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Women on Wheels: empowering women through an innovative training and employment programme

Bipasha Baruah

ABSTRACT

Significant victories have been won due to the development sector's engagement with gender inequality as a political project, but regressive shifts have also led to development being conceptualised as a managerial issue rather than as a process of social change. This article uses empirical research conducted in New Delhi, India with an organisation that trains and employs poor urban women as commercial drivers to discuss how an obsession with "cost effectiveness" and "scale" can delegitimise the valuable work of some organisations. This article encourages re-engagement with gender equality as a complicated social issue rather than as a technical-rational management project.

Des victoires significatives ont été obtenues grâce à l'engagement, en tant que projet politique, du secteur du développement dans la lutte contre les inégalités entre les genres, mais parallèlement, des changements rétrogrades ont conduit à une conceptualisation du développement en tant que problème managérial plutôt que processus de changement social. Cet article s'appuie sur une recherche empirique conduite à New Delhi avec une organisation qui forme et emploie des femmes issues des zones urbaines défavorisées comme conductrices de véhicules commerciaux pour examiner comment l'obsession des concepts de « coût-efficacité » et « d'échelle » peut délégitimer le travail utile de certaines organisations. Cet article encourage le réengagement dans la lutte contre les inégalités entre les genres, perçues comme un problème social plutôt que comme un projet technique-rationnel de management.

El hecho de que el sector de desarrollo haya impulsado un proyecto político orientado a disminuir la desigualdad de género ha propiciado el logro de varias victorias significativas. A pesar de ello, algunos retrocesos registrados han determinado que el desarrollo sea conceptualizado como un problema de gestión y no como un proceso de cambio social. Partiendo de investigaciones empíricas realizadas en Nueva Delhi, India, con una organización que capacita y contrata como choferes comerciales a mujeres marginalizadas del sector urbano, el presente artículo concluye que la obsesión con el "costo-eficacia" y el "rendimiento a escala" puede llegar a deslegitimar el valioso trabajo realizado por algunas organizaciones, razón por la cual alienta a que el tema de la igualdad de género sea abordado como un tema social complejo y no como un proyecto de gestión técnico-razional.

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Introduction

The development sector's engagement with poverty alleviation and gender equality has evolved considerably over the past 40 years. Significant efforts have been made to accommodate theoretical

advancements in the broader field of gender and development. Programmes designed to empower women – and men in some settings – have evolved from the welfare, efficiency, and equity focused-approaches of the 1970s and 1980s to the more recent empowerment, human rights, and capabilities-based approaches of the 1990s and the new millennium. Because of a broader structural understanding of the sources of women's poverty and disempowerment, today many more actors in development engage not just with employment and labour force participation as means to empower women, but also with more politically sensitive issues (such as property rights, political participation, and the gendered division of household labour) that they had previously been hesitant or unwilling to take on.

These progressive shifts have sometimes paradoxically occurred alongside changes that construct poverty alleviation and gender equality less as complex structural issues and more as technical-rational topics that can be addressed through a bureaucratic approach to development management and practice. There has been a gradual shift away from a political understanding of the causes of poverty and gender inequality to an apolitical and ahistorical management of its symptoms (Ramalingam 2013). The widespread use within donor agencies, government organisations, charities, and even NGOs of the language and logic of business management – through, for example, tools such as results-based management (RBM) and logical framework analysis (LFA) – has had a profound impact not just upon how development is conceptualised and operationalised but also upon the operational cultures and management styles of organisations working on the ground to alleviate poverty and promote gender equality. Consequently, these actors increasingly understand development more as a managerial issue that can be planned, carried out, and evaluated within short periods of time rather than as a messy, unpredictable process of social change.

It is important to remember that the technical-rational approach and the political approach are not entirely antithetical. Actors that understand development as a political process can nonetheless support a careful thinking through of the logical “theories of change”, and recognise that in a context of scarce resources, a focus on efficient and effective use of resources is a serious responsibility for those supporting change. The two strategies do not have to be mutually exclusive.

This article is not aimed at questioning the importance of careful marshalling of resources, or of the need for accountability in development. Rather it seeks to emphasise that the depth of the impact upon people's lives must also be considered a critical factor in promoting gender equality. Gender equality and poverty alleviation outcomes can be significant and valuable even when achieved at a relatively small scale. Quantity is not always more important than quality. Further, this research underlines the importance of addressing multiple barriers to women's employment and empowerment simultaneously in order to optimise outcomes. It demonstrates that providing skills and training – even in depth – is not sufficient when the barriers to women's employment go beyond knowledge and skills. The arguments presented in this article are based upon empirical research conducted in India with an initiative called Women on Wheels (WOW) that trains and employs poor urban women as chauffeurs and taxi drivers in the capital city of New Delhi. WOW's work is made possible by two organisations: a NGO called the Azad Foundation that provides professional driving training and organises chauffeur placement services for women after they acquire their licences; and a for-profit taxi company, Sakha Cabs, that employs drivers trained by its sister NGO.

The research drew upon in-depth interviews conducted in New Delhi in 2012 and 2013 with all seven drivers employed at the time by Sakha Cabs, as well as interviews with the founder, chief operating officer, and two other staff members (a programme officer and a programme advisor) of the WOW initiative. Interviews with the drivers were open-ended, unstructured, and aimed at understanding how the training and employment provided by WOW had influenced their personal and professional lives. Interviews with WOW staff were more structured and aimed at understanding programmatic challenges and opportunities.

The research also used secondary sources such as *Women with Wings: Stories about Women Drivers*, a publication about the lives of 50 women who trained as commercial taxi drivers and personal

chauffeurs with Azad Foundation. Two journalists – Bharat Dogra and Reena Mehta – produced this publication after they conducted 50 semi-structured interviews in Hindi with trainees and drivers at the Azad Foundation in 2011. Interviewees were encouraged to tell their life stories in their own words and the publication was eventually produced in Hindi and English.

There is also a less formal participant-observation component to this research. I am currently working on a number of research projects in collaboration with New Delhi-based organisations and I use the Sakha cab service as often as possible. Extended conversations with the drivers I am assigned and my observations as we drive around New Delhi also inform this article. The WOW initiative has received a lot of attention in the past four years in the mainstream media in India, North America and Europe. *The Times of India*, *Indian Express*, *Asian Age*, *Guardian*, *Toronto Star*, *Globe and Mail*, *Business Standard*, and the *Seattle Globalist* have written about Sakha Cabs recently.¹ I analysed this coverage as secondary data along with other relevant scholarly and practitioner literature in gender and development.

Academic and practitioner literature on women's empowerment is extensive. However, research on the potential of innovations in skills and training to promote gender equality is rare. The International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) is the only organisation that has produced a scholarly assessment of how social and technological innovations might empower women and advance gender equality (ICRW 2009). This assessment identified three critical entry points for realising women's empowerment: (1) technology use; (2) social norm change; and (3) economic resilience. Whereas this assessment expects that innovations that make a significant difference in women's lives may only fulfil one or two of the criteria, I have found that women trained by the WOW initiative achieve all three. By putting women in charge of a technology to which they had no previous access, WOW not only creates dependable livelihood opportunities that enable women to permanently escape lives of poverty and indignity, it also challenges deep-rooted gender and class stereotypes and barriers.

Writing about gender and technology, Hafkin and Huyer (2006) similarly identify three forms of capital that women need to be able to empower themselves: human capital represented by training, skills, and knowledge; financial capital represented by income, savings, assets, and resources obtained through credit-providing institutions; and social capital represented by access to networks and relationships based on trust, reciprocity, and camaraderie. Women trained and employed as commercial drivers through WOW appear to acquire all three forms.

It is important to emphasise that although the research showed a range of significant benefits for women as a result of their participation in the WOW initiative, they simultaneously continued to face multiple challenges and inequalities linked to gender and socio-economic background, underlining the need for comprehensive and sustained efforts. Since this research is modest in scope and exploratory in nature, its findings shed light upon problems that may warrant more detailed investigation. I hope that the issues identified by my research will provide the grounding and detail against which other research, perhaps using very different methodologies, can be tested, verified, and advanced.

Overview of the Women on Wheels (WOW) initiative

The World Economic Forum has consistently ranked India last among G20 countries for gender equality in the economic sphere. There are large numbers of highly educated and well-paid professional women in cities, but for poor women, both rural and urban, the opportunities for economic advancement are far more limited. Most find themselves in the informal sector doing poorly compensated, menial, and insecure work (Baruah 2004; 2007a). The numbers of urban poor have grown steadily in India. In some states and union territories – the National Capital Territory of Delhi is a good example – more than 50% of people below the poverty line reside in urban areas (Government of India 2009). Much greater attention is currently being paid to reducing urban poverty than in previous decades, but large-scale job training and livelihood programmes still tend to be skewed in favour of men. The limited number of income-generation and skill development

programmes available to poor urban women in India tend to focus on stereotypically female occupations such as beautician training, tailoring, and embroidery (Vadera 2013). Organisations like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and the Working Women's Forum that do offer more lucrative and innovative training opportunities for women tend to have a regional focus in cities like Ahmedabad and Chennai (Baruah 2010; Chen 2008). The lack of opportunities for training and skill development severely constrains the economic potential of poor urban women and compromises their and their dependents' overall well-being. There are virtually no opportunities for disadvantaged urban women with limited education and socio-economic resources to acquire skills in more lucrative growing fields such as transportation, warehousing, and skilled construction work (*ibid.*).

Azad Foundation was launched in New Delhi in 2008 to make a modest contribution towards addressing this gap. Its flagship initiative, Women on Wheels (WOW), recruits and prepares poor urban women to become professional and commercial drivers. Its motto, "For Women, By Women", is seamless in its logic of dovetailing disadvantaged urban women's need for better-paying economic opportunities with the transportation needs of the growing numbers of upper- and middle-class professional women and their families. New Delhi does not have a higher crime rate than similar-sized cities in other parts of the world. It does have the dubious distinction of being the city with the highest incidence of rape in India. There is no empirical evidence to suggest that women-only taxi or bus services offer women a safer mode of transportation, but the logic that it might be a practical way to increase mobility and visibility for women in the city also made New Delhi a suitable location to launch the WOW initiative. The growth of similar initiatives in a range of different contexts – including with the support of donor organisations (see, for example, UN Women 2016) – suggests that there is some confidence that the combination of employment and safety outcomes is attractive from both the demand and supply side.

Depending on individual circumstance and ability, it takes between eight and 10 months for each learner to complete the training programme developed by Azad Foundation. The first three months are a structured driving training programme; the remaining time is used to provide actual city driving practice. Every trainee is required to log a minimum of 100 hours of training on the road. Driving skills, customer service, and English language training (a necessity for social mobility in the Indian context) is provided in-house by Azad's trainers and through a corporate social responsibility (CSR) collaboration with Maruti Suzuki, India's largest automobile manufacture company. Gender equality, legal rights, assertiveness training, and counselling services are provided by an NGO called Jagori; and self-defence skills are taught by the Women's Cell of the Delhi Police. The training costs about US \$85 per month. Since most women take between eight and 10 months to complete the programme and become skilled employable chauffeurs, the total cost of the programme varies between US\$680 and 850. Many women are very interested in becoming professional drivers but cannot afford to give up their daily wages to join the training. Azad Foundation seeks out subsidies or fee waivers for such trainees through private donors and corporations. Additionally, it can provide trainees with a one-time interest-free subsistence loan of up to US\$200 that they can pay back upon completing the training and finding a placement.

Influencing government policies that are often apathetic and discriminatory towards the poor in general and women in particular is an important component of the Azad Foundation's work. As an example, procuring a driver's licence requires a proof of residence in the name of the licensee. This requirement is difficult even for poor men to fulfil since they are much more likely to live in unlisted slums or other informal settlements than non-poor applicants. It is much more difficult for women to procure a proof of residence since they are even less likely than the men in their households to have any documents such as electricity and water bills in their names. Completing the paperwork for something as seemingly simple as a learner's licence can be extremely challenging. The Azad Foundation works with individual women to clear such hurdles and also advocates more broadly for pro-poor and pro-women policies at various levels of government.

It became obvious soon after Azad was founded that it would not be enough to train and license women without also attempting to create employment for them. Azad's founder, Meenu Vadera, who had previously been a development professional in India and Uganda, arrived at this conclusion because there have been many attempts in the past, in both developed and developing countries, to create opportunities for women in non-traditional fields. Although there is no doubt that this can be done, much evidence suggests that it is easier for women to acquire the training than to subsequently find employment. Women face tremendous social and cultural barriers in entering traditionally male-dominated fields unless there is specific access to placement services (for examples about women's employment in the construction industry, see Adubra 2005; Baruah 2010; Ness 2012; Watts 2009) as well as support for coping with broader social and economic constraints. Sakha Cabs, the for-profit taxi company, was established alongside Azad to provide employment to licensed women through its own radio taxi service and through chauffeur placement services with a range of employers, including individual women employers, families, NGOs, and corporations. Although the long-term viability of the initiative is difficult to predict, together Sakha Cabs and Azad Foundation make up an innovative hybrid institutional model of entities that are independent but also interdependent for impact and financial sustainability. There are plans to introduce the WOW initiative in three other cities in India (Gurgaon, Jaipur, and Kolkata) using a similar model.

In its first year of operation, Azad Foundation trained nine women. Over the past three years more than 100 women have registered, 80 have completed training, and 35 have been employed as drivers with Sakha Cabs or placed as chauffeurs. Another 100 women are currently in various stages of the training (Vadera 2013).

Findings

This section first elaborates upon the effects of the WOW programme in the lives of drivers, then discusses the opportunities and constraints facing Azad Foundation and Sakha Cabs. Finally, it describes the broader implications of the findings and identify why it is important to look beyond limited definitions of cost-effectiveness and scale to enable initiatives like WOW to succeed. Presenting the findings in this order follows the order in which the research was conducted: first, interviewing women about economic and social outcomes of becoming trained drivers; then, interviewing programme staff about institutional opportunities and constraints; and, finally, using these findings to reflect on the wider implications of programmes like WOW.

Economic and social outcomes for female drivers

In sharing findings about the effects of the WOW programme, I focus on the different levels (individual, family, community, and institutional) at which gender inequality is experienced and across which most definitions and conceptual frameworks of women's empowerment – including those I draw upon for this study (Hafkin and Huyer 2006; ICRW 2009) agree women must make sustained progress towards.

The economic benefits of employment as a personal chauffeur or as a commercial driver become clear when one understands that all women who sign up for training come from families living below the poverty line in urban slums and resettlement colonies in New Delhi with total monthly household incomes of US\$50 to 85. The average woman in the training programme has only eight years of formal schooling. Many had never travelled alone outside their neighbourhoods before they began their training. In addition to chronic poverty, many face violence, or the threat of violence, typically but not exclusively at the hands of male relatives. Ninety per cent (45 out of 50) of the women in Dogra and Mehta's (2012) report indicated having experienced some form of physical or emotional violence in their lives. The fact that these women nonetheless aspire to complete a programme that

requires both long hours of training and challenging deep-seated social norms is evidence of their desire to make dramatic changes in their lives.

Depending on the employer, chauffeurs in large cities in India, including New Delhi, may negotiate monthly starting salaries between US\$85 and 168. Taxi drivers with Sakha Cabs earn a starting monthly salary of US\$100 with guaranteed 10% annual raises and a package of other benefits such as health care and contributions towards a national pension plan. The average monthly starting salary earned by a chauffeur or a taxi driver almost immediately makes her a co-breadwinner, if not the primary breadwinner in the family. All seven women currently employed as drivers by Sakha Cabs are either primary or sole breadwinners for their families. The other 28 trained drivers are currently employed as chauffeurs by individuals, families, or businesses. With average incomes above US\$85 per month, they are also primary or co-breadwinners for their families. This would have been next to impossible for any of the women to accomplish had they remained in occupations such as domestic help, elder care, tailoring, embroidery, cooking, and meal services.

The women interviewed for this research spoke of significant changes in their ability to make important decisions about their lives and those of their children since they became involved in the WOW programme. The higher incomes, job security, and social status derived from commercial driving have enabled women to make empowering decisions in their personal lives, including leaving abusive marriages, reporting domestic and other abuse to police, filing for separation or divorce, assuming primary financial responsibility for children, enrolling or re-enrolling (where children had previously been forced to leave due to financial reasons) children and younger siblings in school, providing financial support to aging parents, building new homes and upgrading old ones. Additionally, 35 of the 50 women interviewed by Dogra and Mehta (2012) indicated either having gone back to school, or wanting to go back, to complete formal education programmes (usually high school) or other certificate and skills training programmes that they had previously been forced to drop out of or have been unable to join for primarily financial reasons. An active process of what in development theory is called “*adaptive preference*” (Connell 1977) appears to be unfolding for all or most of the women who now want more from life than they had previously been able to expect.

Commercial driving has been and continues to be a male-dominated field in India. It is a livelihood option that is systematically denied to women. “*We can quite easily count the total number of commercial women drivers in India. Imagine being able to confidently say that about a country of 1.2 billion people,*” exclaimed Meenu Vadera (2012), founder of Azad Foundation, during our interview in December 2012. Although large numbers of college-educated women from affluent and middle-class families drive cars in New Delhi and other metropolitan areas, it was virtually unheard of for a poor woman to be able to do so prior to the introduction of the WOW programme. In its first two years of operation, Azad Foundation staff struggled to convince young women and their families to join. The earning potential in commercial driving and the demonstration effect created by women who have already found work has made it relatively easier today to convince women and their families to try an unconventional occupation.

The increased mobility, visibility, and confidence that these women have enjoyed also enhanced their sense of belonging and entitlement to the services and benefits offered by the city. Prior to getting their licences, none of the women would have been able to offer any proof of identity even though such documents are a prerequisite for accessing various rights and entitlements. As one driver stated: “*Before I got my licence, if I had died on the street in an accident, no one would even have known who I was.*” Most non-poor people in industrialised or emerging economies use driver’s licences as proof of identity for everything from applying for utility connections to credit cards to passports. For people who have never possessed any proof of identity, a driver’s licence can represent a form of government-approved recognition of personhood that can then open other doors. This is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that even women who, for a variety of reasons described later, ended up not working as commercial drivers after getting their licences indicated that they regularly used their licences as proof of identity for purposes such as opening bank accounts and applying for ration cards and voter registration cards. Additionally, all women who train

as commercial drivers live in informal settlements with little or no tenure security. Several women indicated that because the driver's licence must include residential address information, it can enable the women to access other utilities and services such as water connections and mobile phones. Such less obvious social and economic benefits of possessing drivers' licences should not be underestimated.

Women who train as commercial drivers simultaneously continue to face challenges on many fronts: scepticism or ridicule from family and friends, deep-rooted social prejudices against women drivers, balancing long working hours with family responsibilities, and lack of a sense of community beyond their peers in the programme. Riding around New Delhi in a Sakha cab, it was difficult not to notice the challenges these women face while going about their jobs on a daily basis: the startled expressions from pedestrians and other drivers, the constant need to manoeuvre and defuse conflict when they are harassed or intimidated by aggressive male drivers, the condescending attitudes of parking attendants, and the absence of public toilet facilities for women. However, none of the women spoken with for this research perceived these challenges as insurmountable or permanent. They were all very optimistic that social attitudes toward female drivers would change over time as more of them got behind the wheel. The blue uniforms worn by the women made their occupations as drivers more visible. The uniforms exposed drivers to increased hostility in some settings while simultaneously commanding respect in others. Nonetheless, all the women interviewed liked having to wear the uniform during working hours.

New Delhi has an extremely expensive real-estate market. Several NGOs I work with have unmarked offices in less expensive neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city and we have had to stop to ask for directions from other drivers on several occasions. Most people in New Delhi are accustomed to only seeing upper- and middle-class educated women drive cars. I noticed that even older men and women always used *"aap"* – the reverent version of "you" in Hindi, typically reserved for people of equal or higher social status – to address Sakha drivers. Two young women articulated my observations when they emphasised that no one had ever addressed them that way before they started driving. In the context of a deeply (and very visibly) hierarchical and socially stratified city like New Delhi, it is not naïve to suggest that simply being seen driving a car elevates the social status of young women from disadvantaged backgrounds. The effects upon confidence and self-worth gained by the young drivers from such positive interactions with people from higher socio-economic backgrounds cannot be ignored or trivialised.

All the drivers also mentioned that attitudes within their families and communities had already shifted in the short time that they had started driving. Although they continued to shoulder much of the responsibility for childcare and household maintenance, they also emphasised that other family members had become more willing to share responsibility for domestic chores once the women started earning higher incomes from commercial driving. Other researchers working in India (see, for example, Patel 2014 and Nielsen and Waldrop 2014) have corroborated that gender roles tend to be malleable, that the intra-household division of labour is dynamic and negotiable, that economics often trumps culture and tradition, and that oppression and agency can exist conterminously and hence are not mutually exclusive.

It is not surprising, then, to discover that mothers-in-law and husbands who had previously been unsupportive of women working as drivers became more willing to relieve them of some of their domestic chores as the women started to contribute a greater share of the household income. One driver described how her husband – who now not only cooks and cleans but also assumes the primary caregiver role for their toddler son – had been so incensed by her decision to learn to drive that he had travelled to the Azad Foundation office in 2010 to express his outrage. He had vowed that no woman in his family or in seven generations after him (a dramatic way of saying "forever" in Hindi) would ever drive a taxi. *"How did he forget about seven generations of tradition within two years?"* she wondered with wry amusement as we drove around the city.

Of course, it is important to remember that husbands and other family members allowing women to take on roles that benefit the household economically does not necessarily always lead to deep

shifts in attitudes regarding women's status and rights. Other authors have emphasised that there may be less resistance to women taking part in income-generating activities because they are considered a "win-win" for the family (Agarwal 2003). While men may not challenge such activities, they are likely to be far more resistant to deeper economic and political demands from women – for independent land and property rights, for example – that challenge their traditional privileges and entitlement to resources.

How the women in the WOW programme relate to one another is also instructive. Although Azad Foundation and Sakha Cabs do not formally require trained women to provide emotional or financial support to other women, most women choose to do so. Of the 50 women interviewed by Dogra and Mehta (2012), 43 identified the supportive institutional culture and the camaraderie they felt with other women in the programme as being strong influences in their motivation to complete training. Evidence of women's willingness to support other women in the programme may at least in part be attributed to their very small numbers and what Spivak (1996) has called "*strategic essentialism*". Put simply, there are so few female commercial drivers that they must out of necessity present a unified front to gain visibility and status even though they may actually be a very diverse group in terms of their ideas, opinions, and preferences. Programme staff at Azad Foundation and Sakha Cabs emphasised on several occasions that they often do not hear about major problems in the lives of trainees and drivers until after the crises have been addressed, because the women have built such a strong social support system. Accounts of drivers helping out other drivers and trainees with money, emotional support, shelter and childcare, for example, may certainly be explained by the logic that such solidarity is essentially a means to broader gains for a marginalised group. Whether or not such solidarity will endure as the group gets bigger remains to be seen.

It is important to emphasise that the increased access to income, familial support, and social networks enjoyed by women who work as commercial drivers does not in any way minimise the need for the state to create adequate social security floors to protect against vagaries in the job market, illness, maternity, old age, job losses, and other risks to people's well-being. There have been significant advancements in strengthening social protection floors in India recently, including unconditional cash transfer programmes that enable poor women to make priority decisions for themselves and their dependents (Davalva et al. 2015). Structural inequality constrains individual ability to exercise rights and demand entitlements. The benefits women derive from initiatives like WOW can only find optimal traction within the context of a wider and more comprehensive social security infrastructure.

Sakha Cabs' success has motivated at least two other cab companies in New Delhi, that had until now exclusively hired men, to also train and hire small numbers of women. These companies are simply aiming for a bigger share of the women-only niche market so their institutional cultures and structures remain mostly unchanged after they add a few women to their existing programmes. There is little attempt to understand the social and economic factors that constrain women or to provide the type of holistic training and support services that Azad Foundation does. On contacting two companies that mentioned having female drivers on their websites to learn more about their cab services, both stated that their female drivers were not allowed to pick up clients after 8 pm because it was not safe for women to be out late at night in New Delhi. Instead of building programmes that make it possible for women to drive and be driven at all hours of day and night, as WOW has tried to do, the other cab companies had chosen to reinforce rather than challenge broader societal anxieties and taboos. That said, the sheer fact that other taxi companies have started hiring female drivers is cause for optimism that their institutional cultures and practices may also change over time.

It is important to emphasise that there have been very valid feminist criticisms that women-only taxi and bus services may very quickly become cosmetic technological fixes for broader concerns about women's safety in public spaces. In the aftermath of the widely publicised rape and murder of a medical student in New Delhi in December 2012, much of the mainstream media described WOW and other women-only taxi and bus services as "solutions" for gang rape and sexual violence (Kapoor 2013). Azad Foundation and Sakha Cabs are quick to point out that they consider this to be a

very simplistic association since it places the responsibility for preventing sexual violence on the victim rather than on the perpetrator. Violence against women, sexual or otherwise, is a structural global problem. Eliminating violence against women will require much deeper and more proactive engagement with the social structures and power relations that sustain and reproduce it. Researchers working in other contexts (Abdelnour and Saeed 2014) have noted how easily the quest to design, produce, promote, and deliver the most efficient technical panaceas can replace the need to understand complex structural problems.

The WOW initiative, on the other hand, appreciates that reducing violence against women will require much more than women-only taxi services. It sees its services as a practical way to increase women's visibility and mobility within the city while simultaneously advocating for more proactive engagement with the social structures and institutions that maintain and perpetuate violence against women. Both Azad Foundation and Sakha Cabs participate actively in broader forums – such as those organised by feminist organisations and NGOs – that question and confront Indian society about its attitudes towards women. Other authors emphasise that organisations committed to transformative social change must necessarily strike a balance between the politics of the feasible and the politics of transformation (Rai 2002). As Molyneux (1998, 78) contends, *“clearly practical interests can, at times should, be the basis for a political transformation”*.

Institutional opportunities and constraints

Since women rarely drive commercially in India, there appears, at least in theory, to be tremendous potential to create employment in this sector. The hybrid institutional model (non-profit foundation and for-profit taxi company) was built purposively to ensure that Azad Foundation's work would not be completely dependent on grant or donor funding. The WOW initiative is not yet financially self-sustaining – largely because of the higher initial costs of setting up the physical infrastructure in the early years of operation – but it does expect to be in the future. As the initial set-up costs go down and level off over time, Sakha Cabs should become more profitable. This will allow the company not just to purchase more cars, hire more drivers, and offer better salaries and benefits, but also to improve and expand Azad's Foundation's training programmes and support services.

Despite a promising start, deeply entrenched social barriers and prejudices continue to make it difficult for Azad Foundation to recruit women for the training programme. The term “professional driver” is almost everywhere in the world, and certainly in India, associated with images of male drivers drinking, smoking, and generally living a rough and hardened life on the road. Like most stereotypes, this is an inaccurate and incomplete portrayal of the lives of male drivers but it is one that many young women and their families are familiar with and influenced by. Although there has been a limited demonstration effect due to the small numbers of women working as drivers, in a city of 25 million people there is currently not enough of a critical mass of female commercial drivers to ensure that women, as well as their families, would consider it a viable livelihood option. The numbers of women who are interested in learning to drive has grown dramatically since the single-digit enrolment in 2009 but there are still far too few women who see themselves driving professionally, despite Azad's extensive outreach efforts in low-income neighbourhoods throughout the city. It was beyond the scope of this research to understand why some families might be more supportive of professional driving as an occupation for women than others, but research conducted in this area would certainly be useful.

Retention is also a challenge. Approximately 40% of women who enrol in the training programme currently drop out (Vadera 2013). Large conventional skills training programmes in India – with hundreds or thousands of trainees – have similar, if not higher, dropout rates, but the effects upon morale for programmes like WOW are more dramatic because they are much smaller to begin with (ibid.). The no-interest subsistence loans offered to trainees can ensure that women do not drop out of the training due to financial reasons but there are other reasons, including child and elder care responsibilities as well as lack of confidence, motivation, and family support, which often compel

them to do so. The dropout rates for women in non-traditional occupations do tend to be high everywhere in the world (see, for example, National Women's Law Centre 2014 for selected statistics about the US).

Finding chauffeur placements for trainees after they have acquired their licences can also be a challenge due to pervasive societal biases against women drivers. Very few individuals and companies are willing to consider hiring women as drivers. NGOs (both domestic and international) and other development or charitable organisations are more willing to do so because of their commitment to social justice, but their support is not enough as the cohorts of licensed drivers grow larger every year. Taken together, these constraints may explain why Azad Foundation has in the last three years reached out to thousands of women, developed a list of 3,000 potential trainees, had conversations with almost 1,000 women, but convinced only 100 women to register with the programme Janardhan (personal interview, New Delhi, India, 15 June 2013).

It is important to emphasise that much like the Sakha drivers who are optimistic about the future, none of the programme staff perceive these challenges as unsolvable or permanent. And they do have reason to be optimistic. A database of more than 150 clients – including NGOs, private companies, and individuals – was established to enable more successful placement. By June 2013, Azad Foundation had a waiting list of employers wanting to hire its graduates and each licensed driver had at least two interviews lined up upon completion of the programme. The Chief Operating Officer stressed during an interview in mid-2013 that increasing the number of licensed drivers and reducing the time it takes the average trainee to complete training was proving to be a bigger challenge. Sakha Cabs also struggles to meet the demand for taxis, especially during holidays and festivals.

Extensive media coverage and celebrity endorsements have helped give the two organisations visibility within and outside India. Popular Bollywood actor, Aamir Khan, featured the WOW initiative in an episode of his Hindi language TV talk show, *Satyamev Jayate*. Other celebrities and even heads of state now hire Sakha Cabs when they visit New Delhi. The WOW initiative has also received several prestigious international awards for socially responsible innovation and business development. Although the media attention and awards have helped Sakha Cabs secure new clients, Azad Foundation staff are quick to point out that they have not helped generate much funding for its work. Meenu Vadera explicitly identifies securing funding for WOW as one of the most frustrating and demotivating aspects of her work. As a unique and innovative programme that helps break down boundaries for women and enables them to transform their living conditions, she had expected the rationale for the WOW initiative to be clear and compelling. She was surprised to discover otherwise.

Azad Foundation's work is currently supported by two UK-based charities, iPartner and Human Dignity Foundation. WOW also raises money through CSR initiatives, individual donors, and crowd-funding initiatives. Why have other – often better resourced entities with explicit commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment (including Indian and international development funding organisations, government agencies, and private sector organisations) – been unwilling or hesitant to support its work?

Cost-effectiveness

An entrenched but unquestioned preference for low-cost, high-volume interventions that can create a broad impact within a very short amount of time (typically less than three months) is one of the primary reasons for the hesitation – or outright refusal – to support WOW (Vadera 2013). The cost per trainee (approximately US\$850) and the training period (eight to 10 months) for the WOW initiative seems very reasonable – especially considering that it turns women who have often never ridden in a private vehicle let alone driven one into commercial drivers – but it is much higher than the average costs for livelihood training programmes for women. The founder of Azad Foundation emphasised that the maximum amount that potential funders she has approached were willing to

provide was about US\$220 per person, far too little for the type of well-rounded programme the foundation offers.

There are also fundamental disagreements between Azad Foundation and potential funders about the social and cultural appropriateness of training women to be taxi drivers. “Wouldn’t it be more appropriate for poor girls to learn to be beauticians or hotel maids?” is one question that Azad Foundation’s staff find themselves answering frequently. Given the intellectual advancements in gender and development that encourage us to challenge the social and political structures that sustain gender inequality, rather than just increase women’s access to resources, it is surprising that professional staff within funding organisations, who typically have graduate degrees in development studies or related fields, do not appreciate that training women for low-wage feminised occupations reinforces rather than challenges social hierarchies and norms. The inability to appreciate what initiatives like WOW are trying to accomplish may be a result of the relatively low priority given to gender analysis by mainstream development actors as well as the inadequacy of teaching on gender and development in conventional development studies programmes.

The fact that the WOW initiative requires women to be enrolled full-time (six to eight hours a day) for eight to 10 months is, according to Vadera (2013), also perceived as a “weakness” by some potential funders. During interviews Azad Foundation staff stressed that most livelihood programmes require women to only commit to two or three hours of training a day, thereby perpetuating rather than challenging the entrenched patriarchal logic that women would (or should) only attempt to learn “income-generating skills” after they had completed all their household chores. The WOW initiative requires a very different level of time commitment from learners as well as tough negotiations with families and communities over gender roles and domestic responsibilities. The need to provide financial resources, counselling, assertiveness and conflict-resolution training to enable women to negotiate optimal learning situations significantly increases programme costs for WOW but may also result in more transformative changes for women who complete the training. If we want to influence sustainable improvements in women’s lives, we must be concerned with more than just enabling women to cope with the status quo and to perform their traditional roles better, since empowerment and coping are distinctly different. Elson (1995, 193) elaborates:

“It is not a matter of wanting organizations that empower women as opposed to enabling them to cope, but of wanting organizations that seek to empower women as well as enabling them to cope – organizations that have the goal of transforming gender relations through practical action.”

An insistence on low costs per trainee is problematic for other reasons. The idea that a maximum of US\$220 can enable a poor urban woman to pull herself out of poverty in a matter of months while her non-poor counterparts in industrialised countries and emerging economies spend thousands of dollars to become employable is a double standard that is pervasive today in the development sector. That the tyranny of low costs reinforces existing global hierarchies based on gender and race is also patently obvious: poor women must be “empowered” as quickly and as cheaply as possible – and in very large numbers.

Even if we were to ignore our moral and philosophical discomfort with the emphasis on low costs, the perception that initiatives like WOW are not cost-effective is also untrue. From a purely economic standpoint, the total cost of the training (US\$850) is easily recovered by the trainees within a year of working as a chauffeur or taxi driver even if they also pay back the US\$200 subsistence loan to Azad Foundation during the same time. There are very few existing livelihood programmes that can make this claim. The return on investment for the learner is exceptionally high from a purely economic perspective. It is even higher if non-economic gains for the women, their families, and communities are considered.

Given this preoccupation with quantity over quality, it is also easy to understand why the 40% dropout rate from Azad’s training programme may be perceived as proof of “failure” even though the corresponding dropout rates from large livelihood training programmes, as described previously,

may be even higher. Getting potential funders to appreciate the value of making a large difference in the lives of a small number of women, while growing the programme slowly to reach more women with all its depth and detail intact, has been a persistent challenge for Azad Foundation.

Replication and scale

Much like low costs, the words “replication and scale” have assumed the status of what Žižek (1989) would call “*a sublime object of ideology*” in contemporary development orthodoxy. They are perpetually invoked but seldom defined or analysed. “Can it be replicated and scaled-up?” is a question that all development interventions are subjected to, and the WOW initiative is no exception. The high programme costs and the small numbers of women Azad has trained so far are easily invoked as impediments for scaling up the programme.

The focus on large-scale interventions may seem reasonable in a country like India that has, depending on which measures and estimates are used, between 200 and 700 million poor people. However, it is important to unpack the two terms – “replicability and scalability” – instead of invoking them together unthinkingly to understand why criticisms that Azad Foundation’s work can achieve neither are actually unfounded. Although initiatives based on public–private or private–NGO partnerships have their limitations (see, example, Baruah 2007b; Crawford 2003), the hybrid institutional model that the WOW initiative is based upon is highly replicable and is indeed currently being replicated in three other Indian cities. The fact that the WOW initiative is designed to work with small numbers of women in each training cycle should be perceived as a strength and not a weakness of the programme since it is precisely the focus on detail and depth of impact that makes the transformative differences in the lives of women and their families. Vadera (2013, 152) explains:

“In a livelihood intervention that is as socially disruptive as ours, each individual woman who chooses to complete her training and build a career as a professional chauffeur must be held within a carefully managed web of institutional systems that supports, advises, guides, counsels, and nurtures, that helps build on her strengths and launches her as a professional chauffeur.”

The WOW initiative is committed to replication (and in doing so to “scaling-up” to reach more women) as long as the quality and nuance of its programme are not compromised. By considering only numbers and not depth of impact in its conceptualisation of scale, potential funders ironically prevent WOW from replicating and scaling up its work. Emerging scholarship and practice that encourages us to move beyond “scaling up” to thinking about “scaling deep” to create more lasting social change (Coburn 2003; Koenig 2015) may encourage a different perspective about the work of organisations like Azad Foundation in the future. Other researchers have also pointed out some basic incongruities of the current architecture of aid. De la Cruz (2009) notes, for example, that funders and organisations are often stuck in a vicious cycle where small women’s groups are seen as not having the absorption capacity to grow. Consequently, funding is not increased, yet with increased funding organisational capacities would expand.

The pressure to scale-up interventions to reach millions of people without any real consideration for the depth of the impact has become so deeply entrenched that even organisations that exist to support and incubate social innovation now understand success and failure in solely numeric terms. As an example, the Ashoka Foundation, a global association dedicated to supporting the work of social innovators, turned down Meenu Vadera’s application for a fellowship because the WOW initiative was deemed too expensive and time-consuming to be scalable. Emerging research suggests that people innovate in different ways and that women may be more likely to perceive their effectiveness in terms of impact rather than scale (Segran 2010). The fact that only 40% of Ashoka fellows are women may not be surprising given the foundation’s preoccupation with conventional notions of scale. Instead of questioning its tendency to privilege scale over impact, Ashoka ironically launched an initiative called WISE: Women’s Initiatives for Social Entrepreneurship to enable women to scale up their ideas to reach larger numbers of people.

My criticisms of the obsession with cost-effectiveness and scale are not blind to the fact there is a great need for low-cost and high-volume technical and social innovations to improve the lives of poor people around the world. It is easy to appreciate the benefits that things like energy-efficient cook stoves, water purifiers, or solar lights can offer and the fact that they should probably be disseminated to large numbers of people in order to have a broad impact. The fact that such innovations, if combined with microcredit, for example, can also create livelihood opportunities for some women is also well-established. My criticism has more to do with the assumption that such one-step simplistic interventions that make no effort to question entrenched inequitable social norms or structural global hierarchies will create lasting social change.

Funding organisations must also question the practice of working only with big institutions. It is easier and much cheaper to provide large amounts of money to a few institutions than providing smaller amounts to a larger number of institutions. However, the practice of privileging logistical convenience over effectiveness often results in smaller institutions working on new and innovative initiatives being denied the opportunity to create very meaningful differences in people's lives. There will always be a need for large-scale programmes in development but instead of always spending millions of dollars in one place, going forward we must figure out how to spend US\$100,000 in ten different places. Writing about women's rights and gender equality in the context of the new aid environment, Collison et al. (2008) specifically emphasise that there is an urgent need to establish funding mechanisms that are accessible to a wide range of civil society organisations, not only the strongest and largest. Other scholars and practitioners are articulating similar perspectives. In an op-ed published in the *Toronto Star* on International Women's Day, the executive director of MATCH International Women's Fund, an Ottawa-based charitable foundation that funds women's rights organisations around the world, emphasised the need to fund small grassroots organisations that *"do not fit into the tidy mold that donors are looking for"* (Tomlin 2014).

Conclusion

The WOW initiative is an instructive example of how development impact can be broadened by linking up initiatives and creating pathways for women to use new skills and training. The transformative impact of this for very poor women in a context of highly constrained and stereotyped expectations for women should not be underestimated. Moving forward it is also important to appreciate that quantity is not always more important than quality. The depth of the impact and the detail of the intervention must also be considered critical factors in promoting gender equality and social change. Delivering quick, measurable results in large numbers is very different from delivering long-lasting development impact.

It would be unwise to conclude without locating the lessons learnt from this particular initiative in New Delhi, India within broader debates in the field of gender and development. The purpose of this article was not to argue that initiatives like WOW, which adopt features typical of neo-liberal development projects – such as corporate social responsibility contributions and a for-profit component, and that seek to empower smaller numbers of women individually as workers and entrepreneurs – are "better" in any way than organisations like the Self-Employed Women's Association and Working Women's Forum that focus on unionisation, establishment of cooperatives, and other grassroots mobilising strategies in order to create solidarity among much larger groups of women. I have written about such large membership organisations extensively, and find them equally compelling. The important lesson that emerges from this research and other research conducted in the past on resource-poor women and paid labour in India and elsewhere seems to be that similar social and economic outcomes can be accomplished using both neo-liberal and non-neo-liberal strategies. The two may not be as different and diametrically opposed as they are often made out to be in the development literature, and they certainly do not have to be mutually exclusive. Therefore, we should also remain open to the possibility of promoting gender equality and progressive social

change within the context of new and hybrid institutional arrangements, such as the one presented in this article.

Note

1. See www.sakhaconsultingwings.com for samples of media coverage.

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