

WHO DETERMINES NEED? A CASE STUDY OF A WOMEN'S ORGANISATION IN NORTH INDIA

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Empowerment and participation are concepts that run throughout discourses on development. In the following, I look at the context of empowerment for women within the debate around people's needs, and then illustrate some of the issues arising through a case study of women's development in a non-governmental organisation in India.

Within an era when basic needs approaches to development are current, there is a continuing debate about the nature of these needs and whether they should be perceived as a matter of 'human rights'. Although the notion of need is itself problematic, there is general agreement about broadly defined human rights, e.g. food, shelter, water. However, the way in which these needs should be fulfilled is open to a variety of interpretations. Typically, basic needs have been determined by experts: development or welfare professionals. They have defined which social groups should be seen as a priority, determined to what extent their needs should be satisfied and identified how this should be done.¹ This approach renders individuals passive and obscures the fact that the interpretation of needs is not self-evident but a highly political issue. The discourse around the politics of need interpretation challenges the dominant policy frameworks in development, frameworks that are determined at many levels: local, state and international. There is a need to displace the political momentum which currently is largely to and from the centre² so that people at a local level can be involved in identifying and contextualising their own needs. This will inevitably raise many areas of potential conflict.

To enter into a political debate around people's needs will necessitate finding an arena for discourse. Within patriarchal, capitalist societies, politics is usually defined as separate from the economic and domestic sphere. Nancy Fraser identifies two principal sets of institutions that depoliticize social discourse — domestic institutions, particularly the normative, male-headed family, and economic capitalist institutions. Both of these are arenas in which relations of domination and subordination exist. Within gender relations, the power in both the economic and domestic sphere lies with the masculine, and women, as members of a subordinated group, may internalize an

understanding of needs that works to their own disadvantage.³ However, it is clear that although women may adopt these imposed need interpretations, there is often a latent oppositional movement to them.

Fraser postulates that three major kinds of discourse about needs exist in late capitalist societies, and I will explore the relevance of this model to Women in Development (WID). She identifies them as:

Oppositional forms of need talk: a politicized way of talking about needs which stems from subordinate groups

Reprivatization discourses which attempt to return these politicized debates to a normative, non-political sphere that was previously taken for granted

Expert need discourses which reinterpret political demands and present them in a form acceptable to the state.

In proposing this model, it is important to note that it assumes the initial interpretation of needs emerges from the oppressed groups. The reprivatization and expert need discourses are contextualised as responses to the needs expressed by these subordinate groups.

In reality, whether within the context of a Western welfare state or of women's development in parts of Africa or Asia, we find a highly complex picture. There will be a multiplicity of discourses about needs already in existence, emerging from the state, from professionals, religious organisations, politicians, the media, community groups and others. Some of these groups will adhere strongly to normative values, identifying themselves with reprivatization discourses. Others will attempt to reinterpret women's needs for them, whilst others will clearly align themselves with the subordinate group. It is not automatic that a particular organisation or institution will necessarily be aligned with one type of discourse. For example, the state may, at different times and over different issues, identify itself with each of the separate discourses on needs.

Within the growing field of WID in academic and international agencies, it is increasingly clear that there

¹ Fraser, N., 1989, 'Struggle over needs: outline of a socialist-feminist critical theory of late capitalist political culture' in *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, Polity Press: 161-90

² Wisner, B., 1988, *Power and Need in Africa*, Earthscan Publications: 121

³ Fraser, N., 1989, 'Struggle over needs', op cit: 168-9

is no uniform way of viewing the politics of need interpretation. There continues to be a strong commitment to women's empowerment from some quarters, linked to a recognition of the need to be clearly allied with local women's interpretation of needs and the political demands they make. However, there is much work emerging which suggests a swing away from a political approach to WID, to a more expert needs type approach, which situates women as welfare clients and thus reduces the possibilities for local women of gaining power to influence change.

Any subordinate group attempting to express its own view of its needs will do so against this pre-existing backdrop of debate about, and action in response to, perceived needs. The group may in fact have been stimulated to articulate its own interpretation of needs in response to attempts to impose an external interpretation. There are numerous examples of situations in which women's personal experiences have been given new meaning by the attempts of others to define the women's problems for them and to provide solutions.⁴ This change in consciousness has led to women organising themselves around issues that are a continuing part of their day-to-day experience — health, fertility, environment, water, work, sexual violence.

Whether through responding to imposed programmes, gaining access to new circles, through education, politics or other avenues, women may be exposed to new ways of constituting the meaning of their experiences, ways that appear to address their interests more directly and which help lead to an understanding of the social production of the problems they face as a subordinate group. It is through this process of attempting to identify interests more clearly that women come to interpret their needs and develop the struggle for change. What we are seeing in these situations is the opening to women of the possibility of new modes of subjectivity, new ways of being an individual, which offers both a perspective and a choice. It is from this change of consciousness that resistance and struggles for political change emerge.

Although this only briefly sketches the outline of a theoretical framework, it provides us with one way of discussing approaches to development that emphasise the political dimensions of any type of programme initiated, and the centrality of empowerment within this.

INTRODUCTION TO SUTRA

In the following case study, I look at the process of women's empowerment within a development programme in India, reflecting upon the applicability of the above analysis of approaches to women's development.

1 Background to the area

Jagjitnagar, the base of the indigenous non-governmental organisation, Society for Social Uplift Through Rural Action (SUTRA), is a small village situated in the foothills of the Himalayas in Himachal Pradesh, India. It is 15 miles off the main Chandigarh to Shimla highway, in an area of rugged, hilly terrain, rising to a height of 5,000 feet above sea level. Transport is by hill roads, many of which are still unsealed and impassable in the rainy season, or by foot along steep mountain tracks. The population is scattered, living in small villages or isolated homesteads, and although amenities have improved dramatically over the last 15 years, electricity and protected drinking water supplies are still not available in many homes.

The people of the area are descendants of those driven into the hills a couple of centuries ago due to persecution by the Moghuls, and one finds a blend of Pahari (hill) and Punjabi culture.⁵ The majority religion is Hindu. Development in the region has been uneven, stemming in part from the former colonial presence in hill stations around the region, which resulted in areas of concentrated amenities surrounded by underdevelopment.

Until recently it supported an agricultural subsistence economy, growing maize, wheat and pulses. The hills in many places are steeply terraced for farming, the remainder being grazing land for cattle, or government planted pine forest. There is now an increasing amount of land given over to growing vegetables for the market. Patterns of employment are changing, with women taking an increasing responsibility for farm work — they do 50 per cent of the field work, 90 per cent of the cattle care and all the domestic work⁶ but are rarely found in the wage labour force. Women's work is physically very demanding, made increasingly so over recent years as access to fodder and fuel has diminished due to increasing state control of forest areas, with concomitant deforestation. Meanwhile men are moving out to work in the factories and forest-based industries opening on the plains, taking service jobs, or working as daily wage labourers on the roads, paid by the government. These changing patterns of migration,

⁴ Weedon, C., 1987, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Basil Blackwell: 33

⁵ Sarin, M., 1989, 'Himachali women — a situational analysis', a report prepared for UNICEF

⁶ Sethi, R. M. and SUTRA, 1988, 'Quantification of labour inputs by women in agriculture and allied activities', report submitted to the Ministry of Labour, Government of India

together with a growing number of deserted wives means that there are estimated to be over 15 per cent female headed households.⁷

The dominant culture is strongly patriarchal. Girl children are less valued than boys, are expected to take more responsibility on a day-to-day level for work around the home, and are subject to far more restrictions on their behaviour than boys. Most marriages are arranged, and women are held responsible for the family 'ijjat' or honour. With homes being so scattered and severe restrictions placed on women's opportunities to travel around the area, they often face isolation. Despite their massive labour input to the household, women living in male-headed households usually exist in a situation of economic dependency. Hinduism, as practised locally, demands that women recognise and follow many taboos and pollution rituals, particularly linked with menstruation and childbirth, although younger women are beginning to rebel against these. There are many severe social problems faced by women: bigamy, desertion, rape within the family, male alcoholism, domestic violence and suicide.

With the formation of Development Blocks by the national government, there has been increasing state involvement in the lives of people, particularly those who are most disadvantaged. Schemes, particularly for the uplift of the rural poor, are available through the development office — loans for cattle, agricultural equipment and small businesses — but there is a network of corruption surrounding these which render it difficult if not impossible for those eligible to actually benefit. The difficulties are manifestly greater for women, whose eligibility is in any case limited, often to schemes such as sewing classes, of little use to women who have a farm to run. It was within this context that SUTRA, an indigenous non-government organisation, started to work in 1977.

2 SUTRA and development

SUTRA was the first organisation of its kind to work in Himachal Pradesh, where the only precedents in the field of voluntary work were those of the welfare organisations, which ran creches for children, literacy programmes for women, and hostels for students. Supported by a combination of government and foreign aid agency funding, SUTRA was started by a male social worker from Maharashtra and staffed predominantly by local young men. As an organisation that aimed towards broader social development SUTRA had to face many misconceptions about its role. On the one hand were those who expected them to take up welfare programmes, and on the other were

those who saw their partial foreign funding as a political threat. These fears and misconceptions were exacerbated by the fact that Himachal has almost no overt history of people's movements and so there has been a limited tradition of local political action.⁸

SUTRA began its work with a commitment to change, to improving the lives of local people. In working towards this, in the early years, they adopted the pre-existing development framework espoused by the government, that of service delivery. Through their programmes they attempted to show how services could be provided more effectively and efficiently, better targeted to those in greatest need, than was current through government channels. They argued that when people recognised that better quality development services could be provided, they would demand change from the government. In adopting this approach, they accepted the pre-existing interpretation of local people's needs.

Thus, whilst establishing a base, SUTRA became heavily involved in development and welfare schemes of a service delivery nature. These included creches, literacy programmes, subsidised agricultural extension schemes, and a health programme. Projects were gendered, with those directed towards men aiming at increasing agricultural production, enhancing access to markets and improving economic status, whilst those directed towards women conformed with the dominant ideology of women's role in the family, in childcare, health and domestic work. Funding for these projects came from both government and international funding agencies, and the nature of the project was to a large extent constrained by the demands and needs of these funding bodies.

By 1984, there was a growing questioning within the organisation of their aims and policies, asking whether by confining themselves to running development schemes, many of which were also provided through government services, they were actually stimulating change. The debate centred around the meaning of development and social change, raising questions of social justice, discrimination against the weaker sections of society, and of the distribution of power. The result of this internal evaluation was a consensus decision to change direction, to work to raise awareness amongst villagers, encouraging them to demand improved performance from the government through collective action and to express their views on how their needs should be met, rather than continuing to provide replacement services.⁹

⁷ Sarin, M., 1989, op cit

⁸ SUTRA, 1990, 'Organising hill women: a quest for change', an

evaluation report prepared by SUTRA women's staff

⁹ SUTRA, 1990, op cit

An analysis of their work up to this time indicated that the major active participants in programmes had been women. A number of Mahila Mandals (women's groups) had been started, and the positive attitude and interest from women was far greater than that shown by men. Women expressed the view that the organisation offered them an alternative space, (although not at this stage an alternative vision), and were beginning to recognise latent possibilities for change. Existing social, religious, economic and political organisations either ignored women or worked against their interests and so the organisation shifted its emphasis entirely and concentrated on building up women's organisations as its main goal, giving secondary importance to the implementation of development programmes.

Partly as a result of the raised awareness created through the International Decade of Women, there were changes both in government policy, especially within the Central Social Welfare Board, (a government funding body), and within international agencies. Funding women's projects became the 'flavour of the month'. This gave SUTRA greater access to financial support for women's programmes. There was an increased recognition of women's multiple tasks and problems, and of the need to put time and resources into women's personal development, rather than to supporting ideologically inappropriate and under-funded welfare schemes. This led to a willingness on the part of some agencies to support projects that aimed to raise women's awareness, to help them organise and mobilise. However, many others continued to have clearly set limits as to the types of programmes they were prepared to support.

At this stage, there was the beginning of a move away from accepting that women's involvement in development should be pre-determined according to an existing set of frameworks. Women had begun to fight back both against having their own needs defined by the government or aid agencies. Nor were they prepared to accept their traditional ideological roles as 'simply' wives and mothers, limited to the household with access only to sewing and pickle-making schemes. Slowly, and with many set-backs, they were beginning to explore how they could be involved in defining their own needs and priorities.

3 Formation of Mahila Mandals

The increasing emphasis on work with Mahila Mandals represented a shift in ethos within the organisation, a shift to which the Mahila Mandals themselves also had to adapt. Initially there were strong expectations that schemes would be forthcoming as in the past, and many women were heavily pressurised by their husbands to bring back evidence of material benefits from the meetings. When this failed to materialise, some women dropped out but groups gradually grew in strength and

women clearly expressed the value they felt in being able to meet together with other women in an informal situation. Traditionally, women's lives are very isolated, with rare occasions for meetings with women from outside the family. The opportunity to come together, discuss local village problems, share ideas and gain new information from the organisation's staff who attended most meetings, led to a slow increase both in the self confidence the women felt, and in group solidarity. Inevitably there was conflict to be resolved — often resulting from caste barriers, or precipitated by husbands politicking to establish their wives in powerful positions within the group, thinking to gain some benefit from this.

4 Women staff

A major problem that began to emerge as the groups grew in strength was the limited number of female staff working within the organisation. Most of the initial awareness raising work with women had been carried out by male staff, and yet, as discussions broadened and women increased in self confidence, there emerged a growing number of issues which male staff were not able to address easily, due to cultural barriers. These included obvious areas such as women's health and religious taboos against women, but as time went on and women staff began to work with the mandals, many new problems came to light, particularly those of domestic violence, rape and alcoholism. Thus issues that were viewed as private and personal began to be addressed within a public space, and became a focus of political debate amongst women.

The need to increase female staff numbers had not gone unrecognised and yet, from the early days, a series of traditions had grown up around work — that field staff had to be literate, they had to be able to work full time, and they had to be ready to be based wherever the organisation sent them within the area. Most women could not even meet one, never mind all of these criteria. There were women working within other projects for SUTRA, but these were largely home or village based roles: creche workers, women building smokeless cooking stoves, traditional midwives.

The breakthrough in bringing more women in to work with women's groups came about not through any major change in the situation of local women, but through shifts in the organisation. Once an agreement was reached to abandon the criteria indicated above, a small core staff of women emerged, some of whom worked in other programmes, some of whom were Mahila Mandal activists at a village level, and some of whom had problems at home, having been deserted or their husband having taken a second wife. The choice of taking local women as workers had been a conscious one, based on the belief that local women who

developed skills as activists would have a far greater understanding of and empathy with local problems, and also be more acceptable to village women than workers from outside the area.

With the entry of local women staff into the organisation, there was a further shift in approach. As indicated, previous programmes for women's development had tended to follow a normative framework, and even with the reorientation within SUTRA, this still continued to be partially true. As the numbers of women staff increased, they were able to articulate the needs of local women far more clearly as, for many of them, they were their own personal needs too. A much clearer debate around needs emerged and the Mahila Mandals started to play an increasing role in determining what programmes should be adopted and what issues addressed.

The training, development of skills and problems faced by female activists are discussed further at a later stage.

5 Politics of need prioritisation

As the women's groups grew in confidence, they began to identify needs that fell beyond those arenas seen as being women's traditional family responsibility. They thus challenged the public/private divide, which sees women's needs as private, to be met within the confines of the family, whilst the public, political discourse is reserved for men. Drinking water supplies to the village, irrigation schemes, teachers non-attendance at school, the patwari (land registration officer) taking bribes — all these were issues about which women expressed concern. Although mandals were taking up issues that were related to their own villages, largely concerned with service provision, they frequently came into conflict with both government servants and village menfolk in their campaigns. Many of the cases that women addressed were in fact the responsibility of the village panchayat on which women were either not represented or had only a nominated and frequently silenced member. Both Panchayat members and government officers to whom they took their complaints frequently failed to respond, or treated the women with disrespect, trying to fool them because they were illiterate, or demanding that the women send their menfolk in their place. Through these experiences, the women began to have a clearer understanding of local political processes and the ways in which they deny women a voice. Their response was to develop innovative methods to make their protest and put their demands forward.

The harijan village of Zhangar had recently had a drinking water supply installed, but the upper caste

villages who lived down the hill had blocked the pipes, cutting the supply. The Chief Minister of HP was known to be passing through a few days later and so the women arranged to sit in dharna on the road where his car was to pass. They refused to let him leave until he had given in writing that their supply would be reinstated.

It was clear that as women began to raise their voices and identify their own needs they were coming up against a number of problems. On the one hand they were expected to be satisfied with programmes within a welfare framework that institutionalised their roles as wives and mothers and emphasised their economic dependence on men, projects that can be categorised as 'system conforming ones that reinforce rather than challenge basic structural inequalities'.¹⁰

In addition to their categorisation within the welfare mode, a reprivatization discourse was taking place. This questioned not so much the issues that women were raising but, more powerfully, the right of women to raise these issues at all. There was a clear attempt by both government officials and village men to prevent women from entering the political arena and to restrict them to the private world of the family, thus re-establishing the public/private dichotomy and restricting women to their normative gendered role as wives and mothers.

A further set of problems arose 'from the typical way in which issues get framed, given the institutional dynamics of the political system?'¹¹ 'What I want to highlight here is the way in which pre-established modes of service-delivery for development limit the opportunities offered to oppressed groups, such as women, to express their own needs. The demands women were raising initially were largely around social welfare and basic needs, identified by them within their own villages. The state/welfare/development systems, which are still predominantly male-dominated and hierarchical, are accustomed to defining for themselves what needs a group is experiencing, how far the system should go in satisfying these pre-determined needs and how this should be accomplished. This way of asking the question limits the answers and tends to take for granted that needs are self-evident and beyond dispute. That 'clients' of the system should begin to prioritize their own needs and define the ways in which they should be provided for is rarely considered. The system is limited in its ability to respond to the political reality of people's interpretations of their own needs, particularly those of women, who have little place within it either as employees or political decision makers.

¹⁰ Fraser, N., 1989, 'Women, welfare and the politics of need interpretation', op cit: 145

¹¹ Fraser, N., 1989, 'Women, welfare and the politics of need interpretation', *ibid*: 145

However, there have been notable exceptions to these major trends. The Central Social Welfare Board and the women's section of the Ministry for Human Resource Development of the Government of India created and funded a number of programmes for voluntary organisations which offered support to women to enable them to meet together, raise awareness, organise and mobilise, thus offering the opportunity for women to participate actively in defining their own development needs, rather than simply accepting pre-determined programmes.

SUTRA took full advantage of these schemes. As women became more organised, they made demands on development and welfare systems that established a political discourse on the interpretation of needs and challenged both the normative and the various 'expert' views. Addressing these local issues pulled women into conflict with the state and with their menfolk, challenging patriarchal institutions. This growing critical consciousness acted as the stimulus for a number of changes and developments within the women's groups.

6 Questioning social and economic norms

As the organisation shifted from a welfare stance, it reduced the number of programmes that had provided subsidies and direct material benefits thus creating a direct dependency on the organisation (e.g. agricultural subsidies, irrigation schemes). At the same time, there was a recognition from women that economic and social change had to take place hand in hand if they were to become truly empowered.

Women have few personal possessions and rarely own land, being dependent, according to custom, on first father, then husband, then son, throughout their lives. The situation is changing as the number of female headed households increases, and women contribute a major share in all family economies with their input to agriculture and cattle care, bearing increasing responsibility for subsistence farming as men become increasingly involved in the cash economy. Women expressed the view that the atrocities committed against some of them, particularly within the family, were exacerbated by their economic dependence. One aspect of the solution to this that they identified was the need for women to increase their material possessions and access to credit. The majority of loan schemes provided by the government either did not include women, or were extremely difficult to negotiate, and thus SUTRA was encouraged to set up a loan scheme specifically for women of the local Mahila Mandals. This was organised so that the responsibility for decisions about loans, their disbursement and repayments lay largely with the mandals, who aimed to provide particular help to poor women, within their villages.

Alongside, a number of mandals set up their own small loan scheme, which provided women with support in times of family crisis such as deaths or sickness. This scheme has provided a background of economic support from which women have felt able to address questions of social subordination.

In the early days, questions at a village level about violence against women, problems of widows or of deserted women, were usually met with silence or a denial of any difficulties. Women felt that the honour of the family was affected by such discussions, and if individual women were being beaten or facing other difficulties, there was often a tendency to lay the blame on the woman herself, for not 'suffering in silence'. One of the stimuli that brought about greater recognition of these problems and increased support to women who suffered from them, was the role played by the women staff. Amongst them there were a number who had suffered severe hardships at home.

Savitri had married when only 13, and became sterile as a result of a difficult first delivery, when she bore a daughter. Her husband took a second wife who had two sons, and Savitri became, in effect, the household servant. Her husband started drinking and beat her so badly on a number of occasions she almost died. Savitri eventually left, initially to work in a factory and ultimately to join the organisation. Once working with SUTRA, given support and encouraged to share her personal experiences, she became strong and confident in sharing them with other women at a village level. As the subject was opened, and some of the taboos began to be stripped away, an increasing number of women came forward on their own or others' behalf, to explore ways in which violent and potentially dangerous situations for women could be dealt with. Women began to take action at a local level, confronting men involved in violence and involving the village panchayat in determining solutions. They also gained confidence in using the legal system, pressurising the police to file cases of assault against its perpetrators.

The growing need to deal with violence against women was occurring within the context of changing social norms. In recent years the government has started a large number of liquor outlets at village level, and their presence has led to increased levels of drunkenness amongst the men, violence against women, suicide by a number of women who were unable to bear the pressures of life with a drunkard, and severe economic problems leading to malnutrition in children of families where the father was drinking.

Thus, domestic violence, which has always been viewed as situated in the private domain was brought

into the public sphere, and women struggled to establish it as a legitimate area of concern and action. The separation of public and private spheres is again shown to be a false divide, for the major increase in 'private' domestic violence had come about as a result of state policies increasing the sale of alcohol for revenue purposes.

7 Political action

The women of the Mahila Mandals began a major campaign against the opening of liquor shops in their villages. This marked a new stage in the women's consciousness as they moved on from local issues to address a problem faced by women across the region. Their latent opposition to alcohol and the violence it produces had found an avenue for expression and the anti-liquor campaign drew them together. The actions they have undertaken have led to many changes in the women, increasing their confidence and providing the basis for a solidarity which has become more firmly established with time.

The campaign brought them into head on conflict — with the state government, which earns a large share of its revenue from liquor sales, with the village Panchayats which play a role in establishing liquor shops in the villages, and in some cases, with the men of their own households.

The success of the campaign was mixed. They took out court petitions to prevent outlets opening, staged sit-ins both outside the liquor shops themselves and in front of the courts and, ultimately undertook a five day march to mount a protest outside the Chief Minister's residence in the state capital. They were unable to prevent the opening of the majority of shops in the region, but a small number were shifted or closed, largely due to the women staging protest sit-ins on the road in front of the shops, and stopping all traffic passing for a number of days. In many areas, women and men worked closely together on these campaigns, women coming to the fore due to the men's fear of the greater violence that might be used against them by the state.

Since this first major campaign, women have become involved in a series of other campaigns. These have included forest based issues such as the control of village common land by the government, and the planting of commercial trees instead of fodder species, an attempt to stop limestone quarrying that was damaging fertile land and leading to serious environmental problems, and a series of more local issues that affected groups of women have taken up together.

One further consequence of the women's joint

campaigning together has been the formation of a women's federation, stretching across the state, and involving women from Mahila Mandals in seven development blocks. This provides a permanent organised base which is independent from SUTRA and which is run by representatives of the Mahila Mandals.

8 Experience and training of women staff

The major part of this case study has looked at the organisational experience of moving from a 'welfare approach to development' to one which focuses on the politics of need interpretation and women's empowerment. A major impetus for this change has been individual women involved with SUTRA, either as staff or as local Mahila Mandal members. In this section I will look at the experiences of these women. If this more personal aspect of history is ignored there is the danger of setting up a division in which changes in the organisation are represented as unconnected to the lives of women, as they move from the private sphere and client role to a position of greater empowerment.

In becoming active in Mahila Mandals and in particular in joining the staff of the organisation, women were stepping out of the normative roles assigned them. I have previously described the difficulties within the organisation in altering rules to enable women staff to be employed. Once on the staff, they faced very powerful pressures to return to their traditional way of life. Rumours circulated around the area that they were loose women, employed for the satisfaction of the male staff of the organisation, and whilst out on field work they were verbally harassed and, on a number of occasions, physically assaulted by local men. There were problems to establish a space in a previously male-dominated structure. They received support from some of the male staff, but others felt very strongly that women should not be carrying out such work and harassed them.

A decision to provide women-only space and time for the staff was one of the most important steps in enabling the women to deal with the personal conflicts aroused by the new role they were taking on. Regular meetings and longer bi-monthly workshops served as an arena in which women could not only develop new skills and gain knowledge, but more importantly, talk about their lives and the conflicts they were facing. A tradition rapidly grew through which women shared experiences, talked at great length about their life histories, and offered each other support and empathy to deal with both work and personal situations. Contradictions continually emerged as the women staff struggled with their conditioned views and internalized beliefs on themselves as women, their expectations of the state and 'experts', and their desire for change.

A major element in these workshops was an exploration of the politics of culture. A feminist researcher from Delhi shared her work on the representation of women in ancient texts and temple architecture and sculpture, with the women. The interpretation she offered differed dramatically from the current tendency towards Hindu fundamentalist thought, providing women both with alternative views on women's power, strength and roles, and with the skills to start questioning and challenging for themselves. Through pictures, stories, role play, possession, dance and drama the women staff began an exploration of themselves, their bodies, and their culture which enabled them to explore their fears and fantasies and empowered them.

This was supported by sessions spent looking specifically at women's relations to their bodies, unwrapping the pollution taboos that surround them, and sharing stories and information — on the personal, mythical, metaphorical and anatomical experiences of the body. These types of sessions were of vital importance in helping women build their self-confidence, to enable them to use the practical knowledge they also gained — in legal issues, cattle care, loans schemes and health — for the support of women in the Mahila Mandals.

As the women staff have grown in confidence, a number have moved out to establish sub-centres of the women's organisation across the state, thus extending the work in women's development to a larger area.

CONCLUSIONS

In the first half of this article I addressed the question of current trends in Women in Development (WID) and highlighted the dangers of universalizing and institutionalizing these approaches. In particular, I focused on the welfare ideologies that continue to play a major role in women's development programmes and I attempted to show how displacing these opened up many new possibilities for women to be empowered and involved in their own development. More specifically, I looked at the question of needs, relating it particularly to the potential for oppressed groups such as women to be involved in defining and acting upon their own perceptions of their needs.

In the latter half, I have tried to show how this theoretical critique can help us to refocus far more clearly upon women in local communities. Rather than exploring the state or funding agencies, views of how women's development should happen, I have attempted to record the experiences of the women themselves. Through their struggles, set-backs and successes what emerges most clearly is that, when given the space and opportunity to express their needs, to work together, to challenge the limitations of their normative roles, women can and want to be responsible for determining the nature of 'Women's Development' in their own backyard.

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