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Gordon, Rebecca

Published in:
Gender and Development

DOI:
[10.1080/13552074.2019.1664044](https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2019.1664044)

E-pub ahead of print: 29/10/2019

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Gordon, R. (2019). 'Why would I want to be anonymous?' Questioning ethical principles of anonymity in cross-cultural feminist research. *Gender and Development*, 27(3), 541-554.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2019.1664044>

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‘Why would I want to be anonymous?’ Questioning ethical principles of anonymity in cross-cultural feminist research

Rebecca Gordon

This article focuses on anonymity in research, considering it in relation to feminist values. There has been increasing debate in the feminist literature on the universality of ethics, including reflection on principles such as anonymity. However, there has been limited discussion of the specific challenge facing feminist researchers to amplify the voices of women participants, but also to respect their wishes regarding voice and agency. Assuring anonymity can be empowering for women and girls participating in research, allowing individuals to freely share their experiences without concerns about attribution and its consequences. On the other hand, if research ethics require anonymity, this can actually deny research respondents the right to be heard and operate as a form of silencing. This article focuses on research in Bihar, India, where many of the respondents rejected the idea of anonymity. Upholding a feminist ethics of care and delivering on a feminist commitment to giving voice to women requires a focus on women’s agency in the decision-making process around ethics.

Key words: ethics; anonymity; feminist research; voice

Introduction

Ethical tensions are part of the everyday practice of doing research; researchers rely on the ethical guidelines of funders and stakeholder institutions to inform their practice. However, the relatively abstract nature of ethical principles has been noted (Hammersley 2015) and ethical guidelines have also been critiqued for having less focus on identifying issues of ethical concern, and more on setting out the parameters of responsibility (Robison-Pant 2005). The literature shows increasing awareness of the need to look beyond these guidelines, to focus on researchers’ own ethical conscience (Guillemin & Gillam 2004). This focus on personal ethics is clear to feminist researchers (Edwards & Mauthner 2012).

Ethical guidelines have changed and adapted in recent years, in many cases reflecting greater recognition of the existence of different social and cultural norms, and growing awareness of the need for flexibility so that they can adapt to contextual differences (Tikly & Bond 2013). Yet in spite of these developments and the proliferation of practical guidance, each research context is different, and so it is difficult to find guidance that can fully prepare a researcher for the unique challenges they may face when conducting research (Yee & Andrews 2006) This is particularly the case in cross-cultural research, where ethical guidelines developed in one country are unlikely to translate smoothly into different research contexts.

In this article I discuss these issues in relation to my PhD research, which focused on a grassroots, predominantly women-led, microfinance organisation in rural Bihar (India). The research was underpinned by feminist standpoint epistemology – that is, it was based on a commitment to knowledge-building that challenges us to see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of women. Feminist standpoint epistemology aims to fuse knowledge and practice, and pushes us as researchers to then apply this vision and knowledge to social activism and change (Brooks 2006).

As a white, British woman studying at a British university, I focused attention at the start of the research process on the particular challenges of doing cross-cultural research. I tried to carefully consider the place in which I was carrying out my research, as well as my own identity, so that the

needs and wellbeing of those participating in the research could be taken into account, particularly in relation to ensuring rigorous ethical standards.

However, there was one particular ethical issue that arose which I had not considered, and that was the possibility that women involved in my research as respondents would question and refuse the offer of anonymity [1]. This article reflects on this aspect of my research experience and seeks to draw some insights from it to offer to other researchers faced with similar concerns. I begin the article with a section focusing in more detail on feminist thinking about ethics and in particular, the issue of anonymity.

Feminist thinking on anonymity

As a feminist researcher, I see the concept of anonymity as especially worthy of critical reflection, as I am committed to giving voice to groups – namely women – who experience inequality and oppression. The majority of the wider literature on anonymity discusses the difficulties in concealing identities and refers to the practicalities of pseudonyms (Ruth, Allen & Wiles, 2016). In contrast, there have been important discussions dealing with concepts of anonymity in feminist research. As I set out on my research journey, I aimed to engage with - and learn from - these discussions.

Feminist approaches to ethics aim to move past abstracted notions of ethics, and place care at the heart of research practice (Edwards & Mauthner 2012). In feminist ethics, thinkers emphasise that ‘the particular context, not abstract principles of right and wrong, must shape and inform morally appropriate choices’ (Browning Cole & Coultrap-McGuinn 1992, 2). It follows that feminist research requires meaningful dialogue at the local level, not the imposition of rules (Eyre, 2010).

For feminists, each woman’s standpoint presents a unique lived experience and perspective and should be valued as such (Brooks 2006). As feminist research requires us to place women at the centre of the research process, women’s own opinions about ethical concepts should also be of utmost importance. Historically feminist research has advocated for radical challenges to traditional research practice and to conceptions of how knowledge is, and should be, generated, particularly in relation to the need to democratise research (Edwards & Brannelly 2017).

There are a range of arguments made in favour of anonymity, from the perspective of research participants. A key point is that assurances of anonymity can be empowering, allowing individuals to speak candidly without concerns about attribution or retribution (Guenther 2009). The most prevalent reasons cited in the literature on ethics confirm that anonymity is about protecting individuals from harm, protecting individuals’ privacy, and ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the research (Baez, 2002). It is likely that these reasons also underpin the repeated calls for anonymity within ethical guidelines and frameworks.

In feminist research, anonymity can be particularly important for women, who may be placed at risk as a result of their participation in research that is informed by a critique of gender power relations in their homes and communities (ibid). Anonymity also has the power to support women’s collective action. Anonymity can encourage solidarity and greater understanding about women’s experiences and amplify women’s voices, but still maintain women’s safety when the issues under discussion are subject to intense debate and scrutiny. This argument has been advanced during the recent wave of feminist activism using social media to ‘out’ violence against women (Hyndman 2017, no page number).

However, there is a downside to anonymity. Both feminist and postcolonial researchers question a tendency to assume research participants should be anonymised. In particular, they highlight the

potential to reduce freedom of speech. A core feminist argument against anonymity is that naming in itself is an act of power, challenging delegitimising or silencing (Berkhout, 2013). Some authors have argued that anonymisation can feel like a form of 'erasure' of personhood, one that 'creates distance that separates participants from researchers and the audiences for whom they write' (Smart et al., 2014, 11). Niamh Moore points out that erasing women's experiences through anonymity disempowers them and renders them vulnerable:

...for much of history, anonymity did not protect the vulnerable, but excluded women and others from authorship and ownership of their own words, erasing them from the archive, even from history and in the process creating vulnerability through rendering people nameless

(Moore 2012, 332).

Feminist researchers have also critiqued anonymisation because of its impact on how research participants are represented (Pickering & Kara 2017). The idea of anonymity being about the protection of participants, although well-meaning and justified, can be seen as embedded in paternalistic presuppositions about marginalisation and power (Wilson et al 2018). Specific considerations for feminist research include power relations between the researcher and participants, as well as the importance of foregrounding participants' viewpoints. Some feminist researchers have argued that anonymity can play a role in maintaining the same unequal power relationships in research that prevail in society in general (Vainio 2012). Not fully crediting or attributing participants' voice can play a role in replicating experiences of marginalisation and does not allow individuals to address these oppressive structures, which goes against the core aims of feminist research.

On the other hand, in most cases naming participants does not eliminate power differentials between research participants. The researcher retains control of the data and makes the decisions about what is included in final publications. There are difficulties in managing the naming of participants in research. Participants' consent to the rejection of anonymity is just the start. After that, they could be asked for consent about decisions around choice of quotation, translation, editing, and context. These difficulties may have contributed to why anonymity has been challenged less than other ethical concepts.

Given the prominence of feminist researchers in the discussions challenging anonymity, there has been a relative lack of discussion about the realities of these debates in research practice. In the next sections I aim to use my own PhD research to contribute to this discussion, and to demonstrate insights from my own feminist research journey.

As part of my commitment to ethical practice, I kept a reflective research journal, noting conversations that had taken place, as well as thoughts or concerns I had. This journal helped me to detail, explore, and understand challenges I faced, and to reflect on the perspectives of members of the organisation I was working with. This case study includes information from this reflective journal, drawing from conversations at the time, and recorded conversations post-fieldwork, which focused on clarifying why some women had challenged or refused anonymity, so that their direct words and real names could be used for this article.

Questioning anonymity: a case study of research in Bihar

Introducing the research

In July 2015, I undertook research with Rojiroti [2], a grassroots microfinance organisation, whose mechanisms of delivery are predominantly women-led and entirely member-focused. I worked with

the organisation to look at the experience of intimate partner violence among women members both prior to, and after their membership of Rojiroti. This research aimed to provide insights for the organisation into its impact and help it to reflect on its ways of operating. During focus group discussions, the positive impact of women's Rojiroti group membership on daughters' education was mentioned. This led both those within the organisation, and me, to want to explore this further.

Between 2015 and 2017 I was in regular communication with the organisation, and eventually I began a second research study, for my PhD, looking at the impact of membership of this organisation on the lives of women, and specifically at the longer-term impact on their daughters' education. Rojiroti was established to try and reach women who had not previously had access to microfinance. I aimed to understand how membership was seen by women themselves, and to hear their narratives and explanations of any subsequent changes in their lives.

My PhD research took place between October and December 2017, in rural Bihar, India. It involved two different methods. Firstly, I undertook one-on-one interviews with 18 women staff from the organisation, mentioned above, who are the main focus of this paper. I also conducted focus group discussions with 30 self-help groups from the organisation. After my main research phase, I conducted one follow up group discussion with the 18 women staff as they had been the ones who had challenged the idea of remaining anonymous in the research. These women had initially joined groups run by the organisation and had then begun facilitating their own groups. Their backgrounds were similar; most of the women interviewed were from scheduled or other disadvantaged castes [3] former agricultural or bonded labourers [4], who experienced interlocking class-, caste-, and gender-based marginalisation.

Approaching the issue of research ethics from a feminist perspective

As a white woman from a high-income country, I recognised the importance of working closely with the organisation to develop culturally-sensitive research procedures (Israel et al, 2013). This included discussions at planning stage about ethical practice with women and men staff at the organisation. I also ensured that the women participating in the research worked with me to develop the informed consent procedure [5]. I wanted to establish my own commitment to reflective ethical practice, thinking about potential issues that could arise, and explicitly discussing these issues throughout the process with those in the organisation with whom I was working.

The ethical guidelines I was using clearly suggested that given their experience of marginalisation, anonymity could be assumed to be of paramount importance to my research participants. For example, the British Education Research Association (2018, 21) states that: 'the confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research'. That said, this guideline does recognise the option of non-anonymity: 'researchers must recognise the participants' entitlement to privacy... unless they or their guardians or responsible others specifically and willingly waive that right' (ibid, 21). Similarly, the guidelines from my own institution stated: 'the implicit assumption is that anonymity is always desirable* and is always achievable' (Faculty of Education, 2018, 4), with the caveat that: '*some institutions or participants may welcome being acknowledged by name in a thesis, and their views should be taken into account and balanced against other considerations' (ibid, 4). It seemed that ensuring and offering anonymity was the norm, and so this was my assumption.

I started each interview by detailing the aims of my research and where I hoped to use the research, in as open a way as possible. I stressed that the participants did not have to agree to be interviewed, did not have to remain in the interview, and that they would be anonymous. However, the women

mostly told me that they did not want to be anonymous. I was greeted with dismay, soft amusement, and comments such as:

No, why would I want to be anonymous?

(Pratibha Kumari: One-on-one recorded interview, November 2017).

Asking why women objected to anonymity

While I had considered a number of ethical issues that could arise, I had not considered any objection to anonymity. When I asked why, a number of themes emerged. These included the fact that the women wanted to be recognised for the work they were doing and the social benefits it would bring, but also because they were confident and proud of it.

These comments were also repeated when I spoke to the women again in post-fieldwork recorded discussion in February 2019, after the original interviews.

Mentioning my name is positive not only for us but for village and country too. (Pratibha Kumari).

It is a gain for the organisation, and the member involved can also explain to her family members about her own exposure and involvement. (Nirasha Kumari).

Another reason was that they felt that being named was an important way through which the work they were doing could be promoted. They felt that the way in which their organisation functioned could provide an example to other agencies and organisations working in their area and considered that being named would enable the potential for an honest transfer of knowledge between themselves and communities of practice in their own location, but also more widely.

Are we doing something wrong? If not wrong, then it should go to [a] wider audience (Savitri Devi).

Mentioning my name will create opportunity for other women too (Sunita Devi).

Because they will learn many things mentioning our name will be important (Pratima Devi).

Finally, and most importantly, women felt that their identity and naming was part of them being able to tell their stories, and establish their names and their identities, which they had not always been able to do. This chimes with the points made in the feminist research literature, discussed earlier.

My name was limited within the four walls of my home. When I joined this group, people started asking about it and my work. If I had confined myself within the house no one would ever know me. This has given me identity (Kiran Devi).

Had we been confined at home today, would anyone come to meet us or know our names? Nobody (Pratima Devi).

It seemed that these women perceived being named as being integral to having a 'voice' (McCormack et al., 2012) and conceived naming as a form of public acknowledgement associated with 'justice, pride and empowerment' (Yanar et al., 2016 125). Their comments also seem to confirm the importance they attach to receiving recognition for the knowledge they have contributed to the research, particularly from outside their communities.

We meet and interact with each other, even people from abroad are coming to meet us and know about our work. (Nirasha Devi).

This echoed earlier comments during the fieldwork as women recognised their authority as experts on subjects that I, as the researcher, still had to learn about. A comment exemplifying this came, at the beginning of a discussion where women involved in the research talked to other staff members, in November 2017:

Women like Rebecca are being taught by us (Savitri Devi).

Each woman's experience and knowledge is unique, and their ownership and gift of that experience as part of the research is part of knowledge creation.

Dilemmas arising from women's request to be named

Whilst I was excited about the possibility of being able to name the women in my research, there were still a number of ethical considerations that were particularly complex given the cross-cultural context.

Respecting women's agency to give free informed consent

Firstly, I was concerned about whether I had adequately explained how the research would be used, and where it would be published. This concern was grounded in the importance of anonymity and protection of participants being a core part of all ethical guidelines and frameworks. I was very aware of the power dynamic created by my location and identity, the fact that we had worked together previously, and the ongoing working relationship we had. I was concerned that because they knew me and had worked with me before, that this had fostered a sense of trust that meant they would be less likely to question me about the way in which their words would be represented.

When I went back to the ethical guidelines and frameworks discussed earlier, I noticed that there was limited discussion of where some of the challenges to anonymity might come from, or how one would negotiate these in practice. Particularly important for my case is the fact that these guidelines did not incorporate feminist understandings of the crosscutting gender, race and other power dynamics that are involved in research in general, and specifically in cross-cultural research. Consequently, they could not provide me with guidance on this particular dilemma.

My own perspective was – and still is – that feminist research principles stress the importance of acknowledging the unequal power between the researcher and research participants, and this may suggest a specific course of action, such as anonymity. But challenging the power balance in line with feminist thinking really means that greater consideration should be given to the preferences of women in wanting to be named. Therefore, I was troubled that this initial concern of mine was a patronising worry. The participants might well have enough understanding of research to warrant sufficient informed consent and subsequent rejection of the concept of anonymity, and their right to reject anonymity must be at the forefront of my thinking and engagement. The organisation had been part of a study with an international research institution before; many of them had been involved in that earlier research process. They had also been invited, as a result of my research affiliation with a local university, to speak about their work, so might have received more information about how research is shared and discussed during that experience.

Ensuring women can check their words are represented accurately

The second main concern about naming the women involved was that this meant it was particularly necessary to check they were happy with the way they and their words have been represented. In some studies, participants have been able to clarify their own words through checking both full

transcriptions and the write up from the data analysis, in order to ensure that their words had been adequately represented (Rooney 2015). This process has enabled them to challenge the representation and change their minds (ibid).

Although I mentioned these concerns and have subsequently continued the conversation with the women staff members of the organisation, there has been some difficulty in backchecking the way in which women's words are represented in the final thesis. The fact that the women are illiterate means considerable time would be needed to read through, clarify, translate, and re-translate these ideas. A number of the women said that they trusted their own words. In light of this, I thought it might perhaps be a bit patronising to check the transcripts with them again, since I had taken care to use the exact words.

In acknowledging the issues I, and many other feminist researchers, face in being able to accurately and ethically represent women's words and stories in a way in which they approve of, we also need to acknowledge that this process cannot be devoid of power dynamics (Brear 2017). Bearing in mind the fact that I feel strongly that women's own knowledge and agency should be respected, should I really excuse lack of checking because of concerns about patronising them? Would it not be more honest to consider the pressures on a researcher to finish the thesis, research report or evaluation on time, without breaking the budget on additional trips to meet the respondents?

Recognising women's knowledge and understanding of ethical procedures

I think my biggest reflection in relation to feminist standpoint epistemology and this conversation about anonymity that took place within my research setting, is the need for feminist researchers to apply insights from feminist standpoint epistemology (explained earlier) to our own ethical decision-making. Feminist standpoint epistemology and feminist research intend to provide an innovative approach to knowledge building that breaks down boundaries between academia and activism, between theory and practice. They ask that researchers translate women's knowledge into practice, and that we apply what we learn from women's experiences toward social change and toward the elimination of the oppression not only of women but of all marginalised groups (Brooks 2006).

We need not only to value and affirm women as expert knowers in relation to the themes and topics we research, but also in relation to research ethics. We should do this in two ways. First, we should offer more and better detail about ethical debates that have been had during the research process, when we come to write up the research. Second, we should identify those who shared this process and their knowledge on it as part of the research process (Davison, Brown & Moffit, 2006). Specifically, feminist research should prioritise women's own knowledge on the ethical decisions that govern their involvement in research.

If women reject assumptions that they will want, and would benefit from, anonymity, feminist researchers need to listen and understand. The refusal, rejection and challenging of the concept of anonymity can be seen as part the 'spaces of resistance' (hooks 2004, 156) and 'site of radical possibility' created by the knowledge gleaned from feminist research. Women are exercising agency in rejecting notions of anonymity, and as they do so, they are challenging unequal power dynamics between them and the researcher. When women assert their desire to be named in research and challenge principles of anonymity, we can see this as an act of power.

Women in this research also felt the use of their names, and that of the organisation, would lead to more positive change for them and other women. A number of the women felt that naming themselves and their organisation had an important role in sharing practice that had positive impacts

on their lives. Naming was conceptualised in the ability it gave women to talk more openly about their work, and how it could allow others to benefit from it:

Mentioning my name is positive not only for us but for village and country too. (Pratibha Kumari)

On the other hand, given that research is not solely to present work and activities in this way, but also to critically engage with their impact on women's lives, I wonder whether there would be any difference in their thinking about using names if the research had been written up in a negative way, and I had criticised the work they were doing. However, notes from my reflective journal have reminded me about the number of times that the women asked for feedback, both positive and negative, that was coming from my research; they were eager to learn from what members of their groups were saying, and saw criticism as an important opportunity for them to adapt their practices, and also to then engage with other organisations on these issues. Therefore, perhaps even critiques or reflections on their work could be seen as having the potential for transformative action, and they would have stuck to their view that naming is positive.

Rejecting ideas of ethics as universal, neutral and normative

This case study has led me to greater reflection on the differences in values and ethics that can occur between the researcher and research participants (Morris 2015) and the flaw in thinking that procedural ethics are 'universal, neutral and normative' (Durham 2014). It seems to me that the women in the Bihar case study were not only rejecting the norm of anonymity, but also the widespread assumption that ethical principles are universal (Battiste 2008). It is essential for researchers to recognise and reflect on the unequal power dynamics that underpin these notions of universality and neutrality in ethical guidelines intended for use in many different research projects.

But while researchers may see these issues, the requirements of the institutions involved in the research may mean they are limited in their ability to challenge ideas about ethics, or research procedures coming out of them. The institutional guidelines a researcher is working with may have influenced their thinking. 'We cannot free ourselves from the social constraints on our knowing and a high level of self-awareness might not be possible' (Scharff 2010, 91).

Given the reflections above, I was drawn to the literature on a feminist ethics of care, which offers strategies to deal with such moral dilemmas, 'even if only on a temporary basis' (Sevenhuijsen 1998, 16). A feminist ethics of care emphasises care and responsibility, rather than outcomes, justice or rights and is underpinned by both the ethic of caring, and of personal accountability, where the centre of discussion on ethics is appropriately pivoted so that participants can exchange their wisdom (Hill Collins, 1991).

Wanting to fully give credit to the knowledge that women had given me about their own personal challenges to anonymity led me to write this article, and to conduct further discussion with them about why they felt that naming was important, so that I could use their own words, and names to demonstrate these dilemmas in this case study. In my PhD study, I will name the women who took part in one-on-one interviews who all wanted their names to be associated with their words. I submitted a request to my university's ethics committee to explain this decision, and the above-mentioned reasons for this change, and this was approved in July 2019.

In writing this article, I also acknowledge that there is a need to be held to account by others, and this article is my way of trying to shine a light to my own experience for others to both critically reflect on, and learn from, given that utilising a feminist ethics of care and researcher intention may not always be enough. In research, our work is subject to peer review, where the methods that we have used are

scrutinised, the theories we have drawn upon are critiqued and our findings are interrogated. However, there are many aspects of the research process that do not make it into the final paper, in particular, decision making around ethical dilemmas and decisions.

Therefore, in line with Elena Wilson et al's (2018) calls for greater consideration of ethics in practice, I think that a learning exchange among researchers of the ethical decisions that are made as part of the research process, should become standard practice within feminist research. We engage in dialogue about the choices researchers make methodologically and theoretically, so we should discuss our ethical decision making too.

Conclusion

Anonymity can be of utmost importance in many research settings, particularly in feminist research or in research where participation and findings may lead to retribution for participants and threats to their safety. However, anonymity has the potential to contradict the importance in feminist research of women owning their own narrative and telling their story while asserting their own identity. Anonymity may also fundamentally hinder the emancipatory and political goals of feminist research to create spaces of resistance and transformative change.

At the very least, in order to better recognise the politics of naming, feminist researchers should question the general assumption that anonymity is always best, ensuring that their research is informed by the knowledge and priorities of women participants in the research, and paying attention to the specific context of the research, rejecting ideas of universal ethics. They need to support women's knowledge and agency by working with them in dialogue to agree ethical principles and practices that reflect women's wishes.

Finally, feminist researchers need to consider and openly discuss their own agency in challenging the well-established principles of ethical practices, such as anonymity, through critical reflection and learning exchanges with researchers – in academia, but also in policy and practice.

Acknowledgements

The purpose of my research and this article is to recognise voice and knowledge and to pursue this in the most ethical way possible. Therefore, there are a number of acknowledgements I would like to make, for inspiring, assisting and supporting with the development of this article. However, my reflections on my fieldwork are situated in a specific context, time and space, brought together through my own reflective research journal, some interview transcripts, some conversations, memories and recent reflections. Therefore, unless specified, the words and critiques are my own, as I do not wish to inadequately represent the ideas of anyone else.

Particular thanks are due to Ajmeri Khatun, Amrita Kumari, Gyanti Devi, Kanti Devi, Kiran Devi, Nilam Devi (Pirhi), Nilam Devi (Alipur) Nirasha Devi, Nirmala Devi, Pratibha Kumari, Pratima Devi, Punam Devi, Rinku Devi, Rita Devi, Savitri Devi, Smida Khatun, Sudha Devi, Sunita Devi, Sunayana Devi and Suraykanti Devi for questioning my assumptions about anonymity and for sharing their perspectives on what attaching their words to their name meant for them.

Thanks also to those who were involved in the discussions which supported me in writing this article, researchers engaging in feminist, postcolonial and critical scholarship: Aliya Khalid, Arathi Sriprakash, Lakshmi Bose, Breanna McDaniel and Michelle Brear. To those who have provided practical support for my work in translation, in clarifications, and also in deeply questioning my drafts for a presentation on this issue as well as the paper: Geeta Alok, Sunil Choudhary, Sharon Walker, Asma Zubairi, Chelsea

Ljutic, Garima Sahai, Jude Brady, Mansi Nanda, Ju Hayes, Seema Nath, Pia Kreijkjes, Arif Naveed, Anna Lise and Harriet Gordon. Thank you to Pauline Rose and Nidhi Singal for supporting me in re-navigating the ethical approval process in light of these issues that arose.

To all the participants at the Gender and Development conference for their questions and comments and to the co-editors of this issue in believing in the importance of this article and giving me the opportunity to write it, and for their support during the editing process.

Endnotes

[1] There has been comparatively little critique of anonymity in the literature in comparison with other contested ethical principles. That said, some scholars, including those involved in participatory action research have explored the contradictions between the politics of voice and the blanket necessity for anonymity (Yanar et al 2016).

[2] For more information, see <https://rojiroti.org/index.php?section=1> (last checked 28 August 2019)

[3] Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and other disadvantaged castes are officially designated groups of historically disadvantaged people in India.

[4] Bonded labour refers to a system where a person is forced to work in order to pay off debts.

[5] An informed consent procedure is ethically required for all research involving people. It was a required part of receiving ethical clearance from my University and is the process through which a participant is informed about all aspects of the research which will help them to make an informed decision about whether or not they want to participate.

Notes on author

Rebecca Gordon is a PhD Candidate at the University of Cambridge. Email: Rg504@cam.ac.uk
Postal address: c/o The Editor, Gender & Development, Oxfam GB, John Smith Drive, Oxford OX4 2JY, UK.

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