. Stirrat and Henkel's account of partnership (1997) is pertinent here in that it lays bare the contradictions and tensions covered by the benevolent term 'partnership'. Hence, the accounts presented here clearly show that there is a *mutual dependency* between organisations in the North and the South: the Northern organisations need their partner organisations for the provision of information, for moral legitimacy and to increase their motivation through feeling connected with 'the ground'. However, this mutual dependency has not resulted in a more balanced power relation; rather the partner relation is still mediated through a power imbalance expressed in the power to select the partner and financial aid coming with certain demands.

In the final section I have explored narratives in which the women NGO workers justified their spatial position in relation to the women they supported. In addition, I presented Stacey's account to show an alternative way in which the distance between North/South is negotiated, which is through the effective collapse of the rigid distinction between the categories. I have argued that the justifications to work either in the field or in headquarters were made at three different levels: by reference to personal preference, to practical reasons and to strategic reasons, beliefs about where one can be most effective. As Baaz (2005) argues, a common assumption among those who write critically about notions of partnership in development is that the idea of partnership is merely used by Northern organisations to hide their real motives without any intention to really change their practices. On the basis of the interview narratives, following Baaz (2005), I would be critical of such a conclusion that implies

some sort of conspiracy of Northern organisations. As Baaz (2005) writes, the term partnership is not reflective of a conspiracy, but rather has conflicts, ambivalences and tensions subsumed under it.

Baaz in her research on partnership observed that “a spirit of critical self-reflection (...) informed many of the interviews, in some cases accompanied by feelings of alienation and self-doubt” (Baaz 2005:91). In the interviews I conducted there was similarly this element of self-doubt and alienation particularly with respect to the relations across space and, related to that, many of the women displayed an awareness of the discourse which negatively evaluates NGO work carried out at a distance. Given the moral assumptions regarding space and distance in relation to NGO work and the real challenges associated with bridging the distance through stories, field visits and partner organisations due to power differences, it is imperative that the bridging of the distance and its implications for the relations between the people supported is critically interrogated.

## 8 - Conclusion

*“We need to ask: Where am I in this picture? Am I positioning myself as the saviour of less fortunate peoples? as the progressive one? as more subordinated? as innocent? These are moves of superiority and we need to reach beyond them.” (Razack 2001:170)*

This research has asked questions about how women located in the global North who are active for non-governmental or intergovernmental organisations seeking to support women in/from the global South understand their work practices and relate to those they support. For this purpose, twenty interviews and one pilot interview were conducted with women NGO workers and volunteers. Some of those women worked for explicitly feminist organisations, some worked for organisations with a wider remit, but had dedicated roles related to women and gender. In the above quote, Razack hints at potential positions these women can take as ‘the saviour’, as ‘progressive’, ‘subordinate’ or ‘innocent’. Razack’s statement should be understood as part of the critique expressed by black women in the 1980s who felt that their experiences were not sufficiently taken into account by the mainstream white, middle class feminist movement, which relied on a simple assumption of a natural bond between women, ignoring differences in position (Lorde 1984, hooks 1981, 1986, Carby 1992, Lazreg 2000). In addition, white feminists have been accused of claiming that their subordination is more real and fundamental than other oppressions rather than understanding patriarchy as “interlocking” with other forms of oppression like racism and classism



(Razack 2001:14). Related to this charge, (and expressed in Razack's term 'saviour'), is the concern that the women from the global North understand themselves as liberated and independent in contrast to an image of women from the South as oppressed and in need of help.

Razack's quote can also be read in terms of another critique, which considered the development industry a neo-imperial and post-colonial project (Shiva 1989, Escobar 1995, Stirrat and Henkel 1997, Gronemeyer 1999, Kothari 2005, Nederveen Pieterse 2006). Despite this accusation of neo-imperialism, since then their number and influence have increased, producing 'global citizens', a transnational elite at home everywhere to practice its sense of global responsibility (Anheier et al. 2001, Taylor 2002, Desforges 2004, Baker and Chandler 2005). Concurrently, while the women's movement has arguably been less visible in the last decades than before, feminism has been institutionalised both in the academy and in development organisations through the subsequent policies of WID, WAD, GAD and gender mainstreaming. These developments have been met with scepticism and charges of bureaucratisation, depoliticisation and cooptation (Lang 1997, Alvarez 1998, Silliman 1999, Menon 2004, de Alwis 2009). Sceptics tend to favour social movements, as movements 'from below', over the more top-down NGOs dependent on (state) funding. They also prefer the women's movement with feminist activists to the so-called 'femocrats'. This research has taken the approach that the construction of a binary in which social movements and feminist activists are considered 'good' and NGOs and

femocrats 'bad', reduces the diversity within both camps and takes insufficient account of potential similarities between both groups.

Both the black feminist critique and the development critique importantly challenge the notion that those who are active within non-governmental organisations or the feminist movement have a moral innocence by virtue of their efforts for some form of justice. This study has not been intended to repeat these critiques; but rather to try to understand the perspectives of women situated at their nexus. How did they relate to 'the Other' whom their organisations were targeting? Did these women realise the contentiousness of their position? If so, how did they negotiate this? Furthermore, this first goal implied a second aim for this study, which was an evaluation of the relevance of the critique of the 80s and 90s for today.

While I considered it imperative to bring the dilemmas and ponderings of the women in those positions to life (by making extensive use of interview material in the text), it is not intended to 'name and shame' individuals. Rather, this analysis attempts to provide what Spivak calls a "constructive reading", which is "unaccusing, unexcusing, attentive, situationally productive through dismantling" (Spivak 1999:81). In the quote at the beginning of this conclusion, by using the personal pronoun 'I', Razack does not exempt herself from the necessity of critical introspection and reflection. In the same way I have not wanted to (nor do I believe one can) position myself as 'innocent', meaning neither as non-complicit, nor as more 'progressive' than the women I interviewed. Volunteering for different projects of a refugee organisation has

shown me the pervasiveness of my own prejudices and racist assumptions. It helped me to realise my complicity in perpetuating structures of inequality not just outside the volunteering but inside these projects; for example when I acted in awareness raising sessions as the white middle-class ‘expert’ on the asylum process while the asylum seeker was allowed to provide the ‘oral history’ or ‘local knowledge’ by presenting his or her experiences. In the context of these personal experiences and the encounter with these theoretical critiques, Spivak’s hope for “a constructive complicity” (Spivak 1999:3-4) seemed very relevant and appealing. However, as it remains difficult to derive from Spivak’s writing affirmative examples of what such constructive complicity would look like, this study has attempted to identify instances of constructive complicity in the accounts of the interviewed women and tried to evaluate its potential as an ethical positioning for our current times.

I have attempted to sketch a multi-faceted picture of these women by structuring this work in different chapters which each take a different main approach to the subject and introduce the different critiques that combine in the women’s practices. These have been feminist theory, post-colonial theory, global citizenship/civil society theory and critical development theory. It is important to note that in a few interviews the women positioned themselves and their organisation explicitly as different from other NGO workers and their organisations, and that women NGO workers sometimes took very different positions, for example on contentious issues like sex work/prostitution or regarding the use of ‘culture’ as an explanatory proxy for race. I would also argue however that the women NGO workers shared more

than they might have expected. This will be illustrated in the following synthesis of the different insights yielded by the respective chapters.

Chapter Four has combined a feminist and a gender analysis and has analysed which type of feminism they pursued, how the NGO workers understood their relations with the women they support and how gender shaped the experiences of the women NGO workers. I have argued that the different understandings of feminism in the narratives of the women NGO workers, rather than neatly reflecting socialist, radical, and liberal strands of feminism, actually displayed the major thematic debates within feminism: the institutionalisation of feminism, responses to backlashes and critiques of feminism, essentialism versus anti-essentialism, and inclusion or separatism. The private/public divide and its relation to the 'political' are key topics in both feminist theory and in global citizenship/civil society theory. I have argued that the process of (re)drawing the boundaries of the public and the private, the professional and the personal is vital for the women NGO workers' self-constitution. Through exposing how the public and private gain moral meaning in impassioned practices, I have enriched the traditionally rather abstract and disembodied discussion within citizenship and civil society theory on the public and the private. Furthermore, I have shown that whilst the notion of the public serves to maintain their idea of professionalism, the idea of the private is central to a non-instrumental morality. I have warned against the romanticisation of moral work encroaching on private time as it arguably leaves space for exploitation. The narratives of the women NGO workers showed their awareness of the persistent discourse against the professionalisation of NGO work in which

careerism is seen as incompatible with moral work, either through their support or rejection of it.

In Chapter Four I paid particular attention to the notion of sisterhood in the narratives of the women NGO workers in relation to their understanding of the relation between themselves and women in the global South. While the notion of sisterhood has been heavily contested by black feminists due to its association with the simplified idea of common subordination, silencing the way women have oppressed other women, I have observed that ‘sisterhood’ still has currency among the women NGO workers. I would also argue however, that an alternative form of sisterhood is present, without being named as such, in the repeated expressions of the sheer pleasure associated with working with women across the globe. The black feminist critique of the 1980s appears relevant also in today’s context since some of the women NGO workers indeed performed the ‘race to innocence’ (Fellows and Razack 1998), privileging gender oppression over other oppressions and thereby turning a blind eye to other forms of oppression and their potential complicity.

In Chapter Five, these potential complicities took shape when I introduced Kothari’s (2006a) argument that the notion of ‘race’ has been replaced with ‘culture’ without losing the connotations associated with the former. This is still instructive for understanding some of the narratives of the women NGO workers in which they made sense of their experiences with women from the global South. These women NGO workers explained differences between themselves and the women from the global South by referring to ‘culture’, and

risked homogenised and hierarchical understandings of 'culture'. In addition, 'culture' sometimes served to position women in the North as more liberated than women in the South. However, other women NGO workers consciously destabilised homogeneous accounts of culture. In addition, this process is complicated in the case of research participants with a migrant background as they experience both identification and differentiation in relation to the women from the South they seek to support. This tendency of reification of 'culture' as stable, homogeneous, 'something of them rather than us' defies the intended purpose of adding to a mere economic or social understanding of phenomena. Furthermore, this understanding of 'culture' seems to leave little space for other approaches that transcend either liberal tolerance or relativism. I have also argued that dominant understandings of racism, which are highly individualised, prevent critical reflection on complicity in the perpetuation of racial images through notions of cultural difference, which would be promoted by an alternative, more structural account of racism. Situating the women's narratives both in relation to the critique of black feminism and of postcolonial feminism is a significant corrective to the common practice to either discuss the one or the other, without looking at the combined merits of these critiques.

The fact that some of the testimonies of the women NGO workers contained direct links to colonial times (showing that colonialism is still lurking in the histories of some organisations and in the education of its members despite the fact that the women tended to situate colonialism firmly in the past), underlines the significance of post-colonial critiques. As discussed in Chapter Six, Anderson and Rieff (2004) make implicit reference to these colonial

continuities when they label global civil society organisations, which claim representative status despite the absence of a global state and global democratic procedures, 'missionaries'. I have argued in this chapter that representation involves a number of 'burdens', which obstruct the representative process. First, NGOs are often under pressure from governments and policy makers to provide a simplified picture of the group they represent. Second, the represented group is expected to 'perform well' in the consultative process, which, given the power inequalities involved, can posit a great burden on those represented. These same burdens surfaced in Chapter Seven, which explored how the distance between the women NGO workers and the women they supported was negotiated. The stories and 'myths' (Cornwall et al. 2007) that linked the women NGO workers with their beneficiaries failed to provide a nuanced picture. In addition, the cooperation with partner organisations to bridge the distance involved a range of demands on the partners, like providing information and 'translating' between the Northern NGOs and the grassroots, which were sometimes hard to meet, given their precarious financial situation and lack of staff.

In addition, I have argued in Chapter Six that in the representative process, the power inequalities are potentially exacerbated, since the status of representative bestows a number of privileges. However, with Spivak (1998) I would claim that given the requirements and limitations of the current political system, representation could not be discarded completely. Like Anderson and Rieff (2004), Hutchings (2005) pointed to global inequalities underlying the mobility and the feeling of responsibility of the 'global citizen'. The women

NGO workers often articulated their sense of responsibility by reference to the opportunities they had enjoyed. The dominant understanding of opportunities among the NGO workers however disregarded the relation between their privilege and others' marginalisation. In addition, similar to the fact that the representative role came with privileges, the NGO work -conducted to improve the lives of others- also improved their own opportunities. I have argued that contrary to the view that altruism and careerism or other instrumental motivations are incompatible, 'selfish motives' might sometimes serve a positive purpose by steering away from a 'benevolence', which underlines power inequalities.

Throughout the work, I have pointed to ruptures and resistances to the hegemonic discourses and power structures using notions such as "negotiated solidarity" (hooks 1986), "constructive complicity" (Spivak 1999) and "critical reflexivity" (Harding 1991, Haraway 1991). In Chapter Four I have argued that some of the participants problematised sisterhood, either moving to a negotiated solidarity (as suggested by hooks) or by using critical reflexivity to analyse the power relations at stake. I would suggest that 'critical reflexivity' is an important tool to deconstruct the 'innocence' of sisterhood and one's complicity in maintaining that innocence. Thereby I have shown the wider applicability of reflexivity beyond the realm of its original inception, namely (feminist) knowledge production. At the same time, I maintain that there is a risk that it could result in 'navel gazing' or a return to 'innocence' when reflexivity turns 'transparent'. In a similar vein, in Chapter Five I have argued that the identification of racialised discourses needs to be



complemented with resisting and challenging these discourses. Some of the research participants' challenges consisted of conscious efforts to address cultural and racialised stereotypes that arise on both sides. In addition, Spivak's notions of 'unlearning privilege as a loss' (Spivak 1990) and 'learning to learn from below' (Spivak 2000), could be potential responses to this challenge. However, while in some of the narratives these strategies can be traced, simultaneously they run the risk of narcissism or failure due to power and geographical differences.

I have suggested in Chapter Four that another way to avoid the 'race to innocence' is to destabilise gender as a fixed category by looking at the interaction between gender and other categories. Using an intersectional approach to analyse the women's narratives about gender I illustrated that their experiences of 'gender' often take on meaning in conjunction with other categories, like age, and ethnicity, producing for example 'the young woman' or the 'honorary man'. In both Chapter Five and Seven I have attempted to find practised, lived forms of "constructive complicity" (Spivak 1999) - a responsibility which should be articulated through an (always incomplete) acknowledgement of one's embeddedness in structural injustices- in the narratives of the women NGO workers, respectively in relation to racial discourses and spatial distance to the women supported. The attempt to trace "constructive complicity" in practice is an important addition to the abstract, theoretically dense work of Spivak, whose deconstructive approach rarely allows affirmative examples. I noticed that it is possible to catch glimpses of Spivak's intended responsibility, but also that these are sometimes limited to

short reflexive moments with an easy 'closure' rather than a continued vigilance. In Chapter Seven I discussed a narrative, which presented a constructively complicit position with regard to taking an advocacy position away from the 'field' in a powerful international organisation. However, it needs to be acknowledged that this position is a dangerous and precarious one as well, as it is a challenge to guide against complacency in the work and to be vigilant for cooptation when organisations circumscribe the possibilities.

As mentioned previously, this work can be situated within a relatively new genre within critical development literature, which focuses on the subjectivities, experiences, and identity constructions of NGO and development workers (Goudge 2003, Baaz 2005, Charlés 2007, Cook 2007, Heron 2007) in order to complement the traditional organisational focus within critical development literature. The insights generated in these studies, particularly those inspired by a post-colonial reading of the reflections of the NGO workers display strong similarities with some of the conclusions of this research, despite differences in the exact focus and location of the research. Baaz and Heron both allude to processes of questioning (Baaz 2005:152) and critique (Heron 2007:124) among the development workers, which I have here identified as 'reflexivity'. In addition, this research aligns itself with those studies in foregrounding theoretical depth and nuance over quick-fix solutions that risk reductionism. Some of the studies (Goudge 2003, Cook 2007, Heron 2007) explored the role of gender and or of white feminism in the development enterprise, used insights from feminist theory or only interviewed female development workers. This research has attempted to

contribute to these rich and important studies by concentrating more explicitly on the experiences of women who support only women or who have a specific gender focus in their work and by emphasising the role of feminism and the gendered dimensions of the women's experiences. Hence, as elaborated above, the findings include a discussion of the role of sisterhood, the 'race to innocence', gender stereotypes, the interpretation of feminism, post-colonial images of the female Other compared to the Western feminist Self, and of the private/public divide. I have applied intersectional approaches, as generated in feminist theory, in order to highlight the mixed positions the women NGO workers occupied in terms of their (often) white, middle-class privilege combined with their gender. In addition, this study has broadened the field of enquiry these studies have helped to create, by engaging extensively with global citizenship/global civil society theory and its discussions of representation, responsibility and the public/private divide.

Chapter Seven has concentrated on a key difference between the present study and existing studies, namely the fact that in this research many of the interviewed women NGO workers were *not* located in the global South and supported women in the South across distance. It discusses the theme of space and distance in relation to NGO work in order to complement the existing studies about NGO workers who work in physical proximity to the people they support, by exploring how the women NGO workers negotiated distance. More generally, it inserted the theme of space and place in critical development/NGO studies. Throughout, this research has been testimony to the different ways in which mobility is understood depending on the direction and goal of the journey and on the actor involved; from field trips to

trafficking, from migration to travel and from fleeing wars to international careers. Specifically, I have suggested that NGO workers in capital cities in the North referred to field visits (and the stories collected during such visits) as a significant way to 'stay in touch' with what happens on the ground. The danger is that both field trips and stories might present oversimplified, incomplete pictures and be mediated in several ways; through the 'urban trap' (Chambers 2006), through power structures, and through repeated telling.

However, I would argue that the main strategy or aid for bridging the distance was identified as the contact with the partner organisations in the South. While most often partners are described as bridging the geographical divide, in some instances it seems as if the partners almost 'replaced' the final beneficiaries as that the latter disappear out of view. However, the role of the partner organisations in negotiating distance needs to be contextualised with reference to the power imbalance, which means that Northern organisations can often select their partners, and often function as donors with a range of demands. While the interview narratives clearly showed the *mutual* dependency between organisations in the North and the South - the Northern organisations need their partner organisations for the provision of information, for moral legitimacy and to boost motivation - this mutual dependency has not redressed this power imbalance. Many of the women NGO workers displayed an awareness of the discourse, which negatively evaluates NGO work carried out at a distance and provided explicit justifications for their spatial position in relation to the women they supported. I have argued that these justifications

took three forms: personal preference, practical reasons and strategic arguments.

I would generally argue that the analysis of the narratives of the women NGO workers has shown that many of the women were quite aware of the contentious issues related to their position and that they at times displayed a reflexive approach to their own work practices. This reflexivity was sometimes aided by their awareness of the mechanisms underlying gender oppression. At the same time, however, I would maintain that the circumstances of their work which put them in a more vulnerable position –the fact that ‘gender’ was often a marginalised theme in their own organisation or in the wider NGO world, some of their own experiences of gender discrimination, their overwork and huge pressure on their private time- at some moments could lead to a less reflexive stance. This either happened because the other pressures left little time for reflection (as also suggested by Mawdskey and Porter 2005:79) or because the ‘victim’ role allowed in Fellows and Razack’s (1998) words a “race to innocence”.

After one of the interviews, one research participant who had been particularly open about her reflections and ambivalences regarding her work stressed to me the importance of confidentiality for her cooperation in the research, as she would otherwise risk being fired. Whilst this suggested that not all organisations encourage reflexivity and critical engagement with the organisation and one’s own work practices, I would argue that this critical reflection and engagement should be the point of departure for any NGO

endeavour and that staff should receive time, space and support for this. Eade, in the context of capacity building actions of NGOs suggests that if NGOs want to make a sustainable contribution to change this “means a commitment to learning as intrinsic to their interventions to build the capacities of others” (Eade 2007:634, see also Eyben 2007b:44). While reflexivity and the acknowledgement of complicity might neither always be comfortable or easy, as some of the narratives have shown it does not need to be “incapacitating” (Kapoor 2008:57) or “paralysing” (Spivak 1999:3). I hope that the relevance of these conclusions, while arising from the particular focus of this project, extends to other areas and sectors beyond the NGO sector or the women’s movement.

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## **Appendix 1: Sample Email Interview Request**

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am a PhD student at the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice, School of Politics and IR at the University of Nottingham (UK) and I am working on a research project about the reflections of women working for international organisations concerned with gender/women on their work (for a brief project outline see below). [Name of Organisation Omitted] is of particular interest to me because of its position as a European network and the global reach of its aims. I would be grateful if I would be granted the opportunity to interview a (female) staff member of the department. The interview would last max. 1 hour and interviewees are offered the possibility to remain anonymous. I am planning to make my field research trip to [location omitted] in the week commencing Monday the 31st of March and I will stay for that week.

Brief Project Outline:

The purpose of my PhD research is to analyse some of the tensions and complexities related to global citizenship, otherness and responsibility. The empirical part of my research consists of interviews with 'global citizens', i.e. women working for organisations concerned with women/gender with a global reach. Here I investigate how people working for organisations with a gender dimension understand their own work practices while the wider

research project seeks to relate this to debates on global citizenship and global justice. The interview themes include motivation to do the work, the impact of the work, the relation to the group that is supported, possible tensions/difficulties that arise and responsibility.

If you have any more questions, please don't hesitate to contact me again. I would be grateful for your reply.

Kind regards,

Sara de Jong

Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice, School of Politics and IR  
University of Nottingham

## **Appendix 2: Interview Consent Form**

### **Explanatory Statement**

The empirical part of this research project investigates how people working for organisations with a global justice dimension understand their own work practices while the wider research project seeks to relate this to debates on global citizenship and global justice. The interview themes include motivation to do the work, the impact of the work, the relation to the group that is supported, possible tensions/difficulties that arise and responsibility.

The interview is designed to take approximately an hour. The research is conducted by Sara de Jong, Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice, School of Politics and IR, University of Nottingham, UK.

### **Consent**

I agree to take part in the research project as described in the explanatory statement. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the explanatory statement, which I may keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part in this project means that I am willing to:

- be interviewed by the researcher
- allow the interview to be recorded on audio tape
- allow information to be used in a PhD thesis and any related future publications

I am aware that my participation in this interview is voluntary. If, for any reason, at any time, I wish to stop the interview, refuse to answer a specific question or discontinue the participation in the research project, I may do so without having to give an explanation.

Name:.....

Signature: .....

Date: .....

Name of Organisation: .....

☐ If you would prefer to remain anonymous (your name will be changed in the text) please tick this box.

OR

☐ I understand that I have given approval for my name and/or the name of my organisation to be used in the final report of the project, and future publications.