



Women on Wheels in New Delhi, India: Empowering Women Through an Innovative Training and Employment Program

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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. I employ empirical research conducted in New Delhi, India with an organization 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 organizations. Moving forward, I encourage re-engagement with gender equality as a complicated social issue rather than as a technical-rational management project.

Keywords

Women, gender equality, development, taxi drivers, non-traditional occupations, social innovation, India, South Asia

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. Programs 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 (i.e. property rights, political participation and the gendered division of household labour, to name a few) 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 organizations, 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 organizations 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.

Of course, 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 in any way aimed at questioning the importance of careful marshaling 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 organizations: a non-profit organization called Azad Foundation that provides professional driving training and also organises chauffeur placement services for women after they acquire their licenses; and a for-profit taxi company, Sakha Cabs, that employs drivers trained by its sister NGO.

To inform my research, I 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, the chief operating officer and two other staff members (a program officer and a program advisor) of the WOW initiative. My interviews with the drivers were open-ended, unstructured and aimed at understanding how the training and employment provided by the WOW initiative had influenced their personal and professional lives. My interviews with the WOW staff were more structured and aimed at understanding programmatic challenges and opportunities.

I also relied upon secondary sources such as a publication called *Women with Wings: Stories about Women Drivers* 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 - had produced this publication. In order to write it, they conducted a series of 50 semi-structured interviews in Hindi with trainees and drivers at the Azad Foundation's office in New Delhi 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 organizations, 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 paper. 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* are some of the newspapers that have written about Sakha Cabs recently.¹ I assembled and analyzed this coverage as secondary data along with other relevant scholarly and practitioner literature in gender and development.

¹ samples of media coverage can be found on Sakha's website (www.sakhaconsultingwings.com).

The 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 organization 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 realizing 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 fulfill one or two of the established 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 the WOW initiative appear to acquire all three forms of capital.

It is important to emphasise that, although my 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 well 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.

A brief 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 percent 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 programs still tend to be skewed in favour of men. The limited number of "income-generation"

and skill development programs available to poor urban women in India tend to focus on stereotypically female occupations such as beautician training, tailoring and embroidery (Vadera 2013). Organizations 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 (Chen 2008; Baruah 2010). 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 (Chen 2008; Baruah 2010).

An NGO, called the 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 cities of its size 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's 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 organizations (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 8 to 10 months for each learner to complete the training program developed by the Azad Foundation. The first three months are a structured driving training program; 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 Foundation'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-defense skills are taught by the Women's Cell of the Delhi Police. The training costs about USD 85 per month. Since most women take between 8 to 10 months to complete the program and become skilled employable chauffeurs, the total cost of the program varies between USD 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 USD 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 license requires a proof of residence in the name of the licensee. This requirement is difficult even for poor men to fulfill 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 license 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; Watts 2009; Baruah 2010; Ness 2012) 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 9 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

In this section, I first elaborate upon the effects of the WOW program in the lives of drivers. Second, I discuss the opportunities and constraints facing Azad Foundation and Sakha Cabs. Finally, I describe the broader implications of the findings and identify why it is important for us to look beyond limited definitions of cost-effectiveness and scale to enable initiatives like WOW to succeed. I chose to organise findings this way because this is the order in which the research was conducted: I interviewed women about economic and social outcomes of becoming trained drivers; I interviewed program staff about institutional opportunities and constraints; and I finally used these findings to reflect on the wider implications of programs like WOW.

Economic and social outcomes for female drivers

In sharing findings about the effects of the WOW program in this section, 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 the ones 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 USD 50 to 85. The average woman in the training program has only eight years of formal schooling. Many had never traveled alone outside their neighborhoods 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 percent (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 program 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 USD 85 and 168. Taxi drivers with Sakha Cabs earn a starting monthly salary of USD 100 with guaranteed 10 percent 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 7 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 USD 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 I interviewed 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 program. 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 programs (usually high school) or other certificate and skills training programs that they had previously been forced to drop out of or 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 completely 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, the 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 is virtually unheard of for a poor woman to be able to do so prior to the introduction of the WOW program. In its first two years of operation, Azad Foundation staff had 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 licenses, 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 impressed upon me “Before I got my license, 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 licenses as proofs 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 license 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 in this article, ended up not working as commercial drivers after getting their licenses indicated that they regularly used their licenses as proofs of identity for purposes such as opening bank accounts and applying for documentation such as 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 license 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 driver's licenses should not be underestimated.

Women who train as commercial drivers do 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 program. 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 maneuver 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. It is interesting to note, however, that none of the women I have 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 I interviewed liked having to wear the uniform during working hours.

New Delhi has an extremely expensive real-estate market by any standards in the world. Several NGOs I work with have unmarked offices in less-expensive neighborhoods 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 had 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 I spoke with 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 other contributions to Nielsen and Waldrop 2014) have corroborated that gender roles tend to be malleable, that the intra-household division of labor 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 at all, 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 program relate to one another is also instructive. Although Azad Foundation and Sakha Cabs do not in any formal way 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 program as being strong influences in their motivation to complete training. Evidence of women’s willingness to support other women in the program may at least in part be attributed to their very small numbers and what Spivak (1996) has called “strategic essentialism.” To put it 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. Program staff at Azad Foundation and Sakha Cabs emphasised on several occasions that they often do not even get to 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 programs that enable poor women to make priority decisions for themselves and their dependents (Davalala *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 recently 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 programs. 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. I called two Delhi-based companies that mentioned having female drivers on their websites to learn more about their cab services. Both told me 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 programs 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's 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 has described the WOW initiative as well as other women-only taxi and bus services as "solutions" for gang rape and sexual violence (see, for example, 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 (see, for example, 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, does appreciate that reducing violence against women will require much more than women's 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 organizations and NGOs – that question and confront Indian society about its attitudes towards women. Other authors emphasise that organizations 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 costs of setting up the enterprise 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 programs 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 program. 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 who are 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 themselves 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 can see themselves driving professionally despite Azad's extensive outreach efforts in low-income neighborhoods 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 aimed at answering this question would certainly be useful.

Retention is also a challenge. Approximately 40 percent of women who enroll in the training program currently drop out (Vadera 2013). Large conventional skills training programs in India - with hundreds or thousands of trainees - have similar, if not higher, dropout rates, but the optics and effects upon morale for programs 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 licenses 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 organizations 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 a 1,000 women but convinced only 100 women to register with the program (Janardhan 2013).

It is important to emphasize that much like the Sakha drivers who are optimistic about the future, none of the program 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 waitlist of employers wanting to hire its graduates and each licensed driver had at least two interviews lined up upon completion of the program. 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. I was compelled to hire taxis with a different company on Christmas and New Year's Day because all the Sakha cabs had been booked well ahead of time.

Extensive media coverage and celebrity endorsements have helped give the two organizations 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 (most recently British Prime Minister, David Cameron) 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 members are quick to point out that they have not helped generate much funding for its work. Meenu Vadera, Azad's founder, explicitly identifies securing funding for WOW as one of the most frustrating and demotivating aspects of her work. As a unique and innovative program 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. The WOW initiative also raises money through CSR initiatives, individual donors and crowdfunding initiatives. Why have other - often better resourced entities with explicit commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment (including Indian and international development funding organizations, government agencies and private sector organizations) - been unwilling or hesitant to support its work? I identify some of the reasons under the headings of "cost effectiveness" and "replication and scale."

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 USD 850) and the training period (8 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 programs for women. The founder of Azad Foundation emphasised that the maximum amount that potential funders she has approached were willing to provide was about USD 220 per person, which is obviously far too little for the type of well-rounded program 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 the field of 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 organizations, 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 programs.

The fact that the WOW initiative requires women to be enrolled full-time (six to eight hours a day) for 8 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 programs 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, counseling, assertiveness and conflict-resolution training to enable women to negotiate optimal learning situations does significantly increase program 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 amount of USD 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 Third World 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 (USD 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 USD 200 subsistence loan in instalments to Azad Foundation during the same time. There are very few existing livelihood programs 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 percent dropout rate from Azad’s training program may be perceived as proof of “failure” even though the corresponding dropout rates from large livelihood training programs, 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 program slowly to reach more women with all its depth and detail intact has been a persistent challenge for Azad Foundation's founder and staff.

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 analyzed. “Can it be replicated and scaled-up?” is a question that all development interventions and innovations are subjected to and the WOW initiative is no exception. The high program costs and the small numbers of women Azad has trained so far are easily invoked as impediments for “scaling up” the program.

The focus on large-scale interventions may seem reasonable in a country like India that has, depending on which measures and estimates we use, 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, Crawford 2003; Baruah 2007b), the hybrid institutional model (non-profit foundation and for-profit taxi company) 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 program 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) 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 (152).” 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 program are not compromised. By considering only numbers and not depth of impact in its conceptualization 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 organizations 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 organizations 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 organizational 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 organizations 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 percent 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 indeed 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 organizations 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 programs in development but instead of always spending millions of dollars in one place, going forward we must figure out how to spend 100K 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 organizations, not only the strongest and largest. Other scholars and practitioners are articulating similar perspectives. In an op-ed that was 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 organizations around the world, emphasised the

need to fund small grassroots organizations 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 this article without locating the lessons learned from this particular initiative in New Delhi, India within broader debates in the field of gender and development. The purpose of this paper was certainly not to argue that initiatives like WOW, which adopt features typical of neoliberal 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 organizations like the Self-Employed Women’s Association and Working Women’s Forum that focus on unionization, establishment of cooperatives and other grassroots mobilizing strategies in order to create solidarity among much larger groups of women. I have studied and written about such large membership organizations 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 labor in India and elsewhere seems to be that similar social and economic outcomes can be accomplished using both neoliberal and non-neoliberal 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.

Postscript

It is difficult to predict how sustainable the WOW model (and others like it) will be in the future. A couple of newer developments in the taxi industry may complicate matters. The first is the entry of ride-share companies like Uber into the Indian market. Uber has committed to enlisting 1 million female drivers worldwide by 2020; in India, it has set a target for 50,000 drivers by

2020. Uber's major competitor in India is an Indian ride-share company called Ola Cabs, which has also committed to a target of 50,000 female drivers by 2020.

A female passenger was raped by an Uber driver in New Delhi in December 2014. Even before this happened, Uber had received a lot of criticism globally for not recruiting more women as drivers and for not being more responsive to concerns about the safety of female passengers. A combination of such pressures led Uber to briefly partner with UN Women in March 2015 to launch the 1 million women drivers' initiative (Uber Newsroom 2015). UN Women withdrew from this collaboration very shortly after (Alter 2015) over objections from the International Transport Federation (ITF) about Uber's safety record with women and the treatment of its drivers as well as broader concerns from ITF that the Uber rideshare business model creates precarious, poorly-paid, part-time work that impoverishes the conventional taxi industry, and that stands to reinforce rather than subvert women's economic disempowerment and marginalization across the globe (ITF 2015). In its response to the announcement of the Uber-UN Women collaboration, ITF emphasises that: "The creation of one million precarious, informal jobs will not contribute to women's economic empowerment and represents exactly the type of structural inequality within the labour market that the women's movement has been fighting for decades. Uber's practices are defined by an aggressive informalisation of an industry that was already deregulated three decades ago (ibid.)." Despite UN Women's withdrawal from the initiative, Uber has remained committed to its goal of recruiting 1 million female drivers by 2010.

Uber's modus operandi is quite different from social enterprises like Sakha Cabs. Unlike companies like Sakha, Uber has access to significantly more capital. The Uber and Ola model is also different in that it offers loans and other financing as well as access to garages and second-hand car dealers in order to enable drivers to own their own cars. India is the first international market in which Uber offers financing – probably because it realised quite quickly that most people interested in driving for pay in India are not wealthy enough to own their own cars. Although women's taxi companies like Sakha also incorporate hybrid public-private components into its model, it still operates as a cooperative in which drivers are shareholders. The Uber model is much more explicitly and unapologetically individualistic and capitalistic.

Both Uber and Ola have approached Sakha Cabs and Azad Foundation with offers of various kinds. The basic thrust of these offers is that Uber would offer WOW access to extensive resources, which would enable WOW to dramatically scale up its operations. In turn, Azad and Sakha would train the taxi drivers that the rideshare companies would employ. What WOW stands to gain is obvious; what it stands to lose is less obvious. And whether it is possible to collaborate with entities like Uber while also retaining the depth and detail of its own program is presently a matter of conjecture.

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