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## **Introduction: Vol 27 No 3, Feminist values in research**

**Katy Jenkins, Lata Narayanaswamy and Caroline Sweetman**

Welcome to the Feminist Values in Research issue of *Gender & Development*. In May 2018, *Gender & Development* journal and the Women and Development Study Group of the UK Development Studies Association (DSA) co-hosted a seminar of the same title, to celebrate the journal's 25<sup>th</sup> birthday. This issue includes articles initially presented there, alongside a range of others, commissioned in line with our usual practice from an open Call for Contributions.

To ensure international development supports women's rights and gender equality, it is essential that feminist values infuse and underpin every aspect of research. Feminist values in research may be understood in a variety of ways. The overarching goal is to create spaces and opportunities to reveal lived realities of power inequalities and difference, and provide evidence that can be deployed in working towards addressing these engrained inequalities. Feminist values are most often deployed to challenge the continued marginalisation of poor women and girls from decision-making, resources and opportunities in a range of contexts. Feminist values and a related focus on 'gender' can also allow us to talk about sexual orientation and gender identities in all their diversity, and gendered power relations between individuals and groups. Our starting point in the curation of the workshop that inspired this issue of the journal is that the research process should reflect feminist values, empowering the people who participate in it.

Research into the gendered nature of development and analysis of its failure to recognise and/or respond to the differential needs and challenges of women and men is a critical part of feminist activism and transformation, and this is as true today as it was when *Gender & Development* journal was launched. Above all, feminist researchers in international development are interested in power: its nature, the ways it can be wielded, and by whom. We are interested in the effect powerful institutions and the elites who head them have on gender inequality, the material effects of which tend disproportionately to affect women and girls living in poverty in the global South. We want to understand how the slow progress

to women's equal rights is going, where it is encountering resistance, and how women and girls – in particular the most marginalised - are finding opportunities to negotiate with the powerful, find spaces for resistance, and organise for empowerment. The political project that we all share, to achieve gender equality by asserting full and equal rights, is about using agency – 'power to' and 'power with' – to challenge patriarchal 'power-over'.

Feminist researchers in international development are working in a space where there are multiple intersecting relations of power operating concurrently in interlocking ways, privileging women from high-income countries, white women, and women from powerful elites and majority groups. Among the first global feminist research collectives was the pathbreaking Development with Women for a New era (DAWN) network, which in the 1980s put forward its feminist, postcolonial analysis of international development. It is this vision that underpinned the global vision forged at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. The challenge since has been for the feminist movement to avoid gender equality and women's rights goals being co-opted by the 'mainstream' in ways that depoliticise feminist struggle, and to ensure that feminist research nurtures space for the expression of diverse, contextualised understandings of gendered power imbalances. *Gender and Development* has always sought to accommodate these different approaches whilst striving ultimately to promote gender equality.

The writers in this issue represent a diverse group of feminists working in academia, policy research and practice – including monitoring, evaluation and learning. Each of these different contexts holds specific challenges for feminists, but the key feminist value underpinning all their research experiences is the aim of challenging and ending inequality between women and men, affirming women as expert knowers, marginalised by patriarchal power yet exercising agency in often constrained circumstances to further their interests and needs, and those of their dependents. This special issue, and the workshop from which it emerges, aim to provide a space where researchers can reflect upon their own experience of research – as investigators, participants, practitioners, academics and/or activists – and the challenges and contradictions they have faced in conducting feminist research, from practical and organisational barriers and struggles, to ethical and methodological dilemmas. How does embedding feminist values in research enable us to navigate and deal with

difficult subjects and sensitivities in ways that might otherwise not be possible? How do feminist research practices enable us to translate our values into meaningful ways of tackling inequalities, poverty and exclusion in the global South? The papers in this issue grapple with these issues across a wide range of different development contexts.

### **Looking at research through a gendered lens**

Historically, educated and predominantly white and Northern male elites have defined knowledge and learning, placing a high value on research involving 'objective' methods seen as removing the dangers of bias and revealing 'facts'. Feminists, however, have highlighted the unconscious bias embedded in these apparently value-free research methodologies, and the skewed findings that result from the assumption that researchers can remain neutral and external to any research process. There has also been a tendency to ignore difference, instead starting from an assumption that there is nothing distinctive and different about the experiences of women, girls and non-gender conforming groups – or that these distinctions and differences between women and men are not significant or important to analyse and include in findings; the experiences of men have been assumed to be the norm, from which others deviate.

In international development research, unconscious biases that privilege male, Western European and US ideas about women and men, and gender roles and relations, and which reproduced colonial thinking, created early international development programming that ignored the existence of very different ways of thinking about sex, gender, family and society, and different divisions of labour and responsibility in households and communities. When international development policies misfire, they can do significant harm, as feminists researching the impact of gender-blind development have shown over four decades.

International development policies of past decades have had the most devastating and damaging effects on women and girls who are most distanced from power and resources, due to other aspects of their identities. This, too, is currently being acknowledged in 'mainstream' international development thinking, and expressed in global policy commitments. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflect a global acknowledgement that complex inequalities (including but not limited to age, education,

religion, ethnicity, caste, and SOGI [sexual orientation and gender identity]) need to be better understood in order to ensure they can be challenged by a new generation of development initiatives informed by intersectional feminist approaches aiming to achieve the aim of the SDGs, of 'leaving no-one behind'.

In this issue, authors emphasise the link between who does the research, and the quality of the findings and analyses that emerge. They are also keen to emphasise how they interact with the research process, and the challenges this creates for pursuing feminist research values where they see themselves as part of, rather than separate to, the research process. Research, like all other human endeavours, needs to be instigated by individuals and teams with diverse identities and experiences, to reflect the needs and interests of all in society. Across much of the global South we see the emergence of a new generation of committed feminist scholars, and *Gender and Development* journal remains a key outlet in opening up spaces for diverse feminist voices to be heard.

Emerging researchers are building on a literature and a history – or 'herstory' – of activism inside and outside the academy, with University-based researchers joining forces with feminists working in women's movements and inside government and development NGOs of all sizes. Gender inequality and women's rights are still goals to be achieved in the future, but it is now much less acceptable to ignore the need for gender-disaggregated data in large survey research, or to make assumptions about farmers being male, or assume women will - indeed, should - perform all the unpaid care work in a community. Feminists of many different hues – post/decolonial thinkers, feminist economists, feminist anthropologists among them – have had a profound influence in how we think about research, the research agendas selected for funding, the methods used and the way findings are disseminated. But – as the writers in this issue highlight – there is still a very long way to go to ensure international development research achieves feminist outcomes.

### **Equality, power, and ethics: the importance of self-reflection to feminist researchers**

As we suggested above, a critical element of the feminist research process is for feminist researchers to reflect on their own position and location in relation to their research participants, in this case in the global South. Every writer whose voice is included in this

issue considers this question, sharing their self-reflections on who they are and how their lives have shaped the ways they see and understand the world around them. While earlier generations of researchers in both the natural and social sciences strove to attain 'objectivity', seeing the idea that they may be biased as a flaw and something to be challenged – and denied – feminist researchers reject the idea that objectivity is attainable, seeing it instead as important to develop as sophisticated a sense of their own biases as is possible.

Feminists' focus on these issues has put them at the forefront of research ethics and allied them to proponents of participatory, iconoclastic approaches to research including Robert Chambers (**date**), challenging notions of development as something done by experts and highly educated professionals, to people in so-called developing countries who lack material resources and essential services. Such participatory approaches, at their best, and notwithstanding their many critiques, open up the possibility of developing research that responds to, and emerges from, the needs of marginalised groups and communities, involving them in conceiving and undertaking research that they and their allies can deploy to effect meaningful change on the ground.

Feminist praxis [1] demands that we try, where possible, to equalise the relationship between researchers and the research subjects – people whose lives are being researched. Taken to its logical conclusion, these two categories should become one and the same, with participants undertaking action research into their own experiences and knowledge. There may be a role for an outsider to work with them, but this relationship is far from the traditional one familiar to formally educated, technically-trained 'experts', who extract data and present it in technical, often highly abstract and theoretical terms, accessible only to others with similar levels of formal education. In these projects, the role of the outsider may be to train participants in an unfamiliar technology that they will use to record the data, and to work with them to develop appropriate, context specific analytical tools to make sense of it. The outsider may also facilitate access to decision-makers – for example, government officials in charge of budgets who could change women's lives for the better if they are exposed to the research findings.

In this issue, several authors discuss experiences of this kind where the research data itself – and the direction the project takes as the data mounts up - is determined and controlled by the research participants. The role of the researcher transforms from an expert harvesting ‘raw data’, to an enabler of a project where participants themselves explore and analyse their knowledge, creating a finished ‘product’ to share, aiming to further their own priorities through influencing power-holders and decision-makers. In her article, Elsa Oliveira offers a personal reflection on the journey she took into research with sex worker migrants in South Africa, where she uses participatory arts-based methods:

*What I most enjoy about the research process is the opportunity to listen to stories, and the possibility of making a difference through active listening and witnessing. In my opinion, feminist and participatory research traditions facilitate communication and exchange, and have values that extend beyond simply expanding academic knowledge. We should therefore not treat academic work as constitutively different from activism, but rather conceptualise research processes as political practices*

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Leva Rouhani’s article discusses the experience of working with rural women involved in Mothers’ Associations to promote girls’ education in Benin, West Africa. Women used digital story-telling as their method of relating and analysing their experiences and articulating their priorities at workshops, advocating for adult literacy classes as well as changing attitudes in the community about the factors that affect girls’ education. Leva Rouhani says:

*As a feminist researcher committed to collaborative methods and challenging the power dynamics between myself and the participants, my goal was to support participants to take ownership over the research process, giving them agency and support to identify challenges and facilitate critical reflection*

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These are inspiring case studies of innovative feminist research and practice. Yet these writers - and others in the issue - would be first to say that it may not be possible to ever entirely succeed in equalising the power relationship between professional researchers located in academic, policy and practice research institutions, and women and girls living in contexts deemed to be resource-poor, fragile and conflict affected, or in some other way deemed to 'require' the intervention of international development policymakers and practitioners. Indeed, reflecting on researchers' own role and complicity in this global system is critical in order to try to become part of the solution, But there is always an element of double-think in this for anyone involved in research who is located in a position of relative power in a university, a large development NGO, government organisation or policy think-tank. Yet much can be achieved through respectful collaboration. While researchers continue to work with women and girls as well as non-gender conforming groups in poverty, the articles reflect the way in which feminist researchers continually challenge themselves in relation to rebalancing or softening such complex but unequal power relations.

Feminist lead researchers also have to consider similar issues in relation to the members of their research teams: local staff employed as translators, research assistants, enumerators, and translators. The knowledge and insights of these local staff are often appropriated and presented in research findings under the names of lead researchers, whose careers flourish in an international context where their prospects and their bargaining power as professionals are both starkly different from the local staff who have given so much to the work. In these relationships, feminist lead researchers need to 'walk their talk' on partnership and challenge the norms and conventions of research that are rooted in colonial and post-colonial racism.

In relation to this point, the article by Dashakti Reddy, Clare Hollowell, Lona Liong Charles Aresto, Nyaboi Grace, Mängu Bande Joseph, Joseph Aleu Mayen Ker, Jane Lado and Kiden Mary in this issue offers interesting insights into the need to ensure feminist research tools reflect an awareness of intersectionality – specifically, the ways that culture and race intersect with feminism. . The first-named writers are two 'expatriate' researchers who led research into gender-based violence in South Sudan. The research relied significantly on a team of local researchers, with whom the piece is co-authored, and the two 'expatriate'



team leaders were keen to create spaces for the research team to collectively address the possible stress induced by the experience of researching GBV in South Sudan. Yet local researchers' ways of dealing with this stress were very different. Instead of using the spaces created for sharing emotional responses as they were intended, local researchers saw them as valuable for building professionalism, enabling them to respond appropriately to the traumatising stories they heard. The article emphasises that feminist principles, tools and practices cannot be taken-for-granted but also need to be interrogated from a critical perspective, fully conscious that they may reflect ways of thinking that fail to respond to the realities of local researchers. Once again, we are reminded of the importance of closing the distance between researchers, research participants and research support staff, a point also taken up by Leung et al (this issue) who emphasise that their feminist principles extended to tackling under-representation of women in researcher roles through prioritising the use of women local researchers, and providing extensive training to their collaborators on the ground.

### **Researching sensitive issues from a feminist perspective**

Because the 'personal is political', and many of the issues of most critical importance to women concern issues that have historically been seen as private, and/or sources of stigma or shame, a key focus of feminist researchers is to research these topics and air them, asserting the importance of exposing them to public debate. Research into violence against women (VAWG) and gender-based violence (GBV) is an obvious example of naming and exploring the dimensions of a social issue affecting all women, whether or not they directly experience this violence themselves; knowledge that it is a possibility shapes women's and girls' lives in countless ways. The ramifications of researching violence against women (VAWG) in a fragile, conflict-affected context is discussed in this issue by Dashakti Reddy et al, who focus on the impact on local researchers, as described in the last section.

Mirna Guha researched the lives of women formerly and currently involved in sex work in Kolkata, India. Mirna Guha came from a development practitioner perspective to her academic research, and as an Indian national, illustrates the ways in which insider:outsider distinctions are often blurred, and the multiple, overlapping positionalities that we all

occupy as researchers, a theme that cuts across all the papers in this issue. Mirna Guha's article begins with a discussion of the exclusion of sex workers from the mainstream feminist movement, and their marginalisation from policy discussions on VAWG. Perspectives on women selling sex are, as she says, 'sharply divided' in feminist movements from Anglo-American traditions – and many feminists with that heritage are currently working in international development. Some radical feminists see the act of a man purchasing the use of a woman's body as a patriarchal act of dominance that should be seen as violence against women. For other feminists, listening to the stories of sex workers and their accounts of lives made harder and more dangerous by laws that drive sex work underground and further stigmatise women who sell sex, the priority is to destigmatise sex work and understand it as a choice taken by women whose right to control their own bodies and lives should not be in question. In international development, policies and programming reflect both these positions.

The nuanced accounts of women sex workers are critical to better inform those with responsibility and power to determine policies around sex work. But it is a challenge to present these in ways that allow the diversity and range of views of different individuals and groups to cut through. One response is to consciously choose research methods which allow for sustained narrative voice from participants, who can then tell their stories in their own words. For Mirna Guha, using life histories within an open-ended ethnographic research approach allowed the possibility:

*...to move away from standard topics associated with sex work. It also allows women in sex work to share their accounts of the dynamism and fluidity within their lives, within and before/after sex work.*

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Spending time with women, 'ethnographically "hanging out"' (ibid.) preceded more formal interviews, to build trust and rapport with them. Women expressed surprise that the conversations and interviews touched on subjects and came from angles that they did not expect from researchers. Many communities in the global South are well-acquainted with

social science researchers scrutinising their lives, but many of the topics that feminists ask about – sex, violence, the drudgery of unpaid care work and women’s thoughts on marriage and other topics – are still unexpected topics to be expected to discuss with anyone beyond close friends and neighbours. Feminist principles of equality and reciprocity informed Mirna Guha’s decision to make the process of research questioning a two-way one. The women involved in her research quizzed her on issues of her own personal life. Teasing, cracking jokes, and smoking together created a relationship that subverted the power dynamics of traditional interviewing.

Asking questions about sensitive subjects is just one aspect of deciding how to produce research that minimises harm to respondents. Crucially, Mirna Guha also reminds us of the need to sometimes be silent as researchers, and also the importance of establishing boundaries that ensure both our participants’ and our own wellbeing. A related issue is around the use of pseudonyms and anonymity in the writing up of research.. In her article, Rebecca Gordon compares the advice given to her by the authorities at her university with her own thinking about the question of anonymising the views of women she interviewed in Bihar, India. ‘Why would I want to be anonymous?’ asked one participant, wanting to have her words included together with her name. Her views would then be clearly her own. As Rebecca Gordon says, feminist researchers anxious not to appropriate knowledge may well feel that giving credit to research participants by naming them is a positive thing. What emerges here is the acknowledgement that the ethical standards to which we must strictly adhere if we are to have projects ‘approved’ by our institutions are not always appropriate in the field. Instead, issues are best resolved by paying adequate attention to the views of women involved in the research, and giving them decision-making power, along with sufficient information for them to be fully informed about the consequences of these decisions. As Elsa Oliveira (this issue) observes:

*Participants should have a say in how research unfolds and how they are represented, but at the same time it may not be equitable to assume that they have the same investment or interest in research and its significance or value.*

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## **‘Quant versus qual’: feminist researchers need both!**

Qualitative research methods – including case studies, life histories, participant observation and focus group discussions, as well as innovative digital and arts-based methods used by Elsa Oliviera and Leva Rouhani (both this issue) – have the ability to generate rich and nuanced data, often allowing data collection to evolve over time, as the researcher interacts with participants. Such approaches enable the gradual revelation of experiences, and the elicitation of data that both foregrounds the diversity of individual experience and also allows the researcher to develop an understanding of a collective or typical experience amongst a particular group. In short, qualitative research keeps the attention on individual human experiences, with the similarities and differences between them in sharp focus.

This is not, however, to undermine the strategic value of employing quantitative methods. This is also valuable, but in a different way. In their article in this issue, Loksee Leung, Stephanie Miedema, Xian Warner, Sarah Homan, and Emma Fulu provide an antidote to any argument that good feminist research is only qualitative. Theirs is a compelling account of the worth and many uses of quantitative research when placed in feminist hands, with methods selected for a particular reason, and augmented with equally carefully-selected qualitative methods. Both ‘quant’ and ‘qual’ have unique contributions to make.

An example is the widely-used ‘one in three’ statistic on global VAWG. This is discussed by, Loksee Leung *et al* in their account of the gradual progress of VAWG up global policy agendas. Yet the one in three figure is frequently pilloried for failing to reveal the variety of different forms of VAWG, and failing to inform about the causes. Quantitative data is also often critiqued by feminists because whilst it is seen by many to be objective and reliable, there is still subjectivity involved in its creation, and it can over-simplify what are often complex social problems.

Whilst this interpretation reflects, in our view, a failure to understand the limitations of quantitative data and use it appropriately, it is still useful and necessary, particularly in

establishing the intensity and scale of pressing gender inequalities, and communicating these to diverse audiences, as Leung et al demonstrate. The rather simplistic and polarised 'quant versus qual' debate appears increasingly out of date to feminists, who are innovating and piloting mixed-method research. Qualitative and quantitative research can be used alongside and integrated with each other: qualitative data can now be transformed into quantitative data (with varying degrees of success, say feminists), and qualitative methods used to illuminate issues raised by quantitative findings.

In just the same way that quantitative research can be criticised for failing to reveal difference and nuance, qualitative research is criticised often for failing to create data that suggest ways of addressing a concern like VAWG. Yet this criticism, too, presents a partial picture. Qualitative research does not only focus on difference, variation and nuance, but also reveals the commonalities between participants' experiences. The fundamental cause of VAWG is patriarchal power and gender inequality, and research into all contexts reveals this. If patriarchal social norms permit – even encourage – VAWG, then feminist approaches to deal with the global pandemic of VAWG need to be developed and funded. Quantitative methods are used by feminist researchers whose findings underpin significant shifts in thinking about issues of critical importance to millions of women. With quantitative statistics on prevalence and case studies from qualitative research both influencing decision-makers, action is possible as Leung et al demonstrate.

### **Research accounts from development practitioners**

Several of the articles in this issue come from feminist development practitioners, providing valuable critical insight into how it feels to be a feminist researcher in an organisation that delivers a programme of planned interventions aiming to have a positive and empowering effect on the lives of women and girls, often accompanied by advocacy and influencing work that aims to dismantle structural inequality to realise human development worthy of the name.

Alejandra Pineda and Sophie Purdue's article explores how the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) and its partner organisations have aimed to embed feminist

values in the research they undertake. It provides two case studies of research projects in Asia Pacific, focusing on the enablers and barriers to women's leadership. In true feminist style, the projects focus on the 'private' factors that affect women would-be leaders, as well as 'public' factors. While women's leadership is not a conventionally 'sensitive' subject, since it is about public participation in community and society, the range of gender-specific factors that affect women's ability to take on these leadership roles cross the public-private divide.

IWDA's article is fascinating in its discussion of the importance of working with local women's rights organisations, which offer a feminist but locally grounded perspective on their research questions. In one of the two initiatives discussed, the Women's Leadership Pathways project, a mixed-method approach is being used and an international consultancy offers local feminists training in technical skills and mentorship, which

*Builds the skills and capabilities of these individuals and organisations to produce their own knowledge and baseline evidence to inform their work and future programming.*

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Critically, these local co-researchers were involved in, and consulted on, the research design, but the analysis (which is in the future at the time of writing) will also be a collaborative effort, involving all the co-researchers. One organisation involved, United Sisterhood in Cambodia, has identified the research as feminist for these reasons. This evaluation from a feminist women's organisation is probably the best accolade such a project can hope for.

Also included here is an article from Michelle Lokot, who was formerly a humanitarian worker and is currently undertaking academic research into humanitarian practice. Her article focuses on the issue of power. She argues that while humanitarian practitioners have begun to focus much more than previously on the power hierarchies that shape women's lives before, during and after humanitarian crises, they have reflected less than they need to

on the power relations they themselves perpetuate through monitoring and evaluating the impact of their work on refugee populations.

Michelle Lokot suggests that feminist analysis can offer insights into power imbalances between researchers and refugee communities, and research informed by feminist values can offer potential to address them. She notes that the concerns she raises are not unique to feminist approaches, however, and this is an important point to make as we near the end of our introduction to this issue. Literature has long criticised the power hierarchies within humanitarian – and international development – agencies, and between them and the communities they exist to serve. Yet Michelle Lokot highlights the ways the sector has evolved, and the pressures on monitoring and evaluation teams. It is particularly hard to work in empowering and participatory ways with urgent pressures to demonstrate positive impact in short time-frames, defined by funding availability rather than need on the ground over the long term. These issues are familiar to all feminist development practitioners, and also come to the fore in Andrea Azevedo, Alexia Pretari and Rosa Wilson Garwood's article reflecting on their experiences as feminists working in Oxfam. Theirs is an account of personal and professional commitment to real change for women and girls directly coming into contact with Oxfam programmes and projects. They offer an honest and revealing insight into programming planning, monitoring, and evaluations, using feminist methods to reflect on complex realities and unexpected outcomes. Their article reveals the challenges of embedding feminist values in research *across* a large organisation. Their emphasis on revealing what is, rather than what was hoped for, is critical – not only for the women and girls involved in development programming, but for improving Oxfam's future programming, creating a virtuous circle. As their paper, and the paper by Leung et al, both make clear, there are specific challenges facing feminist researchers in the programme monitoring, evaluation and learning teams of development organisations. The provision of adequate time and resources is critical if we are to comprehensively embed feminist values in research.

## **Conclusion**

Can we offer a summary of the key characteristics of feminist values in research to conclude

this introduction to the issue? Perhaps the most important are goals of social transformation; an emphasis on recognising researcher positionality and subjectivity as integral to feminist research; involvement of ‘the researched’ in the process that calls for self-reflexive and participatory approaches; and an emphasis on the importance of research methods that reveal complexity and nuance, with a focus on valuing individuals and ensuring that both the researcher and the research participants retain their human faces and voices, rather than being subsumed by numerical averages and statistics at a level of abstraction where human experience is rendered invisible.

Taken together, the articles in this issue also exemplify the work that feminist researchers must do as ‘translators’, translating our feminist values across cultures, contexts, institutions and languages. Doing this effectively, and sensitively, is essential to the success of feminist research and its ability to make a difference to the lives of marginalised women, girls and gender non-conforming groups in the global South. Above all, we argue for the importance of recognising and unpacking the challenges and tensions around embedding feminist values in our research processes and outcomes, from organisational challenges to ethical ‘messiness’. However, we also embrace such challenges as part and parcel of what it means to do feminist research well, rather than seeing these as problems to be ‘solved’.

### **Endnotes**

1. Feminist praxis can be summarised as follows: praxis (that is, the performance of an action) inspired by a belief system drawing on principles of mutual nurturing and care, non-violence, and collective action where small groups work for change, paying attention to the importance of community, reciprocity, self-reflection, and personal development over time.

### **Notes on authors**

### **References**

Chambers, Robert **add**

Sen, Gita, and Grown, Caren, **add**



