

Developing Contradictions: Women's Participation as a Site of Struggle Within an Indian NGO*

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Women are being hired in increasing numbers by development projects to facilitate women's participation components. Once employed, however, women often find themselves marginalized within their organizations. In this paper, I find that the women's participation component of an Indian drinking water project has enabled the exclusion of women fieldworkers employed by the project. Drawing on the work of Bakhtin, I show participatory approaches as multiple, partial, and contentious. Moves to thwart women fieldworkers and women's participation give rise to struggles over development geography. Analysis of project records, interviews with staff, and observation of staff activities provide evidence for results. **Key Words:** gender, development, participation, NGOs, India.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and their services have grown explosively in poor countries. They have taken on a major role in the implementation of development projects. Donor agencies see them as a good investment, believing that they are cost-efficient and hardworking with the ability to reach marginalized sectors of a population (Biggs and Neame 1996; Clark 1995; Edwards and Hulme 1996; Fisher 1997). Regard for NGOs as development-instituting apparatuses has led to more and better-funded NGOs—a trend that seems to be continuing (Clark 1995; Edwards and Hulme 1996; Fisher 1997). In South Asia, not only are numbers of individual NGOs rising, but sizes of NGOs and their programs are growing also. Indian economic liberalization has led to “a substantial increase” in the money available to NGOs from international aid agencies and a corresponding decrease in state regulation (Ray 1999, 165). *Human Development in South Asia* (Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre 2000) reports that there are 500,000 NGOs working in India alone.¹ Despite their image as ideal institutions for delivering development, NGOs have been shown to be fraught with conflicting meanings and competing viewpoints (Mosse 2001;

O'Reilly 2003a). NGOs are not homogeneous organizations acting in a unified manner (Fisher 1997). Instead, they are comprised of multiply interested actors with different levels and realms of power (Cleaver 2001; Crewe and Harrison 2000; O'Reilly 2002).² NGOs, as mediators of development discourses and practices, generate struggles and contradictions (Crewe and Harrison 2000; O'Reilly 2003a; Mosse 2001). In this paper, I examine struggles inside NGOs by specifically focusing on one organization's women's participation component.

Esther Boserup's (1970) book, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, brought women to the forefront of development at the level of donor institutions and the United Nations. Since then, many development organizations have incorporated women into their missions, whether they are large enterprises like the World Bank or the smallest of NGOs. Women's generally low status in South Asia forms the context for gendered development interventions there. Inequalities favoring Indian men over Indian women surface in a variety of indicators, for example education level; age at marriage; access to health care; employment; literacy; wages; and property rights (Agarwal 1992; Mies 1982; Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre 2000; Bhatia 2000). Imbalanced sex ratios (94 women per 100 men) across South Asia³ may be

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partially attributed to discriminatory practices in food distribution, health care decision making, and work burden (Halvorson 2003; Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre 2000). In rural Rajasthan, the site of my case study, social norms call for women's seclusion and veiling (Unnithan-Kumar 1997; Luthra 1976; Agarwal 1992). (Discrimination against Indian women is significant; however, we must not reify the category "oppressed third world woman" [Mohanty 1991]. Considerable diversity exists between women and their material realities across generations, classes, castes, etc.). In order to facilitate growing women's participation components, women are being hired in increasing numbers by development projects, only to find themselves marginalized within their organizations. Women's incorporation into development projects, instead of being a straightforward process, has generated conflicts and paradoxes.

Although they are often the ones producing development on the ground, the work of women employed by development projects has yet to be systematically examined. Numerous geographers and anthropologists have studied the effects of development discourses and interventions (e.g., Carney and Watts 1991; Schroeder 1999; Bebbington 2000; Ferguson 1990, 1999; Escobar 1995; Pigg 1992), but few give explicit attention to individuals and their activities *inside* organizations actually implementing the projects (exceptions include Nagar 2000; Weisgrau 1997; Garcia 2001; Mosse 2001).⁴ Feminist anthropological and sociological works on gendered labor processes (Lee 1998; Pringle 1988; Wolf 1992; Ong 1987) and interactive service work (Leidner 1993; Hochschild 1983) inside factories and firms provide important insights into women workers' agency and inter-institutional dynamics, but their findings cannot adequately explain the unique situation of women fieldworkers, who negotiate *meanings, spaces, and practices* of women's development.

In this paper, I examine the roles of women fieldworkers in participatory schemes. Women's participation began as an effort to include village women, but I find that it has enabled the exclusion of women fieldworkers employed by the project. I demonstrate in this paper that moves to thwart women fieldworkers and women's participation give rise to alternative dialogues and struggles over development geog-

raphy. Contests over meanings of women's participation unfold in a main office, field offices, and villages. I unpack the conflicts of one particular NGO in order to show its gendered participatory approach as fragmented and contentious. Analysis of project records, structured and unstructured interviews (in English and Hindi) with staff, and observation of staff activities provide evidence for results. My study of women fieldworkers also provides a lens through which to view village women's participation and expands our understanding of the internal gender dynamics of development projects. I explore these ideas in the following sections, after an introduction to my case study.

Case Study

Over the course of six visits between 1997 and the present, I lived and worked with a joint Indo-German-funded drinking water supply project (hereafter, the Project) that has women's participation as a specific goal. The project area covers approximately 20,000 square kilometers of northern Rajasthan's saline belt, where groundwater is not potable (see Figure 1.1). In its first phase it will reach 900,000 people spread over 378 villages and two towns. Its estimated cost stands at \$150 million dollars. The Project is a combined effort between: (1) a German donor bank offering financial assistance and consulting services; (2) a technical component, drawing on the expertise of the Government of Rajasthan Public Health and Engineering Department; and (3) the Project Social Side (PSS), comprising a consortium of five Rajasthanian NGOs (see Figure 1.2). Approximately 70 Indian staff work on issues of community participation; 15 of these staff are women who work on women's participation. The sole woman program officer (of seven) is responsible for the women's participation and health education components.

The Project's stated primary goal is to improve health conditions of the population. The Project includes: (1) building a drinking water supply system, (2) creating need in the Project area for clean water and sanitation facilities, and (3) convincing villagers to accept commodification and community-level management of a resource (water) they have been getting for free from the government. Villagers in the project area have access to water through

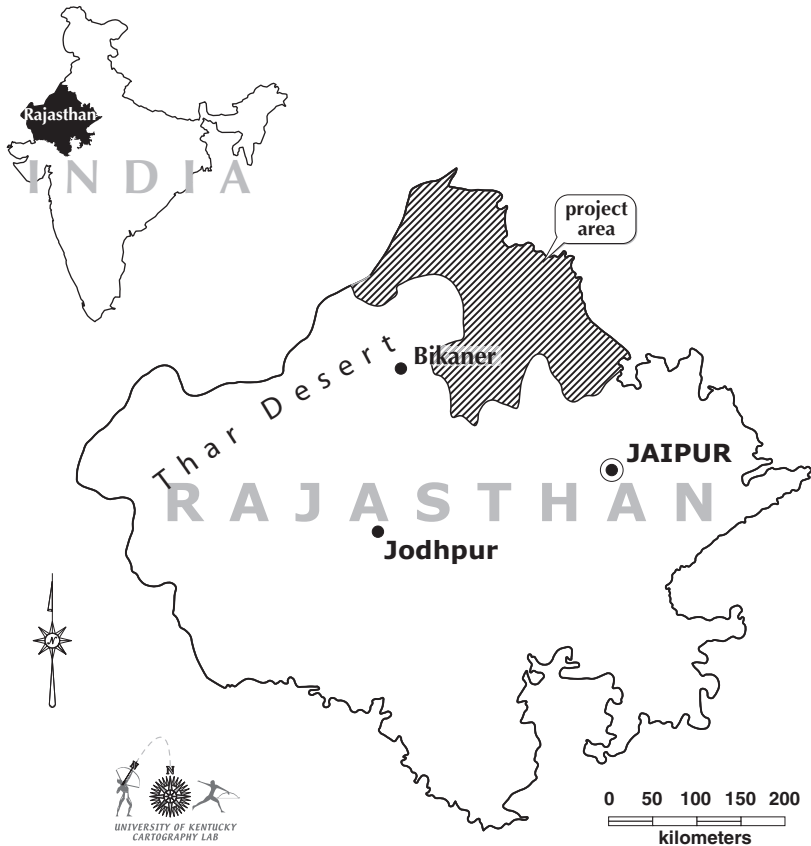


Figure 1.1. Project Area Map (Map courtesy of Dick Gilbreath, University of Kentucky Cartography Lab)

the existing Government of Rajasthan pipeline, but it is unreliable and unclean. Less than 10% of rural households in the area have latrines (Project *Feasibility Study* 1993, E2/3); instead, people defecate in the open. The PSS constructs subsidized latrines after reaching agreement with local communities that (1) a clean reliable water supply is worth paying for and (2) the benefits of building sanitation facilities outweigh the cost.⁵ The Project is unique in its village-level solicitation of payment for water and expectation that communities will manage the system inside village boundaries. PSS staff meet with villagers and detail their managerial and financial responsibility for the system.

Microprocesses of Development

When I first visited the Project in its third year of operations, I was struck by the difference

between the Project’s declaration that “[a]ctive participation of women is essential” (Project *Leporello Leaflet*, n.d.) and women’s marginalization. During my two years of fieldwork, I watched women’s participation grow from a suggestion in the Project’s feasibility study to a full-fledged Project component. It eventually expanded into a dense web of Indian staff, German consultants, and donor representatives. Despite growth of the component, women fieldworkers continually struggle to make plain the value of their contributions in the face of rhetoric and practices that render their work invisible.

In my attempt to understand the contradiction between women’s stated importance and their apparent marginalization, I came to view women’s participation as a dialogic process. By employing a concept of dialogic process, I draw on the work of Bakhtin (1994), who writes that discourses are comprised of many competing

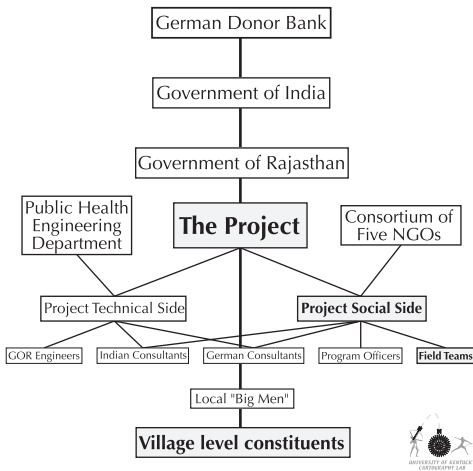


Figure 1.2. *Project Organizational Hierarchy* (Figure courtesy of Dick Gilbreath, University of Kentucky Cartography Lab)

voices. These individual voices emerge in spoken dialogue; every line of conversation may be considered a competitive fragment of a larger discourse. Bakhtin holds that these individual, spoken fragments are the pieces of a dialogic process of negotiation. In Bakhtin’s formulations, the words of actors engaged in conversation represent elements of a discourse, which is being negotiated through that conversation. Dialogues, therefore, are processes of negotiation; meanings are negotiated through a dialogic process. For Bakhtin, these negotiations occur within a context of power differences between speakers. Context is critically important for what is spoken and how individual statements are understood. I understand context to include gender, class, ethnicity, caste, and age of the speaking body, as well as geographical location, social situation, and the presence or absence of other speakers or listeners.

Considering women’s participation as a dialogic process makes clear that neoliberal approaches to women’s participation cannot work because technical solutions to such problems as women’s marginalization fail to grasp the power struggles surrounding plans to incorporate women into projects (Ferguson 1990; Mutersbaugh 1998; Schroeder 1999). Poststructuralist criticisms of development, exemplified by Ferguson (1990) and Escobar (1995), illuminate some of the effects of devel-

opment discourses, but they do not give ample attention to the agency of project staff members and accompanying internal struggles inside implementing organizations.⁶ Furthermore, the words of women fieldworkers cannot be understood, I insist, without a concept of dialogic process and context. Staff inhabit and construct varying subject positions during conversations in order to invoke and rework particular discourses. In the case of the PSS’s women’s participation component, the two most significant discourses are that (1) women’s participation is critical to Project success and (2) women’s participation is not critical to Project success. Although Bakhtin focuses on context in terms of the positionality of speakers and listeners, I suggest expanding his formulation to include location as part of context. Location, in part, determines which discourses are available to speakers and how they may be used. The emergence of struggles over women’s participation and their outcomes inflect in different ways depending on positionality of speakers and context involved.

Locating Laboring Bodies

Central to my study is an analysis of gender-biased labor practices as constitutive of meanings of women’s participation. Labor processes reveal what must be negotiated, specifically the contradictions contained within and produced by discourses of development and participation. By examining labor processes the exercise of power becomes clearer—staff, in order to do their jobs and *by* doing their jobs, confront and exercise power. Not only do we get “answers” to questions of power through a study of labor processes but, in response to Hochschild’s (1983) and Leidner’s (1993) calls for the importance of subjectivity in the labor process, we see at an individual level how staff negotiate exercises of power. As Leidner (1993) so beautifully shows, laborers in an informed, highly personal way, resolve for themselves conflicts they face trying to do their jobs. Labor processes within the Project both create and resolve tensions and reflect the coincidence and collision of member interests (see Schroeder 1999; Mutersbaugh 1998; Hart 1992). Observing and analyzing discrete acts and exchanges illustrates how individual staff members resolve conflicts and negotiate workable solutions.

A discussion of labor processes also leads to the question, "What are Project staff producing?" It is important to recall that the "products" that Project staff create are most often intangibles like meanings and social relationships, constantly reproduced through a process that is primarily talk. The commodities fetishized through Project labor processes are not widgets, but services and targets (e.g., health education and latrines, respectively). This is not to say that there are no practical outcomes to the meanings they create (after all, latrines and public water taps get built), but simply that I view staff practices as producing social relations that are based on meanings constructed through their practices. Staff power and positionality within these contexts are critical for the outcomes of struggles over women's participation.

Finally, I want to suggest that women fieldworkers, by engaging in a labor process to increase women's participation in the Project, become more aware of possibilities for alternatives to constructed roles (Ong 1987). Women's increased self-awareness also opens up possibilities for indirect and direct challenges to oppressive social relations (Ong 1987). In part, women's participation creates opportunities for resistance because of (1) needing women to do the work of women's participation and (2) training these women about empowerment and women's "roles and responsibilities." This logic sets up specific opportunities for women to then challenge discrimination as they do their work.

Developing Contradictions

Early on in my acquaintance with the Project I became interested in contradictory goals for women's participation written into Project documents. The selection below comes from the Project *Feasibility Study* (1993, E9/24), written by German consulting engineers on behalf of the donor bank:

The establishment of **women groups** should be considered as an additional activity. The betterment of the women's situation and progress of their knowledge of health and hygiene problems is very much required. Thus, related activities will be carried out in every village. But due to the overall programmatic design of the project which has for its goal bringing safe water in the

villages this field of activity would not be in the center of [Field Teams'] workload in the village.

—(emphasis in original)

Consider now a portion from the *Handbook on Women's Participation* (n.d.: 1–2), written by program officers and German consultants to the Project early on in the establishment phase of the Project (1994–1996).

Apart from the two primary objectives [improving health and hygiene practices within the home and involving women in the public domain of the Project], we are also hoping that, as a result of encouraging women to come out of their homes⁷ and by meeting and discussing with other women in groups, this will contribute to *empowering the women of a village to help themselves and organise for the solution of other problems* which are not necessarily related to water and sanitation issues.

—(emphasis in original)

In this document, village women have been identified as important support for the long-term sustainability of the Project, and the work of women fieldworkers is expected to contribute to the empowerment of village women. The authors envision women, both village women and women fieldworkers, emerging as powerful actors at the village level. The emphasis on women's involvement related in the *Handbook on Women's Participation* continues to manifest itself and grow in the Project's day-to-day operations. As I will show below, extending plans for women's participation does not neatly resolve into "priorities" because women are embedded in a complex system of social relations and spaces.

We see in the above documents the logic of women fieldworkers' and village women's involvement in the Project, and the text of the *Feasibility Study* and *Handbook on Women's Participation* gives the impression that Project discourses for women's participation are unified and uncontested. However, at an empirical level, I understand discourses (and during fieldwork I experienced them) as individual voices and fragile meanings, embedded in documents and embodied in agents. For example, the following dialogue reveals the contests and multiple voices behind the expressed logic of Project documents; notions of women's potential involvement are more fragmented than these texts admit. The excerpt below

comes from a meeting of program officers in January 2000. We see a struggle taking place over a potential expansion of women's participation into territory that has been "staked out" as that of male fieldworkers. The Women's Participation Program Officer has just been asked what she wants regarding women's participation:

Women's Participation Program Officer: In terms of the Project . . . take O&M in hand . . . [i.e., women to assume Operations and Maintenance component activities]

Program Officer #2: [interrupts] Snatch it from men's group? Must work with women and men.

Program Officer #3: Why women are not empowered?

Women's Participation Program Officer: We know about the division of labor.

Program Officer #2: You think women should take all the work. Take the work and snatch it from them [men].

Women's Participation Program Officer: We define roles for men and women. [We should] spread the work.

Program Officer #3 interrupts.

Women's Participation Program Officer: Women are not deciding anything.

Program Officer #3 asks for clarification on what kind of decisions. *Program Officer #2* is now signing bills.

Program Officer #4: Who do we want to empower? Define who? [We] can't reach [village women] because not enough coverage. [Women fieldworkers'] pregnancy is a problem.

Laughter.

German Consultant: [We] need a multiplier level—women to tell other women. [We] can't cover only through [women fieldworkers].

In this discussion the Women's Participation Program Officer argues that women fieldworkers should take up responsibilities beyond those prescribed for women's participation, while Program Officer #2 reacts defensively. The Program Officer #3 tries to get at larger issues, or perhaps simply wants to change the subject, which he does throughout the meeting. Program Officer #4 speaks of the practical problem of an insufficient number of women fieldworkers and raises the issue of too many pregnant fieldworkers, evoking laughter from

all. The consultant offers a practical solution to the women fieldworkers' shortage. Clearly, there is no consensus among these five members of Project management. At the center of this dialogue is a struggle over meanings of women's participation and the extent of women fieldworkers' contributions to the Project.

Increasing attention given to the women's participation component during 2000 created rising levels of tension as program officers and fieldworkers struggled to manage their own internal resistance to women's active involvement. On the one hand, the presence of women fieldworkers is considered critical support for producing women's participation in villages:

[m]ore effective and efficient support has to be given . . . mostly in the form of frequent visits by the female [staff] of the [Project], the number of which has to be increased substantially. (*Project Proposal for Strengthening Women's Participation in the Project*⁸ 2000, 12)

[without women's participation] the system will either remain underused or will be misused. (*Project Achievements 2000*⁹, 27)

[women's participation is] essential across all activities. (*Project Leporello Leaflet*,¹⁰ n.d.)

On the other hand, one result of a "woman-centered" imaginary is the production of "resistance" on the part of Project leaders who challenge notions of women's importance based on their positionality and power. Project program officers and consultants inconsistently emphasize women's lack of agency and powerlessness in certain spheres, for example, female fieldworkers cannot "seriously contribute to the elaboration, acceptance, and implementation of new strategies" (*Project Proposal for Strengthening Women's Participation in the Project* 2000, 18). Paradoxically, the more program officers and consultants fixate on women fieldworkers' lack of competence or failure to improve in their jobs, the more clearly a message is conveyed that women are in fact critical to the success of the Project. Even negative attention heightens notice given to women as an integral part of the Project's work. However, efforts by Project leaders to denigrate women's participation provide justification for women fieldworkers to voice their counter-demands, as illustrated below.

Negotiating Geographies of Participation

Women field staff constantly negotiate the demands of powerful individuals as they go about the everyday work of the Project—in the main office, in field offices, or in villages; thus women's participation emerges as a site of struggle in various spaces. Context matters for meanings, and I would argue that locations are constructed (and imagined) as certain types of places for particular interactions. The emergence of struggles over women's participation and their outcomes inflect in different ways depending on positionality of speakers and context involved. In this section I demonstrate how development geographies are produced and transformed through contests over women's participation.

The following example depicts how conflict resolution stems from staff positionality and power. For one fieldworker, on her first day in the field after training, her field team leader, Gopal,¹¹ disabused her of any naïve notions about the "real" reasons for women's participation in the Project. She remarks that she now understands his comments to reflect widely held beliefs throughout the organization.

Kavita: It was my first day at Aapnagadh [field office] and naturally I was very eager to know all about [women's participation]. But within ten minutes conversation with her [Savitri, another woman fieldworker] at Gopalji's place (he was also an active participant in that conversation), I came to know that [women's participation] is nothing but a great joke and it is a decorative item (according to Gopalji [the team leader]) for the whole project. Otherwise the [German bank] won't sanction any grant for this project.

Kathleen: In your opinion, what is [the Project's] goal for [women's participation]?

Kavita: In my opinion, [the Project's] goal for women's participation is nothing but to manage the financial aid from [the German bank] and a little bit of show off. That's all. They (I mean the top management) never take it seriously. And believe me or not, it's a fact.

Gopal, from his position as team leader, informs a new recruit that her work in women's participation is a "great joke" and "decorative item" to the Project. Regardless of what she might have been told in training, he asserts

authority on the subject of women's participation as not only an experienced, "on-the-ground" expert but also someone who "knows" because he is close to management through his position as a senior team leader. In this case, Gopal wields his authority to emphasize to a new member of his team that women's participation is not (and, he implies, will not) be taken seriously. In this situation, the field office becomes a space where aspirations for women's participation will not be realized.

In another case, the Women's Participation Program Officer is silenced during a meeting of all program officers in the Project Director's office. The Women's Participation Program Officer turns and complains to a program officer that she is left out of his plans, that is, they don't sit down and talk about integrating the work of his component and hers. One German consultant argues that no one has bad intentions and another program officer also hastens to smooth tensions; soon everyone is talking at once. The Women's Participation Program Officer tries to give an example of her marginalization over the din, then the consultant speaks again:

men must go forth themselves and make an effort. Early! Don't expect the Women's Participation Program Officer to change. Male program officers must make the initial overture. We must think in terms of women's participation—all program officers must keep this in mind—"It's my problem too." This attitude must come forward.

The program officer criticized for not cooperating ignores the consultant's message by talking at length about the problems of public tap site selection, and the meeting goes off on this tangent. I make eye contact with the Women's Participation Program Officer whose expression indicates she knows that the program officer has missed the point, perhaps deliberately. Doubtless, others in the room also notice that she has been silenced, but no one interrupts. The program officer has effectively (if temporarily) controlled the space and discussion pertaining to his willingness to work together with the Women's Participation Program Officer. He is senior to her, and in the course of the discussion, he has momentarily gained the support of the consultant and the other program officer who attempt to placate

the Women's Participation Program Officer instead of taking up her case. The Director's office becomes a space in which, at this moment, the Women's Participation Program Officer will not find satisfaction. Later, the German consultant uses his authority as "development expert" to upbraid male program officers for not supporting women's participation and its program officer. Through the voice of the senior, foreign, male consultant, the Director's office is transformed into a platform for the importance of women's participation.

According to Project logic dispensed in studies and reports, women field staff work with village women because village women cannot be approached by men (which genders women's work feminine), and because female fieldworkers have difficulty speaking in front of men (which genders men's work masculine). Male program officers do not consider women for sanitation or water distribution management jobs, despite a declared weakness of women's participation in that area. According to Project literature: "[village] women's activities still continue to play a marginal role, particularly in the two components of Water Distribution Management and Sanitation" (*Project Proposal for Strengthening Women's Participation in the Project 2000*, 2). But that is not to say that women fieldworkers simply accept this. In a dramatic outburst, an experienced female fieldworker shouted tearfully in a monthly meeting of all staff that female fieldworkers could open a field office and show what they could do. When I asked a program officer if the fieldworker's distress in the meeting was surprising, the program officer explained that Savitri was not upset, but was sick that day. It was true; Savitri herself stated that she was ill, but the program officer's response certainly minimized the event, especially given the extreme tension in the meeting overall.

I see Savitri's words and those of this program officer engaged in dialogic process. On the one hand, Savitri draws on discourses of women's participation and empowerment that purport that women have a contribution to make. In a non-official space of women's participation (i.e., in the main office instead of a village) a claim is made for women's full inclusion. The program officer considers village women speaking in village meetings, that is, in front of men, a key symbol of their empowerment, but the program

officer has overlooked the fact that powerful women (like Savitri) may speak up in other public spaces, like Project staff meetings. In what may be understood as an effort to downplay Savitri's demand for recognition of women's power, the program officer responds to me in a way that minimizes women fieldworkers' claims to importance. We glimpse through this example the ongoing contest over how women will be involved in the Project itself. It highlights struggles over what voices are acceptable in which spaces. In an expansion of the dialogue between Savitri and the program officer, Ravinder, a male fieldworker, said to me later that what Savitri had said made him think that the Project should abolish its three components (water distribution management, sanitation, and women's participation) and men and women should simply work in the component that interested them regardless of gender. Savitri's bold act draws attention to Project divisions that need not necessarily be what they are—other approaches to the work of women's participation are possible. She also disrupts a circulating geographic imaginary of villages as the only space of women's development,¹² by demonstrating that women speak out wherever an opportunity arises.

Sexual Harassment and Spatial Contests

Controlling women fieldworkers' involvement in the Project does not only happen through dialogue on women's participation. Forms of sexual harassment in work spaces are also used to constrain women. Following Ong (1987) and Foucault (1990), I argue that gender norms (e.g., segregation by gender) and sexual harassment are used during the labor process to control female staff. However, as discussed earlier, Ong (1987) also argues that women's increased self-awareness opens up possibilities for indirect and direct challenges to oppressive social relations. When women fieldworkers of my case study move into spaces and roles that were previously male-only domains, concerns over controlling their sexuality heighten. Yet the logic of women's participation requires that women move into new spaces, and women's expanded "range of motion" sets new limits on men's power and sexuality in previously male-only spaces.

Neither consultants nor program officers ever spoke of the Project's women workers

being “harassed” (in those terms) in front of me. In contrast, women fieldworkers spoke plainly with me about issues of sexual harassment, for example, “women are sometimes subject to sexual harassment by their colleagues and boss.” One woman told me she and her female colleague agreed that one of her male coworkers stared at her inappropriately, which, given the long contact hours of field teams, is intolerable. Another woman reported that a woman in her field team had been told by a male coworker dressed in only a towel that “you are meant for me.” When I asked why women did not tell management about sexual harassment, I was told that women are afraid—“*merii naukrii chale jaaye*” (I may lose my job). However, women did speak up, at least among themselves and to me, and in this light, speaking openly about sexual harassment is a subversive voice in the dialogic process surrounding women’s participation.

Taking advantage of her imminent departure, the outgoing Women’s Participation Program Officer addressed the issue of sexual harassment in her final report:

5. Code of Working Conduct regarding mixed gender Field Team/[Program Officer] groups: A binding code of working conduct of [Project] staff (office order) should be elaborated and reinforced at [Program Officer] and Field Team level. Taking into consideration the prevalent difficult situation of female staff working in a male-dominated office setting, own observation and experiences as well the well-proven feedback of female staff, it is unavoidable to issue a compulsory code. Improper behaviour, comments, lacking office discipline, discriminative job distribution etc. up to harassment are the main criticism mentioned and experienced by female staff. These matters should be taken up in an open manner and appropriate solutions are to be developed by [Program Officers] and Consortium. Disciplinary actions against the violation of the code of working conduct have to be legalised by administrative [Project] staff rules.

—(Project *Women’s Participation Program Officer’s Final Report* 2000; emphasis in original)

When I first read this brief paragraph, I was stunned. Although I had heard and seen some of the specifics the Women’s Participation Program Officer referred to, I had never heard her or anyone at the program officer level discuss something as formal and direct as a code of working conduct around interactions between

men and women in the organization. (Of course, it is possible that they did so when I was not present.) I suspect she mentioned this sensitive issue only because she was departing and it was safe to do so. Nevertheless, she demanded, on the grounds of her experience and authority, that appropriate attention be given to an issue that had long been ignored. Although the possibilities are limited, we see from the above examples that women staff contest in a variety of ways the spatial limits set by practices of sexual harassment. Project rhetoric of women’s participation provides a justification for their complaints.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have demonstrated how women fieldworkers employed by the Project are simultaneously highlighted as critical to development interventions *and* excluded from full participation. I find that contradictions surrounding women’s participation have created opportunities for women fieldworkers to assert counterclaims. By examining dialogic processes of negotiation within the PSS, I have shown women’s participation as multiple and highly contested. It is through these contests, I argue, that development geographies are produced and transformed. Field offices, villages, and the main office become spaces where women fieldworkers can voice their demands.

An exploration of contests over women’s participation reveals in detail gendered struggles occurring inside development projects. Given development institutions’ increasing focus on women, my ethnographic investigation of women fieldworkers and spaces of women’s participation contributes a timely new area of inquiry to geographical work on development. My research findings point to additional questions, particularly those addressing the impacts of labor processes and development spaces on women fieldworkers’ subjectivity. As development projects are increasing in size and number, it is critical we move toward a richer understanding of their internal, gendered dynamics. ■

Notes

¹ *Human Development in South Asia* (Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre 2000) reports be-

- tween 10,000 to 29,500 NGOs operating in Pakistan. It also states that 65% of active NGOs in Sri Lanka started up after 1977. For Nepal, prior to 1990 there were 229 registered NGOs; by 1998 there were 15,000. Edwards and Hulme (1996) note six South Asian NGOs serving millions of people each (e.g., SEWA [Self-employed Women's Association] in India). Many of these larger NGOs are directly, and primarily, funded by international donors.
- ² The literature deconstructing "households" (Folbre 1986; Chant 1991; Hart 1992; Wolf 1992; Halvorson 2003) is also useful for dismantling "NGOs" as a category.
- ³ Sri Lanka is the exception with 102 women per 100 men.
- ⁴ Nagar (2000) examines feminist activists and their spatial strategies in the field, but not the individual internal negotiations within organizations. Weisgrau's (1997) work is an ethnography of a Rajasthani NGO, also without explicit attention to inter-staff dynamics. Garcia (2001) investigates internal troubles when development organizations address issues of gender, but her work fails to analyze power and its exercises. Mosse (2001) has great insight into meanings of participation for an Indian case study, but does not scrutinize staff/client dialogues.
- ⁵ Elsewhere I discuss multiple meanings of latrines (O'Reilly 2003b).
- ⁶ For further critiques of Ferguson's approach see Watts (2001); Cooper (1990); Slater (1998); and Everett (1997).
- ⁷ In this area women's seclusion stands as a mark of family status by signaling to neighbors that the family can afford to have her "idle," i.e., it does not need/rely on her labor (Luthra 1976; Unnithan-Kumar 1997).
- ⁸ This document was primarily the work of German consultants, the Women's Participation Program Officer, the Director, and members of the consortium of NGOs that comprise the Project's community participation division.
- ⁹ This document was primarily the work of program officers and German consultants.
- ¹⁰ This document was primarily the work of program officers and German consultants.
- ¹¹ All personal and geographical names have been changed for the purpose of confidentiality.
- ¹² See Pigg (1992) for a related argument about villages constructed as development spaces.
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