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"Daughter" as a positionality and the gendered politics of taking parents into the field

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Research on gendered politics of the field has delved into the practices of accompaniment and its implications on research and knowledge production, particularly through the case of researchers' children and partners. In comparison, the tendency to seek assistance from parents is neglected within the scholarship. Drawing on the PhD fieldwork experiences of two researchers in their "native" country, specifically a Sri Lankan researcher conducting fieldwork in Sri Lanka and a North Indian scholar researching in South India, the paper reveals parents' contribution to the research process, in terms of enhancing researcher credibility, facilitating contact-making and access, and providing emotional and practical care. The discussion illuminates two aspects of parents' involvement in fieldwork: (1) how the unique nature of parent–child relationships shapes the research process at multiple stages, and (2) how the gendered notions of knowledge production results in parents' contributions being typically unacknowledged. The paper emphasises that a researcher's positionality as a daughter shapes her ability to navigate gendered field sites in her "native" country and is implicated in the wider research process.

KEYWORDS
accompaniment, gender, India, knowledge production, positionality, Sri Lanka

1 | INTRODUCTION

My participant, a 68-year-old retired migrant, seemed uncomfortable when I asked about his reasons for leaving Sri Lanka [which occurred during the worst economic recession in the country's history]. He dismissively responded, 'You were not even born then. We went through really hard times that you young people will never know of. Ask your mother.' He turns to my 60-year-old mother who is seated beside me, 'You must have also stood in those bread lines. You must remember how terrible it was.' She nodded sympathetically. Throughout the interview, when discussing difficult topics he seemed more comfortable addressing my mother. (De Silva, field notes 2014)

'I made some hot *idlis* [rice cakes] and chutney for both of you' said my landlady as she smilingly handed them to my mother. My landlady's associations with me have undergone a drastic change since my mother's arrival in the field. During the first round of fieldwork, as a lone researcher, her dealings with me were markedly cold and disapproving. My mother's presence seems to give me a quality of respectability and

trustworthiness. She appeared to be more tolerant of housing a female researcher since an older woman accompanied me. (Gandhi, field notes 2008)

These excerpts from our PhD fieldwork experiences draw attention to some of the roles our parents played within the research process, which invariably influenced the dynamics between the researcher, the participants and the gatekeepers. Despite the limited documentation of their contributions, parents are involved in their adult children's research projects as facilitators of field contacts, chaperones during interviews and companions when researchers travel to distant field sites.

Currently, feminist work recognises how the researchers' children and partners shape their ability to negotiate issues in the field (Bell, 1999; Drozdzewski & Robinson, 2015; Levey, 2009; Lunn & Moscuzza, 2014). Apart from shedding light on a neglected form of assistance, analysing parents' involvements in their adult children's research offers more nuanced understandings of gendered politics in the field. Given that parents' support is sought mainly when research is conducted in the scholar's home country, the analysis also contributes to the literature on "native" researchers, which is less developed than the literature on cross-cultural experiences in the field (Katz, 1994; Mullings, 1999; Skelton, 2001).

By explicating the parental assistance we received during our home-country-based PhD fieldwork in Sri Lanka and India, we argue that reliance on parents brings the researcher's positionality as a daughter to the fore, shapes the fieldwork dynamics and is implicated in her research findings. In this paper, we employ positionality as the lens to examine gendered place dynamics in the field and the gendered politics that undergird knowledge construction. Following a brief review of the gendered politics of doing fieldwork, we scrutinise how daughter–parent relations shape the research process at various junctures. Subsequently, we examine how the researcher's positionality in relation to academia affects the tendency to acknowledge parents' contributions.

2 | GENDERED FIELDS, ACCOMPANIMENT AND POSITIONALITY

Feminist geographers have highlighted the manner in which the field is a "space of inbetweenness" (Katz, 1994, p. 67) or a "leaky space" (Cupples & Kindon, 2003, p. 212), where a scholar's positionalities and social relations shape the contours of their research. The particular gendered, racialised, classed structures that constitute the social world they investigate shape the research process (Hiemstra & Billo, 2017; Lal, 1996). Broadly, male and female researchers occupy contrasting power positions to access participants: that is, men tend to embody authority while women convey a more feminine and subordinate position (Chiswell & Wheeler, 2016; Sultana, 2007). A woman's morality, particularly in terms of her sexuality, whether as a married or unmarried woman, is frequently seen as an extension of her credibility as a researcher (Islam, 2000; Miller, 2014). Work that attends to these disjunctions between research and social relations highlights the intersections of positionality, subjectivity and reflexivity (for a review, see Hiemstra & Billo, 2017).

These works affirm that the researcher is a subjective being and that reflexive discussions on the researcher's subjectivities is instrumental in illuminating how positionalities shape fieldwork encounters and the impact they have on the research outcomes (Sultana, 2007; Wolf, 1996). Recent studies argue that positionality goes beyond the scholar's negotiations of his/her identity (axes of difference) and that the researcher's positionality constantly varies in relation to the participants, the issues under discussion and the researcher's level of insider-ness (Mukherjee, 2017; Whitson, 2017). We posit that the ways in which the researcher's positionality is implicated by those who accompany them also requires similar scholarly attention.

As Lunn and Moscuzza astutely observe, "whether a field researcher is accompanied or not, and by whom, constitutes one of [their] identities" (2014, p. 72). Reflections on how the presence of children in the field and the researcher's identity as a mother have been instrumental in breaking down barriers between the "foreign" researcher and her participants are prevalent (Drozdzewski & Robinson, 2015; Levey, 2009). Partners have also received attention, especially regarding the ways in which their presence conveys that female researchers are conforming to the social and cultural norms of the field site (Bell, 1999; Lunn & Moscuzza, 2014). In comparison, there is limited deliberation on how the presence of the researcher's parents can influence the dynamics in the field (for an exception, see O'Brien, 1999).

However, these studies are largely situated in cross-cultural settings, where "White" researchers are urged to consider how their positionalities shape the politics of the field (Moser, 2008; Mullings, 1999; Skelton, 2001). In comparison, the complexities of being "native" to the field and the ambivalences of this position have received insufficient attention. As noted by O'Brien (1999, p. 237), a foreign scholar's distance from the culture she studies offers her a broader negotiating space that "native" researchers are not "quite exotic enough" to claim. Islam highlights that "we are not automatically considered insiders in our respective ethnic communities" (2000, p. 42), and participants evaluate researchers' positionalities in relation to essentialised understandings of belonging to a particular social group. The researcher's ability to perform nativity

to a particular field site or group, possibly through accompaniment, determines the depth of the information participants are willing to share and thus undergirds the success of the research process (Hyndman, 2001; Sultana, 2007). Yet, the researcher occupies multiple social locations that include those within their family, community and academia, which leads to tensions as they negotiate the politics attached to their personal and professional identities (Lal, 1996). As such, the practice of taking parents into the field brings to fore the complexities of being an independent researcher, while performing the role of the daughter who should be under her parents' protection.

Feminist methodologies have interrogated the epistemological underpinnings of knowledge construction and encourage a greater reflexivity on how the researchers' subjectivities influence the ways in which other individuals' voices emerge through their research (Skelton, 2001; Wolf, 1996). Much of the academic concerns on how knowledge is constructed are directed towards researchers' ability to acknowledge their epistemic privilege and give voice to the communities they research (Katz, 1996). Due to the emphasis on the researcher–researched dialectic, there is insufficient reflection on how other actors involved in the research process, i.e. research assistants, translators and accompanying family members, contribute to knowledge construction. The few studies that focus on assistants who receive monetary remuneration underscore the issues of negotiating their subjectivities and positionalities that differ from the researcher's (Leck, 2014; Temple & Edwards, 2002). However, the ethical dilemmas of incorporating the work of both paid and unpaid assistants during the writing of the research remain unaddressed. The paper addresses this gap by explicating the case of taking parents to the field and their influence on the research process, and interrogating why the politics of knowledge production render their contributions invisible.

3 | THE PRACTICES OF TAKING PARENTS TO THE FIELD

Given the absence of reflections on academics seeking assistance from their parents, and concerned that our experiences were idiosyncratic, we were keen to identify other researchers with similar experiences. While the majority responded with a surprised, emphatic "no," especially our male colleagues, many women did rely on their parents' assistance in varying degrees. In the analysis we refer to the reflections of a few such colleagues (see Table 1 for their details).

De Silva's research focused on Sri Lankan-British retirees' migration histories and the emotionality of these experiences. From the point of proposing the research, De Silva was aware that her mother's social capital, in the form of relatives and friends in the UK, would be crucial for the project's success. Since De Silva intended to document retired migrants' migration and citizenship manipulations within a limited period of time, she preferred to approach participants through known sources, which would make it easier to gain trust and broach personal and politically sensitive issues. Similarly, our colleagues Anika and Michelle shared that the ability to tap into their parents' professional and social networks influenced the choice of industry they researched. Since our research relations were built on pre-existing connections of trust and

TABLE 1 Details of selected female researchers and their practices of taking parents to the field.

Personal details at the time of fieldwork; field sites; length of the fieldwork; present stage in the PhD	Parents' contributions in the field
Anika, 33 years old, married, Indian; New Delhi and the urban areas of surrounding states), India; multiple 1–2 week visits over a period of 3 years; PhD received	Anika contacted all her father's personal contacts related to the field – they were vital to gain access to government officers. She resided with her parents and was provided with food and accommodation
Elisabeth, 31 years old, single, Filipina; upland village in the Philippines; initial field site visit and subsequently 12 months of fieldwork; PhD received	Both parents accompanied Elisabeth to the village during the initial field visit and their presence helped her to form networks
Michelle, 33 years old, single, Filipina; Metro Manila and a gated community located in a city periphery of Philippines; 12 months in the field; writing the thesis	Both parents tapped friends and colleagues in the industry to gain access to potential interviewees, agencies, officers and key events. Michelle's mother accompanied her to several interviews with contacts for introductions and during visits to meet gatekeepers in institutions and companies. Michelle used her parents' professional and personal experiences as background information on the industry and field sites

friendship, this approach led to more honest discussions with the participants. However, not all researchers adopted this strategy: Gandhi and Elisabeth focused on topics that would not benefit from their parents' social capital.

Many researchers are constrained by gatekeepers when accessing the field due to distrust and/or identity-based differences (Mandel, 2003; Sanghera & Thapar-Björkert, 2008). In contrast, De Silva found a very accommodating gatekeeper in her mother, and had several confirmed participants and gatekeepers who were willing to provide referrals even before commencing fieldwork. Yet her mother's subjectivity with regard to the persons she was willing to ask for favours shaped the cross-section of Sri Lankan-British migrants the 60 participants represented. For instance, since most of the participants were closer to her mother's age group, the sample was skewed towards the experiences of those in their 60s and 70s. Gaining access to older participants was more challenging because De Silva's mother perceived her associations with older migrant relatives to be less intimate and hence that it would be "rude to trouble them." Thus, while a researcher's access to the field is markedly easier when the gatekeeper is a parent, the researcher still contends with constraints due to their parents' positionality and subjectivities.

Gandhi's fieldwork aimed at understanding state and civil society responses to the December 2004 tsunami through the experiences of a fishing community in the Akkraipettai village of Nagapattinam district, Tamil Nadu. Her reliance on her parents was more intermittent and a response to particular risks to her safety and health during fieldwork. Issues regarding researchers' well-being when travelling, residing in rural or isolated field sites and entering unknown participants' homes is gradually gaining recognition within the literature on fieldwork (Chiswell & Wheeler, 2016; Sampson & Thomas, 2003). These reflexive accounts on the dangers that researchers face rarely consider accompaniment as a solution, nor do studies on accompaniment explicitly discuss safety as a motivation. According to Sampson and Thomas (2003), gender amplifies the risks a researcher may face within a site. As women conducting research in their home countries, we and our colleagues were compelled to project ourselves as an "authentic native" (Lal, 1996, p. 191), which was predicated on the extent we complied with the gendered social norms of our field sites. Though not uniformly, women continue to be perceived as symbols of tradition and morality, while in the Global South these constructions are also underlain with nationalist ideals that contrast the essentialised notions of local women with "Western" women, thereby creating the good women–bad women dichotomy (Islam, 2000; West, 2014).

Although Gandhi was a 30-year-old, international graduate student, the prevalence of violence and rape in public spaces, especially in North India, motivated her to seek her father's company for the journey from New Delhi to Nagapattinam and until she secured safe accommodation in the distant and unfamiliar field site. Yet notions of risk and appropriate conduct are subjective and reveal another facet of the researcher's positionality in relation to the field site's cultural norms. Although Gandhi was eager to be chaperoned during the first week of her fieldwork, mainly due to the fear of male-dominated public spaces, she "did not want to be a burden" and opted to remain alone in the district during the first three months of her fieldwork. The Tamil culture (as most cultures in India) emphasises the need to protect female sexuality. Unmarried girls are particularly under the protective gaze of their families, while married women's status entails submission to the guardianship and control of their husbands and to motherhood. As a married, Punjabi female, Gandhi was both an outsider to Tamil Nadu at a regional level and a non-native due to language and cultural differences. Yet, as an Indian woman she was expected to conform to the codes of gendered public spaces.

This breach of social norms did impact Gandhi's field relations, where her female participants asked about her marital status and if she had children.[1] Since marriage is a marker of respect for women in Tamil society, her respondents appeared satisfied when she explained her marital status and the inability of her husband to join her in the field. However, her landlady questioned Gandhi about her family's approval of her work, and the landlady's aloof reception conveyed her displeasure about her tenant being unchaperoned, which markedly improved when Gandhi's mother accompanied her during the second phase of fieldwork. In contrast, both parents accompanied our colleague Elisabeth during her initial field visit to a village in the Philippines, which established her as a trustworthy researcher. Further, her positionality as a retired military person's daughter helped to "guard" her respectability when she returned alone for fieldwork.

Gandhi and Elisabeth's experiences convey that the willingness of a female scholar to risk her physical safety by working alone, particularly before establishing some familiarity with the field, is intertwined with her credibility as a researcher. Yet the experiences of De Silva and Michelle highlight that proximity between the field site and the researcher's home is not the key determinant of parental accompaniment. They conducted interviews in participants' homes and government offices that were located within their city. However, similar gendered concerns about safety and morality compelled them to rely on parental accompaniment. Although De Silva was a single, 32-year-old researcher, similar concerns resonated from her participants: "it's a good thing you're coming with your mother. Colombo is not safe anymore." Despite being aware that parental accompaniment contributed to our safety, as independent scholars with experience of living abroad alone, the discourses of vulnerability and purity that influenced our dependent position in the field led to feelings of chagrin

(for similar issues see O'Brien, 1999). Gandhi sought to challenge this by conducting the initial phase of her fieldwork alone, while De Silva acquiesced to her parents' insistence on accompaniment due to her positionality as "dutiful daughter" who resided with her parents during fieldwork.

Being accompanied by her parents, particularly her mother, inadvertently influenced the De Silva's relations with her participants. Although De Silva's positionality as a "friend's daughter" provided her an insider status with some participants, gaining trust of referred participants was more challenging due to the perceived generation gap. Instead, these participants quickly formed an affinity with De Silva's mother based on shared social connections, parental concerns and experiences. These interviews began by evaluating how De Silva and her mother were connected to the gatekeeper and subsequently seeking (and eventually finding) other social connections (for similar practices see Islam, 2000). Greater trust was accorded when multiple connections were discovered, thus the success of De Silva in identifying common schoolmates, college friends and extended family was instrumental in gaining participants' trust. Further, the positionality of the researcher's family members influenced researcher–researched power dynamics. Given the participants' attunement with De Silva's mother, she was frequently addressed with a parent-like authority and/or benevolence, which she maintained by asking questions or steering the conversation in a deferential manner.[2]

A less recognised benefit of conducting researching while residing at home is receiving free lodging and food from our parents, which De Silva, Anika and Michelle capitalised on. While they also benefited from emotional support, Gandhi's experiences highlight the significant care role her mother played during her accompaniment. During the first phase of her fieldwork, Gandhi developed flu and severe back pains, and was admitted to hospital by a fellow researcher, which prompted her to seek her mother's company for the second visit to Nagapattinam. In addition, working in a tsunami-affected district where 6065 people had died was stressful for Gandhi. Her mother's presence in the field thus provided her with both practical support, e.g. cooking, and emotional care, which was crucial to complete the fieldwork on time. Gandhi's reliance on her mother highlights the various nuances of researcher fatigue (Mandel, 2003). As argued by Willis (2014), researchers need appropriate support, including counselling during fieldwork, especially when working on themes such as child mortality, domestic violence and HIV/AIDS. In the absence of such formal support systems, Gandhi tapped into the most intimate and reliable form of support accessible to her.

On many occasions, the researcher's responsibility to give back to the field was fulfilled by parents. Since De Silva's participants belonged to the elite segment of Sri Lankan society, giving back involved fulfilling requests such as finding the best physician for various ailments or service providers such as carpenters. These requests were directed to De Silva's parents, partly due to their shared age and experiences with the participants. While such practices are common among acquaintances in Sri Lanka, underlying these requests were also the sentiment that the participants had done the daughter-researcher a favour, which made De Silva' parents more obligated. Gandhi's mother volunteered at an organisation that housed and taught Tsunami orphans, which increased her daughter's trustworthiness among the members of the civil-society organisations in Nagapattinam whom she interviewed. Members of these organisations were weary of the numerous researchers and journalists who had crowded the district since the Tsunami, labelled "disaster-tourists" because they promptly left after extracting information. In contrast, due to Ghandi's longer presence and later her mother's teaching-engagement with the children, the participants were more forthcoming with her as opposed to the restraint they exercised with the shorter-duration researchers.

4 | THE POLITICS OF RELYING ON PARENTS' ASSISTANCE

Although we could have opted to be accompanied by a friend or a research assistant, our colleagues' and our preference to rely on parents is linked to the particular nature of parent–child relationships where the family norms of (inter)dependency can be strategically employed and without explicit forms of remuneration. As discussed above, parents play crucial roles by facilitating access to study participants either as gatekeepers or by creating attunement with participants, providing companionship, accommodation and care for the researcher, and giving back to the field in lieu of the researcher. Since the boundaries between the "field" and researchers' everyday lives are rarely well defined (Cupples & Kindon, 2003), the traditional caregiving roles of the parents spill beyond the home into the fieldwork sites of their children. These parent–child/researcher–researched interactions are overlain on familial relationships. However, since family roles and obligations are gendered, female researchers tend to benefit from them far more than their male counterparts.

The gendered norms of familial interdependencies, where adult men are perceived as care-givers rather than care-receivers, discourage adult men from seeking their parents' accompaniment, and could disrupt their notions of being an independent researcher. Our male colleagues revealed that their field sites were located far away from their parents' homes. They

did conduct home visits during fieldwork, yet these two phases of their fieldwork were compartmentalised as work and pleasure, with little reflection on how the food, shelter, care and affection they received from their parents provides the much-needed respite from the fatigue of doing fieldwork. It is unlikely that men are immune to loneliness and risks in the field. However, the lack of discussion on the challenges faced by male researchers and benefits of accompaniment by any family member signals a gendered bias that disadvantages both men and their parents. While we recognise that our male colleagues' experiences and views cannot be extrapolated to all male researchers, their dismissive attitudes about even inadvertently benefiting from parental assistance reiterates researchers' insistence on being independent.

The disjunctions between the supposed gender-neutral, independent researcher and the femininities and masculinities that underlie social relations were salient in our field experiences. Our credibility as researchers was most questioned when we were not accompanied in the field, and our work was most successful when we performed the role of being a dutiful and protected daughter. In contrast, men perceived a reliance on parents as a risk to their credibility as a researcher and failed to recognise the implicit contributions their parents did make towards the success of their research. Yet, these gendered realities of the field are not easily transferred to discussions on politics of knowledge construction. Katz highlights that geographical knowledge construction has been concerned with creating "emancipatory geographies" through predominantly privileged, white male narratives of "explorers, survival themes, discovery" (1996, p. 178). Despite the advances in feminist methodologies, such masculine, survivalist rhetoric still underlies academics' notions of conducting independent research.

As non-white women who were researching communities within a native space, we and our colleagues were keenly aware that our positionalities and experiences did not align with the dominant notions of knowledge production. Further, given the individualistic nature of PhD research, we were particularly pressured to convey ownership and authority over the knowledge we produced. Whitson (2017) insists that researchers acknowledge their emotions when conducting research, instead of hiding them. As such, we and our colleagues recognise that our decision to underplay parents' contributions in our written work, to varying degrees, was influenced by the fear of being perceived as unprofessional. Due to the long-standing practice of depending on parents and since parents are less inclined to seek explicit acknowledgment of their contributions to their children's achievements, we rarely perceived these omissions as an appropriation of their input. Thus, the invisibility of parents' role in fieldwork and consequently in knowledge production is due the scholars' tendency to view a reliance on their parents as undermining their credibility as researchers.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, we sought to illuminate researchers' practices of taking parents to the field. By reflecting on our colleagues' and our own positionality as female researchers who are researching communities in our home countries, we revealed how seeking assistance from our parents enabled us to navigate gendered challenges in the field. Our positionality in relation to the cultural norms within our field sites revealed how the performance of feminine subservience was essential to easily identify study participants and gain their trust. As such, our parents' positionality as mature, married and respectable individuals were intertwined with ours. These fieldwork relations highlight how the subjectivities of the researchers and their parents shape the research process. The parents' willingness to be involved in the research process either by tapping into their social networks or engaging in volunteer work had influenced the scope and success of the project. Yet, due to our notions of independence and experiences of living in foreign countries, reliance on parental assistance led to feelings of shame.

These disjunctions between the researchers' positionality as a "protected daughter" in the field and an "independent researcher" within academia lead to certain silences on how knowledge is constructed. First, given the masculine, survivalist rhetoric within academia, female researchers tend to downplay their parents' direct contributions towards the research. Second, the practical and emotional care provided by parents is rarely recognised as crucial to the process of conducting fieldwork. This oversight is partly due to the limited focus on issues of emotion work and researcher fatigue. Although we retrospectively recognise our parents' influence on the research process, we highlight that the tendency to overlook their contributions is due to the long-standing practice of depending on parents with relatively less reciprocation and acknowledgement.

Although the paper draws on Asian examples, we do not suggest that seeking assistance from parents is specific to the region (for an example of a White researcher doing fieldwork in France, see O'Brien, 1999). Nor did all female researchers from Asia rely on their parents or conduct fieldwork in sites that are native to them. As noted by West (2014), gendered cultural norms persist in most cultures. Further, the emphasis on individualism within PhD research makes these projects more susceptible to the underplaying of inputs by others. We suggest that collaborative research allows more space to

incorporate the positionalities and subjectivities of those who assist the projects. Indeed, parents in the field are just one example of how contributors to research are overlooked due to the gendered politics in the field and in knowledge production.

ENDNOTES

[1] During Ghandi's fieldwork, her husband was working in Singapore and they had no children.

[2] While these dynamics were important to gain participants' trust, they did not have an explicit impact on the data interpretation and analysis.

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