Networking across borders: the South Asian Research Network on Gender, Law and Governance

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Abstract *In this article I focus on a subaltern approach to knowledge networks by examining the process of setting up such a network, the South Asia Research Network (SARN) on Gender, Law and Governance. I reflect on the construction of discourses about 'knowledge' and 'knowledge-makers' and the issues of access that emerge as a result of these discourses and practices. I outline three aspects of a 'politics of network(s)-ing': the politics of process; the politics of outcome; and the politics of framing. I conclude that the borders of which we need to be aware are not just national borders but also borders of power. Knowledge networks are politically heterogeneous and for subaltern networks to have sustainable organizations as well as critical politics they need to be self-reflective and deliberative.*

The key institutions and actors in international knowledge networks are too often assumed to be development agencies, foundations, think tanks and consultancy firms, as well as individual experts and academics. This is evident also from the way knowledge networks are spoken of interchangeably as transnational policy research networks. Much of the literature on 'knowledge' and 'knowledge networks' is therefore framed within the context of engagement with institutions of power, whether at the international, global or national levels. Such a focus emerges from dominant discourses of power/knowledge as well as from the economic underpinnings of the 'knowledge industry'. References to the agency of subaltern actors and institutions, and to the work of academics who are engaged with these institutions, remain few and far between.

In this article I focus on a different approach to networks – a subaltern perspective – by examining the setting up and early functioning of the South Asia Research Network (SARN) on Gender, Law and Governance. I write here as a 'participant observer' because, along with several other colleagues, I have been involved in setting up the organization. To tease out some of the issues I consider important, I will reflect very briefly on the construction of discourses about 'knowledge' and 'knowledge-makers' and issues of access that emerge as a result of these discourses and practice. I will then describe the experience of setting up SARN and the issues with which the founding members of the organization have been dealing, while also examining our diverse starting points and political commitments. I will conclude by reflecting on three aspects of a 'politics of network(s)-ing': the politics of framing; the

politics of process; and the politics of outcomes. The borders that we need to be aware of, I conclude, are not just national borders but borders of power.

Agents of knowledge, knowledge as power

I want to argue that an 'archaeology of knowledge' needs to reflect on both the material boundaries of epistemological power and the 'repertoires of collective action' in defiance of these boundaries (Cohen and Rai 2000). Knowledge-makers can therefore be acknowledged as those engaged in historical transmissions, as well as those in defiance, of dominant epistemological flows of power. Further, a subaltern perspective on knowledge and knowledge-makers would, in line with critical feminist theory, 'reverse the traditional relation of dependence, deriving criteria of rationality and knowledge from substantive ideals of solidarity and community, rather than vice versa' (Braaten 1995: 139).

Feminist and subaltern epistemologies

Much has been written about how traditional epistemologies exclude women as subjects and agents in knowledge production (Barwa and Rai 2002; Kemp and Squires 1997). Feminist critics have focused on how epistemological frameworks have been constitutive of the binaries of rational/emotional, universal/particular and objectivity/subjectivity. As Harstock has pointed out, 'the vision of the ruling class (or gender) structures the material relations in which all parties are forced to participate, and therefore cannot be dismissed as simply false' (Hartsock 1983). However, feminist work has also been done on a more assertive project. In Alison Jaggar's view, this has meant rethinking the relationships between these binaries so that the historical identification of emotions, particularity and subjectivity with the subordinate or the subaltern is challenged by suggesting the mutually constitutive nature of the binaries (Jaggar 1997). Feminists have not only disrupted frameworks of epistemological power by challenging the socially constructed binaries but have also developed what came to be called 'standpoint theory'. Drawing on historical materialist accounts of knowledge, standpoint theory argued that the sexual division of labour provides two distinct epistemological perspectives. It has been argued that focusing on a standpoint allows us to examine 'the real relations among human beings as inhuman' and points to the historicity of relationships, which can be liberating (Kemp and Squires 1997: 143). While this materialist account of epistemological power disrupts the dominant discourse of objective, rational and universal knowledge, it does not acknowledge fully the divided and dislocated nature of the subject. As Gayatri Spivak has pointed out, while an economic mode of life might determine the class position of the subject, it does not encapsulate the subject, whose 'parts are not continuous or coherent with each other' but are fragmented and contradictory (Spivak 1988: 276; also see Liddle and Rai 1998).

Feminist concerns about dominant epistemologies are echoed in radical historiography. The starting point of subaltern studies lies in its critique of dominant historiography and anthropology: the 'entire field of transgressions, disorder and violence remains outside the anthropologist's privileged domains of enquiry … [anthropologists who create] order by eliminating the chaos that the introduction of the subject might create' (Das 1989: 310). By examining the stories of the margin-

alized, through their struggles that were not accounted for in the histories of dominant elites, the subaltern studies school makes an important contribution to 'establishing the centrality of the historical moment of rebellion in understanding the subalterns as subjects of their own histories' (Das 1989: 312). However, it is also critical to acknowledge that the subject of colonial subaltern history is also a colonial subject. The embeddedness within and engagement with the dominant legal and political frameworks of power at the same time show history as a 'moment of defiance' as it is about 'to construct the form of legal-rational domination' (Das 1989: 314).[1] However, while a subaltern perspective allows us insights into the subject position of the subaltern at the moment of defiance of the dominant power relations, it also often imbues the subject with qualities that sit ill at ease with his or her marginality. There remains an unanswerable tension in the dialectic of empowered and disempowered subject, which subaltern studies tries to answer by privileging agency at the same moment as it reminds us of the structural marginality of the subject.

Those who were involved in setting up the South Asian Research Network on Gender, Law and Governance approached the project after reflecting on some of these debates.[2] Through this network we were hoping to facilitate a conversation across borders in a region where such cross-border contact has been largely the preserve of political elites. We were also hoping to develop new methodologies of agenda setting for research that would not be predominantly led by the funders but that would emerge from the discussions of participants engaged in feminist research in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. And, finally, we were hoping to keep under review the relations between the researchers and civil society, between the researchers and the funders, and between researchers and the end-product users. At every stage the acknowledgement of the power as well as a defiance of epistemological, political and historical boundaries was seen as critical.

Knowledge networks, nodal communications and democratic norms

If 'knowledge' is a contested term so is our understanding of networks. According to Manuel Castells, 'a network is a set of interconnected nodes' and 'within a given network flows have no distance, or the same distance between nodes' (Castells 1996: 470). Networks are then open structures 'able to expand without limits, integrate new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same communication codes' (Castells 1996: 470). One could argue that such an understanding of networks allows us to evidence both the democratic impulse of networks and their exclusionary power. The language of politics and the politics of language of networks become critical here. Expansion and integration go hand in hand with recognition of 'the same communication codes'. The questions we need to ask here are: expansion to and for what? Integration with and into what? How can communication codes be made more accessible, or how are these used to assert the dominance of these codes over others? In sum, how do networks legitimize and/or challenge flows of power? This is a difficult issue at the local level, but more so when we consider global networks operating on an epistemological terrain reflecting the material power of global capitalism.

In such a context, do networks provide an integrative function by 'linking up' the sites of dominant knowledges as well as the organizations and individuals that seek

and/or obtain recognition within this communicative field? The expansion of networks in this context would also be the further normalization of the dominant discourses of power. The example of Global Development Network (GDN) set up by the World Bank comes to mind here. The 'gateway to development knowledge', through the incorporation of myriad local and global networks, then attempts to systematize the knowledges generated by the individual and organizational actors that make up these networks. In doing so it seeks to impose a rationality that gives precedence to the 'conception of knowledge rather than ideals of community'. Expansion of networks is then integrated into the dominant development policy framework that legitimizes the policy framework and ensures that the communicative codes are not challenged.

Further, such a systematizing framework of knowledge integration also casts a light upon the (lack of) distance between different nodes within the network. From agenda setting to funding, the nodal density of northern-based organizations such as the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), or the Ford Foundation is far greater within integrative knowledge networks than among other constituent members. As Castells points out, 'network morphology is also a source of dramatic reorganization of power relations. Switches connecting the networks … are the privileged instruments of power' (Castells 1996: 471). These switches can be seen as the nodes of concentration of economic and political power, which can be used simply as a threat or be operationalized to deflect and undermine the defiance of the dominant communicative codes. The distance between nodes then cannot be assumed to be the same, and indeed reflects the material relations within which networks are embedded. However, as Sperling, Ferree and Risman have argued, the resources that networks can garner are not only financial, 'but may also include access, reputation, influence and other intangible benefits' (Sperling et al. 2001: 1159). I would suggest that reputation could be a resource as well as a marker of particular moral politics. This could lead to the recognition of the world of the 'moral entrepreneurs' and allow subaltern networks to approach this world with 'their eyes wide open'.[3] While sometimes the power of privilege conflicts or competes with subaltern local networks and activities, at other times access to the tangible and intangible resources of transnational networks supports particular mobilizations and helps inform and/or expand the effectiveness of local networks. The desire of networks to secure their own reputation can therefore also be a resource for local networks.

These issues have been critical in the discussions leading towards the setting up of SARN. As outlined in the network terms of reference (SARN 2002):

> the purpose of this network is three-fold. First, to allow a conversation regarding gender and governance to take place between organizations and researchers working in this area across national borders. This is important to share experiences both positive and salutary as women's groups and researchers make headway in individual countries. Second, to facilitate and strengthen the links between different groups within each participating country. This will allow for regular contact between researchers and activists for example, and consolidate the different but inter-related work on issues of gender and governance. Third, through these processes of conversing and

networking we will undertake collaborative research on specific areas and aim
to arrive at a regional perspective on issues of gender and governance.

All this occurs within a geopolitical context, which is diverse as well as historically
anxious. The network comprises the already existing feminist research groups in the
five participating countries of South Asia, but in their new configuration within
SARN. Thus, only elements of the existing research groups that are working in the
area of law and governance make part of the network. Does this reflect the same
distance between the network funders and the network partners?

The area of research (agenda setting) within SARN formed part of intense dis-
cussions. The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), the initial
funding body supporting SARN, has a declared interest in the promotion of women's
human rights and would have liked SARN to focus on this area. However, in order to
define women's human rights a communicative code was needed that was decipher-
able by all the partners. If we read off the discourse of human rights from the UN
Declaration, for example, many within the network would be placed at a much greater
distance from that starting point than others. As the conversations about women's
human rights in South Asia are informed by religions, political histories and specific
gendered regimes of the law and of civil society, NORAD's broad commitment to
human rights discourse was challenged by the experience of feminist activism and
research in South Asia. The emphasis on law, in its broadest sense, then replaced a
more pointed reference to human rights. A critical subaltern discourse on the law and
rights then became possible, as did the expansion of the communicative codes with
which to converse across boundaries.

The 'diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and out-
comes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture,' writes Castells
(1996: 469). In paying attention to this networking logic we can thus approach the
process of production of knowledges from different and overlapping standpoints, ever
aware of the material inequalities built into such production and at the same time of
the defiance of the constraints imposed by these. On a yet more positive note, through
this ongoing critical dialogue we encounter vocabularies that might enhance the
quality of conversations, that expand the lexicon of feminist writing, and that might
constructively interact with each other and 'emerge significantly altered' (Sperling et
al. 2001: 1159). The permeability of communicative codes is thus moot here. How-
ever, embeddedness of networks is also reflected in the site of these conversations. I
have already referred to the difficult geopolitical terrain upon which SARN is located.
In the next section I wish to explore the meso-territory that SARN occupies between
the local and the global.

SARN as a regional network: working across political borders

Regional networks are important arenas not only for conversing across borders but
also for doing so in contexts that are more immediate and familiar to all involved. The
strength drawn from regional collaborations can feed back into both national and
global participation of women's groups. The starting point for SARN was an
acknowledgement of the common history of the region, and at the same time of the
significant resistance to border crossing through state regulation.

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Regionalization from below

While the languages of nationalism and women's activism have long helped in creating communicative channels across borders in South Asia, keeping these channels open has not always been easy. It was also important to acknowledge that many activists and researchers that would form part of a regional network were already operating on a much wider global terrain. Globalization in this case formed the backdrop of this regional network. If, we had to ask, our partners were already participating in global policy fora, what would be the purpose of a regional network? It was evident that the political debates on globalization within the five countries involved in SARN had led to some communicative linkages on the ground. The 1990s saw a growing concern about women's work as well as women's political representation in all five countries. There was some evidence that internationally supported strategies of women's empowerment, for example mainstreaming gender through institutional initiatives such as national machineries for the advancement of women, were providing women's movements with a recognizable framework on the ground. The Beijing Conference pointed to the importance of global networking on the one hand and to the difference among women on the other. The spread of technology, especially e-mail, made it possible to build on the contacts made at international fora, but the lack of hardware on the ground suggested the limitations of this strategy for networking.[4] Finally, the question of power differentials in global networking, as well as in national politics, was an important starting point for us. Would a regional, meso-level articulation of issues allow SARN to contribute to democratizing debates at both the global and national levels, as it arguably has in other parts of the world?

Blacklock (2001) has argued that regional economic integration in Central America through the Central American Common Market poses questions for women at regional as well as national levels. It then allows for the regional *Foro de Mujeres para la Integración* (Central American Women's Forum for Economic Integration) to engage the institutions of the common market as well as national states in debate. No such regional integration exists in South Asia. Despite the framework of SARC (South Asian Regional Cooperation), South Asian states have been unable to overcome their considerable political differences to address the issues of globalization through developing regional perspectives. While all five countries involved in SARN are members of SARC, we could not therefore build on already operative regional perspectives. At the inaugural conference of SARN in August 2002, members discussed whether developing a regional perspective on specific issues of law and governance might provide us with political resources to intervene more effectively in global fora and therefore more effectively to address the issue of power differentials among women's groups from the North and South?[5] Blacklock has argued in the context of CACM, that Central American nation-states see in regionalization some potential to augment their power. I would argue that SARN could contribute to the political processes of regionalization in South Asia by creating common communicative codes based on cooperative research work, which might further enhance the common imaginings of/for the region. SARN could also contribute towards the augmentation of the relative power position of South Asian women's groups within international organizations by developing such a regional perspective on gender law and governance.

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Democratic structures and practice: the setting up SARN

Working together across boundaries – national and regional – poses distinct questions of democratic practice. Many issues of democratic structure and functioning of the organization, together with the focus of its research, were discussed among SARN members at the inaugural conference. The structure of SARN reflects our attempts to address the issue of power differentials.

The network works through three principal bodies drawn from within itself: partner organizations, the conference committee and the coordinating group.[6] Partners have a commitment to participate in the network for a minimum of three years. The partners propose, discuss and assess the research agenda of the network at the annual conferences. They also propose specific projects to be undertaken within the agreed research agenda. This ensures that the responsibility and the power to shape the comparative work of the network rests not with the funders, or even the coordinating group, but with partner organizations already involved in women's groups and contributing to debates in individual countries. The funders will thus be 'offering opportunities for … networking' but less so 'models for effective local action' (Sperling et al. 2001: 1160), which will emerge from the discussions and conversations of the partner organizations. I will address the question of how to deal with competing research and political agendas in the concluding part of this article.

SARN's conference committee is comprised of the partners who will host the conference in a particular year and the coordinating group. Membership of this group will therefore rotate annually with the coordinating group providing continuity. The management committee will provide the local point of contact for that year and will be responsible for publishing and disseminating the proceedings and outcomes of the conference. One of the strengths of this model of organization is that the conference committee will be able to draw on the expertise and knowledge of local women's groups and can invite them to attend the conference. The potential for the extension of the network would also be enhanced. By accommodating such a rotation in the work of SARN, this management model will also allow for the sharing and transferability of technologies and skills. An important aspect of this rotation is that it addresses regional sensitivities. Dominance by larger countries, with their greater resources, will be avoided in terms of management of contact between partners.

The coordinating group will continue to help secure funding and coordinate the network's projects and, in the initial phase of SARN, manage its website. A panel of advisers has been established, which includes academics, activists and policy makers from South Asia and other countries. The panel members will publicize SARN's work and help further its international links. The coordinating group's role in the organization is both critical and sensitive. The members of the coordinating group are all, to date, based in a university in the UK (Warwick) and they have the most direct contact with the funders and partners. The issue of coordinator accountability will no doubt arise during the functioning of the network. While the group is a resource for partners, it occupies a more privileged position (switch/ node) than the partners. However, the group's resources are based on the partners' cooperation and their existing national networks. The partners in this case, while looking to enhance their credibility at the regional levels, are already resource-stable organizations. This dialectic of privilege and dependence was discussed during the inaugural conference. The partners were

convinced of the importance of having a coordination group outside South Asia to act as a catalyst and as SARN's organizational hub. The political situation on the ground, as well as the partners' existing responsibilities in their local spaces, meant that none of the partners wished to dilute the role of the coordination group. However, the coordination group has suggested that its membership would eventually need to widen and change in the interest of stabilizing the organization.

The various bodies comprising SARN work not only through the annual conferences but also, more routinely, through the SARN website (www.sarn-glg.net). The website occupies a unique place in the structure of SARN as a virtual office, the site of the various databases developed by SARN, and a communicative space. To create a communicative space in which all partners would feel empowered, an extensive questionnaire seeking their views was circulated prior to the inaugural conference. The development of the website thus reflects the priorities of the partners and extends the possibility of developing democratic practice through working in a safe space. The website is divided into two parts: the intranet, which is accessible only to the partners, and the internet, which is the 'public face' of the organization and carries the products of its work such as databases on law and governance to all five participating countries. The intranet carries the work calendar on the various projects and is where the partners liaise with each other while working together.

Does such an organizational structure make SARN a non-hierarchical network? This is a difficult issue to address. As a research network one could argue it already occupies an elite position in the region. While there are national women's networks, these are largely activists or at least self-consciously occupy a dual space of activism and policy-oriented research. The partners either occupy this dual space (Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi) or are clearly academic institutions involved in research (Human Rights Study Centre, Peshawar University). Second, the structure of SARN, though conceived of on a horizontal plane is already marked by differences between the relative nodal power of the funders, the coordinating group and the partners. Third, while the agenda setting process is envisaged as a 'bottom-up' project, it is as yet difficult to predict whether the broadening of this agenda to address issues the funders/coordinators or even some of the partners have not anticipated (a cross border peace initiative, for example) will result in conflicts of interest, and how these will be resolved. After the inaugural conference one can, however, say that the beginnings have been positive – different research agendas were discussed openly and passionately and a way was found to resolve issues of precedence and focus. Finally, there is the question of relations with nation-states and with global institutions. On the one hand, there is an expectation that national policy networks will be accessed by partner organizations with augmented regional authority gained through comparative work within SARN. On the other hand, SARN also expects to develop critical and subaltern perspectives on issues concerning gender law and governance, which might not support such an engagement with governmental organizations. This tension will need to be addressed, if not resolved, if the network is to be sustained over time.

'Critical and creative' research agendas

Much has now been written about the engagement of feminist and women's groups in

debates on globalization as well as engagement with global economic and social institutions (Marchand and Runyan 2000; O'Brien et al. 2000; Peterson and Runyan 1999; Rai 2002). The literature has not only covered issues of discursive and economic power relations between women's organizations and global institutions, but also the changing relations and differences among women's groups and movements. The process of engagement itself has been reviewed in the contexts of access to policy-making institutions, agenda shifts and the resources available to various groups in this process. Elsewhere I have argued, for example, that 'attempts to leap-frog the nation-state by approaching multilateral organizations can also result in the undermining of democratic politics or struggles towards a democratic politics on the ground' (Rai 2002: 176). Often such undermining occurs as a result of lack of resources of time, technology and money. NGOs often find themselves committed to their funders' agendas and programmes without enough discussion about the politics or processes attached to the funding to pursue goals of organizational sustainability (Cohen 2000; O'Brien et al. 2000). This lack of time to focus on the politics of projects becomes more difficult if organizations are working across borders and do not have the technological and financial support to do so. Project-based funding imposes a disciplinary framework that is often not conducive to democratic practice. These were also some of the issues discussed at the inaugural conference.

At the conference it was decided that SARN would contribute to the debate about the relevance of regional economic linkages on the one hand and about the nature of these linkages on the other. These debates will necessarily include the question of peace across borders, for attempts to focus on economic and trade relations in favour of boundary issues between countries have thus far been unsuccessful. Issues of conflict and security then would form an important element of SARN's research and policy work. Definitions of conflict and security would have to be explored and expanded to include violence against women within and between communities, food security and women's contribution towards resolving these conflicts both through political participation in community organizations and through participation in food production and knowledge creation to support this role. Another area in which we were able to map regional policy transfers from global/local perspectives was in addressing women's under-representation in the political institutions of South Asian countries. National machineries for women's advancements exist in all the participating countries. Conversations across boundaries between members of these machineries, as well as women's groups engaging with them, have already occurred on a regular basis and there is some evidence that these conversations can contribute towards a regional understanding of the constraints as well as the benefits of these institutions. The idea of quotas for women in local as well as national institutions is another area in which there is some cross-fertilization. The Indian legislation in this regard has led to debates about the efficacy of quotas as a means of addressing gender inequalities in panchayats in Pakistan, for example. A sharing of lessons learned from different experiences of a similar strategy could be a useful starting point for a South Asian contribution to this debate globally. Local governance then formed the third research focus for the first phase of SARN's work (SARN 2002). SARN will be the catalyst for exploring regional perspectives in these areas through the research of partners.

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Network sustainability: the challenges before SARN

Scholars have identified three types of relations that go towards making a stable network and are crucial for the sustainability of social action. First, interpersonal networks, which facilitate recruitment and participation; second, links between individuals and organizations based on their multiple allegiances; and third, inter-organizational links that allow for a degree of trust between the participants in a network (Bosco 2001). I would add here the importance of trust between participants and funders. In the coming together of SARN all four of these have been operative, but they also continually need to be nurtured and critically assessed.

Interpersonal networks have been crucial in setting up SARN. The crossing of national boundaries, which is at the heart of the network, was made possible through the members of the coordinating group establishing close professional and then friendship ties. Two members are originally from India, one from Pakistan and one from Oslo, Norway. A common interest in gender and governance was the basis of this relationship, as was a commitment to the development of a regional perspective on these issues. Personal histories of transnational forced family migrations across borders at the time of the partition of India have contributed to this commitment (Rai 1997). Involvement in national politics, as well as in women's movements, has also secured interpersonal networks upon which SARN has been built. Academic contacts and collaborative projects between institutions and individuals have nurtured existing networks and allowed SARN a credibility base critical in the establishment of a new project. Finally, interpersonal networks have been used to draw on the particular memberships of a rich tapestry of women's activist and research groups in South Asia. The challenge here is how to build on these important interpersonal networks without personalizing the long-term trajectory of the network. It would not do to create a sense of a club that hangs together through these interpersonal threads. We will also need to establish norms to guide us in the processes of expanding or reconfiguring the network's membership. Issues of transparency and democratic accountability will have to be discussed and working procedures established if future recruitment is to take place without the original interpersonal contacts necessarily being dominant.

The links between individuals and organizations within SARN are based on their multiple allegiances. NORAD is funding not just SARN but a myriad of projects. While this project, with it emphasis on governance, is currently important to NORAD it might not remain so in the future. NORAD will need to communicate the extent and length of its commitment to the network if it is to help build resources that will be self-sustaining and engage SARN members in dialogues that will allow the development of sustainability strategies. SARN will need not only to establish its rules of organization and functioning but also to set up new organizational relationships through its individual members (partners, panel of advisers, new funding organizations). Though SARN partners are committed to developing regional (rather than comparative) research and political perspectives, this will not be easy. Most partners are grounded in their own countries. To gain a comparative perspective might be of great value and immediate relevance to the participating organizations. To engage in developing a regional perspective needs further commitments of time and effort, which will only gradually begin to bear fruit. Will the coordinating group be able to

provide a sustained focus to partners on this crucial issue? Its interpersonal skills and the trust of partners will be crucial here.

Different relationships will need to be secured through the development of trust. First, though partners have established a framework of working with each other that is open, deliberative and respectful, to sustain long-term collaboration this will need to be nurtured at a distance; face-to-face contact through annual conferences might prove critical here. Then, there is the relationship between SARN members and NORAD, SARN's initial funding body. How far can NORAD exercise agenda-setting influence without compromising the autonomy of the network? One example of this has already become apparent in the context of the human rights/governance focus of the network. Another area with which we have struggled is the registration of the network. NORAD, along with many other Northern funders, shows a strong preference for having SARN registered in a Southern partner country while being far more sanguine about the registration of financial accounts in the North. While political sensitivities necessitate this approach, responsibility and accountability issues for the coordinators of SARN make it imperative that institutional recognition through charity status recognition is gained in the UK where the coordination group is based. At the inaugural conference it was decided that SARN would not pursue a strategy of registration as a charity but instead would concentrate on nurturing inter-organizational links between partners towards the sustainability of the network.

Conclusion: understanding the politics of knowledge networks

In this concluding section I reflect on the politics of knowledge networks in three ways: first I examine the *politics of process* by assessing the possibilities of deliberative politics. Second, I examine the *politics of outcome* by reflecting on issues of access and dangers of circularity of knowledge and policy networks. Finally, I examine the *politics of framing* by assessing the relevance of cosmopolitics in understanding the global/local space that knowledge networks occupy.

The politics of process is critical for building trust and legitimizing the outcomes of deliberation. Deliberative democracy has been put forward as one important model for addressing issues of process in decision-making (Bohman and Rehg 1997; d'Entreves 2002; Elster 1998). Deliberative democracy involves three elements – process, outcome and context. Its starting point seems to be that 'democracy revolves around the transformation rather than simply the aggregation of preferences' (Elster 1998: 1). Feminists have argued for a similar process/outcome-based politics when they have spoken of 'rooting and shifting' or 'transversal politics', of situated deliberation leading to democratic outcomes as particularly suited to the way women do (or are predisposed to do) politics (Yuval-Davis 1997). Deliberative democracy scholars have defined deliberative democracy in the following way. As a *process*, it includes:

1. collective decision-making with the participation of all those who will be affected by the decision or their representatives;
2. decision-making by means of arguments offered *by* and *to* participants who are committed to the values of 'rationality and impartiality'[7] such that they are able to argue in terms of public rather than simply particular interests;

3. conversing in such a way that individuals speak and listen sequentially before making collective decisions (Knight and Johnson 1997); and

4. from the perspective of participants, ensuring that some interests are not privileged above others and that no individual or group can dictate the outcomes of others' actions, which means that outcomes are not know before the deliberations are conducted and completed (Elster 1998).

According to this view, equality becomes a central theme in the deliberative democratic argument.

Having reflected on the need for equality of distance among network nodes on the one hand, and the undermining of this parity through inequality of resources on the other, developing a process of deliberation is indeed a challenge for transnational knowledge networks such as SARN.

A second challenge to the stability and sustainability of SARN emerges from the politics of outcome. I have already referred to the tensions that might arise between the roles of activists and policy advisers for SARN partners, and also between the focus on a comparative and a regional perspective. We have also reflected on issues of agenda setting and on the power differentials between funders and the funded. The question of access here is of particular relevance. The terms under which access to policy-making institutions is granted are crucial. Following Rounaq Jahan, I have argued elsewhere that most of the 'initiatives taken by these institutions under pressure from women's groups are "integrating" rather than "agenda-setting"'(Rai 2002). Further, increasing evidence of women's engagement in policy-making institutions, especially international financial institutions, suggests that such engagements do not generally favour women. Not only are there significant differences between policy-making institutions and women's NGOs or networks, the differences among women's groups and networks also suggest that different actors bear differential costs of (non-)engagement with policy-networks. Not only do these issues of difference go towards building or undermining trust within a network, but they also point to the dangers of circularity. Working against the grain can be difficult; access to influence can exact the price of losing control of agendas for research and around which to build a political argument. In this context, the processes of deliberation can lend themselves to legitimization of outcomes, whether agenda setting, research or the choice of political campaigns. The seduction of influence can blunt the critical edge of subaltern politics.

Finally, transnational networks are constituted by and constitutive of the politics of framing. The global space has become the terrain for transnational politics. This has become possible through the expansion of flows of information, resources and technological change. This new politics (or old) has been captured in the discourse about globalization. As discussed above, globalization is, like most political phenomena, a contested concept. One of the important issues related to globalization is democratic politics. On the one hand, we have the anxiety about the 'hollowing out of the nation-state' and consequent lack of accountability of state institutions to its citizens. On the other hand, we have a limitless vista of new global politics made possible through technology and the agency of global social movements in a global public sphere. Gupta and Ferguson contend that 'something like a transnational public sphere has certainly rendered any strictly bounded sense of community of locality

obsolete. At the same time, it has enabled the creation of forms of solidarity and identity that do not rest on an appropriation of space where contiguity and face-to-face contact is paramount' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 9). However, more cautious voices warn us that 'the discursive spaces through which transnational actors move are socially structured' (Guarnizo and Smith 1998: 21). A new form of politics beckons at the same time as we become aware of the enduring power of capitalist social relations that also frame this new political space. So, while Stone (2003) is correct in pointing to the discourse structuration of development economists, I would argue that this discourse is indeed embedded in the dominant social relations, which is evident in the minimal shifts in the macro-economic framework of development economic policy-making. The question then arises: what can subaltern networks do to produce not only a methodology of social practice but also outcomes that are democratic? Cosmopolitics has been one answer to this question.

Archibugi defines cosmopolitical democracy in the following way: 'cosmopolitical democracy is based on the assumption that important objectives – control of the use of force, respect for human rights and self-determination – will be obtained only through the extension and development of democracy' (Archibugi 2000: 143). It builds on the assumption that issues such as the environment, migration and use of natural resources are no longer contained within national boundaries, that technology allows communicative networks to be globalized and therefore for democratic politics to become possible, including the re-envisioning of non-coercive international institutions without the disappearance of national states. A world parliament has been suggested as an extension of world assemblies, which are representatives not of the states but of the people. Critics have, however, pointed out the naïveté and indeed the danger of such cosmopolitan envisionings: socially structured spaces of world politics do not, Chandler argues, allow for sovereign equality among states. The hegemonic power of some states (particularly the USA) is evidence of the embeddedness of the dominant discursive agency of some in the face of diminishing autonomy of others (Chandler 2000). In this context, subaltern knowledge networks see the spaces for negotiation and deliberations leading to radical outcomes decreasing. This cautionary stance is important if networks are not to transform themselves into 'systems that create themselves' (Riles 2000: 173). The seduction of networks in providing a sense of agency against all odds, at times through emphasizing the process over outcome, at others through emphasizing 'empowerment' without the transfer of resources that denote changes in power relations, also provide cautionary tales. Does this mean that networks are simply integrative? I am not suggesting any such thing. What I am arguing is that networks, like any other structure/agent, are implicated in the many nodes of power in our global society; that they are politically heterogeneous. For subaltern networks to be sustainable not only of their organization but also of their politics they need to be self-reflective. Without such critical self-reflexivity the consequences of network failure can be enormous not only to those directly involved but also to those who depend upon the work of such networks.

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Acknowledgements

Notes

1. For more on subaltern studies, see Guha (1982–1994).
2. The initiative to establish SARN emerged at a meeting on gender and law at Peshawar University, Pakistan in 1996 (Rai 1997). At the time, of the three colleagues involved, one was based in Pakistan, one in the UK and one in Norway; all three are academics. Two carried with them histories of personal/political engagement in South Asia, and one a long experience in setting up a network on gender and law in southern Africa. Another colleague later joined the group in the UK, and the colleague from Pakistan also moved to the UK. So now all three members of the Coordination group of SARN are based in the UK, and the colleague from Norway is a member of the panel of advisers.
3. Sperling et al. (2001: 1159) define moral entrepreneurs as 'those who contribute to building organizations and discourses that have moral implications … [and] in the process they develop a greater or lesser degree of international prominence and credibility'. I would suggest that both transnational and local organizations can be moral entrepreneurs. For a discussion about 'knowledge management' as a means for NGO accountability, see Smyth (2002). Accountability here is to funders and investors, while knowledge management also contributes to securing reputations through cornering the market in specific areas of 'systems for learning', which could be either through activities in 'the field' or 'institutional learning' within the NGO sector.
4. In an interview with Brinda Karat, the author ascertained that an all-India organization of more than 100,000 women had to make do with fewer than ten computers.
5. The conference was originally to take place at Peshawar University, Pakistan. The move to the UK was made because of the difficult political situation between India and Pakistan during the months leading up to the conference. At one stage there were no flights between the two countries, visas were being denied to citizens of the other country, even war seemed imminent. While the move from Pakistan to the UK posed significant challenges for SARN members, it also underlined the need for cross-border cooperation in the region.
6. The feminist organizations that are partners in SARN are largely research organizations. These are the Centre for Women's Development Studies (India), the Intermediate Technology Group (ITDG) (Sri Lanka), the FWLD (Nepal), the Ain o Sailesh Kendra (ASK) (Bangladesh), the National University of Juridical Sciences (India), the Human Rights Study Centre, University of Peshawar (Pakistan), and the Hamdard Law University (Pakistan). Some of these organizations focus on legal issues. They provide legal aid to individual women and lobby governments on specific legal matters. Others work on a variety of women-related issues such as employment, violence and security. Almost all combine research with activism at both the grassroots and policy level.
7. Both these terms have been contested by feminists. Here, however, I offer these within the theoretical framework of deliberative democracy and with the caveat of plural rationality and embedded impartiality.

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