

India Fieldwork Examines Changing Gender Roles

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are increasingly responsible for implementing development projects, which focus on improving living conditions and providing opportunities for the poor. Some of these organizations work towards literacy, girls' education, health education and natural resource management.

Dr. Kathleen O'Reilly, a new addition to Texas A&M University's Geography Department, recently wrapped up a month-long trip to India where she performed fieldwork sponsored by the National Science Foundation (NSF). Her main areas of research on this trip were development NGOs and the women who work for these organizations, specifically in Rajasthan, India.

The NGO O'Reilly studied focuses on health education, labor rights and drought relief. During her time working with this organization, O'Reilly studied the gendered aspects of NGO interventions. "In India, the NGO sector is an expanding area of both social service provision and employment. Many Indian NGOs take a gendered approach to development. They specifically design programs to bring women into the social and economic lives of their communities," said O'Reilly. Her research investigated the gendered, social relations inside rural NGOs for women fieldworkers' daily lives and village-level outcomes. Her month-long fieldwork involved obtaining data through participant observation, interviews and focus groups.

Throughout her time spent researching, O'Reilly gained a greater understanding of the women fieldworkers' sense of themselves in their NGO roles. "There were very mixed answers when I asked women how they came to see themselves as fieldworkers. They expressed feeling a certain sense of empowerment, and having the ability to speak in public and move about in society. They are in a powerful position to spread knowledge about health, sanitation and savings programs, and they have access to NGO resources," O'Reilly said. However, it turns out their high profile is not always prestigious. When women fieldworkers travel to new villages, they face harassment, teasing and lots of questioning. Many of the women were not sure they truly liked the job; some were looking for work that was not so public and of higher status.

O'Reilly views her work in India as exceptionally rewarding and has no doubt that she will return. "Absolutely, I make two trips a year — summer and winter breaks," O'Reilly said.

Her research advances work on development by exploring how gendered relationships inside NGOs influence project outcomes. Given the channeling of huge sums to NGOs from foreign and local donors for projects, the research will contribute to an understanding of how what happens inside NGOs affects what happens in the places where they work.



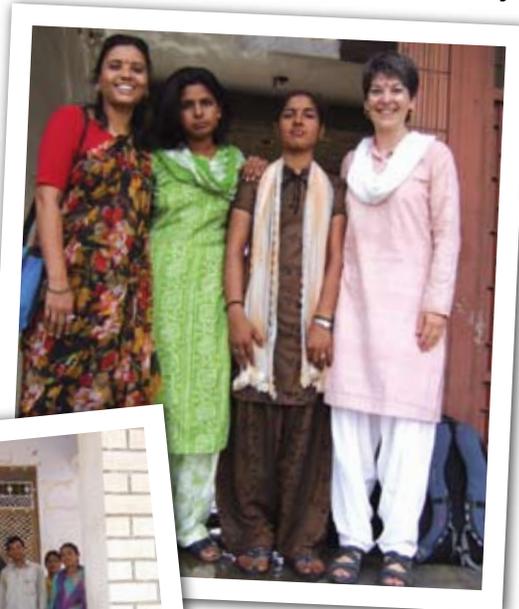
DR. KATHLEEN O'REILLY

Geography

For more information on Dr. O'Reilly's work visit <http://geog.tamu.edu/> and select the Faculty link.



Dr. O'Reilly (far right) sits in on an NGO meeting.



Dr. O'Reilly (right) with the NGO staff on their day off.



Staff portrait of the NGO Dr. O'Reilly studied. This NGO focused on health education, labor rights and drought relief.



Monthly meeting of women childcare workers