The Aporia of the Development Encounter: 
Gender Empowerment, Representation, and Power in Women’s Self-Help Groups in India

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Much ink has gone into thinking about what development is and whether it is happening – development as not yet or in the process of becoming, or development as myth or illusion. Wrestling with such issues often entails a moment of *aporia*: a paralysis, a quandary, a condition in which one does not know where to go – the ordeal of the undecidable. The outcome of such a risk, the decision, determines whether one opts to position oneself on the side of development, post-development or somewhere else.

Kriemild Saunders, 2002: 19
Introduction

As the opening quote by Kriemild Saunders suggests, in recent years there has been a great deal of debate about the concept of “development.” The growth of numerous “post-isms” (i.e. post-development, post-modernism, post-colonialism, etc.) voicing critiques of development is evidence that the promises of development have largely gone unfulfilled. Despite the growth of this academic critique of development work, the intriguingly wide gap between theory and practice in the field has translated into very little change in approaches to development work and relatively little questioning among most development practitioners about the value of implementing development programs. Part of the problem may stem from the fact that by seriously questioning the basic assumptions of development, a practitioner might find him or herself out of a job. However, as anthropologist James Ferguson explains, the dangerous outcome of this failure to critique is that development has become “common knowledge;” rather than “a series of unanswered, but answerable, questions,” it has become “a set of convictions or conclusions” (Ferguson 2005: 140). While I agree that it is deeply problematic for development professionals to be inflexible in their agenda or for them to assume that they always know what is right for others, the kind of paralysis that Saunders describes is, in my opinion, much more perilous. At the end of the day, development professionals must acknowledge the critiques of their work, attempt to incorporate the criticisms to improve their approach if possible, and then push ahead with the work of trying to help improve people’s lives. This argument forms the basis of the broader thesis herein. On a more limited scale, this thesis addresses how Indian self-help groups’ discussion of women’s “empowerment” provides the grounds for a practical analysis of gender and development work. Although there are shortcomings and pitfalls in the model of development work encouraged by these collectives, this work must not be abandoned because it holds the potential for improving the lives of many women and families throughout India.
In this thesis, I hope to address some of the difficulties that I believe are inherent problems of development work by closely examining the work of women’s self-help groups in India. In the first chapter, I will give a brief explanation about why I choose to focus on self-help groups, how these groups are situated in the Indian development scene, and how they have become crucial locations for discussions about poor (and more often than not, rural) women’s empowerment. I will also give an account of the fieldwork I did and the organizations I visited between mid-December 2006 and mid-January 2007, noting the possible biases of and gaps in the information I collected. Chapter 2 is a literature review about development work and more specifically, gender and development work, and its relation to India’s encounter with development. In Chapter 3, I hope to delve deeper into the problematic nature of representations of women who are being “helped” by development programs, how people (and which people) engage in development discourse, and the manner in which privilege and power resulting from development knowledge tends to damage the success of development geared towards social change. This chapter will also discuss whether or not a serious appreciation for cultural differences is possible in development work (and how understanding cultural difference might be construed as “deconstructive” for development agendas). Chapter 4 will focus on a deeper examination of representations of Indian women in self-help groups and how these representations affect the interpretation of successful or failed empowerment of participants. To conclude, Chapter 5 will address how certain representations of women in cross-cultural discussions of development work jeopardize the potential for real dialogue and a kind of international women’s solidarity based on an appreciation for difference rather than on universal values.
Preface

“INDIA POISED: Our Time Is Now!” proclaims the billboards along the Outer Ring Road in Delhi. “Make 2007 the Year of India” boldly states the next sign we whiz past. The small, green and yellow auto-rickshaw in which I am traveling suddenly swerves, avoiding the car that has inched up next to us, and a few angry honks from the driver shake me from my thoughts and back into the present. I am on my way to another interview—this time with the director of a feminist publishing group called Zubaan out in Huaz Khas. But this half hour of travel time gives me a chance to reflect on the amazing fact that I am finally here, in India. During our trip, we pass bright, new department stores, McDonald’s and Dominos restaurants, run-down pharmacies, men selling golgapas on the street, women in construction vests carefully stacking bricks on their heads, a pack of excited, babbling children in their school uniforms, and people waiting for public buses. We share the road with every form of transportation imaginable, from large trucks with the TATA label to motorcycles, bicycles, and people pushing their own carts of produce. The diversity of Delhi is incredible, and I know that in spite of the pollution, noise, and crowds, I have fallen in love with this place.

We arrive outside of the enclave where Zubaan is located, and I ask the driver, “Kitna, bhaiyah?” He tells me it will be 70 rupees, and I wonder to myself at the thought that it has just cost me less than $2.00 for the half-hour trip. I pay him, thinking back to the billboards along the road, wondering what effect India being “poised” will have on this man’s life and on the lives of so many other poor people in this vast, diverse country. There is so much interesting work being done by development organizations and NGOs in India, and on this trip to the country I have the privilege of spending some time talking with people who work specifically on gender and
development issues. Combing the hair back from my face (riding in a ‘scooter’ can be quite breezy, after all), I compose myself and walk through the gate to Zubaan’s office.

I suppose it would be helpful for me to give a brief account of how I – a college student from a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania – wound up in India this past winter, deeply interested in the work of women’s rights and development organizations. Since I have become heavily invested in the subject of gender and development work, I realize the importance of situating myself within this research, and I hope the reader will bear with my personal explanation for choosing this topic. Through my explanation, I hope to describe the particularly difficult task it has been to question my basic assumptions about the values of “development” work and to do a rigorous academic critique of these issues. What I have to contribute to this field of knowledge is limited; nonetheless, I am making a personal attempt to make sense of gender and development work in a sensitive, culturally appropriate, and thoughtful manner.

When I was younger, my grandparents traveled extensively and always used to bring back small gifts for their grandchildren (my sister and I usually received dolls wearing the traditional dress of the country they visited). My grandmother had been a history teacher at our local high school and, therefore, has a great affinity for talking, teaching, and presenting slide shows of her travels. While I credit her with being the first to show me the beauty and diversity of cultures around the world, the two things that really piqued my interest in development work and international studies happened between middle school and my early years of high school.

My family has always been quite religious (Christian – United Methodist), and I often tell people that I “grew up in the church” since so much of my childhood and youth was spent at various activities there. Through the church, I learned the importance of caring for others, treating people with respect and dignity, being concerned for those who “have less than I do,”
and living a life of “service.” When I was in eighth grade, my church decided to help sponsor two refugee families – one from Sudan and the other from Sierra Leone – and assist them with resettling in the United States. Serving as the lone youth representative on the Refugee Resettlement Committee, I quickly became close to Alhaji (from the Sierra Leonean family, resettled in Jersey City), who was just two years older than I, and we kept in touch through writing letters to each other. One of the letters he wrote to me, which was about six pages long, detailed many of the atrocities that he had experienced or witnessed first hand while still in Sierra Leone. I can still remember how much his letter moved and enraged me. I could not comprehend how humans could be so cruel to one another. I wanted to do something with my life that could help prevent these kinds of things from happening in the world.

A few years later, my youth group decided to take its annual service project trip to Tecate, Mexico. Working with a United Methodist church based there, we played with the children in the community, many of whom lived in small shacks on the side of a dry, dusty mountain, and built a small concrete house for another family that was unable to afford a place to live. The poverty we witnessed was not like anything we had ever encountered in the United States. For many of us, it was an eye-opening experience that taught us a great deal about the differences between our country and the so-called developing world. As I mentioned above, the church always emphasized the importance of giving back to those with “less than us.” And yet, I found it fascinating that the assistance we provided to the poor families in Tecate through our building materials, coloring books, and manual labor paled in comparison to what they gave us through their incredible hospitality, deep faith, and willingness to let us into their lives. No matter how much work we did in that short week, many of us left feeling indebted to the people we had met in Tecate.
Although I do not consider my current interest in development work to be as religiously motivated as when I was back in high school, my world-view is certainly shaped by the experiences I gained through my church. When I graduated from high school and headed off to college, people asked me what I wanted to do with my life. My response was always “to help people – at the international level.” To me, it was the perfect way to combine my love for learning about different cultures and places with my desire to improve the lives of people in poor countries. Now, as I am about to graduate from college (numerous Anthropology, International Studies, Women & Gender Studies, Government, and Economics classes later), and people ask me what I want to do with my life, I find myself wondering exactly what it means to want to “help people.” Is it an inherently patronizing goal? In some ways, it implies that the people with whom I hope to work are incapable of helping themselves – a rather arrogant thought, if you consider it carefully. While the anthropologist in me wonders whether I should reject intervening in places to bring “development,” another part of me intensely wants to believe that some of the tools, knowledge, or advocacy that I can offer people in other areas of the world could be beneficial in some way. In hopes of figuring out a more sensitive approach to gender and development work, I traveled to India this past winter. This thesis is my attempt to make sense of the research I did and to position it within the larger context of contemporary international development work.
Chapter 1: Research Methodology and Background Information on Indian Self-Help Groups

Methodology

In mid-December, I traveled to Delhi to begin my research on gender and development work in India. When I arrived, I had no particular topic in mind for my research, but self-help groups quickly became an obvious choice for study. I spent the first three weeks of my visit in Delhi staying with two different families of F&M students. Because of the holiday season, it was rather difficult for me to set up meeting times with most people I had hoped to meet early on in my research. My friend’s mother was helpful in trying to put me in touch with some people and giving me opportunities to see the city. In many ways, my first week was spent organizing my research and adjusting to my surroundings. I sent emails out to the people I had contacted while back in the States, made phone calls, and, by the end of the week, decided that I should just try going to the Centre for Women’s Development Studies (CWDS). Although I could not meet with anyone for very long that day, I did some research in their library, which finally enabled me to dive into the work.

Over the course of the next couple weeks, I visited Smitu Kothari – a coordinator of Intercultural Resources, an advocate for indigenous people’s movements, and a visiting professor at TISS; Madhu Mehra of Partners for Law and Development; Jimmy Dabhi, Sandali Thakur, and Alka Srivastava from the Indian Social Institute; Kiran Modi of Udayan Care; Urvashi Butalia of Zubaan; Vasanthi Raman and Indrani Mazumdar at CWDS; Ashwini Deshpande, a professor of economics at the University of Delhi; Abha Bhaiya from Jagori; Jaya Sharma of Nirantar; and Soma Kishore Parthasarathy, an independent gender and development consultant. During my last week in India, I flew to Mumbai where I visited the Tata Institute for Social Sciences to speak with Professors Vijay Nagaraj, Anjali Dave, and Lakshmi Lingam. I
completed a formal interview in English with each of these individuals which typically lasted anywhere between twenty to forty-five minutes, depending on the amount of time he or she had available. When possible, I spent extra time at each organization or location to browse through printed resources they had available and to gain a better feel for the general atmosphere there. In two cases when it was not possible to meet with an individual, I had a more informal telephone conversation with her (for example, the director of United Way, Mumbai who had done some work with self-help groups and another woman who did work with a group out in Madhya Pradesh). I also spoke informally with a few other individuals about their work with self-help groups, their opinions about poverty alleviation, or, more generally, the “progress” of the country and the liberalization of India’s economy.

Unfortunately, I was not able to make any trips out to self-help groups or speak with any women that were active participants in one of these collectives. Language barriers would have been a difficulty for me during this early research, in any case. However, my inability to talk to women involved in self-help groups translates into a certain limitation to my own first-hand research. Everything that I have learned about self-help groups has been mediated through the people to whom I spoke, the literature that was available to me from them or their organizations, and different academic critiques of development work or the work of self-help groups. It should be noted that my critique of some of the limitations and problems of gender and development work in India, as I understand it, is not intended to undermine the work of the people who so graciously took the time to speak with me. I merely hope to point to some of the difficulties that seem to be inherent to development work more generally in an effort to think critically about how development work might be improved and carried out in a more sensitive manner. More than anything, this thesis is an exercise in self-critique and a recognition that development work
can never be perfect. Nonetheless, I believe that development work is necessary for providing people access to resources they want for improving the quality of their lives. Errors are necessarily a part of this work, but a willingness to recognize mistakes and misunderstandings and strive to learn from them is a crucial aspect to improving how supporters of development in the west think about development and social change in other parts of the world.

The Locations

Upon visiting India in the early 1990s, Sachs commented on the diversity he witnessed in the places he visited, noting that, “For whatever reasons, India is an unmatched mélange of cultures, ethnicities, languages, alphabets, and religions. Diversity is its first and overwhelming characteristic” (Sachs 2005: 172). I, too, would certainly have to agree with this assessment. A few times in the beginning of my research, I caught myself asking someone a question about “Indian culture” – and I was politely challenged by Smitu Kothari (2006), who responded, “What is ‘Indian culture’? In a country with every major religion, 5,000 dialects, 18 languages, a million gods and goddesses… what is Indian culture?” Regional and state differences often come up in general conversation, and there is a sense of deep pride in the fact despite the nation’s overwhelming diversity, India functions as a unified, democratic country.

As I mentioned earlier, my research was limited to the cities of Delhi and Mumbai. Nonetheless, even from the short time I spent in these two places, the cultural, architectural, and attitudinal differences were immediately apparent. Whereas Delhi is the capital city with its wide roads, embassies, greenery, and ancient Mughal architecture, Bombay is the ever-buzzing high-rise heaven of Bollywood. To explain the different atmospheres of these cities, my friends compared Bombay to New York City and Delhi to Washington, D.C. It is said Delhi is a “friendlier” city, since many Punjabis with “big hearts” and a penchant for over-feeding their
guests reside there. On the other hand, people would tell me that Bombay is safer – particularly for women. However, as one of the friends I stayed with expressed, both cities were cities of contradictions. So often one would find a glamorous apartment complex towering over a nearby slum. The stark juxtaposition of wealth and poverty is startling to someone unused to it.

The important point to be made here is that it is simply impossible to speak of such a broad topic of “gender and development work in India” because of the diversity within the country. It is crucial to remember that “Indian women,” much like “American women” or any other national categorization of this nature, are a heterogeneous group, and factors such as class, caste, religion, and rural/urban differences should be taken into consideration by development practitioners and researchers so as to avoid assuming that programs will have similar results for all women in India. I recognize the problems in assuming “women participating in self-help groups” to be a coherent group, but this need for categorizing is an unfortunate, if necessary, limitation of my discussion throughout the thesis.

The Growing Interest in Gender Inequity in India

In 1975, the Committee on the Status of Women in India published an important report entitled *Towards Equality*. This report, widely cited as one of the first landmark reports on the status of women in India, described the “prevailing unequal status of women in the country” at the time and the existence of stark differences between the reality of women’s lives and what are described as the rights of all citizens, enshrined in the Constitution (Banerjee 1995: 1). The report described how “the position of Indian women” had actually declined since independence, (Sen, S. 2002: 460). In its recommendations for action, the report “emphasized that women in poverty should receive priority in all measures to promote and sustain women’s equality” (Banerjee 1995: 1); thereby making considerations for the country’s “development and progress
themselves […]’gender issues’” (Sen, S. 2002: 460). Although there had been women’s movements and organizations long before the 1970s, it was at this point that the government began to include gender as a consideration for how resources should be distributed and who should be “targeted” in national development programs.

Paralleling international discussions of women in development, women’s status in India was also closely tied to discussions of economic development and poverty-alleviation. The new forms of economic development that India had undertaken since independence in its attempt to “modernize” had benefited men more often than women, resulting in profound and often negative effects on gender equity. Today, economic liberalization and globalization continue to influence India’s economy and, as a result, its gender inequities, in a serious way. Although some researchers feel that statistics regarding women’s improved access to education, improved access to paid employment, and lower fertility rates suggest a more general improvement in women’s status in India, others point to the “declining” sex ratio,1 tracing “the complex ways in which this worsening discrimination against females is connected with the orientation of development processes in India” (Kapadia 2002a: 2; cf. Raman 2007). This consideration regarding women’s employment and economic independence remains at the core of government programs for both alleviating poverty and improving gender equity in India. For this reason, Indian self-help groups, which focus on empowering women – usually through microcredit opportunities,2 are an important starting point for this discussion of gender and development work. The next section will trace the history and evolution of self-help groups through present day.

1 In India, a “declining sex ratio” means an increasing male preponderance. Generally, this situation is called an increasing sex ratio, but India organizes its statistics female to male rather than male to female.
2 Although group savings, microcredit, and entrepreneurship often are the main focus of self-help groups, some groups organize around other activities ranging from literacy to childcare, national resource management, income generation, or counseling/support (Dabhi, Sojourners 2006: 9-10).
The Evolution of Self-Help Groups

According to Soma Kishore Parthasarathy (Interview 2007), an independent gender and development consultant who has done extensive research on self-help groups over the past few years, the concept of using groups to channel development aid from the government is not a new phenomenon in India. Self-help groups can be traced back to the government’s rural development planning in the 1950s, a policy that focused on mobilizing communities to take part in development programs through the delivery of agricultural credit to cooperatives (Srivastava, A. 2004: 10-1). Throughout the late 1960s and 70s, access to credit shifted from direct government provision towards commercial banks, and a sprawling network of nationalized banks was established to reach rural households (Srivastava, A. 2004: 11).

The Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP), formed in 1980, provided subsidies for small loans to people in rural areas, but it was discovered that most people were using the loans for purposes other than what they had been designated and that government officials were often stealing or illicitly profiting from the government loans (Parthasarathy 2007; cf. Srivastava, A. 2004: 11). Women had rarely benefited from these early development programs, and soon the government decided to shift its energy towards programs in which women would have more control over their earnings. It was assumed that women would use this money more directly for the household rather than for personal purchases, as men tended to use the funds. Early programs involving women focused on thrift – i.e. cutting back on resources and saving – rather than credit, which involves obtaining surplus funds from an external source (Parthasarathy 2007). Originally, these savings and borrowing schemes were informal and not monitored by the government.

In 1982, the government set up the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) program under the IRDP (ICFAI website 2003; Sharma, K. 2004: 6). The DWCRA
program’s goal was to organize women into collectives of approximately 15-20 women, for the purpose of channeling development assistance more directly to women and children and for encouraging women to save what little money they could in order to have resources in future times of emergency or for use in small-scale entrepreneurial activities. Once these collectives reached a certain level of savings, they became eligible for credit from the bank. These DWCRA groups were the beginning of what are now called self-help groups (ICFAI website 2003).

According to Parthasarathy, the National Agricultural Bank for Rural Development (NABARD) quickly became aware of the fact that women were quite good at paying back loans, so it bought into the program. Women’s “bankability” became more widely recognized by the government and wealthy creditors, and a Bank Linkage program was started, focusing on women as producers in small entrepreneurial ventures (Parthasarathy 2007; Mazumdar 2007). Today, NABARD continues to provide subsidies to banks so that they can give much lower interest rates for loans to women. At the moment, there is a great deal of discussion among the government, various government-sponsored organizations, and other non-governmental organizations about the “Micro Financial Sector (Development and Regulation) Bill” that might bring changes to the manner in which self-help groups are financed and the rates of interest that women must pay on loans (Reddy, e-mail correspondence 2007; MF Bill 2007).

The Popularity of Self-Help Groups and Microfinance Programs

Although self-help groups are similar to the Grameen Bank model (Rahman 1999; Ramakumar 2006; Srivastava, A. 2004; Dabhi, Sojourners 2006: 9) in Bangladesh, they are an organic progression in India from the 1950s development programs (Nirantar 2004: 1). Indeed, it was organizations like the Working Women’s Forum (WWF) in Madras, the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in Gujarat, and a number of other women’s organizations
throughout the country that helped to convince policy makers and banks that investing in poor women was a feasible development scheme (Sharma, K. 2004: 6). Microfinance programs are often lauded as “win-win” situations because they provide poor women with access to credit and “empower” them, while providing advantages to the lenders in a program that is self-sustaining and viable (Kalpana 2005: 73). Although some academics and advocates believe that microfinance has been successful only because it was able to catch “the imagination of the donors and the bankers” by providing a way for people to make a profit from lending to the poor (Parthasarathy 2007), others cite the appeal of a viable, self-sustaining approach to poverty-alleviation. Regardless, the apparent “success” of these kinds of groups has made microfinance and microcredit “extremely central to anti poverty [sic] initiatives the world over” (Kalpana 2005: 72-3). In addition to the government’s financial support for microfinance programs, the World Bank and a wide variety of non-governmental organizations in India – national and international – are also involved in funding and organizing self-help groups.

Obviously microcredit is a fairly “hot topic” right now in India, and it quickly became apparent that this subject was one about which many people were willing to talk to me. Self-help groups are of critical importance to the gender and development scene in India simply because of the depth and breadth of their influence. As Jaya Sharma from Nirantar explained, “right now in the country there are about seven million self-help groups, with maybe an average of fifteen women in a group. You can see that the figures are huge, so banks get access to a vast amount of resources, even though they are small in terms of what each individual woman might pay, but they add up to huge amounts” (Sharma 2007). Some figures estimate that by 2008, self-help groups will involve at least 17 million women (Srivastava, A. 2004: 10).
In India as well as abroad, microcredit is viewed by many development organizations as the “magic bullet” (Nirantar 2004: 1) for addressing poverty and “the panacea for all economic shortcomings” (Sharma, K. 2004: 7). These groups are “expected to save the rural poor from the clutches of money lenders, step up their savings, encourage entrepreneurship, enhance group solidarity, build leadership skills and empower them” (Sharma, K. 2004: 7) – quite a tall order.

In the last few years, increasing numbers of national and regional women’s organizations are studying, critiquing, and reporting on the influence of self-help groups. Among the women-oriented NGOs that I visited and researched, there was a great deal of training, research, political lobbying, publishing, legal advocacy, and union organizing being done on an broad range of women’s issues. Most of these organizations had produced some form of literature on self-help groups.

One reason I felt that self-help groups were a good focus for this study is their relationships with many different levels of development work – from grassroots, to national, to international levels. In 1991, India began a series of structural adjustment programs that made the country eligible for funding from the World Bank (Sachs 2005: 170). Most of the development experts I interviewed mentioned that self-help groups and microfinance were a major funding priority of the World Bank (Dabhi Interview 2006; Sharma 2007; Butalia 2007; Thakur 2006; Raman 2007). It was also often expressed to me that self-help groups were evidence of the government’s receding role in providing for the country’s poor. With few additional inputs, the government could claim it was “doing something” for the poor by organizing people into self-help groups. For what small amount of aid the government is providing, self-help groups and collectives generally serve to disburse the government’s provisions (Kalpana 2005: 76). In development discussions at both the international and national
level, there has also been a shift towards “grassroots empowerment” as a more legitimate form of
development work. This paradigm is supposedly better at including local people as agents of
their own development.

On one hand, a more “people-centered” approach is often called for among development
practitioners – partially in response to recent academic critiques of development and partially in
response to the failure of one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter approaches that assume programs are
universally applicable, despite the unique circumstances of each community. On the other hand,
self-help groups have really “brought about a shift in the development paradigm of the country”
by laying the “onus of progress on the people and do[ing] little to address poverty” (Sharma, K.
2004: 9). With the reduction of government involvement, the goal in development work has
become more of a partnership between civil society and the state through an increasing
participation of people at the grassroots level (Srivastava, K. 2005: 5-6).

As a result of this shift towards grassroots approaches, organizations working on poverty-
relief often paradoxically describe poor people as both powerful agents of social change as well
as victims of a hierarchical system that continues to discriminate against them. The following
passage from Jeffrey Sachs’ book *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*
illustrates the conundrum that development practitioners face:

> The starting points of that chain [of action that will alleviate poverty] are the poor themselves. They are ready to act, both
individually and collectively. They are already hard working, prepared to struggle to stay afloat and to get ahead. They have a
very realistic idea about their conditions and how to improve them, not a mystical acceptance of their fate. They are also ready to
govern themselves responsibly, ensuring that any help that they receive is used for the benefits of the group rather than pocketed by
powerful individuals. But they are too poor to solve their problems on their own. So, too, are their own governments. (2005: 242)
This kind of language is common in development texts – especially more recent works that attempt to be more “people-centered” and sensitive to the idea that people can understand and “have a very realistic idea about their conditions and how to improve them.” At face value, Sachs’ words seem innocuous enough, but there is something about the passage that does not sit quite right with me. Sachs’ calls for greater sensitivity to the needs of the people with whom one is working; however, he seems to begin with the assumption that if poor people are given the opportunity and the resources, they will “develop” themselves in the way that sits acceptably within the definition of “development” given by international development organizations like the World Bank and the IMF. Sachs’ mention of a “mystical acceptance of their fate” seems to belittle the idea that culture might indeed matter very much to people and result in a radically different set of values from his own. Herein lies one of the first, inherent problems of development.

We must interrogate the language we use to speak about the poor in development work because our representations of them might prevent us from treating people as fellow human beings. The urgency with which we speak about the need for development, poverty alleviation, and respect for individual rights can become a very disempowering process for people as they become the “targets” of development rather than the people with goals, values, and a profound understanding of the world in which they live, who they are. People can and do act for themselves, and it is wrong for development workers to assume that they must always act on behalf of others. And yet, I also disagree with the opposite contention that development workers should never act to encourage and assist locals in learning about new possibilities and opportunities for their lives where little organic discussion or action exists. Both development and the women’s movement are based upon the belief that the status quo is not acceptable and
must be improved to favor those people who are disadvantaged by the system. Therefore, on a moral level, I feel justified in arguing that there are instances where development professionals should work to advocate for changes even if they meet resistance. The academic can provide information about the world and will criticize the work of advocates for being biased by certain values and worldviews, but ultimately the advocate cannot afford to be completely paralyzed by the critique. As Weber so eloquently explained:

[I]t [the application of the results of scientific analysis] is rather the task of the acting, willing person: he weighs and chooses from among the values involved according to his own conscience and his personal view of the world. Science can make him realize that all action and naturally, according to the circumstances, inaction imply in their consequences the espousal of certain values – and… the rejection of others. The act of choice itself is his own responsibility. We can also offer the person, who makes a choice, insight into the significance of the desired object. We can teach him to think in terms of the context and the meaning of the ends he desires, and among which he chooses. (Weber: 6)

While academics have a responsibility to present the world in a scientifically rigorous manner, the actors utilize the knowledge to make educated decisions. As a development worker, one should not totally give in to one’s biases about the world, recognizing the limitations of such an approach. The actor in this case has an extremely important responsibility to examine the values and context in which values are being acted upon, but ultimately must make value judgments through his or her actions. This issue is a recurrent theme in this work to which I will return in later chapters.
Chapter 2: Literature Review of Development and its Relation to India

More than half the people in the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate, they are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of these people... I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life... Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace. And the key to greater production is wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge. (President Harry Truman, Inaugural Address on January 20, 1949, quoted in Escobar 1995: 3)

There is some disagreement among academics as to when the concept of “development” began. However, many cite the launching of the Marshall Plan by the United States following the end of World War II as a catalytic moment for modern development (Remenyi 2004: 26-7, McKay 2004: 47, Hunt 2004: 68). Through the Marshall Plan, the United States took an active role in helping to reconstruct many of the European nations that had been destroyed and impoverished by the war, providing them with the financial support necessary to bring them back to their feet. In her article “Aid and Development,” Jane Hunt quotes an excerpt from President Truman’s inaugural speech from 1949, which depicts the belief that poverty and “underdevelopment” were issues that needed to be addressed by the international community. Wealthy, western nations ³ helped poorer countries out of a sense of moral optimism about eradicating poverty, a desire to avoid a future war like World War II that had been provoked by

³ In this paper, I employ the term “western” to describe the particular worldview associated with typical Enlightenment thought as well as the geographical areas of North America and Western Europe that are loosely associated with this worldview and a particularly wealthy standard of living. I use the term “nonwestern” to describe the whole range of worldviews and regions outside of the aforementioned. Although using these terms is problematic because of their suggestion that the “west” and “nonwest” can be considered homogeneous categories, they are working terms for the purpose of describing generalities within development theories. I prefer not to use the term “Third World,” although some argue it has an important political connotation, because it tends to evoke a particular imagery of poverty and disempowered individuals that is not acceptable for this thesis.
Germany’s total economic devastation following World War I, and the hope of curtailing the
spread of communism. Truman described the need to “embark on a bold new program for
making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the
improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas” (quoted in Hunt 2004: 68). The immediate
post-World War period generally brought a sense of optimism about the possibility of the
peaceful cohabitation of nations, and “people believed that it was indeed possible to eradicate
hunger and misery resulting from under-development” (Hunt 2004: 70; cf. Ferguson 2005: 144).

In 1944, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD, now known
as the World Bank) and the International Monetary Fund were created under the Bretton Woods
Agreement to provide development assistance in the form of loans. Originally, these
organizations were based on the Keynesian assumption that substantial government intervention
was necessary at times to regulate markets and ensure that development continued in a positive
direction (Stiglitz 2003: 195-6). At this point, people assumed that the explanation for countries’
so-called backwardness was that they simply had not been developed yet.

Modernization theory, which formed the foundation of development discourse, argued
that all countries moved through certain stages of development beginning with simple, traditional
societies and progressing towards modern, industrialized, capitalist societies. W. W. Rostow’s
five stages of economic growth – traditional society, preconditions for take-off, the take-off, the
drive to maturity, and the age of high mass-consumption – claimed that all societies passed
through the same stages towards modern society (Rostow 1994: 99-106). Ultimately, Rostow
was soundly critiqued for his stages being based on the history of Western Europe and North
America, which were considered the successful model for emulation (Shannon 1996: 3-5). In order to help other countries move past their “historical backwardness” and “traditionalism” (Shannon 1996: 6), “developed” nations had a responsibility to share their technological knowledge and to assist non-industrialized countries to become more differentiated and politically stable. This model of development, therefore, focused on the internal problems in “less developed countries,” blaming them for their own apparent failure to develop “properly” without recognizing the external power relations in the world system that might put countries at a disadvantage (Shannon 1996: 7; Escobar 1995).

In the 1960s, a school of thought called dependency theory rose as a challenge to modernization theory. André Gunder Frank was one of the leading scholars of dependency thought and is credited with distinguishing between “undevelopment” – a natural state – and “underdevelopment” – a state caused by historical exploitation (Kanth 1994: 149; cf. Frank 1994: 149-59). Generally, the goal of dependency theorists is to explain the “limited progress peripheral countries have made in achieving economic development and general modernization” by focusing on these countries’ relationships with “wealthy capitalist countries” (Shannon 1996: 15). According to dependency theory, the world is divided into core, industrialized countries (the former colonizers) and peripheral, agriculturally based countries (the former colonies). The nature of the relationship between the core and periphery, rather than being benign, as modernization theory suggests, is inherently exploitative. In modernization theory, the role of core countries is to transfer technology to the developing world to help it become modern, whereas dependency theory argues that core and periphery countries are involved in trade that is necessarily highly disadvantageous for the peripheral nations.

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4 Rostow’s work was also criticized for being mere anti-Communist propaganda set to counter the Marxist treatise on stages of development, which claimed that capitalism was not the end goal but rather a stage in the ultimate progression towards socialism and communism.
Peripheral countries are responsible for producing the raw materials and agricultural goods that industrialized, core countries need to produce their manufactured goods and sustain their markets (Shannon 1996: 16; Elson 1999: 99). Because the prices of raw materials on the world market generally are quite low relative to the prices of manufactured goods that the core countries produce and sell back to periphery countries, these poorer countries will never be able to climb out of their debts to the industrial countries (Prebisch 1994: 165-6; Elson 1999: 98); thus, the core benefits by keeping the periphery under its control. In development discourse, this situation is frequently referred to as the declining terms of trade (i.e. the Prebisch-Singer hypothesis). Even if the core countries attempted to produce more raw materials to increase their gross domestic product (GDP), the flood of these goods onto the international market would probably only serve to further depreciate prices unless there was enough demand for the raw materials. It becomes very difficult for a poor country to export more monetarily than it imports. In dependency theory the focus is on the external causes for a country’s poverty rather than on internal failures, as modernization theory claims.

A similar theory, which actually stems from dependency theory, is called world-systems theory. Immanuel Wallerstein is credited with formulating this theory, seeking to critique the idea that “the problems of the periphery are the result of historical backwardness or traditionalism” (Shannon 1996: 20). World-systems theory claims to differ from dependency theory in its attempt to explain why some countries have managed to move up and out of the periphery. These countries that have moved up form the “semi-periphery,” working as intermediaries between the core and periphery, producing some manufactured products with raw materials from periphery countries as well as producing raw materials for consumption in core countries. World-systems theory also focuses on historical explanations of the interrelationships
among countries, an examination of the system of exploitation proposed by Leninism, and a holistic approach in explaining the causes for the poverty of peripheral countries, rather than focusing on any one academic discipline (Shannon 1996: 19-20).

Although dependency and world-systems theories critique the concept of development for its inability to help peripheral countries become developed and gain a better foothold in the international economy, there are numerous other critiques that challenge the basic premise of development itself. Rather than viewing countries in a hierarchical manner, for instance, post-colonialism, postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-development, and anthropologists’ critique of development focus on the differences among societies and promulgate the idea that there can be many different, equally valid paths for countries to take for improving the quality of life of its citizens.

A Change in the Model of the Bretton Woods Institutions

Around the 1980s, a shift occurred in the basis of economic development thinking within international development organizations. Rather than relying on the Keynesian assumption that government intervention was necessary – and, indeed, desirable – at times to regulate international markets, the World Bank and IMF shifted towards the liberalization of markets. Liberalism, in terms of economics, focuses on limiting government intervention, involving the government merely as a neutral umpire for settling disputes among private corporations and enforcing the rule of law, securing property rights, and privileging the rights of individuals (Friedman 1962). Feminist economist Diane Elson (1999: 101) explains how in the 1980s, development economics began to “identif[y] the main obstacle to development as policy-induced price distortions, such as over-valued exchange rates, import controls and credit controls. It was argued that deregulation of the economy would remove such distortions and promote both
growth and improved standards of living.” Economic difficulties in the United States and the United Kingdom in the ‘80s, along with the failure of Keynesian economics to solve these problems, were largely responsible for the shift in attitude of international development organizations.

Although development discourse itself was not yet being challenged in mainstream literature or forums in the ‘80s for failing by its own standards, the field moved towards a more extreme, neoliberal emphasis on private market-led growth (Parpart 2002: 43). Although neoliberalism is obviously based in older ideas of economic liberalism, critics argue that it has taken an extreme stance on the need to limit government intervention, focusing on privatization, cutting social spending, the total deregulation of markets, and fiscal austerity on the part of creditors and national governments. Harvey, an obvious opponent declares that neoliberalism leaves all economic decisions possible up to the market, even at the expense of discussions of personal rights (2006). This group of economic prescriptions forms the basis of what became known as structural adjustment policies.

**Failures and Limitations of Development Discourse**

In his book *Globalization and Its Discontents* (2003), Joseph E. Stiglitz, former chief economist for the World Bank, exposed how the World Bank, IMF, and World Trade Organization (WTO) failed to make the necessary fiscal and policy adjustments in order to better assist developing nations. Not only were development programs failing to improve the lives of most citizens of developing nations throughout the 1980s and ‘90s, but, in some places, people’s quality of life was even deteriorating, thus causing the gap between rich and poor to increase (Stiglitz 2003: 24). Instead of viewing these changes as a potentially dangerous consequence of rapid liberalization, the IMF treated the changes as mere side effects, part of temporary growing
pains, or the “cost” of development. Unfortunately, rather than being a short-term pain leading to long-term gain, it seems that increasing poverty and insecurity for the more vulnerable groups in society might simply be one of the characteristics of this kind of “development.” Although the liberal economic model that Milton Friedman proposed might have been appropriate for the United States and United Kingdom’s problems with inflation, economic liberalism does not appear to be the universal answer to economic problems. Yet, increasingly there is an agreement among international monetary bodies that liberalism is the best method to achieve economic stability in developing nations.

One serious problem with the “Washington Consensus” is its neoclassical belief that if the international market is left to the “invisible hand” for its regulation, each country will be able to find a comparative advantage in production and therefore be able to focus its energy on a particular productive niche. What this assumption fails to consider is that western, industrialized countries have had decades to develop slowly and build up their capacities without many external challenges. If unindustrialized, poor countries are forced to modernize quickly, without any form of protection for their markets, their economy is at a severe disadvantage compared to that of already-developed countries. As Stiglitz notes, “The critics of globalization accuse Western countries of hypocrisy, and the critics are right. The Western countries have pushed poor countries to eliminate trade barriers, but kept up their own barriers” (Stiglitz 2003: 6).

Instead of learning from its mistakes when imposing strict measures of fiscal austerity on poor countries in exchange for necessary loans, the IMF often continues to support these measures. This “one-size-fits-all” approach has been heavily criticized by developing countries and nongovernmental organizations that witnessed an increase in poverty during the implementation

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5 Meaning the general agreement among the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization on the neoliberal policies that support structural adjustment programs. All of these organizations, are heavily influenced by Washington’s policies and work in conjunction with the American government.
of structural adjustment policies. For this reason, “neoliberalism” has become a dirty word in development discourse due to its failure to deliver on promises of economic growth and prosperity.

**Constructions and Understandings of Modernity**

Development, as well as our understanding of “modernity,” has become synonymous for international development organizations and western governments with democratic rule, individual rights, industrialization, capitalism, and hyper-consumption. In many ways, the concept of development is rooted in Enlightenment ideas about individual rights and the importance of western, “rational,” scientific knowledge about the world (Parpart 2002: 42; Kothari 2006; Comaroff 1999: 1-5). As Sue Ellen Charlton writes, “‘development’ implies a notion of historical change derived from western European secular and scientific thought” (Charlton 1997: 7). While the recent surge of globalization\(^6\) since the 1980s has aided in the acceptance of this particular understanding of development, academics and activists from nonwestern countries are increasingly voicing their concern about the neoliberal model of capitalist development that is propagated by international development organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF.

Susan Perry and Celeste Schenck describe how development thought and “contemporary notions of modernity” have sought to impose a particular worldview on others that effectively reduces societies that are already in disadvantaged positions “to the status of objects” (2001: 6). By imposing this one understanding of the world, development has also actively disregarded and erased pre-existing indigenous knowledge and values (Kothari 2006). At the World Social

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\(^6\) “Globalization” is understood herein as the increasingly rapid “global cultural flows” that Arjun Appadurai describes in terms of media, technology, finances, ideologies, and cultures (Appadurai 1996: 33). While Appadurai points out some of the problems with discussing globalization in terms of cultural homogenization and heterogenization, he notes that there are “a vast array of empirical facts [that] could be brought to bear on the side of the “homogenization argument” (1996: 32).
Forum, which seeks to provide a space for alternative understandings of progress, Indu Agnihotri voiced her concerns about the homogenizing effects of globalization, stating, “All over the place we have this pro-globalization environment, and one is left wondering whether one’s understanding of history is wrong\redundant\archaic… I think that attack – that onslaught is part of the ideology of globalization – where it tells you that there is ‘no other way to think, you have to accept this’” (Agnihotri 2005: 11). One of the serious consequences of the consensus about modernity and development among international organizations is that all policy prescriptions become “couched in terms of general interest” (Stiglitz 2003: 217). More and more people in developing nations are voicing their concerns with the idea that there is just one set of policies or one direction for improving the standard of living for and lessening inequalities among citizens. The following sections discuss some of the movements that challenge the concept of modernity.

**Postcolonialism**

Postcolonial thought, much like dependency theory and world-systems theory, focuses on the legacy of colonization for former colonies, including the “cultural, military, and/or economic ties with the countries that had colonized them” (Charlton 1997: 10). According to Eiman Zein-Elabdin and S. Charusheela, along with postmodernist and poststructuralist critique, “postcolonial critics have fundamentally shifted current thinking about hegemony, culture, and knowledge structures” (2004: 1). These critiques attempt to challenge the hegemonic development discourse originating in the west, particularly in the form of economic prescriptions about how to develop. Interestingly, despite the powerful arguments of postcolonial thought about economic development discourse’s particular cultural relevance to the experiences of the west, economics has resisted incorporating this critique in its work and still praises a particular understanding of the universal, economic rationality of humans (Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela
With its resistance to critique, economics continues to recreate its discursive hegemony over development work.

In attempting to find new ways to understand economics, postcolonialism neither seeks to instate another form of hegemonic thought nor does it unrealistically hope for a return to nativist power or indigenous ways before the imposition of development (Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela 2004: 4, 8). The goal is to come up with new approaches that do not reconstitute the domination of necolonialism (Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela 2004: 6). Postcolonialism is also very much concerned with issues of identity, hybridity, and representation. These concepts hold particular relevance for this thesis, not only because of the power of language tacitly to reinforce certain understandings about development, but also because, in development work, representations tend to have policy implications. As Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela (2004: 16) note, “it is imperative to give special attention to the question of representation, rather than undertake a simple effort to redo the methods we apply to a pre-given object of analysis. This means revisiting the question of language, which forms a key concern in postcolonial critique, and presents a challenge in its own right.” For this reason, it is important to interrogate our representations of the people who development programs are intended to assist as well as our representations of development itself.

**Postmodernism and Poststructuralism**

Postmodernism emerged in the latter half of the 20th century as a critique to “modern” assumptions about the universality of human nature and the ability of individuals to base these universals in an ultimately knowable reality and normative morality (Ingram 2006: 729). This critique of the “the completeness of our knowledge of things in their totality” challenges the universal desirability of “modern culture,” which “disintegrates under its own self-critical gaze, thereby issuing in oscillating and often discordant trends between absolutism and nihilism,
totalitarianism and anarchism, humanism and multiculturalism, and universalism and parochialism” (Ingram 2006: 729). Postmodernism is relevant to our discussion of development in its desire to recognize the possibility of alternatives to modernity as it has been defined in the west.

Although development professionals should critically reflect upon the cultural embeddedness of western development thought, if one takes the critique too far, everything become culturally relative, and one is left de-centered and without any basis for making judgments about the world. One cannot act when the arguments for advocacy totally disintegrate under a “self-critical gaze.” The state of aporia that complete acceptance of relativism produces is “fundamentally nihilist” (Gardner and Lewis 2005: 353), leaving no place for people interested in working on the serious issues of world poverty and gender discrimination. While having respect for cultural differences is crucial for successful development work, having a moral basis upon which to act is equally important for the development professional. Without such a basis, one would be so paralyzed that even the most abhorrent examples of inequality and discrimination (e.g. slavery, genocide, rape, abject poverty, etc.) could be relativised.

Post-development

Based upon a profound, if not obsessive, respect for cultural differences and a belief in the necessity of a degree of cultural relativism, post-development thought critiques the universal desirability of development as proposed by the west and international development organizations. Kriemild Saunders not only describes the western development model as “a Western cultural invention that has been poorly grafted in the South,” but also as ethnocentric (2002: 22). Therefore, since western countries are largely in charge of development
organizations, “western rationality” continues to dominate mainstream development discourse and policies (Charlton 1997: 7).

Some critics of post-development feel that “alternatives to development exalt images of the ‘local’ and sometimes romanticize or essentialize it” (Charlton 1997: 8), but supporters argue that post-development thought acknowledges that there are different value systems in the world, and proposes that, ideally, social change should be determined from within individual countries (Charlton 1997: 7). Based on this analysis, though, western countries and development organizations are both cursed if they are involved with development funding, but also if they are not providing the funds necessary for development programs. Because post-development has failed to provide alternatives to development discourse so far, Saunders argues that post-development has remained a deconstructive idea (2002: 24). Indeed, one might wonder, “if not development, then what?” Although development practitioners and academics might appreciate the critique and its insight, the sentiment that “development problems cannot simply be wished away” (Parpart 2002: 44) is more than understandable. Charlton argues that perhaps the problem is in people’s inability to “envisage something called development if it does not resemble both western values and the western historical experience” (1997: 11), but until a more pragmatic response is found, I believe development work must continue. I am not so convinced that working to improve people’s access to clean water, healthcare, sanitation facilities, education, and other so-called “modern” services and goods is “ethnocentric.” However, cultural differences must be respected as these services are secured. It does seem that certain aspects of the critique are beginning to make their way into the rhetoric of international development organizations, with the increasing focus on “attention to local knowledge,” “people-centered
development programs,” discussions of empowerment, and the importance of cultural specificity and difference.

**Critiques from Anthropology**

Ever since the beginning of anthropology as a discipline, anthropologists have been drawn to studying exactly the kind of people and communities that development practitioners tend to “target” with their work. Predominantly because of its historical fascination with “‘less developed’ peoples,” anthropology maintains a kind of “uncomfortable intimacy” with development today (Ferguson 2005: 141). One of the main differences between the two fields, however, is that, whereas anthropology has come to reject its earlier theoretical foundation built upon social evolutionist thought (as proposed by anthropologists such as Lewis Henry Morgan and E.B. Tylor), development discourse has failed to break from the general assumption that there is one, single-directional movement towards what would be defined as modernity or a developed society (Ferguson 2005: 141).

To play off of Marx’s famous dialectical quote, anthropologists would be characterized by their desire to understand the world (and, in a romantic sense, their desire to preserve cultures as they are), whereas development practitioners are content with changing the world, sometimes dangerously without attempting to understand it first. Those anthropologists who attempt to tread the uneven ground between the two points may find themselves ostracized by both groups. As James Ferguson notes in his article “Anthropology and Its Evil Twin: ‘Development’ in the Constitution of a Discipline,” many anthropologists tended to shun “development anthropologists” for their interest in making development work more sensitive to cultural differences because their active *application* of anthropology ultimately seemed to support modernization theory (2005: 145, 147). Whereas “[m]any anthropologists… came to
development with a strong sense of theoretical and political purpose, determined to bring anthropological knowledge to bear on the great problems of poverty, exploitation, and global inequality,” (Ferguson 2005: 147) development practitioners sometimes merely used anthropologists and anthropological ideas to help implement development programs more smoothly. Between the increasing influence of postmodern thought – which emphasizes the absolute need for understanding the cultural specificity of social change – on development discourse and the apparent fact that development programs will persevere no matter how much they are critiqued, it seems that anthropology will remain “locked in a strange, agonistic dance” (Ferguson 2005: 150) with its “Evil Twin.” Both development and anthropology are fascinated by similar people and communities; hence, their mutual attraction. But the two fields will always remain opposed because anthropology is an academic, and often romantic, discipline while development is based upon practical action and dynamism.

One particularly well-known post-development anthropologist is Arturo Escobar. His groundbreaking work, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (1995), carefully traces the historical trajectory of modern development thinking from its inception at the Bretton Woods Conference to the present. Escobar’s key arguments discuss the indubitability of western development as a falsely desirable concept (1995: 3–6), the ability of development as a discursive hegemony to convince others of their “underdevelopment” (1995: 5–6), and the reliance of development knowledge upon western norms (1995: 13). To support these points, Escobar focuses on “regimes of representation that underlie constructions” of various groups of people in “less developed” societies (1995: 19). Representations, he argues, eventually have produced apparent “truths” about the world, fallaciously privileging the western model of society above all others.
Yet another outspoken critic of development is anthropologist Mark Hobart. In his introduction to the book *An Anthropological Critique of Development: The Growth of Ignorance?*, Hobart begins by arguing that, “Granted the vast sums invested in trying to find a solution to what is described as the problem of underdevelopment, by the criteria of the development planners matters should be getting better rather than worse. Instead it would seem that development projects often contribute to the deterioration” (Hobart 1993: 1). According to Hobart, one of the main reasons why concepts of development and underdevelopment are so problematic is their total disregard for forms of knowledge other than the Western, scientific model upon which they are based. Not only do development practitioners frequently ignore indigenous knowledge and knowledge practice, since the people being developed are ignorant and must be taught to be educated and literate, but they also treat indigenes “as mere obstacles to rational progress” (Hobart 1993: 2). Hence, culture becomes something that people must overcome in order for the community to develop, as development is defined in the west.

Development work can fail miserably at improving the lives of people in any real way because the external paradigm simply cannot explain real life or account for how culture affects people’s worldviews in a profound manner (Hobart 1993: 3). There is something superficial and flawed, or, perhaps, naively optimistic, about development discourse and its belief that it can solve the problems of other societies – problems that the western world itself has often defined for other countries. Hobart (1999: 16) also points to the fact that “[t]here is an unbridgeable, but largely unappreciated, gap between the neat rationality of development agencies’ representations which imagine the world as ordered or manageable and the actualities of situated social practices, an incommensurability tidied away in sociological jargon as ‘unintended...
consequences’.” Life is complicated and “messy” everywhere; it hardly ever fits nicely into the box of universal, grand theories.

Hobart and Escobar are quintessential post-development scholars. While they assert that development work is often forced, with little understanding of the cultural milieu, they offer few, if any, alternatives. Pragmatically, post-development lacks the coherence to make any meaningful changes in societies. It does, however, have the potential to encourage development workers to be more thoughtful about their work, so long as they do not become completely overwhelmed by the critique. Nonetheless, since post-development thought is firmly based in claims about the importance of cultural relativism, it is not difficult to understand why so many anthropologists argue against development.

The reason I have chosen to examine gender and development work in India through an anthropological lens is that I feel that anthropology’s discussions of representation, power, knowledge, and other socio-cultural phenomena are particularly useful for investigating the rhetoric of women’s empowerment in self-help groups. Also, as mentioned above, I believe that development discourse’s unique relationship to western Enlightenment thought and a particular cultural milieu must be interrogated and questioned. And yet, while a discussion of development might be discredited by anthropologists and other critics, to an extent, for its tendency to homogenize, I agree with Katy Gardner and David Lewis’s assertion that “global inequities and poverty cannot simply be explained away as culturally relative” (2005: 353). Despite my conflicted feelings about the active involvement of anthropologists in development work, I ultimately believe that anthropological approaches to and critiques of development discourse, as well as post-development thought, have much to offer both academics and practitioners alike. Anthropological techniques can help development practitioners and proponents find better ways
to know and understand the world in a manner that might ultimately lead to deeper respect for differences.

**Feminist Critiques of Development**

In 1970, Ester Boserup’s book *Women’s Role in Economic Development* was the first to point out that the benefits of development were not being equitably distributed between men and women. Statistics showed (and continue to show) that the majority of poor people and the “poorest of the poor” are women and children (Todaro 1997: 156). Boserup’s work explained that because gender was not a consideration in development programs, men tended to be more easily incorporated into modernization programs whereas women were marginalized and excluded from the process (Elson 1999: 100; Tinker 1997: 35). Early Women in Development (WID) work – as the field was originally called – depicted women “as languishing in the backward, poverty-inducing rural and informal sectors that were seen as reproducing women’s dependence on men, rather than the liberal feminist ideal of autonomy and self-empowerment” (Saunders 2002: 4). While men’s work was viewed increasingly within the formal, “productive” sphere, women’s work was more and more specifically and strictly tied within development discourse to the “reproductive” work of the household (Benería and Sen 1997: 49).

In response to women’s apparent exclusion from development, Boserup and others felt that encouraging women’s participation in wage labor would help women move towards equality with men. However, this approach was later criticized for its failure to recognize that women were already making meaningful contributions in terms of unpaid work done in the reproductive sphere (i.e. the so-called domestic sphere, in the parlance of the day) of the household. As Loudres Benería and Gita Sen explain, rather than looking at development programs in terms of their *exclusion* of women, it is important to examine how they reinforce gender hierarchy:
Contrary to Boserup’s implications, the problem for women is not only the lack of participation in this process [capitalist accumulation] as equal partners with men; it is a system that generates and intensifies inequalities, making use of existing gender hierarchies to place women in subordinate positions at each different level of interaction between class and gender. This is not to deny the possibility that capitalist development might break down certain social rigidities oppressive to women. But these liberating tendencies are accompanied by new forms of subordination. (Benería & Sen 1997: 48)

By carefully studying these new forms of subordination, development work could become more sensitive to women’s needs and try to avoid the tendencies of the field to create new disadvantages for women or new forms of gender hierarchy in the future. Another critique often leveled at Boserup’s work is that it focused on including women in the process of modernization without critiquing the basic structure of the modernization process (Visvanathan 1997b: 20). On the other hand, Women in Development work was powerful because of its ability to point out that up until that moment, women “were largely invisible” within development theories (Elson 1999: 96), and therefore needed to become more visible (i.e. more publicly active).

As more people became aware of the need to examine development through a “gender-sensitive lens” (Tinker 1997: 41), various world conferences were scheduled to make women’s rights and issues a global development priority. Proponents of the Women in Development agenda soon began calling the field Women and Development (WAD) in the late 1970s in response to critiques of modernization theory and in an effort to incorporate dependency theory into the discussion of development in gendered terms (Visvanathan 1997b: 18). Although the change was subtle, the goal was not to focus on women’s exclusion from development per se, but rather on women’s unpaid labor, their active engagement in development, and the reproduction and reinforcement of existing gendered hierarchies (Visvanathan 1997b: 18).
In the 1980s, the name of the field changed again. This time, the shift was from Women and Development to Gender and Development (GAD), thus recognizing the importance of interrogating the relationship and interactions between women and men instead of focusing only on women (Young 1997: 51; Visvanathan 1997b: 23). This change in title was sparked by development practitioners’ recognition that men needed to be included in discussions about women’s status and subordination in order for anything to change. A shift in the way that both men and women conceived gender roles was necessary for any meaningful improvements to occur in terms of gender equity. Saunders explains the revision in the following manner:

While WID assumes a withering away of patriarchal ideology under the force of feminist enlightenment, GAD is concerned to unearth gender as an ideological construct in its culturally varied expressions... Rather than simply asserting women’s sovereign subjectivity, GAD seeks to grasp the construction and reproduction of gender identities, and the role of gender ideologies in the reproduction of unequal power relations between men and women. (2002: 11)

The Gender and Development approach seeks to look at the creation of gender hierarchies in a more holistic manner, understanding the interconnectedness of different aspects of people’s lives instead of a too-narrow focus on economic relations (Young 1997: 52; Visvanathan 1997b: 23). Rather than women being construed as passive recipients of development aid, the language and practice of Gender and Development focuses on women’s active engagement with development. Development programs began incorporating discussions about “consciousness-raising” and the importance of women organizing themselves to have a political voice in the development process (Young 1997: 54; Visvanathan 1997b: 19; Elson 1999: 105). Although individual women are portrayed in this paradigm as the catalyst for action, there is also a socialist component to Gender and Development thought that “emphasizes the state’s duty to provide social services in promoting women’s emancipation” (Visvanathan 1997b: 23). Ultimately, the objective of
Gender and Development work is social transformation and structural reform that will lead to more equitable relations between men and women: an anti-relativist goal.

The notion of “grassroots empowerment” is one of the most frequently cited concepts within Gender and Development work. Gender and Development practitioners believe this approach is most effective at encouraging social change that improves women’s status within development projects. Work at the “grassroots level” has been increasingly important in development discourse because of its emphasis on the need for local people’s participation in and ownership over development programs. Development professionals tend to view grassroots work as more organic and relevant to the needs of people in communities that are often difficult for development practitioners and the national government to reach.

According to Irene Tinker, as development organizations started to focus on ways to include and “empower” women in development, “they drew on this model for training women to recognize and change cultural stereotypes that limited women’s leadership roles. But outright efforts at changing attitudes could not be accomplished within the confines of most international development agencies, since they maintained that foreigners had no business tampering with culture” (Tinker 1997: 37). Therefore, the emphasis is Gender and Development work is on local community organizations for women, which outweigh higher-level organizations in terms of designing development programs (Young 1997: 53). The hope is that these grassroots organizations will coalesce into “networks and coalitions that bridge women’s groups” (Visvanathan 1997b: 26). Often, development professionals who support Gender and Development work view women’s collectives that focus on economic production as a positive thing – especially microcredit groups such as those started by the Grameen Bank – because they focus on “women’s self-organization” (Young 1997: 53, emphasis mine; cf. Todaro 1997: 317).
As Nalini Visvanathan notes, however, there is also some disagreement among scholars and practitioners from different regions about the meaning of empowerment:

Northern population and development agencies misinterpret the term [empowerment], often uncritically treating ‘education’ and ‘employment’ as empowering instruments that lead to women’s fertility reduction. Southern scholars offer different interpretations… In the Indian context, the term emphasizes the changing of power relations through individual challenge to patriarchal relations or group resistance to oppressive practices. (Visvanathan 1997b: 26)

Indeed, in India the concept of “grassroot empowerment” did not really exist before 1975, but it has now become an extraordinarily important topic of debate (Banerjee 1995: 19). As mentioned above, there are numerous arguments occurring between the state and non-governmental organizations about the balance of responsibilities between the state and civil society.

**Critiques of Gender and Development**

Although the term “Gender and Development” has not been changed in response to critique since the 1980s, that does not mean that there have not been additional critiques. Some argue there has really been little change in the approach to development work from the original Women in Development to the present ethos of Gender and Development (Chant and Gutmann 2005: 241). The overwhelming focus in “gender-sensitive” programs is still on women, thus welcoming the criticism that they have a “male-blindness” instead of a male bias (Chant and Gutmann 2005: 240). Because of the GAD’s inability to consider development in genuine terms of gender relations, many programs and projects are not relevant to the lives of people they try to help, actually increasing the workload of women and failing to break down existing gender discrimination (Chant and Gutmann 2005: 240, 244-5). Not only are “workshops on rights, self-esteem and so on… restricted to women,” but these newly “empowered” women must also
continue “to deal with unsensitized men in their personal lives, and with patriarchal structures in both private and public arenas” (Chant and Gutmann 2005: 244).

In terms of post-development and postmodern critiques of Gender and Development, academics note that GAD has not critiqued the basic assumptions of development or loosened its ties to western Enlightenment thinking (Lazreg 2002: 125). Marnia Lazreg (2002: 132) claims that, “[t]he packaging of training in gender-and-development represents another link in the chain of the normalization of the development enterprise in the global era through a convergence of academic feminism and organizational interests.” Another difficulty for western feminists as well as other feminists who have based their work upon “universal women’s rights” has been the recent aloofness towards grand theories, which undermines their argument about the universality of patriarchy and male domination. Saunders (2002: 10) claims that, “[f]eminists appear to be in a quandary about how to address this theoretical crisis around grand theories and sovereign subjects. It is especially evident in development discourses.” Although I believe that the ubiquity of patriarchy in the world is less easily disputed than Saunders would have one believe, her point that recent challenges to the universality of rights language has brought difficulties for feminists working on development issues is far more convincing. Ultimately, “feminist agenda(s)” tend not to support the status quo; they demand changes based on the belief that current gender relations are not satisfactory. For this reason, women’s movements must be morally grounded and can never be totally compatible with post-development or postmodernism, which are based upon cultural relativism.

Relationship of Development Theories to the Indian Experience

When Jawaharlal Nehru became the first prime minister of India immediately following India’s independence from the British Empire, he sought to make the country economically self-
sufficient. Nehru’s approach involved strong state control over the market, in hopes that India’s economy would “not rely on global markets, international trade, and foreign direct investments” (Sachs 2005: 176) – a political move heavily influenced by anti-colonial sentiments. Although this mixed socialist economy led to moderate positive growth for the country, Jeffrey Sachs (2005: 177) describes the economy as having been “tied up in horrendous knots so tight that it could hardly grow.” In the 1960s, India had its Green Revolution during which it began using genetically modified crops to feed people, and this shift also led to a small improvement in the country’s growth rate (Sachs 2005: 177).

In 1991, India finally agreed to the conditions of IMF loans, thereby opening itself up to globalization (Kothari 2006; Sachs 2005: 177; Todaro 1997: 178). According to economist Michael Todaro, the conditions were the following standard structural adjustment policies:

- a fresh set of economic reforms, including currency devaluation designed to promote exports and curtail imports; a reduction of production subsidies, import duties on capital goods, and quantitative import restrictions; a progressive liberalization of interest rates to promote saving and investment; a revision of the personal income tax system; and a speedup of the privatization process with further encouragement to foreign investors. (Todaro 1997: 178)

These policies were an attempt to open India’s borders up to international trade and foreign direct investment. It was assumed that India would find its comparative market advantage and all other prices would adjust themselves as necessary to the fluctuation of international market prices. Many people were afraid that India would be flooded with cheap commodities once the government lowered tariffs and took away import quotas, but, according to Jeffrey Sachs, that did not really happen (2005: 179). By opening up to the world market, India could more easily and cheaply export goods too, and within a short time, the Information Technology (IT) sector blossomed (Sachs 2005: 179).
Although the country’s growth rate reached about 7% by 2004, this growth has not yet reached the vast majority of poor people. Rather, it seems that the gaps between the Indian rich and poor are merely increasing at a rapid pace (Sachs 2005: 183-4; Todaro 1997: 178).

According to the academics I spoke to, there is, overall, greater job insecurity, fewer government “safety nets” for the poor, and evidence of growing gaps in gender equity directly related to the new path of India’s economic development. For these reasons and other, political concerns, globalization is a serious and important topic of debate among Indian academics concerned with development. When Jeffrey Sachs visited in the 1990s and spoke to government leaders, business people, and intellectuals, he noted that, while politicians were completely supportive of the reforms and business people were somewhat optimistic, the academics were highly critical of structural adjustment policies, voicing their concerns that “growth would prove elusive” (2005: 171). Sachs (2005: 171) explains how “[t]he skepticism was unnerving, but also eye-opening. It eventually made me appreciate the weight of history in India [referring to India’s colonial legacy and inability to own its own resources in the past].” Today, many critics are indeed calling globalization’s effects on India a renewed form of imperialism, an exercise of global domination and hegemony, and “anti-people,” with benefits only for already-wealthy financial capitalists (Patnaik 2005: 1, 92). The anti-globalization movement has numerous supporters in India.

In addition to being critical of globalization’s alleged economic assault on poor people, Prabhat Patnaik argues that, “there is a destruction of thought that takes place in much of third world countries” which makes India reliant on external development experts instead of turning to its “organic intellectuals” (2005: 5). Others still wonder whether the development model being encouraged by international development organizations is an appropriate one for India. Sometimes rather than adjusting the model to the reality of life and what they see,
“[development professionals] are prepared to change [their] interpretations of reality rather than change [their] tools” (Menon-Sen 2005: 71). Abha Bhaiya, one of the founders of the women’s training and resource center Jagori, explained to me a similar frustration with western development being thrust upon India:

I’m very critical of the model of development. And, I don’t think this is going to really bring the kind of equity that you’re talking about. We’re following the same old capitalist model, and now it’s all about profit and the marketization, all about introducing consumerism, and that can hardly bring about peace and well-being of people in the long-run… We have basically destroyed the economic base of communities and now we want them to become consumers. (Bhaiya 2007)

Ms. Bhaiya mentioned her socialist-feminist leanings during our conversation, so her opinions regarding capitalization and the livelihoods of rural people are certainly influenced by this ideology. Indeed this focus on consumption is one of the consequences of India’s rapid transition from a mixed socialist economy to a capitalist one and the country’s opening up to the cultural, social, and political influences of globalization (Ghosh 2005: 6). However, with the economy improving by more than 7%, it is important to remember that many people are pleased with India’s progress – especially the burgeoning middle class.

**Failure to Address Poverty**

Many of the individuals with whom I spoke were very skeptical of the World Bank and IMF’s role in Indian development. To them, the responsibility for addressing issues of poverty and human security should rest squarely on the shoulders of the Indian government. For instance, Jimmy Dabhi – the executive director of the Indian Social Institute – explained how the changes the World Bank brought were “largely cosmetic” and came with too many strings attached:

By and large, it [the World Bank] will not change the power structure. It will not take up programs which will upset the interest of the U.S.A. and the West. It will not. Also, it will not upset the
interest of the elites in India or elite in South Asia. I don’t want to put the blame only on the World Bank and on Western countries. We have [this problem] in our own countries. Their mindset is the same as the World Bank or the elites there. (Dabhi 2006)

Vasanthi Raman from CWDS described the situation similarly, noting that the World Bank’s primary concern is to “keep the economy of the North running,” and that development programs – especially microcredit groups - are merely “palliatives.” Regardless, the Indian government is willing to go along with these programs:

You think of the World Bank as sitting out there somewhere, but you have the World Bank in our own government. Our own finance minister and all that – they want to push the very agenda of the World Bank and of structural adjustment policies. That’s how we finally agreed to all the programs in 1991 – the conditionalities of the World Bank. It’s because Indians agreed to it! (Raman 2007)

Therefore, not only is the problem one of the external World Bank and IMF forcing the hand of the Indian government, but within the government there are people who believe that structural adjustment policies will ultimately help poor Indians. Kapadia (2002: 36) explains how “[e]conomic liberalization is based on economic theories that are very remote from Indian realities, given that they assume equal opportunity for all,” but Indian society is rife with inequalities that need to be taken into consideration when planning for the country’s economic development. As expected, neoliberalism has increased and reinforced class privilege and severe inequalities that are not just part of a transition to a better world (Harvey 2006: 66). And, besides, when the minority of people controlling the international organizations are the ones consuming 80% of the world’s resources, says Raman, “and if the same people are telling us what is right for us, why should we want to listen to them?” (2007).

Unfortunately, India must listen to the IMF and the World Bank because these lending organizations provide the country with necessary funds. The question becomes how best to
manage the international economic intervention. Looking at India’s overall statistics, one cannot deny that the country has made incredible economic progress, but the increasing concerns of growing gaps between the rich and the poor must be carefully studied.

**General Insecurity Increasing**

According to international trends, after a country liberalizes its economy, shifting from state control to privatization, unemployment tends to increase, formal employment declines, people move to find jobs, and global interdependencies of production begin to form (Ghosh 2005: 6-7). Under structural adjustment policies, jobs become more insecure and certain sectors might become increasingly irrelevant as the economy opens up to global markets. These shifts are necessary as the economy begins to change, but they may lead greater hardship for the more vulnerable groups in society. Nirmala Banerjee explains the process in the following manner:

> The process of modernization has rendered many of the traditional occupations non-viable; at the same time, agriculture can no longer absorb a much larger workforce. But for the workers released from those occupations, it has been difficult to get a foothold in the newly-opened venues of work. Therefore, more and more of them have been condemned to work in uncertain and poorly paid livelihoods which do not fit well into the earlier patterns of family life. (2002: 43)

As this passage suggests, although new jobs are created in the private sector, it is sometimes difficult for the people who were once working in a particular occupation to translate their experience into another job. It is often poorer people and women who lack the access to newly created jobs, and the “volatility of incomes” (Ghosh 2005: 6) and “volatility of employment” (Mazumdar 2007) cause a great deal of insecurity and stress for these people.

At the same time, while insecurity is increasing, the government has been forced under structural adjustment policies to decrease its “safety nets” for citizens. As mentioned earlier, neoliberalism is an extreme version of liberalism that emphasizes fiscal austerity and cuts in
social spending. The Indian government, as a result, has been less willing to spend money on rural areas and does not put the same energy into income and job generation as it once did (Ghosh 2005: 8). With this in mind, the government has turned to microfinance as a means to reach poor people throughout the country. Microfinance takes hardly any extra resources and has typically had very good rates of return, making these endeavors essentially self-sustaining. They allow the government to say it is helping the poor without really having to invest many resources. Because of the government’s inability to provide for citizens as it used to under a mixed socialist economy, nongovernmental organizations, often microcredit-based ones, have been stepping in to fill the gap in services.

There are mixed feelings about the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in terms of their stepping in to provide basic services for people. On one hand, as just noted, they serve an extremely important purpose and fill the “vacuum in social provisions left by the withdrawal of the state from such activities” (Harvey 2006: 52). On the other hand, however, “[i]n some instances this seems to have helped accelerate further state withdrawal from social provisions” (Harvey 2006: 52). Unfortunately, NGOs are not necessarily more effective than the government at distributing aid and resources, and they often lack the political clout necessary to make real, transformative changes (Edelman and Haugerud 2005: 27, 50). Their nongovernmental status might also serve to depoliticize issues, such as redistribution of wealth and gender inequality, that should be addressed politically. Regrettably, sometimes the organic development of a social movement against unfair situations takes a very long time to percolate, or it might not occur at all. In the interim, the situation among poor people could become rather dire. In such cases, academics, activists, and development professionals have a responsibility to
increase their pressure on the government directly to provide poor people with necessary resources.

**New Gender Inequities**

Diane Elson described the process of development as one that involved the “interplay of conflicting tendencies: a tendency to *intensify* existing forms of gender subordination; a tendency to *decompose* existing forms of gender subordination; and a tendency to *recompose* new forms of gender subordination” (1999: 101). The recent shift in India’s economy from a mixed socialist economy to a capitalist one appears to have produced an intensification, decomposition, and recomposition of various forms of discrimination against women. As Ghosh (2005: 10) tells us, “a complex intermingling of patriarchal culture and cosmopolitan capitalism has resulted in several disturbing trends vis-à-vis the question of gender.” Kapadia – along with the other authors featured in the book *The Violence of Development: The Politics of Identity, Gender & Social Inequalities in India* (2003) – also explicates the numerous ways in which India’s policies of economic liberalization are harming women, especially poor and low caste ones.

First of all, women’s informal, unpaid work is expected to fill in the gaps left by the government’s reduction in social spending – especially in areas of health, education, water, and sanitation – while still engaging in household labor and fulfilling other tasks (Menon-Sen 2005: 70; Elson 1999: 102). Additionally, many young women are being drawn into informal labor pools, which are insecure, low paying, and often without potential for benefits or reform (Swaminathan 2002b: 134). According to older Women in Development theories, women’s involved in wage labor is a positive thing, but it is important to look both at the kinds of jobs that women are working and the conditions under which they work. As Women and Development thought reminds us, women already have a very large burden of responsibilities in the
“reproductive” realm, so wage labor may merely add to their burden. A few of the people I interviewed talked about rural women’s “triple burden” of looking after the household, children, and food preparation, working in the fields, and engaging in some form of formal or informal remunerated economic activities. Although these burdens jeopardize women’s health and place undue pressure upon women, the alternative of women not having access to credit at all seems worse.

Some academics and development practitioners consider that women’s increasing access to income and credit improves their status within the family (Sen, A. 1990; Swaminathan 2002b: 69). Indeed, this explanation is the key reason why microcredit groups speak so much about women’s empowerment through access to credit. By having some control and say over how financial resources are used within the household, women’s weight in decision-making increases and, as a result, their status in the family should rise. Counterarguments describe how women simply turn the money over to their husbands or brothers without giving input as to how the loans should be used, and the majority of loans are used for consumption and emergency purposes rather than for entrepreneurial endeavors (Rahman 1999; Mazumdar 2007; Menon-Sen 2005). But generally, it seems better for women to at least have access to these opportunities, even if they share the money with their male relatives.

All of these issues will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters. For now, let it just be said that with the rapidly changing nature of India’s economy, new gender inequalities have formed. This change has also led to a shift in the focus of the women’s

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7 This last “burden” could also simply be replaced with the responsibility of handling loans and participating in a microcredit group. Although these groups often do have some sort of small entrepreneurial endeavor involved, others might focus on savings and passing on small amounts of money within the group.

movement. Issues that were once important may no longer be so, and there is an increasing focus by national (usually urban-located) women’s organizations on rural women’s issues (Agnihotri 2005: 12).

**The Rise of Women’s Groups and NGOs Focusing on Women’s Issues in India**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the *Towards Equality* report was really a very important milestone in the history of the women’s movement in India. Women who were becoming involved in other social and political movements soon began to realize that they could be advocates specifically on women’s issues (Everett 1983: 23). Since the 1970s, women’s organizations have become increasingly visible in India, and the government has made commitments to “mainstream” gender issues in its policy-making. Although the appearance of international feminist movements may have helped to spark some interest among women in India and supply resources to the women’s movement there, the events already occurring under the purview of the Indian women’s movement at the time were particularly important (Everett 1983: 20). Among rural and lower class women, there had already been radical, even militant, women’s movements in the country (Everett 1983: 22). As Agnihotri (2005: 12-13) eloquently states, “all these facts just go to show how this whole theory about people being mobilized from the top really needs to be questioned. People just don’t go and die because somebody is giving them a call to come out and protest, people don’t go and land up in jail for months.”

The World Conferences on Women may have helped feminists in all different countries to network and share experiences, but, as everyone I interviewed asserted, the feminist movement in India is uniquely and organically Indian. While this resistance to identify with international or western feminist movements might reflect a deeper-seated rejection of anything seemingly neo-colonial in nature, the record of Indian women’s groups is quite impressive. For
this reason, it is important to consider critically the issues that are important to women’s movements in India and not to assume that feminism takes on a similar shape throughout the world.

In the next chapter, I hope to delve deeper into some of the difficulties at the heart of gender and development work. Especially important is a discussion of the challenges of making a serious effort to understand the “other” being assisted in development programs. I hope to discuss the potential (or lack thereof) for development taking cultural differences seriously and incorporating postmodern/post-development critiques into practice.
Chapter 3: The Role of Representation, Power, and Knowledge in Development Work

As described above, the concept of development relies heavily on universalizing ideas about what is good and desirable for all people, everywhere. Often when politicians or development practitioners speak about the urgent necessity of doing development work, they support their beliefs with the promises enshrined in international rights documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). These documents draw upon a kind of rhetoric, often supported by Enlightenment ideals, about what every individual should be guaranteed or provided as a basic human right. For example, Todaro (1997: 16) speaks about “core values,” stating that, “sustenance, self-esteem, and freedom – represent common goals sought by all individuals and societies. They relate to fundamental human needs that find their expression in almost all societies and cultures at all times.” This kind of universalizing language has, in turn, allowed the desirability of development to remain unquestioned, common knowledge among international development proponents.

At least within western societies, when the average person reads about development work, he/she probably does not feel compelled to question his/her assumptions that everyone should want to be “modern” and have access to all of the privileges, rights, goods, and services wrapped up in that term. This reliance on the “universality of rights,” is not, however, purely a western tendency. Throughout the world, organizations and social movements make appeals to universal, human, and women’s rights to make changes in their communities (Parpart 2002: 51). At the same time, the “appeal to the universalism of rights is a double-edged sword” (Harvey 2006: 53), because it “sits uneasily with the local particularities and daily practices of political
economic life” (Harvey 2006: 52). Although the use of universal rights discourse can provide groups with legitimacy or the “authority” to speak on behalf of others by appealing to what is (or should be) considered “human,” such grand theory cannot account for cultural differences related to morals and values. At the same time, if one attempts to reject his/her own set of morals as ethnocentric, he/she no longer has the ability to make decisions and thoughtful judgments. As human beings we must retain the right to be upset by things like extreme poverty, gender-based violence, etc. People from western, modern societies, who have greater rights and opportunities, have a responsibility to be concerned about inequalities throughout the world in a sensitive manner.

Another problem with a universal rights regime – especially for those individuals who rely on this rhetoric as a basis for social change – is that, so far, it has tended not to question the assumptions of neoliberalism (Harvey 2006: 53). David Harvey (2006: 54) describes the need for a serious discussion about “which universals and what rights shall be invoked in particular situations [and] also over how universal principles and conceptions of rights shall be constructed.” Although Harvey advocates for new alternatives to the universals currently in place, it is not clear where he expects this new “regime” to originate. The difficulty with universals is that they will never be able to cover the wide variety of experiences of people everywhere. Exchanging one set of universals for another would change little, considering that all universals are inherently limited.

With academics’ increasing awareness in recent decades of the importance of cultural difference, sparked by postmodernists’ critiques about the heterogeneity of thought, values, and morals, there seems to have been something of a backlash among nonwestern academics and advocates against the idea of a western, hegemonic discourse about rights. Postcolonial critique
often speaks about the importance of people in former colonies having the opportunity to reclaim or create their own, unique positions within (or outside of) development discourse. Development– at least as proposed by external, international organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF– is viewed by postcolonialist critics as inauthentic and out of touch with local realities. During an interview with Urvashi Butalia for example, I raised a question about the potential for non-Indians to assist with development in India, and she provided the following answer:

The fact is: the development, however you define it, of any country, has to be the responsibility of people of that country, and it has to be something which is done within the historical, sociopolitical, economic context of that country. But. There is no reason why other people cannot come in and work within that process and make a contribution of some kind or the other… I think what you’re asking is really not about an individual though. I think what you’re looking at is more what kind of role can the West play or should the West play in development, and that’s a much bigger question, you know? I think that outside intervention in anything, in development or in conflict-resolution, or anything like that, is something that has to be discussed and has to happen only with the consent of the home government or state, and I think it’s something that can so easily go wrong, as it has in many, many countries in the world. Because of course, outside intervention, at an institutional or at a national level is never altruistic. It’s never, “Oh look, there’s a country that’s underdeveloped. Let’s go develop it.” It’s tied in with a whole other range of material, self-interested things so that “development” becomes an excuse for doing quite the opposite. (Butalia 2007)

Having the consent of the people one is working with is paramount. While in the international arena, “consent” manifests itself in the form of national sovereignty over questions about the direction of development. Of course, the government itself might be too distant from the people or too complicit with the modernization ethos of western-controlled international organizations to question carefully the assumptions of development. Butalia therefore followed up her statement, noting the importance of examining the motivations behind development programs:
It comes down to: Whose development at what price? I think all of those things have to be questioned. The whole outside intervention in development brings with it all of these questions. This is not to say that if development were totally indigenous we would not have similar questions, because after all, if the state is involved, then the state also can play the same role [as other international development organizations], which it is doing. (Butalia 2007)

This indigenous recognition that even development programs created and sponsored by the Indian government itself might not bring about positive changes is important for critics of development. As Hobart (1993: 11-2) explains, “The social worlds of developers, whether foreigners or nationals, are almost always far apart from those being developed, as is the nature of their involvement, what is at stake and the perceived purpose of the enterprise.” The distance between government or nongovernmental development organizations and the people being assisted becomes problematic predominantly because of the would-be developers’ failure to understand the realities of the lives of the people “on the ground.” However, just because the national government is distant from its citizens does not mean it should not be responsible for providing for people. Policy-makers should strive to be better informed, but ultimately the government cannot and must not shirk its duties to the poor.

The question, then, becomes how to rectify the gap between the universality of development rhetoric and rights discussions with the specifics of real life and cultural difference. I firmly believe that this difficulty explains much of the failure of “development” to date. Rather than development organizations taking the time to consider the differences in worldviews and values between themselves and the people they are “developing,” “culture” becomes a barrier to development. Blaming culture for the failure of programs is particularly common in cases where social change is viewed as necessary in order to solve a perceived problem. There is a tendency by development practitioners to see “traditional culture” as something irrational that holds people
back from developing; cultural backwardness supposedly prevents people from embracing modernity (Crewe & Harrison 2005: 232). For example, Susie Jolly oversimplifies the manner in which culture influences people’s decisions in terms of gender discrimination. She rightly points out that culture is not “stagnant,” but she believes that it is something “formed on an individual level by a multitude of influences” (Jolly 2002: 9, emphasis mine). In a patriarchal society, all women need to start doing is make individual choices to challenge the discrimination against them and, voilà – cultural change!

Of course, blaming “culture” for discrimination against women in a particular community is not exactly accurate either. Culture becomes the scapegoat for explaining situations that are not well understood by outsiders, and culture fills the gaps of what outsiders do not understand (Narayan 1997: 103). In short, culture is an abstraction that carries very little weight in these discourses. When gender discrimination or an apparent case of violence against women occurs, someone else’s backwardness can be blamed as the cause of this violence (Narayan 1997: 103). Hence, western feminists and development professionals portray nonwestern women as “victims of culture.” This phenomenon lends itself to the belief that culture (i.e. “tradition”) needs to change in order for development (i.e. “modernity”) to occur. Often development practitioners believe that the motivation for cultural change must come from an external catalyst, which is the role of the development professional. Of course, there are issues of power involved – often of a gendered nature – that may prevent individuals from effecting change. But the idea of construing people as “victims” in need of assistance seems not only to fail to take culture seriously, but also can be disempowering for the people being represented as victims. Development discourse is

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9 Interestingly, Narayan points out, “culture” is rarely blamed for violence that occurs against white women in the west. Regarding the Third World, western feminists blame “cultural pathologies,” whereas “‘white culture’ is seldom indicted for these same problems when they occur in white communities” (Narayan 1997: 88). This difference results in the portrayal of nonwestern women’s victimization by culture or “death by culture” (Narayan 1997: 84).
indeed a discourse of alterity, focusing on the “failures” of others to become “modern” and rarely turning the magnifying glass inward upon itself.

Despite wishing to reject the portrayal of women as victims of culture, it might be the case that certain instances of gender discrimination are deeply influenced by cultural norms. The academic can study and explain why a rural family in Bihar decides to send its sons to school but not its daughters, or why a mother in Rajasthan would take her son to a doctor much sooner than she would her daughter. But if a development worker always took cultural reasoning “at face value,” he or she would not be out in the field, encouraging families to enroll both boys and girls in schools. It is important for development professionals to take culture more seriously than they currently take it, but the gap between academic and practical discussions will never completely close.

When Robert Chambers speaks about previous errors that have occurred in development work – which happen so often that they can safely be considered a common part of the development process – he questions, “The puzzle is why we, development professionals, have been wrong so often and for so long” (1997: 15). My suggestion to answer Chambers’ query is that development programs tend to fail to incorporate a serious appreciation for cultural difference in their work. In the following sections, I hope to address how development practitioners’ assumptions about the universal applicability or desirability of development programs lead to misunderstandings between developers and those being developed.

**Who Does Development Work and Why?**

Critics of development and members of anti-neoliberal (dubbed anti-globalization) movements criticize the models of development endorsed by the World Bank, the IMF, and some of the other, more vilified international development organizations for their lack of consideration
for on-the-ground realities and for their cookie-cutter programs and policies. But what of the people who work for these organizations and others – the people who are deeply morally invested in development work? Although the work produced by these international organizations may not be so positive or helpful for the people of poorer nations, it would be rather unfair to totally denigrate the professionals’ motivations for working in these organizations. On the contrary, many people work in the field of development because they hope to make a positive change in the lives of poor people in regions of the world that have been disadvantaged and marginalized within the world system. The people one meets in this field are often deeply committed and morally driven to serve and improve the lives of the poor (Chambers 1997: 12; also cf. results of this research). Numerous individuals have made extremely meaningful contributions to social movements, inspiring people “through their vision, lives and leadership, not just those like Gandhi, Freire, Schumacher, Mother Theresa and Mandela who are well known, but those unnamed millions who work for NGOs, in governments and in other organizations, in a spirit of service” (Chambers 1997: 13). Nonetheless, the following question must be raised: Are good intentions “enough” when doing development work?

Although “good intentions” should be at the heart of wanting to help make positive changes in others’ lives, they are, in my opinion, decidedly not enough. So much destruction has been committed in the name of good intentions – usually because the people who believe they are “doing good” for others fail to see that their actions are imposing a certain regime of values on the people they are seeking to help. As cultural critic Ivan Illich (1968) said during a speech to a group of American volunteers in Mexico, “To hell with good intentions. This is a theological statement. You will not help anybody by your good intentions. There is an Irish saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions; this sums up the same theological insight.” Illich also
explained his opinion that the work that these young people hoped to do was misplaced and an unfair imposition of American values upon the people in Mexican villages. Illich was extremely critical of the “intentions” of these volunteers, claiming, “you are unwilling to go far enough in your reappraisal of your program. You close your eyes because you want to go ahead and could not do so if you looked at some facts” (1968). Illich’s words begin to draw one back into a state of paralysis. If he were actually right that no amount of good intention could help anyone, what a sad, nihilistic world we would live in! Although I agree that a rigorous self-critique of one’s own motivations for participating in development is important for approaching the work in a thoughtful manner, it may ultimately lead one to critique oneself into a proverbial corner. If one has good intentions, he/she should carefully consider the critiques, learn from them, and then try to act upon them in good faith. Development work will never be perfect, but having understanding and sensitivity can go a long way towards respecting the integrity of people’s lives without romanticizing them. It is good intentions that might bring us to a better understanding of the challenges inherent to development.

One such challenge is that the notion of development work itself is determined by one’s own worldview and reflects the desire to “allow” others to share in the kind of consumerist, often individualistic lifestyle that one enjoys under western capitalism. For example, most western feminists would probably advocate for women in other parts of the world to have the same rights and freedoms that they have. However, these beliefs about what should be guaranteed rights are intimately shaped by one’s worldview and one’s society’s history. Charles Taylor (2004), a contemporary philosopher of modernity, engages with the political, economic, and religious transformations that a particular society has undergone over the past few centuries, describing

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10 Martha Nussbaum, for example, wrote the book *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (2000), which sought to delineate various rights that she felt should be considered universals. Her work was heavily criticized for its poorly supported or documented assumptions about the universality of women’s rights.
how these transformations have shaped the worldview of the people of that society. In particular, he discusses the example of the “western world,” which he treats somewhat problematically as a single entity. In his book, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Taylor attempts to outline not only why we care about the things that we care about, but also how these values affect the way we see our comparative welfare and our position within modernity in relation to other individuals and the nonwestern world.

Because the lens through which we see the world is shaped so essentially in a particular cultural and historical context, Taylor argues that it is almost impossible (or at least very difficult) to see the world any other way. Therefore, even the way that we define things like wealth and poverty are completely wrapped up in our particular “modern social imaginary.” His work suggests that, instead of being concerned purely with our own individual situation, we should continually strive to understand what forms our social imaginary, how the current context in which events are occurring is shaping and reshaping our perceptions of what is modern, and whether our “imaginary” reflects the reality of our (and others’) world.

Of course, this exercise is very difficult. Critiquing our own mode of “modernity” is particularly hard because we are inside of it, without much exposure to alternative modes of modernity. Unfortunately, what tends to happen in development work is the normalization of the worldview of the development practitioners who have the power to determine policies and programs according to their own culture. The problem here is that, in development work, an original assumption is usually made about what people want, then development organizations work to provide people with these goods and opportunities. Even the idea that what people want is tangible “things” speaks to the problem at the heart of western development. But on some deep level, there have to be basic things that we, as humans, need. That people want to have enough
food and water, or health living conditions seem to be safe “assumptions” towards which
development professionals can work. These goals are not as problematic as figuring out the
proper approach for achieving them. Additionally, there is a difference between development in
terms of these core, basic goals and development in terms of additional provisions that get
attached to development, such as capitalism, democracy, and individual rights rhetoric.

Within India and other nonwestern, formerly colonized countries, there is sometimes a
rejection of the western model of modernity as well as a rejection of the idea that there is just one
path for social improvement and poverty relief. This desire to give voice to all opinions and not
to suppress alternative views, as the colonizers had done, is integral to postcolonial thought. As
mission of ‘civil societies’ all over the world, in the North as well as the South, has been to
‘civilise’ the uncivil. It is now a time in history however, when the uncivil all over the world are
realising and asserting their identities, and fighting back – which makes this a very important
moment, and movement, in world history.” Despite this positive movement towards recognizing
alternative modernities, it is important to recognize that the majority of people involved in these
discussions in India are individuals from well-educated, upper/middle class families, usually
from urban areas. While these elites are closer to understanding the situation of poor people
within their country than are outside development professionals, the elite Indian “modern social
imaginary” is probably very different from that of a poor, rural woman working in the
agricultural sector. In the next section, I will attempt to describe the conflicts in perceptions and
representations that occur between development practitioners and the people “being developed.”
It is through these differences in representations (and the power of the people doing the
representing) that the problems of gender and development work in India might be most clearly understood.

**Self-Representations of Women’s Rights Activists and NGO Workers**

Among development workers, there seems to be relatively little discussion or reflection on the development professional’s position vis-à-vis the women with whom he/she is working. Because the focus of development work is generally on helping others and often on coordinating the energies of women, a development professional may feel that his or her own personal situation within the work is somewhat irrelevant. Often when activists or advocates do talk about themselves in relation to their work, it is within a political organization or movement where they are advocating for changes that would affect their own situation too. For example, some activists argue that the use of the category of “women” as a platform for the Indian feminist movement – although deemed problematic because of the recognized heterogeneity of the experiences of Indian women – is important so that “a feminist politics remains valid, relevant and necessary” (Kapadia 2002a: 11-12). Advocates therefore may view themselves as working alongside other women as they move towards social change. On the other hand, there is obvious evidence that “women” have many different agendas regarding development (Saunders 2002: 7).

In terms of empowerment and training other women to become empowered, the inherent supposition is that the trainer herself (or himself) is already empowered, and the women being trained are currently without a voice or political capacity. Saunders explains how “[f]eminist professionals fought for such self-recognition, but continued to perpetuate images of impoverished Third World women as helpless victims of patriarchy, since such representations authorized their right to organize a planned liberation of this client population, construed as lacking the sovereign power to liberate themselves” (Saunders 2002: 5). Saunders is perhaps a
bit harsh here, since sometimes these representations are made unintentionally, but it does point out the need for careful self-reflection so as to avoid perpetuating disempowering imagery that has specific policy implications. Without these representations of women as victims of a system they lack the power to change, many non-governmental organizations would lose their raison d'être because the same kind of external development interventions would not be deemed necessary. If rural, poor women were truly conceived of as possessing agency, the demand for better access to resources would be more of a political movement in which these women would be equal partners.

**Representations of Women by Development Practitioners**

While visiting the Tata Institute for Social Sciences in Mumbai, I had the opportunity to attend a class on Gender and Health. During the class, the professor passed out a scenario about a young woman named Karupayee. The handout told the story of this fictional woman, detailing many possible forms of discrimination that a “rural woman” might experience in her life – including being forced to quit school while her brothers continued their education, eating last in the family – sometimes not having food, being pressured by her in-laws to bear sons, being forced to have sex with her husband, and being denied health care when she gave birth to another daughter. While reading and discussing this anecdotal account with the class, I felt somewhat uncomfortable; although the situations described could indeed have happened and probably do, it seemed that we were stereotyping and normalizing a particular view of a “typical rural woman.”

Throughout development literature, one finds many examples of statements about women passively accepting the violence or discrimination committed against them. Kalyani Menon-Sen (2005: 70), for instance, describes women’s willingness to do unpaid work in the household:

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11 In Hindi, the name “Karupayee” means “black girl.” In India, there is a great emphasis on a girl’s skin tone with “fair” girls being more desirable. This use of this name in this story is to stress gender discrimination.
There is also an ideological payoff in as much as the fact that the women who are doing this unpaid work, are not only doing it without questioning or without protesting against the conditions and terms of that work, but are actually feeling good about doing it. Ironically, this actual feeling of being valued for doing something which is not valued, is what perpetuates the framework in which women are the right people to do unpaid work.

Indeed, it might be the case that women are somehow disadvantaged by their acceptance of their role in performing unpaid work. However, this passage seems, to me, to rob these women of their agency to decide what is advantageous to them in their own lives. Menon-Sen also fails to acknowledge the deep cultural significance of these tasks and the possibility that women might actually be valued for doing what she describes as “something which is not valued.” Without these tasks being done, a community could not function. Ganguly-Scrase recognizes the importance of women’s agency, noting that even if statistics suggest that “women’s status in India” is relatively grim, Indian women are not “passive victims of their circumstances” (2000: 90). Indian women’s movements have made impressive ground and challenged numerous instances of gender subordination.

Because Indian women’s experiences are so diverse, people involved in the Indian women’s movement certainly recognize the differences among “Indian women.” It is anything but a homogeneous group (Ganguly-Scrase 2000: 85). India’s deeply multicultural society makes identity one of the most important issues for individuals, and community identities have an important influence on people’s decisions (Thakur 2006). While rejecting the universality of “woman” as a category (Saunders 2002: 13; Sen, S. 2002: 459), the women’s movement in India hopes to “[engage] with, and [represent], women in their particularity” (Kapadia 2002a: 19).

Otherwise, “to act on behalf of unspecified, undifferentiated ‘women’ became highly problematic” (Kapadia 2002a: 10). In the article “Translocal Modernities and Transformations of
Gender and Caste,” Kapadia explains the failure of development institutions thus far to incorporate the idea of women as a heterogeneous group:

But feminist theoreticians have come to recognize what has been a central insight of feminist anthropology – namely, the ironic fact that the differences between women are often of far greater significance than the similarities between them, both from the perspectives of women themselves and the communities they belong to. However, this understanding of the fundamental centrality of sociocultural and economic-political differences in fracturing ‘female’ identities has yet to percolate into the discourses of the international development institutions, which have appropriated the term ‘gender’ but continued to view ‘women’ as an undifferentiated category in their policy and practice, thereby engendering analytical confusion. (2002b: 147)

While development professionals have long since recognized that development affects men and women differently, the acknowledgment that development affects people within those categories differently has not been incorporated yet as successfully. Along similar lines, John argues that taking pluralism seriously would involve a radical revision of certain key feminist concepts, including the nature of patriarchy and the definition of gender. Importantly, she says that “Our [Indian feminists’] notion of pluralism must respond to power-laden global and national realities – it cannot be an abbreviation for the sort of relativism where hermetically sealed cultures and their discrete patriarchal arrangements exist without friction” (John 1998b: 19, emphasis mine). Instead of assuming that patriarchy goes unchallenged in distant, rural communities, feminists should make an effort to see how women are already challenging the power structures within their communities. A discussion of these local challenges to the power structure is relevant to gender and development work because it emphasizes the importance of working with organic movements already occurring at the grassroots level when possible. At the same time, however, academics and development workers must also realize that women can uphold patriarchy in their
communities instead of resisting or struggling against it actively. Additionally, just because women support patriarchy does not mean they are robbed of their agency.

**Problems of Representation and Voice**

When speaking about the differences in representations and interpretations of women’s actions, an often-cited debate in India is that of the practice of *sati*, or a widow’s self-immolation on her husband’s funeral pyre (Srivastava, K. 2005: 87; Narayan 1997; Ganguly-Scrase 2000: 101; Spivak 1988: 300-5). Of course *sati* is rarely practiced today, but the most recent case in 1987 (the case of Roop Kanwar) resulted in an extremely divisive situation for the women’s movement (Srivastava, K. 2005: 87). On one hand, the women’s groups protesting the woman’s “suicide” or “forced suicide” argued that the practice violated a woman’s rights to life and security and was a blatant form of violence targeted against women. On the other hand, many men and women protested in response to these groups’ advocacy, charging them with being “western” and “promiscuous” (Srivastava, K. 2005: 87). Women’s rights activists “were told that they did not understand Indian culture, or what it was to die for the man you love,” and that “religion and custom needed to be protected from attacks by ‘modern’, ‘western’ feminists and by the Indian courts and Parliament, which had no business to interfere in people’s right to worship” (Srivastava, K. 2005: 87). So often it is western feminists who are criticized for representing women in a particular manner when they do not understand the contextual background of the practice (Mohanty 1988; Narayan 1997); yet, even within India, the problems of representing women from different socio-cultural backgrounds are readily apparent. For instance, Susie Jolly quotes an Indian women’s rights activist, M. Mukhopadhyay, who describes how – despite being an Indian herself – she was accused of working against her culture and being “Westernised” (quoted in Jolly 2002: 3). Because of these kind of allegations, many
development practitioners point to the necessity of listening to local women’s own perceptions of themselves (Swaminathan 2002b: 128) and “giving voice” to these interpretations of the situation.

In postcolonialist critique, which emphasizes the importance of listening to the voice of the “subaltern,”12 the production of representations is of deep concern (Mendieta 2006: 727). Postcolonialism “maintains that since no cultural or personal identity exists outside of representation, and all representation is mediated by the history of its production, imposition, or rejection, all identities are thus contaminated by instability, hybridity, or creolization” (Mendieta 2006: 727-8). The problem with representations of life in “less developed” places is that, in practice, real life is much more complex than any model or representation suggests (Hobart 1993: 13). It is this gap between representation and reality, which, according to postmodern and postcolonial thought, can never be completely breached, that leads to many difficulties in development work. Programs based on representations constructed entirely by academics and activists far removed from the field can never completely account for the entirety of people’s experiences – which is to admit that even well-meant development will never be perfect – and when representations are ill founded, development programs may go especially wrong.

Although using postcolonial critique to describe the relationship between upper/middle class development professionals and rural, poor women being aided in development projects may seem unfairly critical on my part – considering that I am even further removed from the experiences of rural, poor Indian women involved in self-help groups than those individuals whose work I am critiquing – I do believe that the concept of the subaltern remains relevant in any discussion of the power of development language to represent Others. Mary John’s comment

12 Meaning, “those agents who have been expropriated, exploited, marginalized, racialized, bestialized, and rendered part of the fauna of continents empty of people” (Mendieta 2006: 727)
about how “‘foreign’ influences may look very different when seen ‘from below’, as the
subaltern, predominantly lower caste locations and careers of Islam and Christianity in India,
might suggest” (John 1998b: 19) seems to support this idea. Although Indian elites and
intellectuals “are at best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of
the Other,” one must recognize that “the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably
heterogeneous” (Spivak 1988: 284). Therefore, for someone from the west interested in
privileging the voice of Indians regarding their own experiences with women’s movements,
development work, etc., it is the Indian intellectuals who are the Others whose voices are heard.
Nonetheless, the voice of the “true subaltern” continues to recede further away from the one
seeking this voice, if there is such a voice. Spivak is arguing here that the category of “subaltern”
is comprised of people who are very diverse, and the voice of one “subaltern” cannot speak to
the experiences of all. Therefore, for someone in the west working on development programs, an
Indian intellectual might be considered the subaltern, whereas to that Indian intellectual, there
are also Indian subalterns vis-à-vis the intellectual.

In response to the critique that representations of others will always fail to depict the
reality of the individuals’ experiences, the obvious response is something like, “for Dalit women
to be authentically represented, they themselves need to be able to speak, to act, to theorize, to
achieve – for themselves” (Kapadia 2002a: 19). Although constructing this space for self-
representation is certainly necessary and desirable in development work, one must wonder how
plausible such an approach is for the increasingly professionalized field of development.
Development professionals have the power and privilege to represent the people with/for whom
they are working because of their “expertise” and position within the field. Therefore, the
representations created by experts, as well as the self-representations of women that have been
co-opted by professionals as a part of development discourse, are more highly ranked or privileged within the discourse. The further down one moves in the hierarchy of representation – meaning the closer one gets to the self-representations of local women – the more difficult it becomes to create development policies or programs because there is no common grounding for them; each community’s development would be entirely unique and unstructured. There could be no established set of development initiatives implemented on a wide scale. Despite the fact that this approach would be much more suitable for helping local individuals in a manner that they themselves deem appropriate, it would be naïve to believe that such a deconstructivist approach could or would ever be implemented. Therefore, development professionals must do the best they can to understand the cultural milieu in which they work and the power of representations produced, and then they need to move on with their work. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to assume that the subaltern can speak in an unmediated manner is a false hope and disguises the role of the intellectual:

In the Foucault-Deleuze conversation, the issue seems to be that there is no representation, no signifier… theory is a relay of practice… and the oppressed can know and speak for themselves. This reintroduces the constitutive subject on at least two levels: the Subject of desire and power as an irreducible methodological presupposition; and the self-proximate, if not self-identical, subject of the oppressed. Further, the intellectuals, who are neither of these S/subjects, become transparent in the relay race, for they merely report on the nonrepresented subject and analyze (without analyzing) the workings of (the unnamed Subject irreducibly presupposed by) power and desire. (1988: 279)

Therefore, argues Spivak, because the subaltern cannot speak in an unmediated way, the intellectual cannot reject her role in the process of advocating on behalf of the subaltern. In truth, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to truly know the “Other” in development work because of the limitations of our different worldviews. Thus is the nature of representation. However, this
does not mean that development practitioners should not make the best attempt possible at trying
to understand the Other by striving to sublimate their western biases and preconceptions.

Anthropologists face this same ethical dilemma in the field because they have the power and
privilege of representing communities and shaping findings in a particular way (Edelman and
Haugerud 2005: 45). And yet, anthropology as a discipline is founded upon the hope that one can
begin to understand the Other through careful, sensitive study. Rather than arguing that
anthropologists rest upon some kind of “high magisterial rock,” able to completely step out of
their own cultures and worldviews, I am simply suggesting that by recognizing the common
humanity in one another, people can struggle along with improved but imperfect knowledge of
one another. It is this “common humanness” that is so often forgotten in development work, and
its lack turns women into development “targets” and urgent welfare recipients rather than people,
like anyone else, who understand what is good and bad about their lives and have ideas about
how they can improve their situation. Representations are a necessary part of development work
as well as any social science. Therefore, the problem is not so much with the representations
themselves, but rather the fact that the development workers have had the unhindered power to
represent local people.

**The Power of Development Knowledge**

Representations are powerful in development work because of their implications for the
kinds of programs established and the approaches taken to alleviate the problem that has been
defined by development professionals. Representation is not merely a symbolic re-presentation
of others by the intellectual or the development practitioner; rather, it is an action that has a
political and moral agenda with intended policy-making consequences. Speaking of the
hierarchical nature of power in development work, Mark Hobart describes how it is “hegemonic
representations [that] constitute the conditions of power” (1993: 5). As noted above, because
development has come to be defined as a very specific, linear process with pre-defined end
goals, a particular kind of knowledge has become associated with this field. Just as with any
occupation or academic discipline, there is a special kind of “jargon” or rhetorical style involved
in development work, which normalizes a particular worldview. It is through words and a
superior kind of “textbook” or formal knowledge of development concepts that development
practitioners dominate the people with or for whom they are working. Spivak explains, referring
to Foucault’s work (1988: 274). This privileging of a certain type of development knowledge
suggests that communities need outside encouragement and “guidance by those with power and
knowledge” (Hobart 1993: 7). According to the rhetoric, without development professionals to
teach and train locals, these people would remain “backwards” and unaware of how to improve
their lives. Locals must be educated in the ways of development before they can progress or
know how to challenge the gender norms in their community.

Jane Everett points to “[t]he tendency of middle-class women to lead without listening to
their lower-class sisters” (1983: 25) as one of the negative consequences of gender and
development work that needs to be most carefully dismantled. Parpart and Harvey cite similar
dilemmas, describing the “well-meaning” development NGOs or practitioners that are just not
able to turn their authority over to the people with whom they work (Parpart 2002: 48; Harvey
2006: 52). As Parpart tells us, “They want to empower the poor, but on their terms. This heavy-
handed approach is particularly common with women, as most development practitioners come
from cultures where women’s subordination and need for direction is taken for granted” (2002:
48). It is simply presumed that people, and especially women, are unable to speak for themselves
or to define their own interests.
Because of development professionals’ ability to define the interests of others, the hegemonic forces of development knowledge create new power relations in the field. Hobart explains that this kind of knowledge “turn[s] people who were at least part agents into a backward and inert proletariat, the masses, who come to be constituted as passive objects to be developed. It is little wonder that attempts to develop them so often fail or go awry” (1993: 22).

Chambers also argues that one of the main reasons for the frequent failure of development programs is that the people who were wrong were also the ones who were powerful (1997: 31-2). The other two reasons there have been so many problems, according to Chambers, are professionalism – meaning, learning from peers and other professionals rather than from below – and a practitioner’s distance from the people and context she/he is working with (1997: 31-2).

The powerful’s ability to dictate policies and their distance from conditions in the field also reinforce a compartmentalization of the lives of poor people, a common tendency in development work. Jimmy Dabhi described this situation, stating:

> If you talk about development and development is a concept that includes the whole of my life, then naturally my belief system and my culture, development must be looked at from this perspective. Often it does not happen. Why not? If I am sitting on the planning commission, and the planning commission does not look or I am sitting in one ministry and am not an inclusive person or I am not a person who respects diversity, my ideas would be that I look from an economic perspective or I look from a social perspective, but I do not look at it [development] from the larger perspective. (Dabhi Interview 2006)

This holistic, “larger perspective” to which Dr. Dabhi refers is something that can only be gained through a close, careful, ethnographic or sociological study of the lives of the people for whom policies are intended.

The privileging of formal education or conventional, western forms of knowledge in development work is obvious – not only regarding differences between development
practitioners and the people in a given community, but also within the program or community itself. For example, within self-help groups, there is a strong correlation between literacy and access to leadership positions (Sharma, J. 2007). Although this type of formal knowledge tends to put development practitioners and women’s rights advocates in a privileged position, some individual development professionals are more sensitive to the need to rethink and critique this knowledge and learn “from the field.” For instance, Abha Bhaiya of Jagori described her work on training women in rural areas about women’s rights as a process of revising old theories and knowledge:

Q: Do you ever have any problems, or was it ever difficult coming from such an academic perspective to work with women in these rural communities? Are there ever any kind of problems as a result of power relations?

A: There are certain problems of inequality. I come from a middle-class background and then I’m going to work with landless women, talking to them, doing trainings with them… doing planning about what we can do in rural areas. I really feel a mix of the perspective of the practice, the theory and practice, is extremely important because they inform each other. My socialist feminist background has given me tools to be able to analyze the structures in society, definitely. I’ve read a lot, you know? And then I’m able to look at the reality and see how do we analyze reality within that perspective? And then action… very often when women start acting on their own behalf, you then create a surface or a platform to reflect on that action from a certain amount of theory and practice together. And then, actually they design your practice. Because there are things that work and some things don’t work. So it has been in the beginning a process of learning and unlearning. For me, a lot of unlearning because theories don’t work so easily in the field. And then you also, I mean I was trained with a masters in social work. Most of our books came from the West and there was just no application of that theory. So my initial years in the field were really unlearning rather than just imposing what I had learned, because it wasn’t working. (Bhaiya 2007)
Although Ms. Bhaiya’s words still suggest a privileging of one kind of knowledge over another, she finds fault with uncritically accepting this knowledge and “imposing” it on other women, especially in terms of what works in her practice.

Indeed, one often discovers a disregard for knowledge that is not academically rigorous enough or “high” enough within development work. This disregard allows for a particular reality to become normative (Spivak 1988: 281), thus returning us to the earlier discussion of how “cultural rules” become associated with a state of ignorance and are perceived by development professionals as barriers to development. Because development practitioners tend to construe cultural differences as ignorance on the part of the people being developed, development workers can be seen as filling “the knowledge gap. Although difficult to overcome, the problem is seen as essentially a technical one” (Crewe & Harrison 2005: 233) rather than a difference of worldview. At the same time, people in a community might equally reject an outsider’s authority to dictate “development programs” and view development professionals as ignorant of the right way to do things (Hobart 1993: 20). As Hobart explains, this difficulty, rife with misunderstandings and the ascription of ignorance, carries with it a kind of moral judgment upon others. The failure of one or both parties involved in the development encounter to appreciate the kind of knowledge that the other has is an intrinsic challenge to development work.

As a development practitioner, one has a responsibility to understand and appreciate alternative models of knowledge. In order to appreciate unconventional or nonwestern forms of knowledge, development workers must learn to de-center themselves and their worldview a bit through the critical application of self-doubt. Too much doubt results in paralysis – a rather uncomfortable state in which to exist – but too little self-critique prevents practitioners from attempting to recognize and subvert pre-existing global power and privilege structures.
Chambers (1997: 32) describes the need for more “‘[s]elf-critical epistemological awareness’… For when faced with complexity, diversity and dynamism of human and local conditions, there is no normal bedrock on which to anchor, and few fixed points… The realities of life and conditions are elusive: they are local, complex, diverse, dynamic and unpredictable.” Even without specifically using the word ‘culture,’ Chambers is arguing for greater appreciation for cultural differences in order to help reverse power relations that tend to favor the “normal dominance of the etic” over “emic reality” (1997: 154).

Far from arguing against the “development encounter” or against the potential for positive social change facilitated by the help of outsiders, I feel that development work is necessary for improving the lives of poor and disadvantaged people. In order to do so though, development practitioners must “endeavor[] to promote an active, nondomineering receptivity to the other, no matter how different it may appear” (Ingram 2006: 730). In the next chapter, we will examine both the shortfalls of self-help groups, vis-à-vis their representations of women, as well as these collectives’ potential for providing positive action within the gender and development agenda.
Chapter 4: Representations of Women in Self-Help Groups and Indian Discussions of Empowerment

I remember one woman telling me how she went to a house where a woman was beaten up. She went with the milk can and pretended that she had come to take milk and approached the husband first saying, “Do you have some extra milk? I need it. I have some guests.” And then he didn’t talk to her properly and she said, “Are you upset about something?” And then the entire story came out, which she knew already, but it came out from him. Then she could kind of make them sit together and talk to them. She didn’t want milk, but she used such a good strategy to get the problems sorted out! - Story recounted by Abha Bhaiya, Jagori 2007

The range of representations of women involved in self-help groups is as varied and diverse as the women and the development organizations themselves. Almost every author spends time describing the forms of gendered discrimination, bias, and violence that “women” – particularly poor and low-caste/class women – experience in order to justify the need for empowerment programs. Some of the adjectives frequently used to describe women include: vulnerable, victim, illiterate, subordinate, marginalized, fearful and lacking self-confidence. At the same time, however, women are portrayed as strong, outspoken, resourceful, articulate, intelligent, and resilient. Of course, any individual woman could potentially fit any of these descriptions at a given time. In the opinion of critics of gender and development work, problems result when the category of women becomes essentialized in terms of the discussion above, leaving the reader with a profound and uncomfortable sense of contradiction. It is at this level of abstraction in development work, when one speaks of “poor women” as category, that one runs into difficulties.

Negative imagery depicts how “women” are denied decision-making power, “oppressed,” unhealthy and overworked, vulnerable to poverty and financial insecurity, subjected to violence from husbands, fathers, and other family members, and lacking the opportunities to “build
capacity” for negotiation (Srivastava, K. 2005: 1, Dabhi 2004: 2, Swaminathan 2004a: 27, Banerjee 1995: 11, Sharma, J. 2004: 21, Sherwani 1998). Women’s mobility is limited within Indian society by the “patriarchal family” (Bhaiya 2007). Ultimately, these factors are explanations for why “poor women’s own efforts are practically non-existent due to no fault of theirs” (Banerjee 1995: 14). In an extreme, propagandist manner, Azim Sherwani describes what he interprets to be a despicable situation of discrimination against “the girl child” in India:

“Every child comes into this world with the message that God is not yet disappointed with man”, said the great Noble Laureate Rabindranath Tagore. But alas! _[sic_] the girl child. She is hated even before her birth. Nay, she is disliked even when only her idea comes to the mind. So is the taboo set for her in this land of Laxmi and Durga. On birth she is either killed or exploited… The girl child in India is facing many torments in the form of sexual abuse, foeticide, infanticide and the like. (1998: 2)

Sherwani’s account, although presented in an academic manner, offers an extreme example of the literature that stereotypes and sensationalizes discrimination against women. His suggestion that “she,” meaning all Indian girls, “is either killed or exploited” absurdly proposes to the reader that this is the natural order of business in India. Despite the fact that instances of these kinds of discrimination might occur, Sherwani’s depiction raises an interesting question about who has the right to say certain things about whom – a question to which we will return in the final chapter.

With the increasingly influential discussion of “people-centered development” based on an “empowerment” approach, development practitioners and organizations speak more often in terms of people’s own self-mobilization and their abilities to understand and challenge the conditions that discriminate against them. Meanwhile, powerful, “longstanding gender inequities” manage to be reproduced even in new structures that were intended to break down such unequal gender relations (Swaminathan 2002b: 96). For example, microcredit programs
tend to invoke the imagery of “women as credit worthy, ‘demure’ and ‘disciplined borrowers’” (Kalpana 2004: 15). Similarly, women may also be discussed “as ‘stakeholders’ or ‘members’ rather than as citizens,” which both depoliticizes women’s issues and transforms women into recipients of aid rather than active people engaging with their own development (Laxmi 2004: 18).

In a summary of a study done by the Behavioural Science Centre (BSC), Jimmy Dabhi discusses the key findings of the report:

Women of the Dalit communities are victims of multiple discriminations (class, caste and gender). The psycho-socio and economic impacts of discrimination are manifested in their behaviour and attitudes – fear, little or no self-confidence, self-hatred, insecurity, suppressed anger leading to strong, mistimed and misplaced reactions, submissiveness to unjust and irrational beliefs and practices. On the other hand, we also observed that these women are strong willed, hardworking, sensitive to others’ pain and hardships, perceptive, curious, willing to learn, articulate and intelligent. (2004: 6)

The obviously contradictory nature of these characterizations makes one question the necessity of stating them. Obviously they are an oversimplification of real life issues, but is it truly necessary for development work to rely on these incongruous representations? For the reality of the situation tends not to be at one extreme or another, but somewhere in the amorphous space between the two where everyday interactions take place. Perhaps if more development programs were better able to conceive of poor women as human beings and as citizens within a culturally influenced hierarchy of power that tends to disadvantage them, women would cease to be objects of development.

As I described in the first chapter, my own research was very limited in scope, and I was unable to travel to any self-help groups or speak directly with any of the women involved in these collectives. Instead, I spoke to the people who work with women as facilitators for groups
and the academics who study gender and development phenomena. For this reason, I am certainly not in a position to say what kinds of gender discrimination does and does not take place in various regions of India among different groups of women. My critique therefore is a theoretical, academic one, based on what people told me, what literature about self-help groups suggests, and the apparent gaps that are admitted by intellectuals and practitioners alike. Rather than supporting the maintenance of the status quo regarding gender relations or doubting the existence of discrimination and particular forms of violence against women, I postulate that it is important to contextualize information about women’s lives and not rely on a simplistic, yet contradictory representation of poor, rural women’s lives for the purpose of development policy creation. There is certainly evidence that a handful of Indian intellectuals and research organizations are attempting to create more nuanced descriptions of the lives of the women with whom they speak. However, the gap between academia and development in practice will always exist. In an academic analysis of gender and development work, there is much less at stake. While the realm of ideas, theories, and critiques is important, it also should not prevent practitioners from engaging with the flesh-and-blood realities of poverty and gender discrimination.

**Official Discourse about Self-Help Groups**

According to official discourse from the government, self-help groups are small collectives of approximately 12-20 women at the village level (Srivastava, A. 2004: 2; Dabhi Sojourners 2006: 9-11). These groups usually work together on savings or credit initiatives, sometime also saving other resources, such as grain, to improve their financial and food security. Although not all self-help groups entail microcredit programs, this thesis will only address these kinds of groups since they are most common. When the groups have achieved a certain level of
savings, they become eligible for bank loans and credit, which they pay back with interest over time (Dabhi *Sojourners* 2006: 10). These loans are intended to help women in various economic activities and are usually limited as to what they can be used for (e.g., agricultural activities, artisan crafts, entrepreneurial endeavors, etc.). The purpose of self-help groups is to extend credit to very poor, rural, and otherwise marginalized people, and it is usually women who are “targeted” to participate in these collectives by the government and other NGOs. Development professionals have claimed that microcredit has the ability to lift people out of poverty and make them self-sufficient, though there is growing critique by academics and practitioners alike about these collectives’ success at really raising people’s standard of living (Ramakumar 2006: 1; Rahman 1999). In addition to having access to credit, women involved in self-help groups are expected to be able to access resources set aside by the government and other educational opportunities as a means for empowerment (Banerjee 1995: 2). According to critiques by numerous non-governmental organizations and research institutes, the government assumes that women’s economic independence, which results from their access to credit through self-help groups, directly translates into empowerment (Parthasarathy 2007; Nirantar 2004; Kannabiran 2004).

**Empowerment: Who Decides?**

In response to the question of who defines empowerment, the answer is once again quite varied. Among the people I spoke to while in Delhi and Mumbai, there was a great deal of recognition that the term “empowerment” has been appropriated by development discourse and thrown around so often that it had lost much of its coherent meaningfulness. “Empowerment” has actually been part of development rhetoric for a long time now, but as more people,
especially the government, start to use the word, it loses its activist undertone. As Vasanathi
Raman (2007) explained:

> The radical slogans which were part of the women’s movement or were part of the wider democratic movement have all sort of been taken over and the soul of them has been removed, so they have acquired totally different meanings. So now, if a woman is able to run some kind of little shop or something, you say it’s women’s empowerment.

Empowerment is often described in development language in terms of what “results” one should see in women’s action (i.e. an empowered woman is willing to speak in public, be argumentative with men in the community, question the gendered hierarchy in their community, etc.). At the same time, empowerment is viewed as a “process” (Dabhi 1999; Parthasarathy 2006: 6). In a report to the government for considerations in the 11th plan, Soma Kishore Parthasarathy critically notes that recently “empowerment is reduced to an outcome, with a linear flow and related to predetermined goals” (2006: 6). Parthasarathy claims that this problem has become more severe as “empowerment” as a concept is hijacked by the government’s neo-liberal agenda that ends up containing empowerment within “prescribe[d] boundaries” synonymous with economic and financial enablement (Parthasarathy 2006: 6). Among academics and NGOs, there is a growing critique of the government’s limited definition of empowerment.

On the other hand, development workers suggest that empowerment must encompass much more than economic autonomy for women. Although economic issues are a frequently cited aspect of empowerment by both the women involved in self-help groups and practitioners, this is just one aspect of empowerment (Sharma, J. 2007; Bhaiya 2007). In the book *Self Help Groups and Civil Society: A Preliminary Study*, Alka Srivastava describes how, in development literature, “empowerment encompasses a few key elements such as power, autonomy and self-reliance, entitlement, participation, awareness generation and capacity building” (2004: 67).
Women’s ability to save and have access to credit is assumed to “build ‘social capital’” (Srivastava, A. 2004: 68), which, in turn, helps women to have more control over their lives and enables women to challenge gender norms in their community. The kind of empowerment that NGOs speak about is often more radical than what the government suggests with its mere credit disbursal. Indeed, empowerment involves some form of changed consciousness, assuming that the status quo is not empowering to women, which may be true but should not be taken for granted.

N.K. Banerjee raises an interesting question in her work, “Grassroots Empowerment (1975-1990): A Discussion Paper” about where perceptions of empowerment originate. She asks whether understandings of empowerment are shared by “grassroot women themselves” or if they are simply “concepts/constructs of interventionists” (Banerjee 1995: 5). This consideration is indeed one that lies at the heart of the debate in this thesis and will be discussed in greater detail throughout the present chapter. Obviously the goal of self-help groups should be to ensure that the women’s perceptions of empowerment take priority. If women of the collective do not have the right to define what is important to them, then are self-help groups merely vehicles for teaching women someone else’s values system, one that is formulated in a context and culture very different from their own?

One particularly helpful example of how a women’s development organization might approach rural women’s empowerment is described in *Face to Face with Rural Women: CWDS’ Search for New Knowledge and An Interventionist Role*, a publication by the Center for Women’s Development Studies that focuses on four camps they sponsored with rural women. The goal of these camps or summits was to find out what issues women wanted to change in their own lives, to make local bureaucracy more aware of women’s needs and their desire to be
involved in planning, and to provide women with information about the kinds of assistance and support they could legally demand from the government (Mazumdar 2002: 5). CWDS took the time to learn about “the economic, social and political crosscurrents, and the socio-economic and demographic characteristics” (Mazumdar 2002: 4) of the locations of the proposed camps, worked through the local elites to gain access to the communities and to build trust, and it listened to women’s concerns, usually without trying to influence their discussions. In one of the four camps (this particular camp was in Bakewar, Uttar Pradesh), however, CWDS was unsuccessful at eliciting much response from the women without “coaxing women to speak” or “repeatedly interjecting information or questions to stimulate women’s thinking.” The CWDS staff running the camp recognized that the women who came together did not have trust in one another. Although the other three camps CWDS ran seem to be positive examples of a balance between an institutional and grassroots approach to development, the camp at Bakewar suggests that if women are unable to respond in a manner roughly equivalent to what the staff are expecting, they are viewed as too “overpowered by their feeling of powerlessness” to act (Mazumdar 2002: 28-30). Despite the failure of the Bakewar camp, in one of the other camps that was deemed a “success,” the women participating explain why they wanted to continue working with CWDS in the future:

Because you do not regard us as dumb idiots. You do not discourage us from asking questions and do not make us conscious of our inferiority and ignorance. You are not trying to impose any readymade solutions, but asking questions like us. We understand that to be effective, to be efficient, we must learn many new things, and plan our activities. We may also have to extend our responsibilities to other tricky problems that oppress women in our villages. But to start with, we shall take up employment generation, which will help everyone, and on which everyone is in agreement. (quoted in Mazumdar 2002: 16)
Of course, this “quote” has not only been translated into English from whatever language and dialect in which the women spoke, but it also has been reproduced in development literature. The remark about not making the women “conscious of [their] inferiority and ignorance” is certainly questionable, and the women’s real words may have been appropriated by the CWDS workers and incorporated into development discourse, but the sentiment expressed is that the women were satisfied with the interaction and hoped it would continue in the future. Through this quote, one might discern that the problem with gender and development work is not so much with the concept of women’s empowerment, but with the idea that there is some “readymade solution” that will lead to this empowerment. By sharing experiences and talking about the problems they had experienced, the women at the camps were able to recognize the commonality of their issues and to communicate their ideas for how to rectify the situation to the staff of CWDS.

Unfortunately, it seems that the vast majority of grassroots development work done by development organizations and the government does not take the time to listen to what people want for their lives, or, if they do, they do not always appreciate the answers if they do not appear to fit into a particular development paradigm. The privileging of one kind of knowledge over another continues, and, rather than envisioning the possibility of a mutual exchange of beneficial information, development organizations still assume a one-way transfer of knowledge to those people who are powerless, ignorant, and subordinated. Self-help groups have the potential to be a positive means for improving people’s lives because the official objectives of these collectives propose that the group members themselves will decide on what changes should be made and how they should be achieved.
How Is Empowerment Supposed to Be Achieved and by Whom?

Empowerment is supposed to be achieved by the women involved in self-help groups for themselves through their participation in income-generating activities, educational programs, and other “awareness-raising” about women’s rights (Banerjee 1995: 19). On one hand, empowerment is discussed as an increasing awareness of one’s own position in society gained through critical reflection, as well as an improvement in one’s ability and desire to challenge situations of discrimination. As Dabhi (“Women’s Empowerment” 2006: 5) explains, “A word of caution – no one empowers anyone, we empower ourselves. Many years ago, Julius Nyerere said, “People are not developed, they develop themselves”… Unfortunately this wisdom bypasses many of us and we become saviour and messiah [sic] of people.” While it may be true that empowerment is an internal, self-reflexive process, it would be wrong to assume that the work or encouragement of others could not spark the self-realization leading to empowerment.

Women-focused development NGOs envision themselves as the facilitators sparking this self-realization through encouraging “economic activities, employment generation, awareness-raising, educational programmes, issue-based struggle, and in some cases specific programmes of the government” (Dabhi, “Women’s Empowerment” 2006: 5). Using these “tools,” women are expected to learn how to be empowered individuals, thus suggesting that empowerment must be “externally initiated” (Dabhi, “Women’s Empowerment” 2006: 7). Indeed, sometimes self-help groups might be a catalyst for involving women in “the public realm” of local governance or financial programs, which later provides a platform women with the ability “to negotiate and push for agendas way beyond the credit driven functions” (Chaudhary, Kuckereja & Jaitly 2004: 31). The role of women’s and development organizations therefore becomes that of facilitator of empowerment (Srivastava, A. 2004: 98-117) – providing the resources and initial catalytic activity to “prompt” women to become involved in improving their lives through participation in
development programs and by becoming aware of the gendered discrimination they face in their lives and giving it a name.\textsuperscript{13} While this process of identifying and acknowledging gendered discrimination could provide opportunities for empowerment, on some level the process reinforces the construction of a privileged kind of development knowledge. Critics of “awareness-raising” or “consciousness-raising” programs could describe such training sessions as an imposition of development practitioners’ beliefs about appropriate gender relations, which are also influenced by international gender and development rhetoric, upon local women.

Working as “facilitators,” NGOs often train local women in the techniques necessary for running self-help groups and empowering women. Local women are better at working in their own communities, because “they are very pragmatic and they know how to go about it without irritating people since they have to live there,” whereas trainers like Abha Bhaiya would probably have very different strategies. For example, Ms. Bhaiya said, “I can be very upfront, very strident, and sometimes see things black and white, while they [local women] somehow manage the gray areas very well.” Whereas outside women’s activists might see situations of gender discrimination as violations of women’s rights that mandate a clear set of responses to rectify the defined problem, local women might not interpret the situation the same way. The “gray areas” that local women can navigate better than outside facilitators are comprised of the women’s own experiences and cultural knowledge about their community as well as the normative development knowledge they are taught. And yet, the question remains as to whether or not community members are being trained to value someone else’s kind of knowledge about development without an appropriate context in which to use that knowledge. Certainly women can and will pick and choose the paths most relevant to their own lives, which may mean they

\textsuperscript{13} Abha Bhaiya (2007) described how Jagori “decided to actually take the feminist consciousness to the hinterlands to work with NGOs that were working with women on women’s issues but that had very little background or understanding.”
act in ways that development workers and women’s rights activists describe as “resistance” or “laziness.” While development workers have a responsibility to provide women with tools and opportunities to challenge forms of gender discrimination in their lives, just because the local women may not accept the “help” does not mean they are oppressed.

**Whose Voices Are Used to Support Self-Help Group and Empowerment Literature?**

Because of the emphasis on development work needing to be “of and for the poor” (Dabhi 2004: 11), the voices and testimonies of women who participate in self-help groups are used by development professionals to reinforce the positive effects of these collectives on gender equity. Sometimes the stories presented in self-help group literature are genuine expressions of how these collectives have improved people’s lives, while other times anecdotes may be taken out of context or appropriated by development organizations to further their own work or rationales. Unfortunately, my limited field experience prevents me from being able to judge the validity of this anecdotal evidence; however, from the stories presented in self-help group literature it appears that women do indeed gain something important from involvement in self-help groups. Srivastava’s report findings, for example, suggest that women would overwhelmingly recommend being a self-help group member to other women, listing the benefits of such involvement as “getting strength due to being SHG members; money power helps in status building; recognition of group’s strength in fighting for a cause; getting linked to outside world; ability to do development/welfare activities etc.” (2004: 81-2). While such substantiation is somewhat convincing, it is also important to remember that the terminology used to express the benefits of self-help groups is that of the development professional interpreting what local women tell him/her.
Although the positive changes enumerated above are proposed by the women themselves, it is also possible that women have internalized development language and learned the “right answers” to give to development practitioners to ensure that they continue to have access to credit. Aminur Rahman, a Bangladeshi anthropologist who studied the influence of the Grameen Bank on a few communities, discusses the concept of “public and hidden transcripts” (1999: 42-4). He notes that the public transcript that individuals who are members of less powerful groups in society construct for people in positions of power may not be the “real story” about what is happening (Rahman 1999: 42-4). The hidden transcripts that people create with others who share the same, disadvantaged social position, on the other hand, serve to critique the dominance of powerful lending institutions over the poor. By adapting their discourse to a perceived audience, the poor and less powerful members of society cannot be described as universally “oppressed” or “subordinated;” rather, they actively find ways to resist the exploitation of the dominant. As Rahman states, “At the theoretical level, the contradiction between the hidden transcript of the weak and the public transcript of the lending institution and wider society also exposes the dynamics of resistance and domination” and represent “a form of protest against the system” (1999: 44). Therefore, women may be empowered in their communities, even while rejecting the dominant discourse about “women’s empowerment.” This example describes how the exercise and influence of power cannot be assumed always to be an imposition from above. Another lesson to be taken from Rahman’s work though, is the idea that even though people might have a hidden transcript that is critical of the official power, he mentions that women do not wish to get rid of the microcredit groups. If they wanted to do so, they simply would decide not to join these groups. Women do want and need the resources that development work provides to them, even if they critique the manner in which it is given.
Criticism of the Ability of Self-Help Groups to Achieve “Empowerment”

The most vigorous and prevalent critique of the use of the term “empowerment” comes from various women’s organizations regarding the government’s facile treatment of the term. In 2004, Nirantar, along with numerous other women’s organizations across India, published a report criticizing self-help groups’ inability to truly empower women. The report described how “attempts at empowerment have been fractured and atomized,” based on the flawed assumption that “empowerment will happen automatically if credit disbursement agencies are in place…” Empowerment seldom transcends the realm of rhetoric” (Nirantar 2004: 2-3). The government’s use of access to credit as a measure of empowerment is totally inappropriate, as it cannot judge whether women have really managed to achieve a transformation in their consciousness, which is what should be at the heart of “empowerment” (Sharma, J. 2004: 19). Even though women might take loans in self-help groups, the money is typically used for the entire family. While development practitioners and women’s rights activists may want the money to go directly to women and not to men (hence, the focus on involving almost entirely women in self-help groups), “it’s very difficult for women to, at least in this society, conceive of themselves as separate from their husbands or brothers and fathers. So it was generally a collective thing” (Raman 2007). If women’s mere access to credit cannot successfully judge a transformation in consciousness, the mode of measurement must really be women’s own expression of their experiences. Development professionals need to do a better job of relying on what local women describe as the positive and negative consequences of the programs being evaluated.

Additionally, with the Indian government’s focus on breadth instead of depth in its programs, it is difficult for government-sponsored self-help groups to provide women with any additional resources – other than access to credit – for achieving empowerment (Banerjee 1995: 12; Kalpana 2005: 77). Empowerment becomes little more than another part of development
discourse, only “empowering individual trainers, possibly at the expense of the women they intend to help” (Lazreg 2002: 132). The promotion of the discourse then results in “[k]nowledge stand[ing] in the way of practice, abstract notions of women/gender hamper[ing] the unmediated understanding of real, concrete women farmers who get turned into ‘target populations’, ‘beneficiaries’, or ‘resources’” (Lazreg 2002: 132).

In addition to these critiques of self-help groups’ ability to empower women, the collectives are also faulted by academics as well as some women’s development organizations for focusing purely on women and not including men, failing to break down class and caste barriers, allowing the government to do very little while claiming it is doing much more for the rural poor, adding to women’s burdens without redistributing other tasks, and maintaining the status quo regarding gender relations and poverty. The call for a more balanced gendered critique of self-help groups is one of the more important mentioned above. By focusing solely on women, self-help groups face the difficulty that was originally cited in the older Women and Development theories regarding the necessity of examining how both men and women relate with one another.

Time and time again, programs that sought to challenge gender inequalities in development were forced to recognize that “without men, gender interventions can only go so far” (Chant and Gutmann 2005: 241; cf. Dabhi 2004: 7, 13). If only women are consulted on certain issues then these topics become marginalized as only “women’s issues” (e.g., contraception and family planning, children’s education and health, microcredit, etc.). Women are forced to take on new responsibilities while maintaining all of their old tasks as well. As Jaya Sharma explains, the representations of women involved in microcredit reinforce the notion that “[b]eing a ‘good woman’ has been redefined to mean a woman who will not only do all the
household work and childrearing but also take on additional financial responsibilities and the
onus of repaying loans. She will be ‘disciplined’ and ‘accountable’ and ‘pay back her debts’ in
time” (Sharma 2004: 20). Sometimes men are simply content to allow women to take on the
extra tasks, bringing in more money for the family without the men having to increase their labor
contribution (Sharma 2007). At other times, there might be a backlash against women’s
challenge to the community’s gender norms (Thakur 2006; Chant and Gutmann 2005: 243).
Men, who are historically responsible for providing for their families, may begin to feel that their
status as “breadwinner” is being challenged and that they are “increasingly redundant in
women’s lives” (Chant and Gutmann 2005: 243). Men’s positions in society and within the
family are challenged as women take on more tasks that are usually masculine. As men’s
masculinity is threatened, some of the possible consequences could be that men might become
depressed, feeling they have little to contribute any longer to their family, or they may respond
violently, reasserting their masculinity by furthering gender discrimination against women.

While all of these critiques are helpful for figuring out how to improve self-help groups,
one might be tempted to decide there are too many problems with the model and wish to throw it
away. Just because academics and researchers criticize self-help groups does not mean that they
should stop trying to reach people with their programs. In truth, these groups have been fairly
successful at providing the poor with much-needed access to credit, education and job
opportunities, and a marginal amount of security. While the model is not perfect and far from a
panacea to widespread poverty, which it is often lauded to be, it should not be discarded.

**Resistance to Change**

When I spoke to people about their research or work in the field regarding implementing
development programs or running “gender-training sessions,” most of them confirmed that they
(or their organization) had experienced direct resistance from the community with which they were working. Abha Bhaiya, who helps run women’s training/rights workshops in rural areas, explained that resistance from the communities at first is to be expected:

Oh, yes! That’s kind of given, and you have to deal with it and kind of be a little strategic as to what issues you pick up because that will definitely decide the level of resistance. Like if you want to talk about rape within marriage, men will get against you immediately. But if you talk about, let’s say, women’s right to an education, there may be less resistance. So you start with a little softer issue sometimes…. In the beginning, you come to expect it [resistance] and be prepared to work through it, and it settles down very quickly. People immediately know what you’re talking about when you’re talking about these issues. We’re not there to break families in that sense, but we’re there to say, “Look, there are problems in the family. Can we rectify them?”

Similarly, Jimmy Dabhi described that resistance to changes – especially in gendered power relations – is a natural response. In this case, however, resistance (both internal and external) can and should be overcome in order to make improvements:

Yes, there is resistance… Now, personally it doesn’t disturb me. It’s okay. All of us resist what is different. If a foreign particle were to come into our body we would resist it only. So I understand that. But to me, the willingness to look at why this is happening to me, why I am resisting, why I am reacting and not responding will eventually lead to a response that will begin to redress and being to understand – I think that is what will lead us to greater empowerment. Therefore, to me, what the Bible says – the truth shall make you free… It sounds very philosophical, but to me it is very important.

On both accounts, the general sentiment was one of sincere belief that resistance was acceptable and natural. Any time social change is expected to occur, particularly when it challenges the gender norms of a community, resistance by the parties that might stand to lose something is assumed as an obvious response. With time, however, it was expected that people would realize that the gender norms of their society were perhaps incorrect, and that they would be “set free”
by their new, more critical knowledge of how men and women should relate to one another. Both Ms. Bhaiya and Dr. Dabhi’s responses portrayed locals’ resistance to their work in a fairly diplomatic, calm light, but another woman I spoke to who had experiences working with a women’s tailoring group in Madhya Pradesh spoke of a more forceful encounter. The tailoring project she was working on sought to give a women’s collective employment through stitching clothing for the local market, a task that men had historically performed. According to the woman I spoke with, many of the men in the community felt that the development organization was teaching women to be too assertive, which would break families apart. Moneylenders and politicians felt especially threatened by the collective, believing that women would become less dependent on moneylenders as they received income and access to credit from their tailoring work. People in the community called the development workers “English” and “Christian” outsiders, encouraging locals not to trust them. Ultimately, the men who stood to lose something because of the intervention burned down the organization’s office building as well as one of their jeeps in an attempt to discourage their work.

Perhaps resistance to some forms of development is a normal reaction to social change that challenges the power hierarchy of a community, but who should instigate the situation? Does the development professional have the right to “push past” the resistance? Such an assertive approach seems to deny the community’s right to have a say over its development, as well as seeming to disregard local knowledge and cultural values. The community should be involved in the development process, but one cannot argue that the privileging of this local

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14 The activists were neither English nor Christian, but the community members perceived them as such because they could speak English and were not as familiar with the local dialect. Calling the social workers “English” also carries the connotation of colonialism – that these people were total outsiders to the community and not to be trusted. Similarly, calling the development workers “Christian” could reflect the vestige of missionary work, with its imposing “civilizing” mission. These two terms are incredibly symbolic within the Indian context and reflect the community’s previous encounters with western modernity.
knowledge will provide the definitive answer for improving people’s lives. Education as well as outside assistance are positive things because they can help broaden people’s ideas about what they could want for their lives. People may simply be misguided. I believe it is possible to appreciate culture, to not treat it as a barrier, and still understand the need for change. As Abha Bhaiya recounted in one of her stories, one of the women who had attended a training session responded quite eloquently when asked how she would act upon returning home after the training session:

She said, “Wait for the oil to heat up. You can’t throw in things to fry until and unless the oil is hot... You need time to prepare and get the fire started.” And I was really quite impressed by that idiom because she was suggesting that you can’t just go and throw a “bomb” in a community. They women are really excellent with it.

The woman had gained something from the training session; it was not necessarily a “hegemonic imposition” of development knowledge upon her. However, when a development practitioner or women’s rights activist is pushing something that does not quite fit with the community, the people in the community will of course, resist. They may also borrow from the development agenda and use the “tools” provided in ways that are considered more appropriate for their lives. The folk analysis above, passed on through Ms. Bhaiya, is a powerful testimony to the fact that women can and do navigate their relationships and social interactions in an extremely thoughtful, culturally specific, and gender specific manner. To fail to recognize this fact is to do a great disservice to the people that one wishes to “help.”

Conversely, academics that advocate for privileging the rationale of locals over that of western development knowledge are critiqued by both development practitioners and other academics for “seeking refuge in subjectivism by proxy [which] can be very appealing. But as with all subjectivism, reaching the ‘real’ Third World woman might be an ever-receding
illusion” (Lazreg 2002: 142). Therefore, development professionals have the responsibility of presenting a balanced approach to gender and development work that neither privileges nor excludes any worldview. The axiomatic acceptance of a single rationale, which is essentially what has happened at present, is detrimental for development work because it shuts down alternative approaches to improving people’s quality of life and fails to take cultural differences seriously. Unfortunately, the methods for addressing these issues of inequity and poverty in a manner that respects the integrity and value of culture are considered too difficult and labor/time-intensive to be feasible.

Because a development worker takes the time to listen to what is important to people at the local level does not mean that he/she should lose the ability altogether to make judgments about conditions that are disadvantageous for others. Anthropologists Gardner and Lewis (2005: 353) note, “while it is important to acknowledge that not everyone perceives the world in the same terms, global inequities and poverty cannot simply be explained away as culturally relative.” Appreciating cultural differences is crucial for understanding such serious issues as global inequities and poverty, but by approaching culture in a manner that leaves the academic unable to pass judgment upon inequality and that paralyzes the development practitioner, making him/her unable to act, is dangerous. Such an approach treats culture as overly “precious,” both in the sense that culture is infinitely specific and not generalizable, and in that everything becomes culturally relative.

As Lazreg (2002: 142) notes, “It is a thin line between accepting one’s culture as valuable but understanding that it is susceptible to change, and stifling it by fearing for its absorption by industrial cultures. It is worth noting that ‘development’ also means cultural change in directions that are not always controllable.” Cultures change over time; they are certainly not stagnant.
Individuals and groups of people can influence cultural changes, too, in a manner that restructures social institutions and gender norms. This process rarely occurs quickly, though. Development work – in which the emphasis is placed on palpable results in short periods of time – runs directly against this process, leading to a great deal of frustration on the part of development organizations. The following passage from a collection of anecdotal short stories by Marija Sres ‘Mishkaben,’ a development worker from Slovenia who spent ten years among an Indian tribal community illustrates the tension between the desires of development workers and locals. This selection, portrays the interactions of Mira, a young social worker who graduated from the Tata Institute for Social Sciences in Mumbai, and Kavita, an older development work who had been in the community much longer:

Kavita put her stitching down and looked at Shweta, “You are too impatient, Mira, you want too much too soon. Do not worry. These women know how to find their way, never fear.” She sighed and looked beyond the younger woman and into the distance. “These women are so frightened, so insecure. They fight for their men. They fight for their children. They fight for their land. And all this because they are in a situation of survival. You have taught them much, but you must also learn much from them. Since you’ve come, they’ve taken up literacy and cooperatives and are standing up for the first time - ” “I know, I know,” cried Mira, “that is why I want them to succeed. To stand together. To reflect together. To succeed with the cooperative, not to tear each other!”

“They will not tear each other,” soothed Kavita, “they have fought like this for centuries, but they have not been destroyed… They will find a way, never fear.”(Sres 1996: 32-3)

While Mira is frustrated by the situation and impatient with her perception of the women’s insecurity, Kavita understands that the situation is improving slowly. Not only that, the older woman recognizes that the young worker “must also learn much” from the women. This kind of appreciation for special attention to “small-scale local initiatives” is difficult to “‘scale up’ to the point where they [grassroots initiatives] resolve problems of widespread poverty and suffering”
(Edelman and Haugerud 2005: 51). As a result, development organizations must rely on imperfect models, such as self-help groups, as means for poverty reduction and women’s empowerment (Chaudhary, Kuckereja and Jaitly 2004: 30). These groups do positive work though, and even if they are imperfect, at least they are a thoughtful, though currently heavily debated, attempt to improve people’s lives.

**Conclusions**

Often it is not possible for the subaltern to speak directly to the bodies that create policies and programs that affect them. In a perfect form of development, it would be the subaltern’s self-representation upon which policies would be formed. With our imperfect models, academics and development practitioners are required to step in as intermediaries between grassroots organizations and the government, ideally to advocate on behalf of the subaltern in an effort to secure much-needed resources for the poor. Although it is difficult completely to understand and appreciate the Other, since everyone – no matter how hard he/she tries – is ethnocentric to some degree, it is the ethical and scholarly responsibility of development practitioners to seek new knowledge from the communities with which they work. Development workers must strive to represent people as fairly as possible, rather than trying to construct poor people’s empowerment in terms of mainstream development discourse. Otherwise, development work might *dism*empower the poor, with professionals controlling their voices and dictating the path of social change in an insensitive way. Pragmatically, however, action is necessary and the development worker cannot *remain* in a moral paralysis over the ethnocentrism of her morals that guide her active and thoughtful engagement in development work.
Chapter 5: Cross-cultural Representations of ‘Women’ at the International Level, Some Final Conclusions

In the 1920s during British colonial rule, American journalist Katherine Mayo traveled to India. Upon returning to the United States, Mayo wrote the infamous book *Mother India*, with scorching descriptions of abominable treatment of “women” in Indian society (Sinha 2006: 1). At the time, the book served to further the interests of the colonizers: the Indians were seen as childlike and incapable of running their own country. Besides, they had no consideration whatsoever for women, so the British – who were refined and chivalrous – had good reason to stay in India (Sinha 2006: 1, 5). Decades later, despite the poor academic standard and the “yellow journalistic” nature of the piece, Mayo’s words continue to haunt Indian academics. It is her decontextualized representation of “Indian women” and others, which she presented as scientific, objective, and rational truth, that Indians found most problematic. According to Mrinalini Sinha, while recognizing the *substance* behind Mayo’s claims, Indian critics were most upset by the framing of her arguments and the book’s representations of Indians (2006: 109).

When Mayo’s arguments, based on a limited number of encounters and some omissions, were incommodiously scaled up to generalizations about “India” or “Indian women,” the validity of those claims was jeopardized (Sinha 2006: 112-3). Even though some of the “facts” Mayo presented might have been true, *Mother India* itself is a false representation of India and Indian women. Sensationalized encounters between western women and Indian women in which western women have the power to represent the other, such as in *Mother India*, pose a serious challenge to cross-cultural feminist work because of the unequal terms of the interaction.

As mentioned earlier in the thesis, Indian feminists reject the belief that the Indian women’s movement evolved solely through western involvement. As Mary John explains, the
“Indian women’s movement can legitimately claim a rich, unique history” (1998a: 2; also John 1998b: 21). First of all, the historical contexts in which these feminist movements formed are extraordinarily different, with the Indian feminist movement having grown out of the post-independence peoples’ movements, popular movements against rising prices, student movements, and leftist movements (Butalia 2007). The issues at stake today, especially those surrounding personal law, religious diversity, communalism, secularism, class, caste, etc., are also quite unique to Indian society, making it difficult for Indian feminists to achieve much solidarity with western feminist groups. John notes, however, that, despite the differences, “the West is an intrinsic part of our [India’s] current entanglements” (John 1998a: 2) The west’s historical influence on India through colonization, as well as its present involvement in India in both political and economic matters, reinforces the west’s powerful influence in and on India.

For a feminist in India to be called “westernized” is often an outright insult; it suggests that the woman (or man, in some cases) is nothing more than a puppet for westerns and their values (John 1998a: 3). For this reason, there are a handful of Indian women who believe in the women’s movement and the fight for gender equity in India but refuse to call themselves “feminists” because the word is considered far too divisive (Raman 2007). Many contemporary feminists in India are extremely well versed in western feminist texts (Butalia 2007; Bhaiya 2007) as well as the work of other Indians, which could partially explain why people believed that the growth of women’s movements in India was not “organic.” Quickly Indian feminists began to realize that western models and theories were not suitable for use in India (John 1998a: 4; Bhaiya 2007). At the same time, John recognizes the problem with finding an “Indian” alternative to feminist thought, since there is no homogeneous, essentially Indian culture that one
could use as a platform (John 1998a: 6-8). In an effort not to impose one hegemonic interpretation of feminism for another, John notes the elusiveness of any kind of internationalist feminism (1998b: 15). After reading the work of one of her “sisters” in the South, John points to her own “ignorance of ‘other others’” (1998b: 15), and to the divisions among women within the South. Therefore, John suggests, “cross-cultural” interpretations of women’s issues are much more complex than discussions at the international or even state level typically acknowledge. Invoking the category of “women” leads to universalizing and essentializing tendencies that cannot account for the experiences of women.

Who Can Say What About Whom?

Poverty, gender discrimination, and violence against women are a few of the many problems that one could find in any country in the world, but who has the right to speak about these problems and in what contexts? Western women have been representing women in other parts of the world in a fairly disempowering light for quite a while now (Mehra 2006; Mohanty 1988). Chandra Talpade Mohanty has described this phenomenon as western feminists’ “discursive hegemony” over the field, which has the ability to turn “Third World women” into a homogeneous category in development discourse and elsewhere. In this discourse, “western” women construct the “Third World woman” as characterized by her oppression, victimization by men and a patriarchal system, ignorance, submissiveness, and marginalization (Mohanty 1988: 51). Mohanty argues that these descriptions are part of a larger, dichotomous ideology by which western feminists are able to describe themselves as empowered, intelligent, individuals with agency vis-à-vis the Third World woman. She demands that western feminists be much more

Nonetheless, one could similarly point out that there are multiple “western” feminisms too, and to assume a homogeneous group therein is equally problematic.
careful and nuanced in their representations of women in other parts of the world since these representations are arrogant and disempowering for women in nonwestern countries.

As more people in the west realize the limitations of their representations, they are beginning to privilege the knowledge of women in the third world. Nonwestern women’s organizations like DAWN are clearly becoming spokespersons on behalf of “poor women in the South” (Saunders 2002: 18). While some of these women “may claim the status of organic intellectuals… the vanguard occupies a precarious position within any genetic narrative – an intellectual class standing in for poor, ‘illiterate’ Southern women. Representative political practice is what we cannot as yet do without” (Saunders 2002: 18). Honestly, representative politics are an inherent part of development discourse; I do not believe that gender and development practitioners will truly ever be able to “do without” them. The constructing of representations is simply a part of how people understand the world. But when representing across cultural boundaries, internationally or domestically – especially when representations have specific implications for policies – one has a moral responsibility to be as academically rigorous, honest, and true to the integrity of the people one is representing.

Challenges to Western Gender and Development Discourse

Too often gender and development discourse has offered us the “liberated” women of the “North” and their “victim sisters in the South” (Saunders 2002: 14). While Mohanty rejected the hegemonic imposition of representations of women in Third World countries in terms of rights discourse, others have also criticized the lack of feminist self-reflection in development work. Lazreg, for example, describes how women’s issues in “developing” nations are turned into prisoners of “traditional culture” that prevents their development, while, when similar

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16 This process of essentializing can go both ways, however, with Southern feminists failing to distinguish among varieties of western feminisms.
situations occur in the west, these issues are cast in terms of gender inequality and other forms of social discrimination:

‘We’ do not ask ourselves whether the molestation of children, the rape of college women, the murder of estranged wives are terms of a discourse of development in America. Rather, we see them as expressions of the resilience of misogyny, gender inequality, the commodification of women’s sexuality, etcetera. The ‘development’ of America is not questioned. The transformation of women’s lives into a discourse relinks with the early feminist tradition of focusing on other women’s victimization by their culture, ‘patriarchy’ or religion. For women’s life histories are seen as valuable not so much for their intrinsic value to the women themselves as for what they tell us about this amorphous entity called ‘development’. (Lazreg 2002: 129)

Lazreg suggests that a more holistic, contextualized approach to women’s issues in other parts of the world is necessary. To assist with this process of contextualizing issues, publishers like Zubaan seek to reverse the flow of information from North to South and West to East, focusing on producing literature with a more sustained discussion of nonwestern women’s issues.

**The Problems of “Universal” Movements**

The biggest problem of universal discourse and grand theory is that they fail to incorporate the local specificities of development and women’s rights agendas into discussions of development work. Mohanty talks about “ethnocentric universalism” (1988: 55), but in truth, all universalisms are ethnocentric and biased towards the worldviews of the societies in which they were created. Because the west has generally controlled world development organizations, it has also controlled “falsely universalizing methodologies that serve the narrow self-interest of Western feminism” (Mohanty 2003: 222-3). The moral dilemma for activists was the desire to appeal to universals within the discourse of rights that supported their causes, while nonetheless calling for more relativistic interpretations that would allow more spaces within the field.
If development specialists with whom I spoke focused too much on undermining universal discourse about women’s rights in development work, they felt that they might slide down the slippery slope of idealizing “endless difference [which] might cause feminism to self-destruct” (Gardner and Lewis 2005: 354; cf. Dabhi 2006; Mehra 2006). Indian feminists are in a difficult position, attempting to unify the feminist cause for political action despite large differences among constituents (Ganguly-Scrase 2000: 107; John 2005: 101-2). Although the dichotomy between universalism and relativism exists, enacting the dichotomy puts development workers into an untenable situation. Perry and Schenck suggest that, “To err too far in either direction – the imposition of a feminist universal or the elaboration of a plethora of local practices – would be to miss the richness and complexity of the development experience. In fact, development as a process is most successful when it mirrors the varied rhythms and cadences of the human condition” (2001: 2; cf. John 1998a: 7). Remaining entirely true to universal rights discourse without room for different interpretations and approaches leads to misunderstandings and the automatic “blame culture” syndrome in gender and development work. However, development professionals must take a moral stand on women’s rights to prevent the affirmation of truly discriminatory situations.

One way to counter this dichotomous divide is to look at specific paths that rural communities have taken and build upon development work (John 1998b: 21). Within the many feminist movements, it would be too difficult to come up with any kind of universal that would be satisfactory for all women involved. Therefore, explained Ms. Butalia, open dialogue and appreciation for differences were the keys:

I don’t think that we can have a universal feminist movement, and I don’t even think that it is necessarily desirable. I think it’s different in different places, and I think that’s what makes it so rich and so exciting, you know? So, I think yes, definitely dialogue. But
that is happening much more now… The way the media has opened up, you get some stories of different kinds of things going on in different parts of the world, and I think that is important and that can continue. But I think there is also an attitudinal change that we need to make. We need to think that movements that exist in other parts of the world are not defined against some norm that is us. In a sense, there is no norm. There is basically a variety, and there is basically difference, and if we start to recognize it as difference rather than as some rung of a hierarchy in which some are at the top and some are at the bottom, then I think actually we’ve got something wonderful going. And it’s not too difficult for us to recognize that. Why should it be? So I think that’s really what I would argue.

Ms. Butalia speaks directly to necessary, potential changes in an international system that has continued to favor one particular account of development over others. Although she paints a lovely and idealistic picture of how everyone could learn to work together, it will take a great deal of effort and energy to come close to this ideal situation.

**Is There Potential for More Egalitarian International Solidarity?**

In order for greater solidarity across international boundaries to occur within the feminist movement and, more generally, in the development process, people in developed countries must recognize how their assumptions about development and modernity are embedded in their own culture and history (Gardner and Lewis 2005: 353). The difficulty with this task is that so many people, NGOs and government bodies are heavily invested in development as it is currently formulated. As Saunders points out, this task “requires that one rise to the difficult and risky task of challenging the faith of the faithful” (2002: 16). Self-critique in this sense is a huge task, but one that must be encouraged in order for a more egalitarian approach to the world system to evolve. Encouraging self-doubt, in individuals as well as in development institutions, and a philosophical reflection about one’s own agenda might help to further de-center western universalist and hegemonic tendencies in development discourse too: a good task for the
academic critic of development. There comes a point, however, where the practitioner must move on and turn the reflections into thoughtful action. For example, Paul Farmer questioned whether or not he had actually accomplished anything for Haiti in his article “The Anthropologist Within.” Even as a medical doctor, he found his anthropological training to be invaluable while doing development work:

\[B\]ut did I really do anything for Haiti? The question may sound ‘neurotic’ or defeatist, but I can’t help wondering if development projects would be more successful if there were more neurotic anthropologists around to ask such questions… If anthropology can foster both understanding and concern for the possible consequences of one’s actions, perhaps it should be required reading for medical students. (1985: 28)

Anthropology should indeed have an important role in educating others about the need for cultural sensitivity in development work. Later in his work, Farmer describes how he came to conclusions about “areas of moral clarity.” Although he acknowledged the possible consequences of taking a strong stand on certain issues, he accepts responsibility for them.

Not only must people be willing to listen to and appreciate different approaches to development, but the west as embodied in international development institutions must also become more willing to learn from nonwestern countries (Jolly 2002: 28-9). Although there seems to be very little hope that such shifts in global power structures will occur in the near future, there are certainly increasing examples of true dialogue.

Most people in nonwestern countries are not asking to counterbalance western universalism with a kind of orientalism; rather, they look for some kind of system that takes “the experiences and aspirations of women [and poor people] in the Third World countries seriously” (Raman 2007). The women’s movement in India is growing in strength, but without some kind of unifying force it will be difficult to make much progress, argues Agnihotri (2005: 15). She
tells us, “to think that spontaneous groups of women in villages or wherever will be able to take on the might of the global forces would be living in a fools paradise” (Agnihotri 2005: 15). At this point in time, rather than focusing on a universalizing agenda, feminist groups should concentrate on “unequal patriarchies and disparate genders,” and work to reconstruct a global movement based on differences. Mohanty argues that her seminal work, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” was not intended to prove the “impossibility of egalitarian and noncolonizing cross-cultural scholarship” (2003: 224). A global feminist movement must be based on the “belief that ‘common differences’ can form the basis of deep solidarity, and that we have to struggle to achieve this in the face of unequal power relations among feminists” (Mohanty 2003: 225). These unequal power relations among feminists persist, just as the unequal power relations among nations prevents nonwestern countries from being valued as they should – as independent entities with the ability to act on behalf of their own citizens. And yet, people are not always able to act on their own behalf, not only because of the power structures that work against them, but also because of the limitations of their worldview. Development practitioners should help people to see the potential for change and growth in their own lives, which is why discussions of grassroots empowerment must not be tossed aside.

The Possible Future of Development and Gender and Development Work

Although some academics have decided to give up the concept of development altogether, advocating a shift to “post-development,” I myself am not ready to give up on the concept of development. There certainly needs to be more sensitivity to cultural differences on all levels of development work – including in interactions between the facilitators and members of self-help groups, the government and poor people, the government and civil society or NGOs, the west and the nonwest, international development organizations and the countries receiving
their aid under stringent conditions, and feminists in western countries and nonwestern countries. Rather than continuing to reproduce value only for one particular form of development knowledge, the goal must be to foster appreciation for new knowledge, a knowledge that values people as fellow humans rather than as targets of development and assistance.

Global conditions and global power relations must change before people’s lives can improve (Gardner and Lewis 2005: 358), and ignoring this bigger picture merely by focusing on grassroots development is to do everyone involved a disservice (Parpart 2002: 47). In the meantime, the power of the “North” must not be overestimated; nor should the resilience of the “South” be underestimated (Parpart 2002: 47). Changes to culturally embedded institutions such as social class, caste systems, and gender relations will take time (Everett 1983: 24), and these changes might not always take the form expected by the west or anyone else, for that matter.

As stated throughout this thesis, gender and development work based upon universal discourse of rights or a certain western conception of modernity is a dangerous tool. At the end of the day, however, development practitioners who are seriously considering academic critiques of development work must move past the aporia of the development encounter. They must continue their necessary effort of trying to make positive changes in the lives of people who are disadvantaged and discriminated against in society. Recognizing the failings and limitations of their own knowledge about and representations of others allows development workers to be more sensitive in their approach to development work. No matter how one understands development, the work is morally grounded in the radical idea that the status quo is not acceptable. Even if morals are the product of one’s worldview, they are indispensable to people interested in making positive changes.
Following this extensive review of development work and its critiques, I feel that I have gained a better understanding of some of the possible ethical dangers that development work entails. After having struggled with the critiques of development for the past academic year, calling into question all of my once-strongly-held beliefs about the desirability of development, I feel much more prepared to think critically and sensitively about this subject as I continue my studies in Mumbai, India at the Tata Institute for Social Sciences (M.A. in Development Studies) next year. With a strong grounding in anthropology, I hope that whatever contributions I am able to make through development work in the future reflect the intense critical analysis that began here at Franklin & Marshall. It is with cautious optimism that I move out of my state of aporia and back into the world of development work, hopefully a bit smarter for the process.
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