

Who needs literacy programs for women in rural Nepal?¹

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on a development project in rural Nepal aimed at women's empowerment. It argues that this project, like numerous others aimed at women's empowerment, serves the developing organizations and experts rather than the women who are the subjects of such projects. The ethnography was collected in the summer of 1977, while working for an Israeli irrigation company by which I was employed as a gender consultant. It demonstrates how organizations enhance recognition of self-evident need for their help by portraying the women, explicitly or implicitly, as needy and backward. Contrary to this portrayal, I wish to show that these women have ample social and economic competence. Rather than addressing the rural women's lack of economic resources, such projects offer literacy programs that are marginally needed for daily routines. The analysis offers testimony of the built-in failure of critical, postcolonial anthropological theory to contend with its subject matter in a manner that credits the voice and agency it purports to accord. The proposed critique breaks down hierarchical dichotomies embedded in both the assumed gender and colonial distinction, affirming the ethical agenda of domination and subordination.

Introduction

The context of international development projects in general, and gender development projects in particular, is at the core of this article. It aims to challenge the whole gamut of gender development schemes in "developing" countries. Literacy programs, which play a prominent role in women's development/empowerment/advancement projects, are perceived here as a means for justifying the intervention of foreign agencies. The women's need for help necessitates, from the perspective of the developers, their "professional help." This "help" implies the stigmatization of the women, their families and the wider society.

Who needs literacy programs?

Describing a case study of a literacy program in rural Nepal, I demonstrate how high-ranking officials in local, national and international agencies cooperate in diverting resources allocated to women, while employing a well-established rhetoric of gender equality, to advance their own interests. Thus, women's marginalization is further manifested. I suggest that, while expressing commitment to social change through development projects and to gender equality through literacy programs, the developing agencies preserve and strengthen male-dominated power structures. Hence, the analysis upholds the argument that sponsored literacy programs for rural women in "developing" countries serve mainly as a fig leaf to cover the vested interests of financial and political organizations, and in any case do not change the gendered power structure.

In the process of negotiating over resources for the gender programs, the rural women, as a target population of the program, appear to become an object in organizational exchange. They are described collectively, against the background of gender development discourse, as a helpless and needy category of Third World women that calls for professional intervention. Consequently, local, national and international organizations enter this arena and, in the name of helping to improve these women's conditions, patronize them. While women become objects of "instruction" and "help," World Bank representatives, local and governmental officials and professionals, NGO employees, expatriate experts, researchers and others gain various benefits from the developmental context.

Drawing on my documented visit to rural Nepal in the summer of 1997, as a gender consultant for a foreign irrigation company, and as a critical observer of a gender development scheme, I argue that no improvement in the women's life conditions, in terms of either economic or social opportunities, was achieved through the project under study. Moreover, the women, whom I met in the villages, described in the project's documents and often perceived and treated by the project personnel as ignorant and primitive, are in fact not much of any of these. Resourceful in their daily lives, the stigmatized village women are critical of the development programs and certainly do not fit the stereotypical ideas the developers have about them. The women take part in the maintenance of their households; enjoy an intensive social life with their offspring, neighbors and other women; often wear pretty, colorful cloths; and produce lovely handicrafts. These women are aware of the political situation and often express their views and criticism about the situation and policymakers. They are cynical about the gender programs and their multiple benefactors who express commitment to helping them. They have been through all of them—numerous NGO programs and women activists, regional and national representatives of government development agencies, expatriate experts and World Bank functionaries. Nevertheless, they cooperate and participate in the game for their own reasons.

The article follows the growing critique concerning "development," making a particular contribution to the criticism referring to gender development projects and

to literacy programs for women. However, it does not offer an alternative discourse or policy recommendations for gender development or for literacy programs. Doing so would entail the acceptance of the development concept, whereas the paper's basic argument is that such projects are inherently concerned with power manipulations rather than social change.

Thus, the challenge of this account is to present and discuss the power game underlying the dynamics of a specific male-dominated context, a case in which loans offered by the World Bank to the Nepali government, designed to benefit women in rural Nepal, ended up benefiting senior male officials. The positioning of the case of literacy classes within increasing circles of impact, from the World Bank through government politics to the irrigation company, sets a broad scene embracing local and global, enabling a contextually informed understanding of the phenomenon at hand rather than an ideologically biased explanation. In this respect the paper liberates the ethnographic study of the presumably oppressed from the ill-conceived onus of oppression theories.

Theoretical perspectives: Development, aid and neocolonialism

Gender development programs should be discussed against the wider background of development projects in “developing” countries. Much of the criticism concerning the development discourse and practices in these countries applies to projects that aspire to social change in gender power relations.

Various studies draw a parallel between development/aid projects and neocolonialism,² claiming that development is a form of structural violence (e.g., Cowen and Shenton, 1995; Des Chene, 1996; Rahnama and Bawtree, 1997). These studies argue that one of the more conspicuous instruments of neocolonialism is the aid industry, which structures hierarchal relationships and power gaps between countries and communities. These unbalanced relations are anchored in conceptual binary categories that differentiate between “givers” and “receivers,” development “professionals” and populations “in need” of development, between the poor/underdeveloped South and the rich/modern/developed North. Critical research reveals the implied paternalism in these projects and points to “development” as enhancing economic exploitation in and of the “developing” countries and regions. They expose the hidden agendas behind the aid/development discourse and projects. Rather than helping the “weak” and “developing” countries, these studies contend that development programs promote the interests of international aid organizations.

Several studies exemplifying this critical approach have been published since the late 1980s (e.g., Easterly, 2006; Escobar, 1988, 1995; Esteva, 1992; Gardner and Lewis, 1996; Hancock, 1989; Sachs, 1992; Shiva, 1989). Following these critiques, I view “development” as well as its derivatives—such as “developing” (world) or “underdeveloped” (countries/economies)—as a constructed concept, which thus

should be placed within quotations marks.³ In this way, development discourse and projects are seen as part of domineering strategies used by powerful organizations toward weaker countries, communities and social categories. They are constructed to preserve dependence and weakness, which in turn call for and justify intervention.

Such critical analysis applied to the development/aid industry pertains to women/gender development projects as well. Thus, it is not a matter of applying the “right” discourse, theory or alternative approach to all variations of “modernization” theories that are embedded implicitly or explicitly in development projects. Rather, power relations and domination, under various and changing guises, are central to the development context, whether the general or the gendered one.

There is by now a large body of work that persuasively argues that development projects do not change women’s marginality because they do not break through the barriers of access to credit and other essential resources. At most, some women, either as individuals or as organized groups, can become part of the hegemonic order, co-opted by it and serving it mainly by adhering to women’s traditional caring roles and activities in society.⁴

Since the early 1990s, the growing recognition of the demands of the feminist movement for gender equality brought in its wake the concept of “Third World women” that was founded on the neocolonialist discourse. This discourse portrayed Western, modern, developed and educated women as the opposite social constructs of poor, non-Western, non-modern, undeveloped and uneducated women.

The construction of “Western” and “non-Western” homogenized categories of women, which emphasized the binary relations between the two groups, established the status of weakness, inferiority, victimization and vulnerability of women in the Third World. This stigmatizing generalization fostered the image of backwardness and of the “severe social problem” that called for intervention of the more affluent, “developed” countries, through their “professional assistance.”⁵

Some of the researchers that argue in this direction are Rana Kabbani (1986), Cynthia Enloe (1989), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) and Geeta Chowdhury (1995). Enloe, for instance, suggests that the *zenana* concept plays a major role in the discourse on Third World women. This representation of veiled women who are “mindless members of a harem” (Enloe, 1989:53) entails the association between images of motherhood identity and women’s primitiveness. According to Chowdhury (1995), the “welfare approach” that best fits the *zenana* representation is most dominant in World Bank WID (Women in Development) policies. This approach conceives of women primarily in their reproductive roles, viewing them as mothers whose central occupation is child-rearing. Such a welfare approach typically focuses on family planning programs, child nutrition and pregnant and lactating women. A striking quotation from the Bank’s documents is the one that states women’s “lack of self confidence, education and basic skills, even for feeding children” (McGuire and Popkin, in World Bank Technical Paper, No. 114, 1990:13). This remark emphasizes to the extreme the Bank’s ethnocentric attitude toward Third World

women, denying them even the skill of feeding their children.⁶ Another World Bank document corroborates Chowdhury's claims. One of the Bank's progress reports advises:

Not all operations in all sectors are equally important for actions related to women. Operations in the area of human resources—education and population, health and nutrition—are of prime importance (World Bank, 1990:14).

The same document stresses the significant role of women as educators, which necessitates educational projects (World Bank, 1990:5).

The GAD (Gender and Development) approach has also reinforced negative stereotypes associated with women in the South by emphasizing their collective weakness and backwardness (e.g., Mohanty, 1991). While postmodern feminist theory has criticized the concept of "modernity" in respect to the South/North divide, it has also been caught up in the paradigm of "development," as well as in the illusion of the promise of gender development projects. Postmodern feminists do not reject the concept of development as such. One example of this self-contradictory argumentation can be found in a study by Janet Henshall Momsen (1991), which clearly illustrates the failure of development projects to promote women's equality in the "Third World," and points to the destructive outcomes of "modernization" from the women's point of view. Moreover, Momsen clarifies that there is no such thing as a "Third World women's" collectivity or identity. She views the concept of the *zenana* and the image of women's utter dependence on men as an absurd stereotype and offers numerous examples of divergent situations, places and contexts in which women are neither collectively passive, nor can they be described as a homogeneous social category (Momsen, 2004).⁷ Nevertheless, notwithstanding her analysis, Momsen does concede that correct thinking and planning based on the understanding that "women are central to development" (1991:93) may engender the anticipated results. She argues, for instance, that "despite the apparent lack of change, the United Nations Decade for Women achieved a new awareness of the need to consider women when planning for development" (1991:3). Thus, "awareness" is championed as a substitute for actual, socioeconomic change.

Jane Parpart's and Marianne Marchand's work (1995) offers another example. They determine that "development" cannot be other than what it is: an ethnocentric approach for reinforcing the existing power structure. Yet, they pursue a new mode of thinking about women/gender and development, which "welcomes diversity, acknowledges previously subjugated voices and knowledge(s) and encourages dialogue between development practitioners and their 'clients'" (1995:17). Thus, instead of discarding "development" completely, they adhere to the notion as it is refracted through postmodern feminist thinking, addressing "development" issues in "an increasingly complex, interrelated and unequal world, with its skepticism

towards Western hegemony, particularly the assumption of a hierarchical North/South divide..." (1995:17).

It follows, then, that postmodern feminism reifies, in essence, the dichotomized approach it criticizes, reinforcing it, for instance, with the binary oppositions of South and North, development practitioners and their clients (who need to be developed). I suggest that this approach entails, unavoidably, homogenizing "Third World women."

Moreover, postmodernist feminists call upon us to focus on difference and to listen to the silenced and ignored voices of "Third World women" (e.g., Parpart, 1993). I suggest that this view not only homogenizes "Third World women," albeit with well intentioned idealized rhetoric, but also assumes that these women's goals and aspirations are not known. "They" are so very different from "us," this view implies, that their aspirations and goals distinctively differ from those of women in other parts of the world. The important point is, rather, that women's voices, like those of minorities or disadvantaged groups, are often overlooked, whether they are heard or not. Furthermore, my field data indicates clearly that those "aspirations and goals" in "developing" countries or in the "Third World" are indeed being strongly and clearly expressed by women. Their needs, unsurprisingly, are similar to those of people anywhere: to have decent living conditions and fair economic opportunities, to be able to provide for their families, to obtain health services and so on.⁸ The women in the villages that I visited were asked about their needs and aspirations time and again by representatives of women's and other NGOs. However, their responses were simply ignored, either by being rephrased in "expert" language or, more importantly, in practice, by inserting them into reports but not considering them as a driver for social change or allocation of resources.

Although later feminist approaches criticized the earlier ones, still they did not reject the validity of "development" itself as a socio-geographic concept that presupposes binary hierarchical situations and relationships. Nor did they reject the legitimacy of development projects, women's development projects included. Thus, the various approaches reviewed here accept the need for development as a self-evident truism. Consequently, they provide arguments of how women's perspectives should be addressed in development projects and as to which terminology is more appropriate for overcoming the "modernization" loop and binary conceptualization criticized by Edward Said (1979) and other postmodernist theorists, feminists among them.

However, development projects for women are gradually being recognized as irrelevant and disappointing at best, or as strengthening the patriarchal social order at worst. Recent feminist publications have expressed growing disappointment and lack of belief in the promise of change through women's development projects. They suggest that these projects, while paying lip service to gender equality, fail to contribute to the eradication of poverty at large and of women's poverty in particular; nor have they contributed to setting in motion any meaningful change in

male-dominated structures. Some of these studies imply the futility of theoretical discussions about development programs that encourage women to either work together, or separately from men, as the case might be. In general, they demonstrate that gender development projects account for no significant change in women's socioeconomic opportunities.

In a tone of despair resulting from the insignificant, disappointing achievements gained in the twentieth century, Rowan-Campbell turns her hopes, or rather her prayers, to the new era: "Perhaps the millennium is the moment to begin actively to subvert some of the strategies used against women's empowerment to turn these in on themselves" (1999:25). These hopes have turned out to be illusions, as emerges from Janet Momsen's more recent work (2004). Momsen claims that, although some three decades of gender development policies (mainly WID and GAD) have elapsed, patriarchy is still blocking any significant change in gender power relations. Naila Kabeer (1999) points to the failure of women-specific projects, in particular those of income-generating projects. She emphasizes, in contrast, the vital importance of a political agenda, which would focus on the participation of women in decision making at the policy level and challenge the existing status quo in society.

Fiona Leach (1999) expresses deep disappointment in relation to the non-formal education (NFE) and training programs for women. Instead of compensating for the failure of the formal system to provide them with marketable skills, these programs have continued to reflect the same disparities and biases that prevail in formal education. Reflecting on my field experience, it appears that the informal education and vocational training programs run by NGOs that, as Leach remarks, "have mushroomed in developing countries" (1999:50), did not, in reality, achieve much in terms of reducing women's illiteracy or widening their employment opportunities (be they "traditional" or not). Rather, they served to silence local and international feminist organizations' claims about discrimination. These programs were easy to organize on a large scale and, therefore, a cheap bargain for buying off the more educated women in local communities in Nepal (and elsewhere). The funds allocated for these programs enabled them to employ some of the women heading local NGOs and to account for the organizations' activities at the same time.

The lack of progress since the 1985 Nairobi World Conference on Women, notwithstanding the institution of development projects and the acknowledgement of women's marginalization, is criticized sharply by Sara Hlupekile Longwe, who states: "Gender policies have a strange tendency to 'evaporate' within international development agencies" (1999:63). Jo Rowlands also discusses the growing awareness of the hidden agendas embedded in development projects; these, she claims, are manipulated through extensive use of appealing terms such as "empowerment," "participation," "capacity-building," "sustainability" or "institutional development" (1999:149).

However, despite the extensive critique directed at gender development projects and agencies, both on the theoretical and practical levels, it appears that they are

assumed to be a self-evident reality that must be endured. Rather than suggest, as the critical analysis implies, the need to categorically reject gender development projects (or any other development project, for that matter), most scholars come up with new names for much of the same mechanisms and practices.

Thus, for instance, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's attempt to "move away from misleading geographical and ideological binarisms," by adopting the language of "One-Third World versus Two-Thirds World" in relation to terms like "Western/Third World and North/South" (2003:506), is futile. As much as Mohanty tries to get rid of binary oppositions, it appears that her terminology introduces new ones, such as "social majority/minority," "One Third/Two Thirds," "marginalized, colonized/privileged," "nations/indigenous communities" and "haves/have-nots." Despite her efforts, these terms *are* "seen as oppositional and incommensurate categories" (2003:522). Apparently, these preferred categorizations do not permit the ascription of "ideas about experience, agency, and struggle" to women (2003:527), which feminist scholars like Parpart and Marchand (1995), Eade (1997) and Mohanty (2003) eagerly aspire to.

Therefore, I suggest that development projects, whether defined generally or as specifically gender-oriented, cannot achieve their formally declared goals. More than anything else, the development discourse serves to construct the self-evident image of a dichotomized-hierarchical social reality of First vs. Third World, North vs. South, developed vs. underdeveloped states and modern vs. traditional societies, which then calls for international intervention in the "needy" "Third World/South," or "developing" countries. Terms such as "modernization," "development" and "Third World" are used in the context of both gender-specific programs and general programs to convey an ideological commitment to universal social values. However, in reality, they are used to conceal vested interests of the agencies and organizations involved in the development/aid industry. The dichotomized discourse is a central component in the emergence of hierarchal relationships. It offers undisputed justification, an "objective" and convincing explanation for foreign intervention and local discriminating policies, masked by a rhetoric of helping, improving and developing the lesser, needy others.

It follows that postcolonial/postfeminist/postmodern discourses provide, inadvertently, academic/ideological reinforcement and justification for intervention in "developing" or "under-developed" countries and for the control over resources which are supposedly intended to help them. Marianne Gronemeyer's cynical definition of "helping" is in place here: "elegant power does not force, it does not resort either to the cudgel or to chains; it helps" (1992:53). Thus, I suggest that development/aid projects, in both the general and gender contexts, can be better understood as part of power structures, defined in terms of patron-client relations, which combine power-dependence relations and a discourse of help/care/aid. Patronage, from this point of view, is control/domination disguised by rhetoric of egalitarianism, humanism, feminism and so forth.⁹

I argue that gender rhetoric in development discourses serves as lip service for the purpose of appeasing vocal feminists' demands or for concealing ulterior commitments to more powerful partners. The concepts, images and descriptions adopted by development agencies have little to do with women's interests in practice. Since, for instance, allocated funds for women's projects are easy to manipulate, they can be conveniently transferred to "more important" purposes when negotiating with politicians, powerful corporations and the like.

The case study presented here describes a project aimed at women's empowerment in rural Nepal. It illustrates the instrumentalization of widely respected terminology for the realization of organizational and individual interests. Thus, in order to preserve power, senior male officials employed gender-equity terms while excluding women from vital resources. In what follows I use written reports and ethnographic data, collected during visits to villages in the Lumbini region in Nepal that were part of the irrigation project, to describe the project and its outcomes. Analyzing the reports and some of the encounters that took place in the villages portrays the women's project as a deceitful social drama.

Literacy classes for women in rural Nepal

Literacy and economic resources—On paper

The Gender Activities Program that aimed at advancing women in rural Nepal will serve to demonstrate various arguments presented in the previous section. The program was financed by a loan of the World Bank to the Nepali government, as part of an irrigation project carried out by a foreign company since 1978.

Empowering women in the rural area of the Lumbini region was the basic rationale of the Gender Activities Program.¹⁰ I shall describe the negotiations that took place with regard to the conceptualization, budgeting and implementation of the program during 1996–1997. The analysis of the program refers to two sources: project reports (my predecessor's and mine) and the documentation of my visits to the villages. In elaborating on the programs' reports and cost estimates, I follow Harold Garfinkel's (1967) argument that documents reveal much more than they explicitly suggest. It will be demonstrated how both the written documents and the field encounters entailed intensive social engagements and ended up with no results. The analysis proposes an insider's view of a project, from the perspective of the developers themselves; it illustrates the alienation of development consultants and the non-engagement, distancing and ethnocentrism of development experts, as noted elsewhere (e.g., Chambers, 1983; Mosse, 2005). Reflecting on my experience from the perspective of a participant and observer, and writing about it vulnerably (Behar,

1996), I introduce some thought-provoking insights on situations that are often conveniently perceived in terms of self-evident truths, such as ideological commitments or professional conduct.

Bargaining over contents, extent, timing and the like was a dominant part of the daily encounters surrounding the project. Two foreign consultants—my predecessor (who worked for the project in 1996) and I (who followed her in the summer of 1997)—played the chief role in the women's project affair. We both submitted reports, including recommendations for implementation, to the irrigation company, to the Nepali Ministry of Agriculture and to the World Bank.¹¹ Both of us traveled to dozens of villages, meeting the women there, listening to their expectations and writing them down. The two of us presented our ideas and proposals to the women in the villages concerning their literacy potential and economic opportunities.

Although we differed with regard to the conceptual and financial emphases that should be placed on various activities, mainly in relation to literacy and to the economic sphere, we both ended up recommending a vast project of literacy classes for some three hundred groups in the "project area." Only ten classes were ultimately opened. My predecessor's main outcome was a gender awareness-raising workshop for high-ranking officials in the project and in other local government offices and for heads of women NGOs. She also succeeded in recruiting eight Women Group Organizers (WGOs). These organizers formed some thirty groups of women, who were expected to join the women's program. My only substantial achievement was a training course (the Seminar) for a group of ten village women, who were candidates for teaching literacy in their villages. Hence, the women's development project turned out to be a fantasy, and existed mainly in my predecessor's and my own reports. The story of the literacy classes for women in this phantom project is at the focus of the present section. I shall use my predecessor's and my reports, as well as my field data, to demonstrate how the program served to enhance the image of the village women's backwardness. This stigmatized image played a vital role in fostering the women's need for professional assistance as self-evident.

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Women students at a seminar for village teachers sitting opposite the irrigation project directors; standing: the Nepali project director

Examination of the study by my predecessor, on "Gender activities in the (irrigation) project area," submitted to the irrigation company, the Nepali government and the World Bank, reveals a striking contradiction. The study clearly indicates that "in all discussions held with the groups, economic needs were the first to be expressed" (p. 8 in the report). She also admits that

an important factor in increasing the standard of living in the Project area is in increasing the yields of the crops and improving techniques of animal raising. This is also the request of many women in the groups. Since agricultural training is part of the Project activities, it is recommended to carry out as much training programs as possible for women (p. 20).

Yet, her main recommendation stresses "social, educational and cultural components". This becomes even more striking when considering that what the women expressed explicitly as their main needs were connected to economic issues:

All women expressed their needs and interests in having agricultural training...cropping and vegetable growing, animal husbandry, poultry keeping, and goat rearing. ...All women expressed their interest in getting

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credit.... [S]everal women groups expressed their wish to have training in sewing and cutting (p. 9).

Nevertheless, behind the expatriate gender expert's recommendation in the Budget Estimation of the Program to allocate most of the budget to "development packages," literacy classes are found to be the core of the whole program and budget (some \$300,000 out of the \$400,000 total). In fact, only the sum of \$60,000 was allocated for any economic-oriented activity, namely animal keeping.

Delving deeper into the explanations of "development packages," the centrality of literacy becomes clearer. She explains: "Literacy programs are the bases for any desired change in lifestyle, and any attempt to increase the living standards of the population in the area should start with such a program" (p. 19). Indeed, this view drew solid support from various publications in the 1990s (e.g., Bown, 1990; Moser, 1993; World Bank, 1990). A UNESCO statement can probably serve as a conspicuous example of the link that was established between women's literacy and others' welfare, their children's in particular:

[T]he priority given to women's literacy is justified...by a recognition of the responsibilities they have for the survival and well-being of their children and the key role they play in transmitting knowledge to upcoming generations (1988:2).

While using her study to provide the rationale for her intensive focus on "social and educational" needs, the gender expert refers to "social needs" expressed by the women (in subheadings), "literacy needs" being first among them. Under the heading of "social needs," most of which are not expressed by the women themselves, the first and major subheadings suggested by her are "marriage at a young age," "women trafficking," "polygamy" and "male drinking and violence in the family." Her fundamental conclusion is: "Women's needs and interests in the Project area are not only in Agriculture. Most of them face problems of male alcoholism and violence in the family, lack of basic health facilities and need advice in family planning" (p. 8). Thus, the "social rationale" becomes a generalizing, stereotyping means, which implies the backwardness of the local society. It follows, therefore, that the project aimed at social change that would lead the local society away from its problematic, traditional, gender-discriminating phase, where it stood at that time, into a literate, modern, egalitarian stage. Thus, the conclusion to be drawn from these descriptions is that the role of experts is essential, as they are the only ones who know how to treat and solve "severe social problems" (Gusfield, 1980).

Another heading in the analysis of "women's needs"—namely "health needs"—lends further support to the argument. Under the subheading of "health care," the gender expert writes:

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The population in the Project area suffers from many diseases and therefore complained about the lack of basic services. They need a doctor visit at least once a week and a nearby clinic. Maternity care is also absent at these villages.

Thus, the lack of proper health services, which the women complained about, became secondary to the “many diseases” of the population in the villages. This description implies the poor hygienic conditions which the people endure, and therefore their neglect and wretchedness, hence their primitivism.¹²

Similarly, in my Costs Estimate of the program, I emphasized primarily the literacy classes, whereas development projects became secondary. It appears that both of us were aware, in some way at least, that the economic activities should appear as secondary and that they were merely employed as lip service. In my introduction to the “Cost Estimation for Women Development and Economic Activities Program,” the primacy of literacy classes is explicitly expressed: “Literacy training will be at the focus of the Project at the first stage.” This decision largely contradicts my basic observation, as mentioned in the recommendations: “The project aims at increasing the income and economic power of these village women, who are at least equal contributors to the village families’ economy and to the national agriculture.”

The rationalization of the distinct and vital need for expatriate services is clearly emphasized in my report. In the last part of my recommendations, I write:

It is recommended that an expatriate consultant should visit the Project for monitoring, assessment and supervision purposes.... This visit will also serve to supervise the preparation activities carried out prior to increasing the Project targets, from 70 literacy classes operating by the end of 1997 to the opening of some 270 new literacy classes in 1998....

Moreover, the December 1997 consultant’s visit is recommended for the purpose of supervising the first stages of economic activities implementation, scheduled to start in the second quarter of 1998. The second visit of the expatriate consultant is suggested to take place in March 1998. At this stage an advanced assessment of the program’s implementation should be made....

Both visits, in December 1997 and in March 1998, are considered crucial in terms of offering encouragement, professional support and advice to the local consultant and WGOs in particular, and also to others in charge of the program, officers and field workers alike.

The allegedly essential need for the expert’s services is revealed also in my supervisor’s forwarded letter to the local project manager, which opens my report. The letter stresses the vital need, expressed in my recommendations, for the

expatriate expert's additional visits for supervision and follow-up purposes. In fact, the irrigation company profits were largely based on employing expatriate experts. The "perdiem" was the hidden interest of the company and its representatives in the women's program (as in other activities). It is not surprising, therefore, that when I was preparing the report, the foreign director of the irrigation project (my superior) instructed me to include the "perdiem" details and how to calculate it.

Moreover, even the modified budget, which I obediently reduced (in comparison to my predecessor's plan), was not intended to be implemented by the project's partners. The literacy classes—which were, as I have suggested above, the core of the project—did not take place after all. The written papers testified to my predecessor's and my own readiness to substitute higher budgeted economic projects with a flexibly changeable budget for literacy classes; they conveyed the Nepali party's fait accompli acceptance of its unquestionable need for the irrigation company's expertise for the maintenance and success of the gender project.

Both plans—my predecessor's and mine—reflect the rhetoric used in many similar programs, literacy programs in particular, which assume that access to education entails significant benefits. Among the anticipated outcomes are: "community, self and socioeconomic worth, mobility, access to information and knowledge, rationality, morality, and orderliness" (Graff, 1979:xv). Lawrence Summers, chief economist of the World Bank, stated that "the 'vicious cycle' of poverty could easily be transformed into a 'virtuous cycle' through the intervention of women's education" (1993:vii, cited in Robinson-Pant, 2004:18), and Robinson-Pant reports that "Women's and girls' education has been taken up by many governments and development agencies as the key to improving the lives of poor families" (2004:1).

Nevertheless, these assumptions and expectations were recognized as "literacy myth" (Graff, 1979:xv) already in the end of the 1980s. My study of the literacy program for women villagers in rural Nepal supports the growing doubts concerning the potential of literacy programs to promote gender change, by unveiling their deceiving nature: the misleading documents, the manipulative use of gender discourse and their role in concealing the authorities' failure to provide access to required economic resources or denying access to them. Some of the latter will be described and discussed in the next sub-section.

The World Bank's people and the Nepali officials cooperate in faking success

There were three main partners in the Gender Activities Program: the Nepali Ministry of Agriculture (through its local branch), the World Bank and the irrigation company. The role of the Bank, although significant, was indirect. Its prominence was based on its control over the budget (a \$500,000 loan) promised for

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implementing the program. The program's budget was part of the entire irrigation project's budget.

A visit of the Bank's delegation to Ekala, one of the villages in the project area, demonstrates the World Bank's remote control and impact over the project's local officials. The Bank heads were urging the local heads of the project to show progress in implementation. Thus, in 1996 (the year before my arrival), when James Wolfensohn, the head of the World Bank, announced his intentions to visit the project, the local staff came under great pressure, knowing that the project had to look good.

As a result, the local project director (an engineer by profession) opened one literacy class in Ekala. This he did with his own resources, paying a woman from the village to start teaching the first and only class of the project at the time. The Bank's delegation went to Ekala by helicopter and visited the literacy class for women in the village. The local director's initiative was found to be successful, as became evident from the World Bank's report on the delegation's visit to Ekala. The irrigation company's director (the Team Leader) showed me a paragraph from the Bank's letter some time later, which stated the satisfaction of the Bank's people with the progress made in implementing the project. However, the letter also included a demand from the local heads of the project to hire a new local coordinator for the women's program by March 1997, as the previous coordinator had not been replaced for a long time. The expatriate director commented, "It is only the Bank's pressure that makes things move here" (a coordinator was hired and she worked with me).

The director's comment reflects the local Nepali heads' reluctance toward the program. A comment made by the "local consultant on farmers' participation" provides further proof for their reservations regarding the gender program. While talking in between our visits (which he joined a few times), he said to me:

The people in high places are not interested in the projects for women. We are dealing with irrigation, what do we have to do with women's development? That is why I always tell people [i.e., the female Women Group Organizers and the male Area Organizers] not to promise anything and explain that the project will be implemented only later within half a year. All we need is to start one group to break the ice.

The local project director's gesture of hiring the one and only class teacher with his own money, an unusual act by itself, further emphasizes the deceitful aspect of the whole program, as after two years of its existence only one class (out of some 300 originally planned) had been opened. The World Bank people seemed to consider this an achievement. The local officials, on the other hand, were quite aware of the fact that, more than showing progress, they had to look like they were making progress with the program. Moreover, the Bank people did not seem to bother about the learning conditions, as no reference was made in the Bank's letter to the small,

muddy hut in which the women were studying. In fact, they cooperated in faking the project's success.

Negotiating consent: Encounters with the village women

Ekala was the first of fifteen villages that I visited. There were about ten of us, including the irrigation company's foreign representative, Aruna; the local gender consultant (an Economics major); and a few WGOs. : We entered the class—a dark, muddy hut, with some 12 girls aged 8–16 seated along the walls, holding a picture book. They were studying Nepali and arithmetic. The teacher, a thin old woman, answered the many questions addressed to her by the irrigation company's representative and myself. I turned to one of the students and asked her to read. She tried her best but had difficulties. The teacher explained that the girl had missed a few lessons.

Behaving as the source of authority and knowledge (“literate” people confronting “illiterates”), our superiority was accentuated all the more by our physical advantage, standing as we did in the low roof hut high above the shy young girl sitting on the ground. It was not only the girl who was shamed by us. The teacher, too, was put into a defensive, humiliating position, having to explain her student's failure, which meant her own failure no less.

The irrigation company's representative openly revealed to me his reluctance concerning the women's literacy classes and his opinion about the waste of money it entailed. He claimed categorically that the literacy program did not stand a real chance, because these women cannot really read. He argued,

In any case, this is not serious, these women cannot learn to read and write within this period of time that the classes are going to last, especially since they are going to be so tired when they return home after a day's work in the fields.

It appeared that none of the parties—the Nepali government, the World Bank or the local and foreign heads of the project—was much concerned with women's literacy or empowerment.

Social interaction between project people and village people assumed the pattern of a two-sided, dichotomized encounter. It was “us” vs. “them,” “outsiders” from the town and “locals” from the village, “literate” vs. “illiterate,” which became the most prominent feature of many of our visits. We were coming to their villages, sometimes into their homes; they awaited us, sometimes for hours on end, when we were delayed in a previous visit. They would gather around us, seated on the ground, most of the time listening or reacting to our directed conversation and questions, while we were sitting on elevated bed seats they offered us. The social hierarchical

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distance in our encounters with the villagers was further stressed by the need to rely on interpreters from among our local colleagues in the project, thus adding to our distanced-superior positioning.

Yet the village women were neither passive nor vulnerable. Most of them, in all the villages we went to, dressed up in colorful fabrics that looked clean, although they were long enough to touch the ground. The longer the meetings went on, the more the women would open up and chat freely and cheerfully with the Nepali people among us. Some of the women seemed to be very assertive and some of them even powerful. For instance, when we met the women in West Bharaulia, they requested advanced training in sewing, as they had finished one course already. They also clearly stated their expectations for our funding of purchase of sewing machines, which would enable them to actualize what they had learned and to make some living out of it. Some of the WGOs were impressive young women. One of them, a remarkable strong-minded woman, had twelve years of schooling, was the mother of two and had her own motorcycle, which enabled her easy mobility. She used to go around the villages before she was recruited to the project, helping needy women with their groceries and encouraging mothers to send their daughters to school. Her husband would share the responsibilities at home.

In many of the villages there were spokeswomen who functioned as mediators between the project people and the local women. They represented the other women in negotiating over the physical learning conditions and over who will be the teacher. They bargained for any possible benefit that could be gained for the women who would join the literacy classes. Those spokeswomen were also in a position to advance their own interests, as it happened in Khurmundihawa, where the spokeswoman expressed her anticipation to profit from renting the project a study room, besides being employed by it as a teacher.

It appears that the women leaders knew, just like the other women, that they had some bargaining power in negotiating the terms of the literacy classes in their villages. They understood that the project people needed their approval of joining the literacy classes. This awareness enabled them to demand some benefits, such as “pocket money” (1–2 rupees per day) for lunch. The women were so confident of their bargaining power that, sometimes, they made their demand ultimate. The project employees, the WGOs and the local consultant in particular depended on the lists of women, whose signatures denoted their willingness to participate in the literacy classes. In fact, they probably depended more on the village women than the other way round, because the lists of enrollment meant that they would continue to work for the project. Even the local project director, reacted positively to the demands made by the women. For instance, when Aruna, the local gender consultant, suggested including “perks for the women students, needed for offering them refreshments” in the budget, he accepted the idea willingly, responding that, “it is possible to buy some biscuits.” He understood quite well the need to buy off the women for their consent to be included in the program. This bargain was worthwhile

from his point of view, because it meant a small amount of money in exchange for the village women's cooperation.

Signing the women on the lists of enrollment to the literacy classes became a ritual in every village we visited. The first stage was probing, having short talks with the women. This was followed by presentation, by either me or the local gender consultant, of the program to the women sitting around us, describing the objectives and the schedule, offering as many details as possible. The third phase was the interactive part, in which the women would ask questions while we, particularly Aruna, would answer patiently and appease suspicions.

The lists of women enrolling in the literacy classes were proof of the WGOs good work in preparing the women for the moment of signing their names. The lists served as a kind of contract from the village women's perspective, and they perceived them as a commitment of the project people to keep their promises concerning the literacy classes and, more importantly, to deliver anticipated benefits, such as vocational and agricultural training, sewing machines and the founding of a credit fund. Counting signatures and claiming the results became the most significant moment of every visit to the villages.



Left to right: Aruna, the Nepali gender consultant, the author and a women's groups organizer (WGO)

Often, the women in the villages signed the list while inquiring about further training and financial assistance, such as for purchasing sewing machines. They probably assumed that by joining the women's program, they would gain more desired resources at a later stage. Wanting the women to sign the lists, Aruna and I did not say anything that would cast doubt over the women's expectations. We referred only vaguely to some later stage of the program, when the focus would shift to the "economic development phase."

The men in the villages also anticipated that the introduction of the women's program would entail various benefits. On our visit to one of the villages, a man asked one of the WGOs to appoint his wife as a teacher. Apparently, he was aware of the advantages involved in being employed by the project for his wife and for himself, in terms of pay and social prestige. Often the men attended these meetings as spectators from the outside, making sure their wives took full advantage of the program's prospects.

The bargaining process was an inseparable part of these meetings. On our visit to Bhawarabari, for example, the usual scene, in which women had to be persuaded into joining the meeting with us, took place. The local WGO and the other WGOs went to call the women, who gradually gathered, accompanied by girls, small children and babies. The women told us that they were interested in raising sheep and goats rather than chickens, as these were causing them trouble by eating the neighbors' crops. Some of the women explained that they would have liked to have kitchen gardens for cultivating vegetables. The shortage of irrigation water, due to the drying out of their small wells, made this initiative unfeasible. Thus, the women expected the project people to provide a solution for the water shortage, probably hoping to gain access to the new irrigation system.

The woman leader in Bhawarabari seemed to be in control of things. With a high school education and matriculation, she was, undoubtedly, the most natural candidate for teaching literacy in her village. This woman was an activist in a women's organization and had headed a group that participated in an agricultural training course some six months earlier. She explained that the three-day course, which she regarded highly, offered training in vegetable and fruit cultivation, in basic health treatment and in marketing. She also told us that she liked to help people with traditional medication and agricultural activities and that she had done so before joining the agricultural course. The woman leader asked to consider her home for the literacy class. When I suggested an open, shaded place to study in Bhawarabari, the women objected, saying that the children would disturb them. A few women mentioned that they would like to have family-planning training for mothers of more than five children.

The agricultural course that the women had previously taken included training in growing red beans, which at that time were very expensive (around 75 rupees per kilo). Following that training the women grew a large quantity of beans, by which

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time the local market was flooded with beans and their price dropped to 33 rupees per kilo. Consequently, the women did not sell their entire crops and stored the beans at home. They preferred to sell their stock during the sowing season as seeds (which apparently had a good price). The woman leader explained that in order to facilitate the women's use of their stock of beans to generate income, all they would need were basic instructions concerning the marketing, mainly packing techniques and selling practices of the beans.

Sewing was another economic option discussed during the meeting in Bhawarabari. The woman leader said that providing the women with training in sewing would enable them to sew uniforms for factory workers, as well as to sell some of their products elsewhere. Moreover, it was suggested that some of the women could sew, while others could be in charge of sales to markets and factories. Responding to my question about how the women would obtain sewing machines, the woman leader explained that the village women's group had a savings fund of some 25,000 rupees. Every woman had to pay 5 rupees per month and was entitled to obtain a loan at an interest rate of 2 rupees per 100 rupees. The money had to be repaid within a month, thus facilitating the fund's continuous growth. The option of selling the women's traditional handicraft was also raised, as in other encounters with the women in the villages. The women rejected this idea spontaneously and the woman leader explained that these were prepared for their daughters' dowry. Nevertheless, she added that the women could produce different items for commercial use.

In our meetings with the village women we sometimes encountered bitter disappointment and even some derision toward the project on the part of the women. We also heard that "others have already been here asking questions" about having education and vocational training and "nothing happened." On several occasions, women openly expressed their suspicion and disbelief in our project, as well as in other organizations' projects. For instance, when we arrived at Pakadihawa, the women did not seem to be in a hurry to come and meet us, and after waiting for some thirty minutes, we sent our vehicle to bring them. During the meeting a smarty woman was teasing us ironically. She raised doubts regarding our promises to provide agricultural training and claimed that the women in the village had already met "some 15 times" with the people from the project. Another woman added that some people came there, took pictures and went away. On another occasion, one of the women mentioned that the year before, the previous expatriate consultant had been there with the head of a women's organization. One of the project employees commented quietly and sarcastically as to "who would come here next year?" Aruna replied: "Next year they will throw stones at us and not just show us unpleasant smiles."

The village women were practical and deeply interested in economic enterprises that could contribute to their families' income. This impression became stronger in our visit to Sikatahan, where we witnessed a bank operating in the field. While

waiting for the money transactions to end, at a nearby teahouse which was owned by the leader of the women's group, we engaged in a nice chat with her and sipped a cooked tea, which she had prepared. The money transactions went on between the "bank people" and the village women in the open field, where buffalos were running free. Two men were sitting on the ground in front of some 30 women. One of the men received money from the women queuing in front of him. Piles of money-bills accumulated at his feet while the women kept handing him money. The "banker" made a note in the women's savings notebooks, to confirm their interest payments. The two "bankers" were representing a credit NGO, which lent money to the village women. The interest of 10 rupees per 100 rupees had to be paid monthly. The entire loan had to be repaid within 50 months. Most of the women took the loans to start small enterprises, such as the small teahouse we were sitting in. Sometimes the money was used for agricultural needs. Loans could amount to as much as 300,000 rupees. The teahouse owner mentioned an example of a woman who bought a taxi with that loan, making a profit from renting it, while repaying her debts. From the distance we could hear the women praying loudly together. Aruna explained to me that, as there was no other way to guarantee the women's repayment of the loans, their commitment to repay the money was based on this collective ritual praying.

As Aruna and I were planning to start a credit fund, we asked one of the activists in a Women's Development organization about the procedures involved in such an initiative. The woman explained, "First you have to organize the group and see what they want to do with the money. Then the group comes into the organization's office and the women are asked to sign on a commitment to repay the money." The organization then would file a request on behalf of the women, adding its recommendation to the bank. Following those procedures, the loan was received within seven days. "The rate of interest is 12 percent," the woman added, and "this is cheaper than the usual rate of interest which is 18 percent. In this way the women start to earn some money, from animal rearing, for instance."

It thus follows that doing business with women was profitable both for the banks and for mediating organizations.¹³ The women in the villages were an attractive potential clientele for loan programs. Concentrated in the villages and organized into social groups, they were easy to approach, easy to convince, easy to be organized into groups and, therefore, easy to profit from. Programs like ours manipulated these elements, which made the village women an ideal target population for their own purposes. Very similar to the banks' and NGO people, our project was interested in the organized groups of women in the villages.

However, the village women were far from naïve. In fact, they were aware of the profit accumulated on their account. In East Khungawa, one of the women complained critically about the loans given to them, saying that "many NGOs [that mediate between the women and the Grameen Bank] are coming here, they give us small money but they make good profit for themselves."¹⁴

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Several NGOs were also attracted by the potential associated with the organized groups of the village women.¹⁵ As soon as it became common knowledge in the region that our project planned to spend a considerable amount of money on literacy studies, the project site became a pilgrimage destination for representatives of various NGOs, including literacy and health training organizations. One such organization was a local health training NGO, whose representatives offered their partnership in planning and implementing the project. Another NGO representative, who approached Aruna and me in an attempt to gain entry into the project, was a woman who offered to train village women in sewing and literacy. Yet another organization was a regional women's organization involved in literacy training and in charity work for women. Aruna responded sarcastically: "They want too much money."

To sum up, the encounters with the village women clarified that the women were neither passive nor ignorant, although they were perceived and treated collectively as such by the developers. The women's assertiveness became apparent as they expressed their wishes and objections, while drawing on their past experience with development projects and programs. Their interest in economic issues, in particular, was openly and unmistakably expressed, indicating their essential need for access to credit and other economic resources and basic public services. Moreover, the village women's entrepreneurial spirit was clearly pronounced.

Focusing on literacy served the developers, the irrigation company, the World Bank and the Nepali agencies to ignore the scarcity of economic resources and public services that the women articulated as essential for their livelihood. That is, the village women's struggles with regard to poverty, access to economic resources and the forces of hegemony were more significant, from their point of view, than those concerning the lack of reading and writing skills (for a similar understanding, see Betts, 2004).

Summary

The women in the villages were very clear in expressing the kind of objects they desired and needed. Economic activities, better access to resources such as credit conditions and easier access to health services and water supplies were obviously objectives they described as most important to them. They went into great detail to clarify their preferences in vocational training, namely agricultural training in vegetable cultivation and marketing, animal rearing and vocational training in sewing. However, the heads of the project—from the World Bank through the government officials and local project heads to the foreign directors of the project and their consultants—all insisted on emphasizing the literacy classes, which in fact did not correspond to the women's explicitly expressed needs and desires. It is not suggested that the women did not want to have literacy classes, although they often

expressed their reservations concerning the offer, but rather that literacy was not among their primary demands. Moreover, as the literacy classes were on the agenda and were put forward as a *fait accompli* by the project people, it follows that the women were made to think that literacy classes were the best bargain they could get. This was well expressed by an older, strong-minded woman in one of the villages we visited, who said: "We are not interested only in literacy, but in more practical things."

It seems that the women assumed that, once they were involved in the project, the other benefits, which they preferred, might follow. In fact, in our talks we made it quite clear that this was going to happen when the literacy classes were over. Furthermore, even when women did respond positively to the literacy classes offered, they were often willing to cooperate on pre-conditions, the most common of which was our renting a study space or, alternatively, the construction of new huts for their classes and money for refreshments. They also demanded to have a teacher from the local village who would be experienced, tolerant and respectful.

Not only did the women know what they wanted and needed, and not only were they well informed about marketing options, they were also highly competent in developing self-empowering activities and in founding their independent entrepreneurships. Given the necessary resources, the women displayed initiative, as shown in the example of the teahouse owned by the woman leader and the taxi business founded by another. The collective fund established by the women in Sikatahan serves as yet another example of these women's competence and resourcefulness, once they had access to credit and some basic agricultural training offered by the government and local NGO agencies. Some of the village women were active in women's organizations and in assisting other women. The women were already organized for mutual help and other social activities before our project representatives arrived at the villages and before the governmental projects of agricultural training started.

Based on my field data, it is my contention that the irrigation company's Groundwater Project, started in 1978, did not contribute to the village women's economic prospects or share in leadership. Moreover, I argue that the women's initiatives, whether economic or social, had nothing to do with the Gender Activities Program. Another conclusion drawn from my field data is that state agencies were not only able to carry out agricultural training, but that, in fact, they were doing it quite efficiently. This observation reinforces the argument that no international assistance was truly needed to proffer comprehensive services for the rural population, women included. Governmental agencies had to compete with outside organizations and consultants for control in their own field of responsibility. As they probably did not have enough economic resources, they had to comply with the intervention of foreign organizations.

Thus, developing organizations and their representatives latently, and sometimes explicitly, assumed the village women's ignorance and primitivism.

Defining the rural women as collectively needy and backward enhanced the recognition of the urgent need for aid from international organizations for Nepal. Nepali women were clearly discriminated against, as various feminist scholars suggest (e.g., Acharya, 2001; Bennett, 1983; Prativa, 1993). However, portraying them collectively as ignorant/helpless/backward, apart from stigmatizing them, conceals the central role of the state's responsibility for discriminatory practices.¹⁶ The women in the villages were far from backward. They lacked economic resources, yet were offered—by our program and other similar projects—educational programs that were hardly needed for their daily routine. Furthermore, even the literacy program was barely carried out, and in practice the women did not benefit even from literacy studies. By the time I left Nepal, three years after the gender development program started, only ten classes had opened. Most of the budget earmarked for the women's project was eventually used to finance “study tours” for senior officials in the local and national Nepali government—needless to say, all of them were men.

Inferring from my field data on the Gender Activities Program, I suggest that the binary concepts of West/East, South/North, First/Third, modern/traditional, One Third/Two Thirds and other similar terms are misleading and manipulative. They should be rejected within gender and general contexts alike. A new discourse, one that can overcome ethnocentric thinking embedded in hidden agendas, needs to be created. In the meantime the “development” terminology should be treated as a political term that serves to conceal the interests of the more powerful behind ideological texts about gender and social justice.

NOTES

¹ I am deeply grateful to Prof. Emanuel Marx and Prof. Haim Hazan, who offered me invaluable comments and insights. I also thank my anonymous readers, who suggested reexamining some of the arguments presented in this article.

² According to Chilisa Bagele, “neocolonialism” signifies the dependence of many formerly colonized countries that have gained geographical and political independence, although in practice their

cultural and economic independence was never really, if at all, won. The colonial systems of domination continue...as the former colonizers continue to economically, culturally, financially, militarily and ideologically dominate what constitutes the so-called developing world (2005:660).

³ This approach follows Gustavo Esteva, who criticizes the false conception of “development” and “underdevelopment” as real and the research which

displays a falsification of reality produced through dismembering the totality of interconnected processes that make up the world's reality and, in its place, it substitutes one of its fragments, isolated from the rest, as a general point of reference (1992:12).

⁴ Ranjani Murthy, for instance, points to the tendency of women's NGOs to "strike bargains with patriarchal structures to ensure their day-to-day survival" (1999:177). Similarly, Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo suggest that, in the context of the Middle East, many of the formal women's groups are politically controlled and are "state run, or owned by political parties or religious organizations.... In general, such organizations are felt to be too dependent on the male controlled power structure..." (1997:12–13).

⁵ The processes of attaining public acknowledgement of "special social problems" that call for the allocation of public funds and professional intervention, which very often create the "problem," have been elaborated by, for example, Gusfield (1980), Hertzog (1999:Ch. 3), and Mosse (2005).

⁶ The embedded association between images of motherhood identity and women's primitiveness is also familiar in the Israeli context. Thus, for instance, Davidovitch and Shvarts (2004) discuss the discourse and practices regarding the immigrants from North Africa who arrived in Israel in the 1950s. They provide citations from nurses who worked in the immigrants' camps at that time. One of them reported in her diary: "The mothers don't know how to behave with a sick child—to give it warm sweet liquids and how to give it pills... Comments: The woman sits on a sack.... The dirt is terrible" (2004:153–154). My own study (Hertzog, 1999:Ch. 3) provides another example in the context of the bureaucratic absorption of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel in the 1980s.

⁷ Momsen (2004) depicts Indian women working in paddy fields and making bricks, Brazilian women picking black pepper and processing nuts, Aborigine women hunting and gathering in Australia, and women loading bananas for export in the West Indies.

⁸ A similar understanding is suggested by Lauren Leve, who criticizes empowerment theories which "track consciousness verses unconsciousness, agency verses alienation, 'subjectivity' verses 'subalternity', and choice verses constraint" (2007:151). Based on her interviews of rural Nepali women in Chorigaon, she argues that the women evaluate their lives in more prosaic terms. The neoliterate women "ask for ease, security, equality of opportunity (including access to education and employment), good food, some degree of respect for their personal desires—and, as much as possible, some fun" (2007:151). She adds that "development," according to their testimonies, "would include water taps, electricity, bridges and roads, and peace" (2007:n. 43). Anna Robinson-Pant's edited volume (2004) and William Sewells' (1992) concept of "the universality of human agency" offer a similar approach.

⁹ The perceived conceptual dyad of "patron-client," which signifies power gaps embedded in formalized social structures, is widely discussed in the literature with regard to

divergent contexts, such as social institutions, historical narratives and various geographical locations (see, e.g., Davis, 1977; Gilsenan, 1996; Lyon, 2004; Shapira, 2008).

¹⁰ A formal document defines the framework and goal of the project as follows:

The Bhairahwa Lumbini Groundwater Project (BLGWP) is in essence an agricultural Project located in the Rupandehi District in the Terai, extending over 20,800 hectare of irrigable land when it will be complete in 1999. The Project is intended to raise the standard of living of the rural population living within its boundaries, most of which are farmers, and the status of women, in particular, so as to enable them to contribute more effectively in the economic development of the area ("Prequalification for employment of NGOs for provision of services related to women's development programs," January 30, 1997).

¹¹ My predecessor also carried out a survey on the women villagers' situation and needs. The study was based on discussions with twelve women's groups and on interviews with project officials, state officials and NGO activists.

¹² Ori Shachak (1985) suggests that that the insinuation of being messy or dirty conveys a more profound stigma than other insinuations. Hertzog (forthcoming)

¹³ This conclusion is well illustrated by Muhammad Yunus' conspicuous success with the Grameen Bank (Yunus, 1998).

¹⁴ For critical analyses of the Grameen Bank and micro-credit schemes, see, for instance, Hulme and Mosley (1996), Matin (1998) and Rahman (1999).

¹⁵ The financial motivation behind the efforts exerted by local women's NGOs to be involved in our project is better understood in light of Whelpton's (2005) explanation for the substantial increase in the estimated number of Nepalese NGOs involved in aid programs (20,000–30,000 by 1997). He attributes this increase to the preference of foreign donors for cooperating "with Nepalese non-governmental organizations rather than with government departments" (2005:135).

¹⁶ Thus, Sharma and Prasain argue that the Maoists' success "has behind it a long history of bad governance, oppression, corruption and marginalization of people, especially women..." (2004:164).

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