AGENCY, RESISTANCE AND

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SUBVERSION: VOICES IN THE

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FIELD

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15 ABSTRACT

17 Purpose Historically, as a result of complex intersections of margina- lisation, women and girls in India are known to have had less access to

19 economic and social capital than men and boys. Progress on poverty alle- viation and the advancement of women’s and girls’ development continues

21 to be slow and has even been described as ‘regressive’ (UN Women,

2015). This chapter provides a microanalysis of experiences and percep-

23 tions of gender and poverty in Mumbai, India. It puts forward new insights into everyday forms of agency, resistance and subversion while

25 confronting western centric ideas around development and colonialist notions of victimhood.

27 Methodology/approach Based upon research conducted in 2012 2013, the qualitative study adopting a multi-methods approach draws on partici-

29 patory action research, participant observation and ethnography. This

chapter draws on a small number of interviews from the original sample

31 of 40 participants.

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1 Research limitations This chapter is based on findings from a small research sample.

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Findings The study finds evidence that confirms experiences of

5 gendered poverty permeate across class divides, suggesting that access to economic capital does not necessarily result in equitable gender relations.

The findings also uncover the diverse ways in which women and adolescent girls strategise and negotiate to acquire agency, through acts of resistance and/or subversion.

Originality/value There are two key aspects of this research that can be considered original: the use of a multi-methods approach and by bringing together a combination of different voices. The theoretical and sociological contribution of this research lies in showcasing the value of expanding the definition of poverty and gender beyond a purely economic analysis.

15 Keywords: Gender; poverty; agency; neoliberalism;

17 development; Mumbai

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INTRODUCTION

In 1995 at the Fourth World Conference held in Beijing, after two weeks of debate, arguably one of the most progressive blueprints for women’s advancement was produced, a report called The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA). Consequently, on the twentieth anniversary, UN Women revisited the original concerns about the advancement of women’s status highlighted in 1995. Captured in a publication titled ‘The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Turns 20’ (2015) the report claims that although some gains have been made since 1995 there is a lot more work that needs to be done. The report states:

33 [t]he overall picture is of slow and uneven implementation, with serious stagnation and even regression in several areas. Progress has been particularly slow for the most mar-

35 ginalized women and girls who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimi- nation. (UN Women, 2015, p. 6)

37 Over the last three decades much has been written about the oppression of black and third-world women. Indeed western feminist discourse has

39 been the subject of much criticism by black, third-world and lesbian women

(Lorde, 1984; Mohanty & Russo, 1991). More recently, in the context of

1 poverty, development and human rights, Purewal (2015) has offered a non- western feminist critique of BPfA and Education for All. She argues that

3 the declaration has been used to further neoliberal economic policies and

neocolonial intervention in developing countries, thereby affecting women’s

5 ability to mobilise, thus suggesting that the reports published by the UN

are used strategically as an ideological weapon to proliferate a free market

7 ideology. Purewal argues that the World Bank has used girls’ education in countries such as Afghanistan as a ‘development investment’ to rationalise

9 the assertion of moral and ideological authority. Furthermore, she argues that the liberal discourse on rights does not represent those who sit outside

11 the periphery of western power, in fact local women who mobilise in countries like Afghanistan are resisting against the oppression of both the occupiers and the fundamentalists (Purewal, 2015). With this in mind, my research aims to contribute different ways of knowing (which often means challenging dominant discourses) by exploring the disjuncture between macro-level framings and micro-level everyday lived experiences and perceptions of gender and poverty.

The underlying suggestion here is that how we understand gendered poverty differs from a macro to a micro level of analysis. Therefore, my research aims to explore this disjunc- ture between macro-level framings and micro-level everyday lived experi-

15 ences and perceptions of gender and poverty.

Drawing on original empirical research this chapter aims to explore the

17 reasons why women and girls in countries such as India continue to experi- ence high levels of gendered poverty. This qualitative research, based on a

19 multi-methods approach, is used to critically evaluate its potential to

inform development practice. This approach to gendered poverty includes

21 drawing on participatory action research, participant observation and ethnography in order to understand, ‘[t]he everyday, fluid, fundamentally

23 historical and dynamic nature of the lives of third world women’ (Mohanty & Russo, 1991, p. 6). The research also aims to show the value

25 inherent in broadening the concept of poverty to include deprivation, discrimination, prejudice and inequalities, thus moving beyond a limited

27 economic analysis. The usefulness of this approach is supported by Perrons

(2015, p. 208), who argues that ‘[…] it is critical to devise policy that is

29 founded on recognition of how inequality is simultaneously gendered, racialised, and marked by other dimensions of social disadvantage if more

31 equitable and economically and socially sustainable development is to be achieved’. This chapter therefore presents a nuanced understanding of the

33 lived experiences and perceptions of gender and poverty in Mumbai, India, by uncovering the complexity of intergenerational oppression, resis-

35 tance and subversion.

India is a particularly interesting place to study as it is the second most

37 populous country in the world. The last census carried out in 2011 esti- mated the population at 1.2 billion with a sex ratio of 940 females per 1000

39 males (Census India, 2011). India’s largest city, Mumbai (formerly

Bombay), the capital of Maharashtra, is known as the commercial capital

1 of India and is home to over 19 million people, making it the fourth most populous city in the world (World Population Review, 2014). The levels of

3 inequality in Mumbai are reflected by the vast majority of the population

(64 per cent) living in slum settlements (World Population Review, 2014).

5 In light of recent international interest in rape and violence against women and girls, arising from the horrific 2012 rape and murder of Jyoti Singh

7 Pandey, questions have resurfaced about the status of women and girls.

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THE RESEARCH

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The methodology for the research was partly inspired by an ambitious

15 study, ‘Voices of the Poor’1 led by Narayan (2000) for the World Bank.

Consulting the poor is not a novel approach, and in fact Participatory

17 Poverty Assessments (PPAs) have been used by international development agencies to explore experiences of poverty, with focus groups favoured over

19 other qualitative methods (Kabeer, 2003). Where participatory methods have been used they have helped to develop a deeper understanding of pov-

21 erty. Understanding poverty as multi-dimensional, including for example, vulnerability, provides insight into the needs of poor people beyond consid-

23 eration of food and nutrition. It highlights the creative and resilient ways they achieve their goals through reliance on human, social and material

25 resources and labour (Kabeer, 2003). Although participatory approaches have been thought to have great potential to capture the complex and

27 diverse aspects of poverty, it has been argued that they have been used

‘unevenly’ and ‘incidentally’ with a lack of reference to gender (Kabeer,

29 2003, p. 101). For my research, using a mixed methodology including parti- cipatory action research, the participants were given the opportunity to

31 have their voices heard without the researcher leading the enquiry with a list of predetermined questions. The rationale was based on the argument

33 that ‘our understanding of the problems of “real” women cannot lie outside the “imagined” constructs in and through which women emerge as subjects’

35 (Sunder Rajan, 1993, p. 10). All of the women and adolescent girls (groups

1 and 2 respectively) were considered to be economically poor because they

37 were living in, or had previously lived in, slum communities or in precar- ious housing in and around Mumbai.

39 A second dimension of the research was inspired by Reis and Moore’s

(2005) edited collection, Elite Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality,

which explores the elite’s perception of poverty. Similarly, I explore the perceptions held by upper and middle class women in Mumbai. By

3 challenging the idea that the growth of the middle classes reduces levels of

poverty, Wietzke and Sumner (2014) make an important contribution and

5 argue that there is a more complex and conflictual relationship between the middle and lower income classes than theories suggest. I selected women

7 from upper and middle class backgrounds (group 3) by mapping income earning localities in Mumbai. I use the term ‘the middle classes’ to describe

9 women who live in apartment buildings that are family owned. I differenti- ate the middle classes from the socio-economic category ‘upper class’, with

11 the latter describing women who live and own property in the more affluent

areas of Mumbai. In sociology, social class and social stratification are

13 used to define groups of people into hierarchies of social categories, commonly described as upper, middle and lower class. As Dorling (2013)

15 reminds us, class categorisation relies on comparisons between groups, without which it would be difficult to conceptualise. Although I understand

17 the complexities and limitations of using class categorisations beyond upper, middle and lower income classes, due to the small sample size of my

19 empirical research I believe mapping class based on differences in housing

and spatial localities (see Dorling, 2014) serves the purpose of this study.

21 The final dimension of the research investigated the role of local, grass- roots, national and international NGOs, exploring the impact they have on

23 women and adolescent girls from low socio-economic backgrounds primar- ily resident in slum communities.

25 The subjects of the research were 40 participants divided into four groups. It consisted of eleven women and eleven adolescent girls from low

27 socio-economic backgrounds; nine women from upper and middle class

backgrounds; nine practitioners working in local, grassroots, national

29 and international non-government organisations and one social science researcher. Drawing on participatory methods, ethnography and partici-

31 pant observation, the participants in the first two groups chose from a range of methods such as photography, writing and drawing which was then followed by an unstructured

33 conversational-style interview. During this ‘conversation’ they described how their photographs, drawings and writings illustrated their experiences

35 (or perceptions) of gender and poverty in Mumbai. Using semi-structured

interviewing, the participants in the third group were asked questions about

37 their perceptions of poverty from a higher class positioning. Lastly, the participants in the fourth group were asked about the impact of their orga-

39 nisation’s intervention strategies. The analysis of the data was shaped through a coding strategy informed by my theoretical framework, with a

1 focus on the ‘everyday’ since I was concerned with capturing experiences of poverty rather than reinforcing pre-conceived notions. For the purpose of

3 this chapter, I will draw upon the commonalities and differences between

women and adolescent girls (groups 1 and 2) living in poverty and upper

5 and middle class women (group 3) (Table 1).

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9 MORE THAN VICTIMS OF POVERTY: AGENCY, RESISTANCE AND EMPOWERMENT

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Women and adolescent girls from the first two groups (1 and 2) offered an

13 alternative reading of oppression and agency to that found in colonial discourses of women in India as victims. The participants in the research

15 challenged the persistent discourse of victimhood by uncovering acts of resistance evidenced through their agency. Agency is about understanding

17 the ‘capacity of different groups to exercise choice and pursue their goals

[and provides an insight into] less empowered groups and their struggles to

19 challenge structures and negotiate change’ (Kabeer, 2010, p. 107). There are three ways to categorise the ability to exercise choice, which is through

21 resources, agency and achievements (Kabeer, 1999). It is also argued that to acquire agency there needs to be an agent who is defined as being active

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Table 1. Research Participantsa.

25 Group 1

Poor Women

Group 2 Poor

Adolescent Girls

Group 3 Upper and

Middle Class Women

Group 4 Local, National and

International NGOs

27 Bhavna Usma Kanbai Manjeet from NGO 1

Valbai Sonali Priya Assam from NGO 2

29

Rambai Alina Premila Neema from NGO 3

31 Saja Radha Panaa Marie from INGO 4

Kalavanti Rubeena Ragani Seema from NGO 5

33 Neha Sona Parini Premila from NGO 6

Sheela Lina Neesha Meera Researcher 7

35 Farah Anna Anita Vaneeta from INGO 8

Champa Saila Muskaan Sumita from NGO 9

37 Deeya Presha Ruby from NGO 10

Rambai Poonam

39

aPseudonyms are being used in this list of participants.

1 (Takhar, 2013). Agency is therefore a process where one has ‘the power within’ (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438).

3 Furthermore, agency is not only acquired through decision-making, but

can be acquired through bargaining and negotiation, deception, manipula-

5 tion, subversion and resistance (Kabeer, 1999). Therefore, if we are to understand how individual women and girls acquire agency, a more

7 nuanced approach is required. For instance, agency describes people’s abil- ity to act for themselves, but if obstructed from doing so they are consid-

9 ered to have been denied their agency, or oppressed. This research is concerned with gaining a critical understanding of the complexity of agency

11 for individual women and adolescent girls from low socio-economic back-

grounds in relation to structural oppression. It is also useful to remind

13 ourselves that the relationship between agency and structure has been debated in social theory.2 The developments in social theory and feminist

15 theory around the concepts have been increasingly used in development dis- course on gender and poverty. Indeed the work of black feminists has been

17 well documented and, by drawing on poststructuralist work on subjectivity and identity, a more complex understanding of oppression, resistance and

19 empowerment has been put forward. Although the concept of empower-

ment is contested (Karlekar, 2004) it could be argued that it is precisely the

21 ‘fuzziness’ of the concept that adds to its value (Butalia, 1993; Kabeer,

1999). This is supported by Patricia Hill-Collins:

23

Empowerment remains an elusive construct and developing a Black feminist politics of

empowerment requires specifying the domains of power that constrain Black women,

25 as well as how such domination can be resisted. (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 19)

27 Understanding empowerment as a ‘process of change’ (Kabeer, 1999), where one acquires power in order to make choices, suggests that agency is

29 not static and that empowerment enables individuals to (re)claim their agency. In the context of my research on women in poverty there are various

31 methods that NGOs use to empower women, and this is particularly evident in poverty alleviation strategies. Although NGOs in India play an important

33 role in empowering women, it is worthwhile to note that outside of NGO

intervention women are constantly negotiating and (re)constituting their

35 positions in society through forms of resistance and subversion. Even though it has been established that agency is fluid, women in India, and particularly

37 poor women, continue to be assigned the status of victim. This is due to a number of factors related to the othering of poor women: firstly by powerful

39 colonial and postcolonial discourses (Said, 1978); secondly, through the his- torical ‘cultural’ practice of sati (widow immolation); and thirdly, privileged

1 spaces reserved for privileged bodies, resulting in educated upper and middle class women speaking for poor women, as evident in the contem-

3 porary Indian women’s movement. Crimes against women are experienced

across socio-economic classes, yet it is those who occupy spaces of privilege

5 who get to be heard. It could be argued that women from low socio-eco- nomic backgrounds then become multiply and marginalised. The fluidity

7 of agency is supported by Sunder Rajan, who contends:

9 Women’s ‘agency’ (like their ‘empowerment’) can neither be viewed as an abstraction, nor celebrated as an unqualified good. Agency is never to be found in some pure state

of volition or action, but is complexly imbricated in the contradictory structures of

11 patriarchy (Sunder Rajan, 1998, p. 10)

13 Agency is fluid and dependent on context (race, class, gender, caste, time, location), and therefore needs to be theorised and understood in

15 relation to multiple dimensions: resistance, oppression, power and empow- erment. This is particularly important in the field of development as devel-

17 opment programmes can be restrictive in nature. For instance the interplay between agency and structure becomes more evident in programmes of

19 empowerment for women as they operate within strict systemic and struc-

tural parameters of power. Therefore, ‘[w]omen are either recipients of

21 development, or instruments, never agents of development as they under- stand and conceptualise it’ (Chakravarti, 2008, p. 12).3 Madhok (2007,

23 2013) takes up this complexity further by questioning whether there is a sufficient theoretical framework that considers the context, and particularly

25 the constraints imposed on women.

Despite the constraints that women experience they are involved in

27 subtle forms of everyday resistance. These acts of resistance could arguably be read as passive compliance, but Scott (1985) argues that these are self-

29 interested acts of survival and that there is awareness of action within local parameters, which makes everyday resistance covert and undercover. The

31 nuances and subtlety of resistance amongst women in poverty can be captured using this approach, although multiple subjectivities are impor-

33 tant in my research an aspect that is overlooked in Scott’s work.

Interestingly, Agarwal’s (1995) gendered analysis of women’s land rights in

35 India locates everyday resistance in resources and how struggles are defined. She pays particular attention to women’s consciousness and per-

37 ceptions, arguing that women’s everyday resistance could include acts such as foot-dragging, withholding sex from husbands and practicing silence.

39 Rather than being actions of false consciousness, she argues they could be acts of self-awareness. As I maintain, research on poverty has often failed

1 to capture such nuances. The next section, therefore, offers examples that challenge understandings of women and girls from low socio-economic

3 backgrounds as lacking agency.

5

7 EVERYDAY ‘MOMENTS’ OF AGENCY

9 Farah, in her twenties, lives in a women’s NGO in Mumbai after many years of violence and abuse from their father. Farah is incredibly passionate about social justice and gender equality and shared her plans to work in the social sector by including boys and men in

13 intervention programmes. She displayed eagerness to learn and had an inquisitive spirit. For the research, Farah produced a drawing to describe

15 women’s agency and structural oppression. Using the metaphor of a tree and its strength to weather any storm, she described women as strong sur-

17 vivors (Fig. 1):

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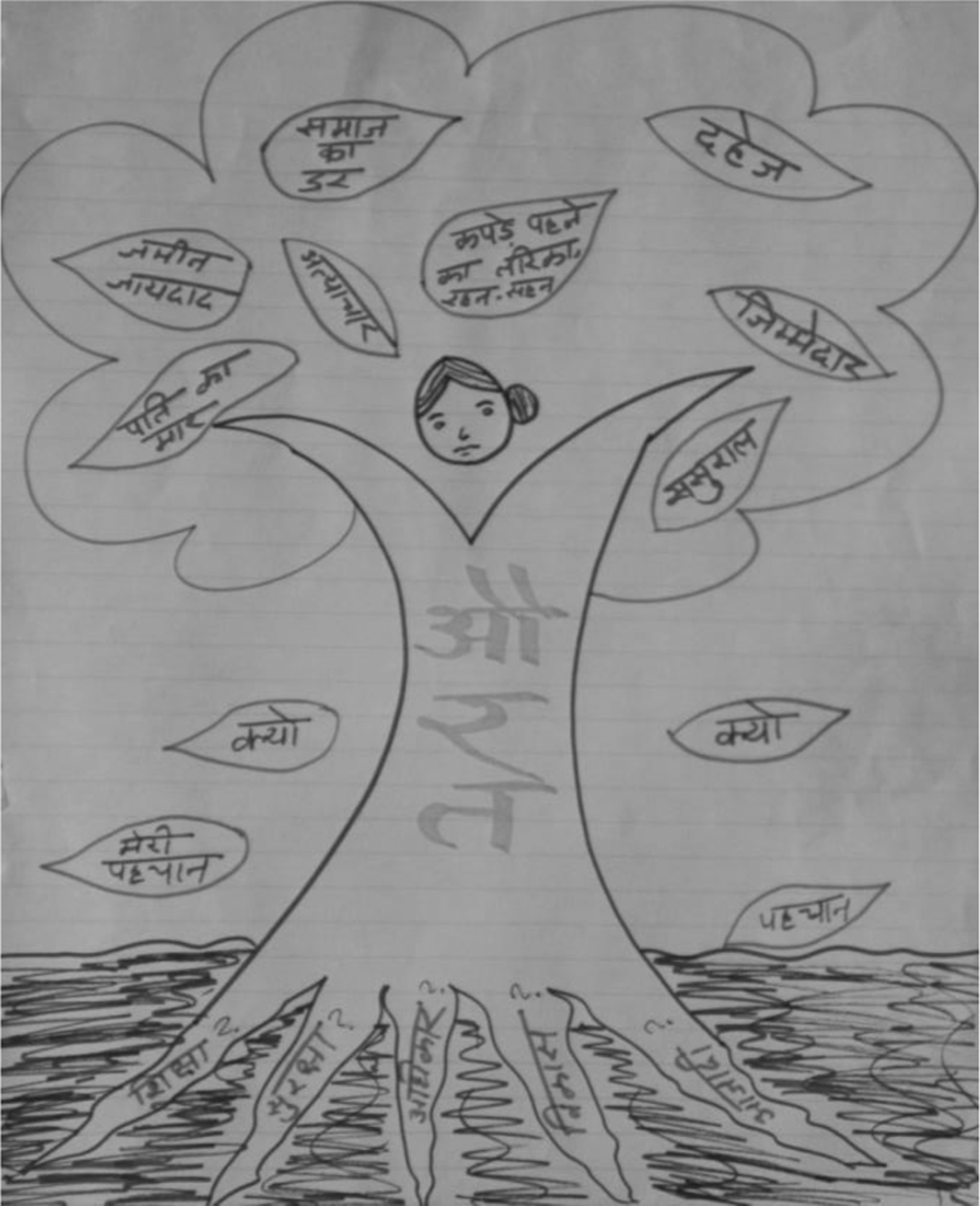
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Fig. 1. Farah’s Drawing.



1 [This] means [referring to the picture] how a lady is and what things are within her.

What happens to her and what she wants. How much of what she wants, she is able to

3 get and the things she is not able to get. I have drawn the woman as the tree, how she grows and how she progresses and how women’s welfare should be and what do people

do with her. So I have depicted a woman through the tree, she will become strong but

5 there are questions on whether she will get all the things such as education, security, rights, welfare, independence, and her own identity. (Farah, Group 1, lives in an NGO)

7 By using this metaphor to describe women’s strength and resilience, Farah suggests that it is ‘society’ that decides what women have access to,

9 even though women have dreams and ambitions for their future. Farah

distinguishes between an individual agent and society as structural, demon-

11 strating that she understands ideas of agency, structure and oppression.

Although Farah has never been married she appears to draw on her perso-

13 nal experiences of violence. For instance, she told me that a husband only

beats up his wife because of his need for power. She displays a multifaceted

15 account of gender and poverty through her drawing, where she demon-

strates the strength of a woman yet also shows she understands that

17 society, traditions, and the power of patriarchy stifle and subjugate women.

During the interview, Farah covered an array of topics by peppering our

19 conversation with many questions, mostly starting or ending with ‘why?’

She reminded me that, ‘in our constitution it is enshrined that we have a

21 right to live, right to live everywhere, right to equality’.

Referring back to her picture, she continued to question what she sees

23 as unchallenged customs and traditions that continue to push women

25 into poverty:

So, like the question is that, why do girls always have to go to her husband’s home

27 [after marriage]? Why she has to leave her own family? Why doesn’t a boy come [to the bride’s home to live]? Why does she have to change her surname? Like her roots, she

29 will grow strong as I told you before. There are questions in her mind, which don’t come out and stay in her mind like a big question on why this is happening to me? Why

people are like this for me? Why I am not getting these things? Why this thing is going

31 to my husband? Why only men are getting these things? Why am I not getting these things? The question of what is my identity, and MY identity alone and what is my

33 identity. Until I don’t get my identity how will the society know about me? That’s why these questions in some way or the other will dry out and eventually disappear and

come to an end. (Farah, Group 1, lives in an NGO)

35

Farah’s ability to identify the social problems related to gender discrimi-

37 nation, along with her questions, disrupts normative customs. Farah ques- tions why it is an accepted norm for married women to leave their families

39 and live with their husband’s family, that is, questioning the status quo.

Similar to black feminist epistemology, Farah rejects discourses that

1 disempower her, and through her engagement with the NGO finds alternative ways to create social change (Hill-Collins, 2000). Kabeer (2010)

3 argues that one’s sense of agency and self-worth is critical for change to

happen, which is evident in Farah’s narrative where she states that her

5 identity is her own. Farah’s narrative must be situated in the context of the

NGO she lives in which works to ‘empower’ its beneficiaries. Kabeer (2010,

7 pp. 107 108) refers to this as a ‘critical relational dimension to empower- ment: the power with [as] changes in individual women are unlikely to go

9 very far in changing structures but women coming together to reflect, to question and to act on their subordinate status can be a powerful force

11 for change.’

This suggests that NGOs and/or political movements are essential for

13 any social change or significant impact to take effect, without denying the potential and power of individual agency. Looking at the interviewees in the first two

15 groups, I am able to identify (by comparing interviews) which women have engaged with NGO feminist praxis and which have not. For instance,

17 Valbai, Rambai and Bhavna living in Dharavi (Asia’s largest slum commu- nity), and Deeya and Champa from neighbouring smaller slum commu-

19 nities, have never accessed an NGO and their responses are very different.

As a result of drawing on participatory research methods with no struc-

21 tured interview questions the participants revealed different means and experiences of accessing agency without being directed or led by me the

23 researcher. Even though the research did not exclusively aim to find out how poor women locate and access everyday agency, many participants

25 made reference to agency. For instance, Radha explained how she felt after their NGO organised a day outing to the beach on India’s national holiday.

29 For the first time I felt that I was really out and I was enjoying and I can enjoy, I didn’t get a chance at home to really enjoy. I enjoyed singing and I started feeling that I

should have friends that I should go out, out of the home, I felt absolutely good that

31 I could do this. (Radha, Group 2, lives in an NGO)

33 Radha left her family to marry a young man without her parents’ bles- sing. She moved from her place of birth to the city. When she became preg-

35 nant her marriage broke down and she ended up running away from her

husband. She was not able to support herself or her baby so, with the help

37 of the NGO, she gave up her child for adoption. She is currently living with a women’s NGO receiving counselling, shelter and guidance. Even in

39 her position, living in an NGO, having given up her daughter for adoption and having lost contact with her family, she has located symbiotic moments

1 of individual and collective agency by accessing a public space, the beach.

The interview captures Radha’s revelation that she can feel good, have fun

3 and access public spaces where perhaps previously she felt this was not pos- sible. Understanding these moments of agency allows us to build a fluid

5 and complex idea of gendered experiences of poverty that is usually lost in statistics. Locating Radha’s subjectivity allows us to understand how domi-

7 nation and resistance impact individual agency (Hill-Collins, 2000). As

Mohanty (2003, p. 83) states, agency is ‘thus figured in small, day to day

9 practices and struggles of Third World women’. In other words, in the con- text of women accessing NGOs, small acts of empowerment and conscious-

11 ness-raising about women’s position in society can lead to rethinking

definitions of local and individual action.

13 The next example draws on an interview with Bhavna, the youngest of three women interviewed in a family living in Dharavi. Initially Bhavna

15 was hostile but then settled into the conversation. In her late twenties, she has two children, a son and a daughter. During the interview, while she

17 was preparing dinner for her family before she started her last working

‘shift’ of the day cooking for a middle class Jain family, she came across as

19 quite assertive. She spoke openly in front of her mother-in-law and grand- mother-in-law when recalling the challenges she experienced living in a

21 joint family with her in-laws when she got married. When talking about whether she felt happy living in her own sectioned-off room, which is part

23 of the family home, she replied, ‘yes, I am happy’. I asked her,

25 Jaya: How long has it been since you made this room [a partition to create a separate room from the main and only room]?

27 Bhavna replied: I lived here [referring to the main room] for 5 years with my in laws then I’ve been here [referring to her family room] for five years. There were disagree- ments with my mother-in-law so we separated. (Bhavna, Group 1, lives in a large

29 slum community)

31 What Bhavna means by ‘separating’ is building a partition wall on one side of a narrow room, which is used interchangeably as an open plan

33 kitchen, living room and bedroom for three adults, measuring approxi- mately 3 × 2 square metres (some of this space is also taken up by a narrow

35 stairwell). The second room (Bhavna’s family room) that is sectioned off, measuring approximately 2 × 2 square metres contains a compact second

37 kitchen and a small God shrine hanging on the wall. By night the room becomes a sleeping area for her family (two children and husband). The

39 agency that is particularly interesting is Bhavna’s transparency and honesty with a stranger in the presence of her in-laws, sharing information about

1 why she has a separate home to that of her mother-in-law. This differs from the interview given by Priya, an upper class woman, who, despite hav-

3 ing grievances about the management of her finances with her husband and

his parents, fails to be open in the presence of her mother-in-law or to take

5 any action to make changes. On the one hand Bhavna, living in a slum community, would appear to have more agency as she creates change that

7 she equates to her idea of self-worth (Kabeer, 2010). On the other, Priya is careful not to divulge these feelings of resentment in the presence of her

9 mother-in-law during the interview, and in fact shared this information with me when walking me out of the apartment onto the main road.

11 This comparison challenges an understanding of poor Indian women as

docile, powerless, and with little agency to create change. Although this

13 comparison challenges (to a certain extent) ideas of agency, power and pov- erty, it however forms part of a collection of experiences that cannot be

15 generalised.

17

19 UPPER AND MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN’S PERCEPTIONS OF THE POOR AND THEIR AGENCY

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This last section of the chapter explores upper and middle class women’s

23 agency, and locates the imagined agency they attribute to women and girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds. One of the dimensions of my

25 research on poverty and gender was to explore upper and middle class women’s perceptions of poverty in Mumbai. Without my probing some of

27 the women willingly shared their own experiences of gendered poverty.

Here, the aim is to demonstrate there are no class boundaries when it

29 comes to how gendered poverty is experienced. Women and girls living in the rich neighbourhoods of Mumbai are heavily policed and a great deal of

31 emphasis is put on the preservation of their reputations (Phadke, Khan, & Ranade, 2011). For upper class women, access to public space is limited to

33 a chauffer driven car. It can be seen that economic power is often used to purchase an escape from the city entirely, to a form of privacy away from the gaze of

35 the community and gendered public spaces. Here there is minimum pres- sure to perform class identity. Although wealth gives access to material

37 products and expensive luxurious experiences, access to choice outside of this seems limited. This raises questions about whether upper class women

39 can fully exercise, or have similar levels of access to, agency as compared to poor women.

1 Reminiscent of the findings in Phadke et al.’s (2011) study, Parini, an upper class woman from group 3, offered an account of her perception of

3 agency from an elite upper class perspective. When talking about marriage

and divorce, Parini comments:

5

I think women are definitely becoming more educated they are beginning to give it back

to the guys. I know a lot of women who are getting divorced because they’re not put-

7 ting up with it absolutely not putting up with the string of bad treatment by their hus-

bands, they would rather be single and have a life rather than pander around and be

9 stuck with a marriage that is not doing anything so which I applaud. (Parini, upper class woman, Group 3)

11 Parini’s perception is that women are responding differently to bad marriage experiences, where historically women have stayed due to family

13 pressure and responsibilities to perform class and gender. Furthermore, she

equates this to an increase in education, which allows women to make an

15 alternative choice. In order to challenge oppressive practices, or in Parini’s words the ‘string of bad treatment’, empowerment needs to be deployed

17 which could be in the form of ‘self-confidence, education and economic development’ (Sudbury, 1998, p. 61). However, another participant,

19 Ragani from group 3, suggests that education can only help women to a certain degree, stating:

21

For them [the poor] it’s even worse, at least in our [upper and middle classes] case peo-

23 ple are educated so the girls can be rebellious about it and can get their way sometimes. (Ragani, middle class woman, Group 3)

25 This quote leads me to question whether ‘getting away with it some- times’ suggests an expression of agency. Agency and poverty were also con-

27 veyed by another participant, Priya, who retold the story of her friend who left her marital family home because her husband’s family rejected her

29 unborn female foetus, demanding that she terminate the pregnancy because of their preference for a boy child. Priya shared this anecdote as an exam-

31 ple of the structural oppression that women from upper and middle class families experience. It offers insight into first- and second-hand experiences

33 and perceptions of agency and structural oppression. My interest in upper and middle class women’s agency is to question whether economic ‘poverty

35 increases the likelihood of agency deprivation’ (Klugman et al., 2014, p. 5), and to explore whether gendered poverty extends to all women across class

37 divides. Therefore, it could be argued that women from rich, upper or mid- dle class families who are unable to exercise choice are in fact experiencing

39 poverty due to gendered oppression. The poverty I refer to does not have to be exclusively economic and/or material deprivation (although for some

1 they may well also experience this), but could include other forms of struc- tural deprivation, such as unequal access to decision-making and resources

3 within the home. Drawing on perceptions that upper and middle class

women have of women from low socio-economic backgrounds, the research

5 findings showed that some of the women in group 3 perceived poor women to have agency that would allow them to exit poverty. I use the term

7 ‘imagined agency’ to describe the construction of the belief that the poor have the ability to exit deprivation, that is, if they choose to. For example, when

9 I asked Priya from group 3 to share her thoughts on what she believed poor women could do to lift themselves out of poverty, she replied with

11 great conviction:

13 There are a lot of self-help groups that can be formed by women, sometimes you need a lot of support in terms of sponsoring your initiatives except that at the end of the day if

you have any skill and you really want to make something out of it and everybody gets

15 together anything is possible. Secondly, they all need to get educated and this is the

biggest problem. (Priya, upper class woman, Group 3)

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Priya has put forward an imagined idea of agency that she believes

19 women and girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds have access to in order to lift themselves out of poverty. She gives little consideration or thought

21 to the structural oppression that women experience. Although very com- plex and fluid, the participants across the four groups pointed to various

23 forms of structural oppression as the cause of gendered poverty, and these formed three distinct groups of governance. I have attempted to capture

25 this in the model I have termed the ‘tri-dynamic system of oppression’. The term aims to foreground the dynamism, fluidity and changeability of those

27 structural forces which are the three sources of oppression the participants alluded to in their interviews. They include State governance, that is, failure

29 to protect women and girls; strong orthodox norms, values and beliefs which are based on morality and woven into culture and religion; and

31 neoliberal economic policies (Fig. 2). The triangular area at the centre of the diagram shows the interconnected relationships between the three

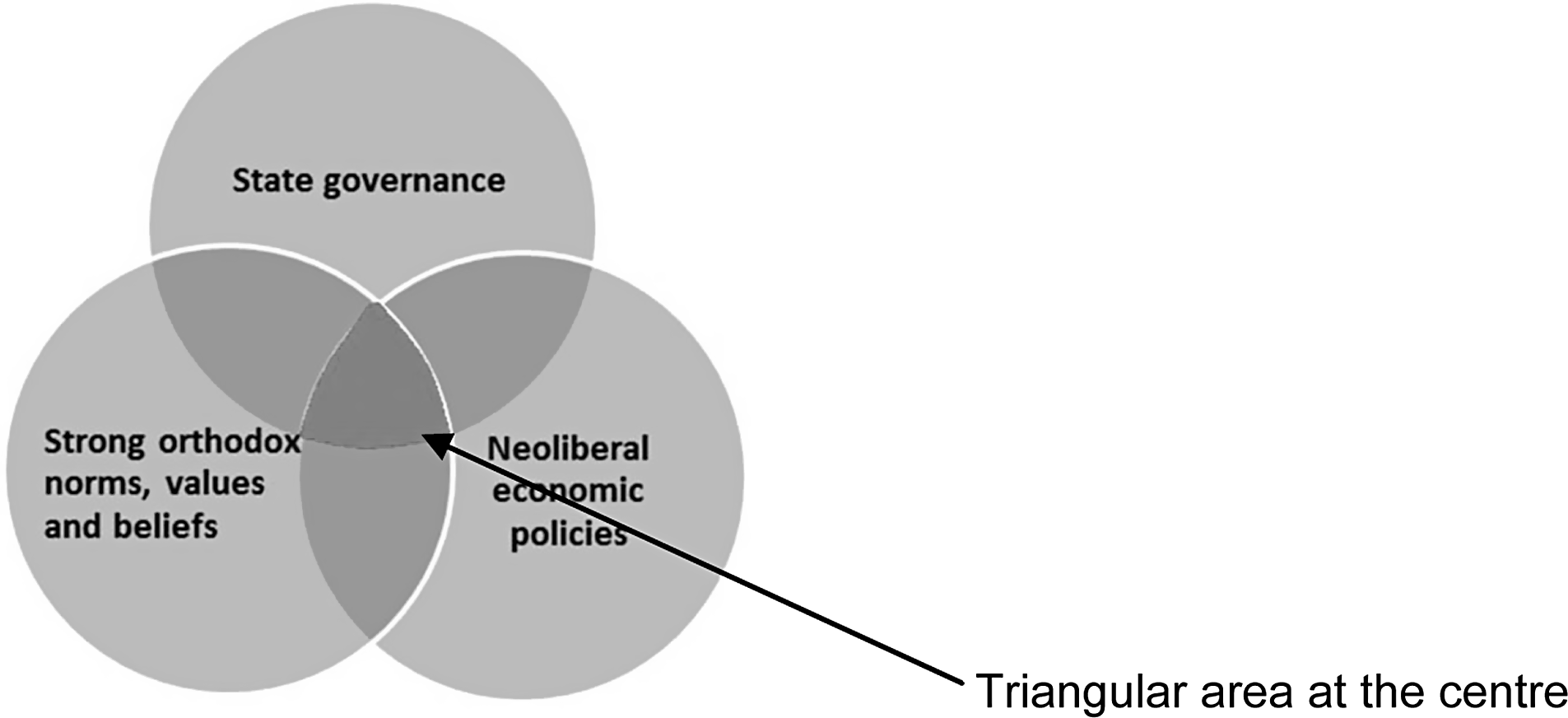
33 sources of oppression which collectively impact the lived experiences of women and adolescent girls.

35 In group 3, the group of upper and middle class women, Priya’s response was very similar to Muskaan’s and Anita’s perceptions of poverty.

37 Although many of the women in the upper and middle class group under- stood poverty as an economic issue there was some understanding that

39 culture had an impact on women’s quality of life. However, this was not made very explicit in relation to their ideas about how women could escape

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Fig. 2. Tri-Dynamic System of Oppression.

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15 their poverty. In fact, the responsibility of continuing to live in poverty was placed on the women themselves. This meritocratic attitude to gender and

17 poverty is evidenced in the following statement:

You see poverty is not your choice but coming out of it is definitely your choice, so if

19 you want to come out of it definitely you have many choices. You can be a housemaid, you do anything, and you can just earn your own money and come out of it you defi-

21 nitely do not have to stay in it. (Muskaan, middle class woman, Group 3)

Not only is Muskaan’s quote an example of understanding poverty as

23 solely economic but she believes that women and girls experiencing gen- dered poverty somehow have access to choices, although this is not clarified. Neoliberalism impacts on how individuals are seen and how meritoc- racy ‘naturally’ rewards those who strive to be better. Education featured

27 in all of the interviews with upper and middle class women as the magic formula to exit poverty. However, none of the interviewees in group 3

29 made any reference to what ‘education’ actually meant to them and how an education could be transferred into a livelihood. In fact, Anita’s quote was

31 interesting as she said:

33 See education to the females first, especially the adolescent girls before they get married, educate them so they can fend for themselves so they don’t need to have to depend on

the government so much. (Anita, upper class woman, Group 3)

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This quote suggests that she believes gaining an education is empower-

37 ing, but more than that, she reveals perhaps a normalised attitude to matrimony. Gendered heteronormativity is a discourse relating to how we

39 think about sexuality and how identity is categorised. The programmed expectation of attaining a heterosexual marital union offers an insight into

1 heteronormative discursive practice, a system that is carried on and nor- malised through religious practices and across the different classes studied

3 within the research. This demonstrates commonality of experience by all

the participants in the groups, through the State’s incompetency to provide

5 gender security, norms and values that dictate gendered behaviour and neoliberalism that promotes individualism and competition.

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CONCLUSION

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To conclude, this chapter has attempted to offer new perspectives on how

13 gendered poverty is examined through micro site research conducted in

Mumbai, India. The empirical data has enabled me to generate a nuanced

15 understanding of gender and poverty by describing the fluidity, synergy and complexity of the lives of poor women and adolescent girls. As a result,

17 this has offered some insight into the persistence of gendered poverty despite ground-breaking work by feminists and activists over the years.

19 While the economic analysis of poverty serves an important purpose it is nonetheless limited in its usefulness for understanding the complex relation-

21 ship between poverty and gender. A multi-method research approach has enabled me to display some of the complexity around agency and

23 oppression by allowing the women and adolescent girls in the research to contribute their own experiences and insights about how they experience,

25 negotiate and perceive gender and poverty in Mumbai. As a result, the con- tributions serve as important examples and reminders of how much is

27 missed out from economic analysis and poverty alleviation strategies.

Indeed the accounts demonstrate how participants access their agency

29 despite living under a myriad of systemic and structural oppressions. As a result, the accounts challenge development discourses that have historically

31 presented third-world women only as victims of the economic climate and/or cultural practices. This is not to say that this is not so, and in fact

33 the research argues for a more complete complex articulation of gender and poverty, rather than one that overburdens poor women and girls with

35 expectations of saving communities and the planet or one that underesti- mates their abilities.

37 With that said, partly inspired by the dynamism of the city, where the intimacy between the rich and poor is overtly evident, I integrated upper

39 and middle class women’s perceptions of gendered poverty in the design of the study, as explored in the latter part of this chapter. Although the initial

1 aim was to juxtapose their perceptions of poverty with marginalised women in group 2, I quickly found that in fact there was a blurring of perceptions

3 and experiences of gender and poverty among the upper and middle class

women in group 3. Some of the findings that I highlight here include how

5 upper and middle class women’s perceptions of poverty underestimate real experiences of poverty, while many describe similar experiences of gendered

7 oppression among affluent households to that of poorer women. As a result, the inclusion of perceptions and experiences of gender and poverty

9 from different class positions has enabled me to contribute to the on-going investigation to understand gendered poverty.

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13 NOTES

15 1. ‘Voices of the Poor’ consists of three books which bring together the experi- ences of over 60,000 poor women and men. The first book, Can Anyone Hear Us?,

17 gathers the voices of over 40,000 poor women and men in 50 countries using partici- patory poverty assessments; the second book, Crying Out for Change, draws mate-

rial from a new 23 country comparative study. Lastly, the final book, From Many

19 Lands, offers regional patterns and country case [studies. www.web.worldbank.org/](http://www.web.worldbank.org/)

WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/0,,contentMDK:20613045∼men

21 uPK:336998∼pagePK:148956∼piPK:216618∼theSitePK:336992,00.html

2. For example, Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory and Pierre Bourdieu’s habi-

23 tus, field and capital (1977) position agency and structure as interdependent and recognise them as equally important concepts for understanding society.

3. Drawing on the collaborative project between women activists and the state to

25 develop a Women’s Development Programme (WDP), also known as the ‘Sathin’

programme in Rajasthan, Chakravarti (2008) complicates the conceptualisation of

27 agency and power. The women beneficiaries in the study identify two central con- cerns: land rights and access to health. However, unfortunately, in relation to the

issue of land rights, the WDP fail to challenge the issue due to its political nature.

29 Although evidently, there were some gains made by the WDP, unfortunately as a

response to the long period of drought, the state integrated the food-for-work-pro-

31 gramme with female sterilisation, to push through the family planning agenda while ensuring government targets were met. Although the women beneficiaries of the

33 programme mobilised and protested, unfortunately this led to government officials terminating the entire WDP.

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