# Women – The Way Out of Poverty

*- Locating women empowerment in a case study of Kudumbashree*

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# Abstract

Since the early 1990s the concept of 'women empowerment' has gained ground in the development discourse as a result of the acknowledgement of the marginalization of women in development strategies. Poverty is frequently given the face of a woman, making it fashionable to evolve gender sensitive development schemes based on women empowerment, which are supposed to challenge the victimization of poor women. In the South Indian State of Kerala, a statewide poverty eradication program called Kudumbashree has developed an anti-poverty strategy including a participatory approach towards women empowerment. Our aim is to critically examine the implementation of women empowerment.

At a theoretical level this study draws on insights from Marxist, development, postmodern, and feminist scholars, and we analyze social and economic empowerment using a multiplicity of methods and sources, with a main focus on oral narratives. In the analysis social and economic changes have been considered, not only with regard to material 'realities', but also in terms of ideology and hegemonic domination. In order to locate the relationship between power structures and the human ability to negotiate with these structures we address the notions of consciousness and agency, which are decisive to understand the process of women empowerment. Our view taken here is that consciousness is shaped by both ideological structures and lived realities, stressing the significance of historical and cultural contexts.

This study shows that women empowerment may reinforce a dependency of the tools given and reproduce a power relation between the women and their potential 'saviors', as development programs tend to move towards a liberal direction rather than challenging dominant ideologies and Western hegemony.

Key words: India, Kerala, Kudumbashree, development, women empowerment, class, gender, ethnicity, ideology, hegemonic domination, participation, agency, consciousness

# I  Introduction

## Background

> " The main aim of Kudumbashree is eradication of relative poverty. Kudumbashree expects to complete its mission within 10 years. Women should get empowered to move on with all these activities. Once these women are empowered, no middleman is needed in this process. Women themselves can work to achieve the aim if they are truly empowered – poverty has got the face of woman. If there is not enough food at home, the woman is the first and last person to go without food. Poverty means the absence of many things. Women does not have a voice, and she is not heard anywhere. /.../ "
> – Lizzy, CDS-president, born 1960[1]

Meeting the 45-year-old Keralan woman Lizzy became the end of our ten-week-stay in Kerala – a small state in the southern part of India. Her story was not very different from that of any of the other women we met during our study, but she put words on problems often overlooked in development schemes. In development work women issues have been frequently marginalized, although the socio-economic situation of many women makes them constitute the group hit hardest in economic crises and employment shortage.[2] However, realizing that 70 per cent of the poor in the world are women it became impossible to dismiss the correlation between women and poverty, making it fashionable to talk about a 'feminization of the poor'. Hence, today many poverty alleviation programs organize women or at least pay attention to women's education in development planning, but the reasons for moving women's situation from the margin to the center of the measurement of well-being differ widely.

 'Kudumbashree' – which literally means family woman – started off as a poverty alleviation scheme in 1998 with the intention of eradicating absolute poverty in the State of Kerala in a ten-year-period. With the strategy to work through *women empowerment* the aim is to make the poor emancipate themselves via a participatory approach towards poverty. These women, selected and organized in neighborhood groups (NHG), are given support to take different kinds of loans for starting up their own businesses – a form of micro enterprises. Through the concept of

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[1] Interview 6 January 2005.
[2] Women are carrying a double burden of work and household responsibilities, which results in women's combined paid and unpaid labor time is greater than men's, see UNDP, *India National Human Development report* (1997).

empowerment in different dimensions – social and economic – these women are supposed to be strengthened in their social position through education and organization.

Women empowerment has been a popular method in development work since realizing the correlation between women and poverty. A clear definition of the expression is almost impossible to come across, due to a diverse use in various contexts. As it forms the basis of the Kudumbashree project it is necessary to understand the significance of women empowerment and to be aware of Kerala's interesting past with its remarkable political background full of involvement among the population. Known for having the first elected communist rule in history and a tradition of social movements Kerala has become an object of fascination for many scientists. Despite limited economic resources the State has managed to achieve great progress in human development. Challenging the Western liberal idea about the correlation between economic growth and social welfare the State of Kerala constitutes a deviation and is seen as a paradox.[3] Thus, the development experience of Kerala, frequently referred to as 'the Kerala Model', is still an object of discussion in the debate on developing strategies.[4] With regard to the standard of living and status of women Kerala is far above low-income countries, and reaches a level comparable with some of the Western countries. Nevertheless, recently the status of women in Kerala has been problematized and the correlation between status and power is questioned.[5] Due to limited influence and power in decision-making bodies and increasing violence against women Kerala statues an example of gender ignorance among development experiences – exposing a second paradox. In this study we are revealing a third paradox concerning the idea of 'planning from below' – a strategy attempting to reorganize social movements on grass root level. Yet, the implementation of strategies initiated from above has resulted in difficulties to establish it in society. A contradiction located in our study of the Kudumbashree project, reflects the attempt to implement grass root agency from above. Hence, this paradoxical approach makes

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[3] Paradoxes are generally used to describe deviating phenomena that fail to correspond with acknowledged theories and established concepts. In this study the notion of paradox is used to explain a phenomenon, which collides with existing presumptions in development theories.

[4] Not all scholars agree that it is relevant to consider Kerala's development experience as a model, because of the contextual difficulties to apply a specific model in other regions without taking into account the relevance of historical backgrounds. For a discussion of the Kerala Model, see M.A. Oommen (ed.), *Kerala's Development Experince*, 2 vols (New Delhi, 1999); Govindan Parayil (ed.), *Kerala, The Development Experince: Reflections on Sustainability and Replicability* (New York, 2000).

[5] Monica Erwér, *Challenging the Genderparadox. Women´s Collective Agency in the Transformation of Kerala Politics* (Göteborg, 2003); Anna Lindberg, *Experience and Identity: A Historical Account of Class, Caste, and Gender among the Cashew Workers of Kerala, 1930-2000* (Malmö, 2001).

it relevant to discuss if it is efficient to work with women empowerment as a development strategy.

## The Aim of the Study

This study arose out of our interest in women's organization and Kerala's political past. The study was carried out in November 2004 – January 2005 and consists of interviews made with women and government officials involved in the Kudumbashree project and participatory observations. The aim of our study is to examine the implementation of women empowerment. The main focus is upon how women empowerment works in practice at a local level and to recognize how the women involved experience it. Being a part of feminist studies in the Western part of the world, our research became an attempt to come across the well-discussed problem of Western hegemony in the feminist debate and to make visible stories often overlooked in feminist studies about women in the so-called 'Third world'.[6] How do the Western norms and values in development theory affect the approach towards the feminization of poverty? Have these norms and values influenced the implementation of women empowerment in development schemes? How do the women in the Kudumbashree project experience the development approach they are exposed to?

At the theoretical level the aim is to study the question of power drawing on perceptions of Marxist, development, postmodern, and feminist scholars. Through an ideological analysis of women empowerment in a case study of Kudumbashree, we examine social and material transformation. Conducting a fieldwork required an understanding of the problematic relationship between the researcher and the researched, a problem deriving from our power to interpret and define the social reality of the women interviewed. It is not possible to understand this context without take perspectives like class, gender, and ethnicity into consideration; i.e. socially constructed categories.

The study concerns women like Lizzy and their experiences of participating in an outspoken women empowerment project, analyzed through the context of working-class women within the

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[6] The concept of 'Third world' belongs to those categories that are non-essential constructions, and the relationship to the West includes various aspects of power, due to class, gender and ethnicity. Yet, the concept has been frequently criticized of reproducing power relations, a criticism which derives from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Stockholm, 2002). We are aware of the problematics of the concept, however, in this study we use the concept of Third world to illuminate power structures between those who are in control of dominating ideas and those who are left out.

poorest section. It is an attempt to give a perspective 'from below', trying to give voice to some of the women who usually do not leave written records behind.

## Kerala on the map

Located in the southwest of the Indian sub continental coastline and watered by the Arabian Sea, a small strip of tropical land with only 1.2 per cent of the geographical size of India has drawn scientific scholars' attention worldwide for its achievements in human development. The small state with its 32 million inhabitants has a history of social development achieved through social intermediation and public action.[7] Kerala is one of twenty-five constituent states of the Indian union and the region also has a long history of commercial and cultural contact with the outside world. The development experience of Kerala, also referred to as 'the Kerala Model', soon became an object for discussion in the debate on developing strategies and poverty alleviation schemes.[8]

  Kerala as a state was formed on 1 November 1956 as part of the States' Reorganisation exercise integrating the Malabar district of the former British colonial province of Madras in Tamil Nadu with the princely States of Cochin (in the middle) and Travancore (in the south).[9] Travancore, always independent from colonialism, was created after a war in the 18th century by the king Martma Varna, who annexed seven small kingdoms and made them into one.[10] The State of Cochin was integrated in its administrative territory in 1949, and the region was then named the state of Travancore-Cochin. The formation of Kerala as a state in its present form was a result of an all-Indian policy of assembling people with a common language in the same state. People in Kerala speak a Dravidian language called Malayalam, and are consequently referred to as Malayalees.

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[7] Kerala government website: http://www.kerala.gov.in/ 2005-04-02.

[8] For a discussion of the Kerala Model, see for example, M.A.. Oommen (ed.), *Kerala's Development Experience*, 2 vols (New Delhi, 1999); Govindan Parayil (ed.), *Kerala, The Development Experience: Reflections on Sustainability and Replicability* (New York, 2000). However, referring to the development experience in Kerala as a model has not been left unquestioned, and there seems to be an agreement among different scholars that each region and each place has its own specific culture and history. Hence there are contextual difficulties to apply a specific model in other regions, which makes the expression problematic.

[9] Govindan Parayil, "Introduction: Is Kerala's Development Experience a 'Model'?", in Govindan Parayil (ed.), *Kerala: The Development Experience* (New York, 2000), pp. 4.

[10] Even though the Travancore with its own monarchy never came under direct British supremacy, it was ruled de facto by the British, who took charge over the states economy early in the eighteenth century and one of the most significant changes under its control was according to Anna Lindberg "the thorough transformation of the country into a capitalist economy." The following social changes in the society created a rural proletariat, mostly constituted of agricultural labourers, who were forced to seek employment in the newly-established factories due to unemployment. Anna Lindberg, pp. 12-13.

In 1957, Kerala attracted the world's attention, when the first elected Communist government in the world came into power in Kerala's first public election. Even though the first democratically elected government of Kerala was dismissed two years later by the Congress-led central government, the political focus was on reduction of social and economic inequalities "through such measures as land and educational reforms."[11] The power-switch between the two parties has continued to color the political development in the state up to the present date.

## Structure of the Study

The following chapter includes two sections wherein we present our theoretical points of departure and methodology. The two sections are consciously not divided into two separated chapter as we consider theory and methodology intimately interconnected.

Chapter III includes a presentation of the development paradoxes of Kerala positioned in relation to the ideological hegemony of the West. It views the context of Kerala, but also emphasizes the power of capitalist forces.

In Chapter IV a brief overview of Kudumbashree is presented, followed by four thematic sections, which consitute the main part of the analysis. Examining women empowerment in the public as well as in the private sphere different dimensions of social and economic transformation are illuminated.

Chapter V summarizes the study and review it as a whole.

Even though the study in many ways has a convential structure, where theory and method are place before the explicit analysis chapters, the study as a whole contains discussions which constitutes different parts of the analytical approach.

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[11] Govindan Parayil, "Preface", in Govindan Parayil (ed.), *Kerala: The Development Experience* (New York, 2000), pp.viii.

# II  Concepts and Methodology

## Introduction

This chapter is divided into two sections in which we will present our theoretical point of departure and our methodology. Earlier research about women and development has mainly focused on economic structures and material conditions, and questions about how power structures interact and settle the premises of agency have conveniently been left out. Yet, there are more to the concept of power than just an economic aspect in a discussion about agency within oppressive structures. Our aim is to link ideological features to the creation of the Third World woman and her emancipation out of poverty. Our focus is upon how those women who are the focus of this study experience women empowerment, and what changes the project have come to bring about in their daily life. Emphasizing the meaning of ideological forces we also address the question of consciousness and how it is linked to the concept of agency. This chapter will consider several concepts which are central to an analysis of women's agency, consciousness, and empowerment.

## Hegemonic Domination

The connection between power structures and the human ability to negotiate with these structures needs to be analyzed in terms of agency and hegemonic domination. A theoretical point of departure in our study is that people, however poor or suppressed, have the capability of thinking, describing and analyzing their own situation. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony has provided us with tools to understand and interpret human agency within oppressive structures. Our theoretical framework concerns the problematic of Western hegemony towards the women interviewed which is relevant, not only to our analysis, but also when discussing methodological standpoints; how ideological structures influenced the way the study was carried out and how our origin as Westerners affected our choice of theory and method. Thus the concepts of ideology and hegemonic domination become relevant to discuss.

Ideology is to be seen in relation to material and social reality, as a 'set of ideas' through which people perceive and construct meaning of lived experiences. These ideas, however, derive from a

dialectical relation with materiality, wherefrom ideologies may emerge as a reflection of the material conditions in which social groups and classes exist. In this sense, ideology has a material base, forming representation of the imaginary relationship individuals have to their social existence. Gramsci asserts that ideology must be seen historically, as a part of structure, working on a super-structural level and affirming the legitimacy of prevalent structures. Therefore ideology should be distinguished from an individual's arbitrary stratagem, i.e. ideology cannot be seen as separated from the structure.[12]

Stuart Hall attempts to place the debate about ideology in a wider context by identifying the most telling weaknesses and limitations in the classical Marxist formulations about ideology. The concept of ideology could be seen as politicized, telling us about knowledge as neither true nor false.

> "By ideology I mean the mental frameworks – the language, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works." [13]

Rejecting the notion of ideologies as fixed or stable, Hall argues that ideology should rather be considered a variation of elements of discourses through different combinations.[14] Ideology should not be seen as exclusively based on class, but is also applicable to other social groups and categories. To avoid replicating the mistake to see 'pre-given' class subjects, and not fall into a trap of essentialist perspectives, Hall emphasizes that we must recognize different categories as 'black', 'white', etc. to be politically and culturally constructed.[15] In this sense the concept of ideology has evolved to refer to all organized forms of social thinking, a consequence derived out of influences from postmodern scholars. "We mean practical as well as the theoretical knowledges which enables people to 'figure out' society, and within whose categories and discourses we 'live out' and 'experience' our objective positioning in social relationships."[16] This definition, however, has been criticized for reducing the link between the concept of ideology and

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[12] Antonio Gramsci, *En kollektiv intellektuell* (Staffanstorp, 1967), pp. 80-81.
[13] Stuart Hall, "The Problem of ideology – Marxism without guarantees", in David Morley and Kuan-Hsin Chen (eds), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London, 1996), pp. 26.
[14] Ibid, pp. 40 ff.
[15] Ibid, pp. 17-18.
[16] Ibid, pp. 27.

class relations, which is explained through the dichotomy structure/superstructure, and the question if it is meaningful to apply such a loose definition of the concept has been raised.[17]

We use the concept of ideology in several dimensions of this study, including both our relationship to the women interviewed and in a discussion about hegemonic domination. On the one hand, we consider the position we as Western students have towards the women interviewed; a position influenced by our origin and our preconceptions of the Kerala society and the women living there. On the other, the experiences and reflexions the women involved in the project had of their own life-situation, deduced from the ideological structures in the society and their consciousness about those structures.[18]

   Ideas about social struggles and ideological forces are intimately bound to its historical context. Hall asserts that ideas "only become effective if they do, in the end, connect with a particular constellation of social forces. In that sense, ideological struggle is a part of the general social struggle for mastery and leadership – in short for hegemony."[19] Hall draws on Gramsci's notion of hegemony in a mere descriptive way of describing and understanding the process by which a historical bloc of social forces is constructed and "…the way we conceptualize the relationship between 'ruling ideas' and 'ruling class' is best thought in terms of the processes of 'hegemonic domination'."[20] Hegemony is seen as a process in which a certain social class could dominate and at the same time get the dominated classes' support. In this sense hegemony becomes a state of power where the ideas of the ruling class coincide with the ideas of the dominated classes, and the dominated classes will experience the dominating ideology as their own. Thus the notion of the connection between ruling ideas and ruling classes makes it more productive to discuss in terms of hegemony in ideological contexts while explaining domination.[21] The ruling classes' struggle to create a state of consensus to legitimize their ideological dominance has been considered to be a way for the ruling class not only to maintain prevalent structure, but also to obscure material relations, implying that the dominated classes would live blindly under a so

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[17] Diana Mulinari, "Om det behövs blir vi uppkäftiga…", in Paulina de los Reyes, Irene Molina, and Diana Mulinari (eds), *Maktens (olika) förklädnader* (Stockholm, 2003), pp. 101-102.

[18] Herein consciousness is defined as an 'awareness' of oppressive structures, i.e. structures based on class, ethnicity, and gender.

[19] Stuart Hall, pp. 43.

[20] Ibid, pp. 44.

[21] However, Gramsci made a conceptual distinction between power based on 'domination' and the exercise of 'hegemony'. This distinction is merely based on economic advance in society; whether it is possible for a social group to move beyond its economic position and aspire to a position of leadership in the political and social arena. See, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds), "Terminology", in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London, 1971), pp. xiii-xiv.

called 'false consciousness'. However, the concept of 'false consciousness' has been criticized for adapting an elitist view of humanity; indicating that workers, women, and racified groups show a false consciousness when their actions contradict what is said to be their objective interests.[22] In this way, the subjects of the dominated classes are seen as victimized, considered to be the ones suffering from such consciousness, and consequently, people's ability to analyze their own situation is dramatically reduced. The problem of the idea of false consciousness and victimized subjects is closely related to many feminists' critique of the Western hegemony and the creation of 'the other', i.e. Third world women.[23] But how is it then possible to write about women in the Third World without repeating and confirming traditional ways to refer to these women, and for us to problematize the structure of Kudumbashree without making simplifications like categories and generalizations? Is it possible to 'reveal' any kind of structures that we are within, and to see its influence on how we interpret and understand the stories of the women we interviewed? Is it possible to conduct a study based on fieldwork without having any valuation about their position in the society; a position defined on the basis of being women, poor, and in many cases uneducated?

Whether we choose to speak about ideological forces and consciousness in terms of falseness or not, one-sided explanations tend to ignore the subjects of dominated social groups neglecting the prospect of struggles for opposing ideologies. Nevertheless, the notion of falseness is relevant to discuss in terms of process and social structures and how people's consciousness about these structures can be influenced by hegemonic domination. It is the concepts and categories that have been obscured and excluded, which make people reproduce their positions in society.

> "The ideological categories in use, in other words, *position us* in relation to the account of the process as depicted in the discourse. The worker who relates to his or her condition of existence in the capitalist process as 'consumer' – who enters the system, so to speak, through that gateway – participates in the process by way of different practice from those who are inscribed in the system as 'skilled labourer' – or not inscribed in it at all, as 'housewife'. All these inscriptions have effects which

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[22] The notion of 'false consciousness' derives from the idea in Marxist theory about who is controling the means of production, and its affects. If ideology is seen as related to the mode of production, it could imply a system of ideas that are produced by the ruling class. Due to the situation in which the ruling class imposes its ideas on oppressed classes, the oppressed class could be seen as suffering from false consciousness. For a critical view on ideology as a false consciousness see, for example, Diana Mulinari, pp. 99, Stuart Hall, pp. 25-46, and Louis Althusser, *För Marx* (Stockholm, 1968), pp. 245-250.

[23] The critique of making Third World women a deviation and constructed as 'the other' in relation to women in the West is discussed further in "Exploring the 'Other'".

are real. They make a material difference, since how we act in certain situations depends on what our definitions of the situation are."[24]

It is important not to mistakenly create essentialist constructions of people's experiences. Marginalized voices need to be heard and listened to, and at the same time it is essential to understand that people have non-told experiences which are not linguistic events; poverty, hunger, oppression, violence, sexual harassment etc, exist no matter which words we choose to use to define them. Even though it may be impossible to fully understand these experiences, they are too important to ignore. The ideological forces of capitalism operate in an exploitive manner, whether we choose to speak about them or not.[25]

Stressing that a discursive understanding of ideological analysis brings the analysis to a concrete level and creates a tool for implementation on material reality, we emphasize a more extensive and complex analysis, due to the significance of different factors that need to be taken into consideration.

> "A discourse may be ideological in its essence, but it is not identical with that ideology; rather, a discourse is a tool to express, mediate, and uphold ideologies, but they both operate at the same level – that of conveying meaning."[26]

People are in many ways active in supporting and contesting ideologies although discourses may also influence them beyond their consciousness.[27] Anna Lindberg emphasizes the separation of class identity and class consciousness, stressing out that people not necessarily totally identify themselves out of the basis of a given class. Other categories can be of as great importance as that of class.[28] The agency of 'the subaltern' must be analyzed through the connection between dominant discourses and the subaltern.[29]

We argue that an ideological analysis must be seen through dominant discourses as the Western dominance in the process of development theory and practice cannot be ignored. Ideology is what keeps the prevailing system working, and hence it influences the shaping of development

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[24] Stuart Hall, pp. 40.
[25] Anna Lindberg, pp. 44.
[26] Ibid, pp. 39.
[27] Ibid, pp. 35.
[28] Ibid, pp. 42.
[29] The term 'subaltern' is commonly used in development theory and is borrowed from Gramsci. The history of 'the subalterns' is an attempt to create something told from below and to reject elitist writings of history. In the contrast of nationalist and colonialist writings this would imply that there are different forms of consciousness and cultures among non-elite groups. For a more detailed discussion regarding Subaltern studies, see Anna Lindberg, pp. 6-7.

schemes. It is a two-way relationship; it both influences the people involved in Kudumbashree and us when conducting fieldwork. We could not carry out a study like this without the awareness of our origin and being conscious of the fact that it affects the process and the outcome whether we want to or not. A negotiation with these power structures requires a multiplicity of perspectives and methods. Thus being aware of the importance of the interaction between social categories is crucial, and to stress out a pronounced gender perspective is a central perspective in our point of departure. The agency of the subaltern could not be understood without the comprehension of gender, ethnicity, and class.

## Exploring the 'Other'

In feminist theory the Western hegemony has been well highlighted and questions concerning difference and diversity have been raised. One of the first to criticize the validity of the global feminist theory and scholarship was Chandra T. Mohanty in her article "Under Western Eyes", referring to feminist scholarship as a 'Western feminist discourse'.[30] Starting off in a poststructuralist view of the world she argues for a deconstruction of general conceptions like 'woman', 'power', 'objectivity' etc., and focuses her criticism on the dualistic way of thinking in the West based on contrasting relationships and categorizations. Thus, the importance of analysing the dominating discourses in feminist theory and practice becomes crucial. The dominating discourse creates deviations like 'Third World Women' who are often pictured as sexually oppressed, uneducated, poor, ignorant, traditional, religious, domestic, family-oriented, and victimized, to easily visualize a clear reference in the well-educated, modern and free Western woman. "Western feminist writings on women in the Third World must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship – that is, the production, publication, distribution, and consumption of information and ideas."[31] Additionally there are several aspects to take into consideration, such as class, education, ethnicity, age etc. to avoid making the women in the Third World a homogenous group.

Trinh T. Minh-ha emphasizes the impossibility to change prevailing power structures from within by using the dominating masters' tools and methods - these tools will never tear down the

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[30] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes", *Feminism without Boarders: Decolonizing theory, practising solidarity* (London, 2003).
[31] Ibid, pp. 21.

existing structures created by the sovereign.[32] Difference is constructed as a division and a tool for self-defense and conquest, making it possible for the Western hegemony to defend its sovereign position. Hence, the dominating masters can refer to poverty as something self-created by the poor.[33] By playing the role as saviors, the Western hegemony strengthens existing power structures by making the Third World more dependent. According to Minh-ha it is a position the West has taken upon itself in the firm conviction of being the right one to put everything in order. To be aware of the Western influence in the creation of development schemes is therefore absolutely necessary. The idea of assistance supplementary to one's own efforts is nothing but a method constructed under the influence of those who dominate the global hegemony.

Reading Mohanty and Minh-ha creates almost desperate questions if it possible to write about women in the Third world without confirming the existing unequal relationship from a Westerner's perspective? Can a study like ours be carried out without an automatic objectification of these women if our language and our theoretical frames in themselves are based on generalizations and categories?

It is essential to visualize an awareness of cultural and historical contexts while analyzing feminist subjects. Although many feminists have pointed out the invisibility of women in history books, ethnicity is still evidently absent. The risk of creating a dichotomized and hierarchical frame of categories when discussing 'women'/'men' or 'Third World Women'/'Western Women' rather concentrates power relations than converts them. Minh-ha stresses out that these codes of identification are not created by whom it is supposed to concern – the Third World women can never accord with the stereotype image pictured by the West.[34] On the other hand, these categories are always leaking despite desperate attempts by the dominating hegemony to control and to keep them intact. It is in these leakages the visibleness of hierarchally built power structures can be revealed.

Aware of the fact that we by conducting this study somehow confirm and justify the system we are criticizing, we have accepted the rules of the scientific "game" we are being part of. The theoretical frame we have to step into is opening up for new ways of understanding but within limits. We cannot escape the fact that by using existing scientific frames and tools we are

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[32] Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Olikhet: sär-skilt för kvinnor i tredje världen", in Catharina Eriksson, Maria Eriksson Baaz, and Håkan Thörn (eds), *Globaliseringens kulturer* (Nora, 1999).
[33] Ibid, pp. 217.
[34] Ibid, pp. 225.

reproducing the Western conception of how knowledge is created. The Western feminist scholarship confinement regarding Third World women is established by the global hegemony of Western scholarship and by its theoretical frame. Therefore the prevailing analytic principles serve to "distort Western feminist political practices and limit the possibility of coalitions among (usually white) Western feminists, working-class feminists, and feminists of colour around the world."[35] Thus the organization among women tends to be influenced by feminist scholars' theoretical limitations as well.

> "These limitations are evident in the construction of the (implicitly consensual) priority of issues around which apparently all women are expected to organize. The necessary and integral connection between feminist scholarship and feminist political practice and organizing determines the significance and status of Western feminist writings on women in the Third World, for feminist scholarship, like most other kinds of scholarship, is not the mere production of knowledge about certain subjects. It is a directly political and discursive practice in that it is purposeful and ideological." [36]

The gap between feminist theory and feminist political practice has been revealed in the programs of international agencies working with women and development. Western feminism, signified by lack of practical understanding for women in the Third World, has been ignorant to diversity among women. Conceptualizing differences as *different from* the norm, feminist theory illuminates differences between women rather than discussing heterogeneities in the category.[37] To reveal power structures and to overcome the limitations in feminist theory it is crucial to visualize the connection between feminist theory and feminist (political) practice. Therefore we emphasize inclusion of ideological features in feminist discussions and analysis as central to the comprehension of the influences prevalent Western hegemony still provide in development theory and in the shaping of development schemes. By looking at power as something that exists everywhere within certain dominating discourses, it is possible to study strategies of resistance and new fields of "space of agency" can be discovered and may be created. Thus it is essential to make explicit the crucial criticism on the conception of Third World women given by structuralist researchers, a depiction which undeniably has reproduced the idea of Third World women as passive and powerless. Studying women workers in Dhaka and London, Naila Kabeer offers an understanding of how the reproduction of cultural traditions must be contextualized. The explanation of women's situation in different parts of the world should include diversity and

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[35] Chandra T. Mohanty, pp. 18.
[36] Ibid, pp. 18-19.
[37] Diana Mulinari, *Motherwork and Politics in Revolutionary Nicaragua* (Lund, 1995), pp. 37.

context-related complexity and open up for a middle way in which both choices and constraints are to be taken into account.[38] Otherwise, the understanding of agency and access in practice will not reach the scientific debate. With us being white students from the West, the awareness of prevailing power structures is our chance to negotiate with these structures and to avoid being caught in a trap of limitations.

Drawing on Mohanty's criticism of Western feminism we consider the problematic relationship between the women who are the focus of this study and us, and the marginalization of ethnicity in feminist research. Nevertheless, we find it necessary to, over again, emphasize the interaction between oppressive structures, stressing the existence of a common interest gathered in a complex set of material reality and thoughts of consensus – the dominating hegemony. Although including ideological features into her analysis, Mohanty ranges class to be just a category among others, our aim should rather be to move the discussion further on to examine the material conditions and social thinking crossing the lines of different categories. To create comprehension for how economic and social conditions limit the agency of an individual or a group we strive to visualize different dimensions of social justice. Nancy Fraser illuminated two of them – redistribution and acknowledgement – concentrating her discussion to the interconnection between class and gender.[39] We want to add a pronounced ethnic perspective, asserting how dimensions of class and gender interconnect with power structures based on ethnicity.

## Em*power*ment – A Question of Power

In the debate on women and development 'empowerment' has become a widely accepted term used both by researchers and development agents, ranging from locally situated NGOs to international development agencies such as the World Bank and the UNDP. Introduced to development theory in the early 1990s as a new way of working against injustices of the world through a participatory approach, the concept of empowerment entered the debate as a radical thought of decentralization and change. As time passed by and the new strategy seemed successful, it has been defined and redefined by different scholars and agencies.[40]

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[38] Naila Kabeer, *The power to choose: Bangladeshi women and labour market decisions in London and Dhaka* (London, 2000).
[39] Nancy Fraser, *Den Radikala Fantasin; Mellan Omfördelning och Erkännande* (Göteborg, 2003).
[40] Monica Erwér, pp. 55.

The focus of earlier development work has been to ameliorate women's status in society, certainly in terms of education and health. Resulting in fertility decline and improved life standard the changes were of great value in the daily lives of poor women.[41] However, working to strengthen women's status did not change women's position in the decision-making process. Women were still excluded from setting the agenda due to limitations regarding women's ability to access power and agency. Women's high status was not to be mistaken for women's influence and autonomy in society.[42] When studying women empowerment we came across questions concerning capitalist interests in the maintenance of prevailing structures, but we were also confronted with interests as well as constraints based on class, ethnicity and gender.

Criticized by many for its blurred limits of definition, empowerment is still considered as a relevant concept and as a valuable tool to achieve improved well-being for people living in development countries in particular. [43] In the early 1990s it became evident that pure neo-liberal policies were not resulting in satisfactory progress for the Third World countries struggling to manage their dept crisis, it rather worsened the situation for the poorest and the most vulnerable.[44] In attempt to give development a 'human face', efforts were made to incorporate non-economic issues into development strategies. Stressed in UNDP's human development report 2001 social and cultural aspects of life conditions are considered a necessity to attain sustainable development.

> "The notion of well-being has shifted away from just material attainments, or the means for development, to outcomes that are either desirable in themselves or desirable because of their role in supporting better opportunities for people. Similarly, poverty is viewed not only in terms of lack of adequate income, but as a state of deprivation spanning the social, economic and political context of the people that prevents their effective participation as equals in the development process to be ultimately assessed for impact on quality of life and human well-being."[45]

Earlier dominated by a 'top-down' approach, with the conviction that development issues could be solved through political decision-making and market solutions, development projects and enormous investments did not reach the poor people. This logic derives from neo-liberal theory with focus on industrialist, large-scale entrepreneurs and state investments, which was believed to

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[41] The WID movement – Women In Development – who worked for the acknowledgement of women in development planning initiated the concept of women's status.
[42] Monica Erwér, pp. 50.
[43] See for example Naila Kabeer, *The power to choose*, and Jo Rowlands, *Questioning empowerment: Working with women in Honduras* (Oxford, 1997) both questioning the concept of empowerment.
[44] Jo Rowlands, pp. 3.
[45] UNDP, *India National Human Development report* (2001), pp. 3.

somehow 'trickle-down' to the poorer section of the population.[46] The analysis perceives a world where obstacles are not structural but individual, and choices are free and open to everybody. The absence of a power analysis is evident.[47] The 'top-down' approach also showed to be economically inefficient in some cases, and one reason to abandon this approach appeared to be problems with corruption and difficulties to integrate the ideas of change in a meaningful way on grass root level. The economical resources meant for improvements in the poorer sections of society tended to vanish through bureaucracy, and barely a few percent of the initial allowance made its way through to the intended beneficiaries.[48] In attempt to overcome these obstacles a new way of organizing development projects was required and the solution puts focus on less bureaucracy and more participation.

The central question repeatedly brought up in the debate on empowerment concerns different aspects of power. Various approaches on empowerment reveal ideological differences that distinguish contrasting worldviews on how to change society. While feminist scholars emphasize the need of power analysis and stress empowerment as a process involving social change, the World Bank Report still asserts an individually based analysis of poverty alleviation. Accentuating poverty as an individual matter the conclusion comes to be that poverty alleviation does not require serious alterations to the current global capitalist world.[49] Frequently, development programs initiated or subsidized by international agencies – influenced by western hegemony – makes out an active part in the reproduction of a stereotype picture of Third World women, emphasizing an oppressed and victimized individual rather than problematizing power relations and limiting social structures that some individuals have to deal with while others do not.

Naila Kabeer argues that empowerment can take place only in a group that has once been disempowered, in the sense of being denied the rights to economical, social and human resources. The power to choose, restricted and shaped by the access to these resources, differs widely with regard to cultural codes and social status, and in most cases there is seen a logical association between poverty and disempowerment as economic resources are unevenly distributed in the world. The material and social situation rules the ability to make choices and Kabeer's thoughts

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[46] Jo Rowlands, pp. 4.
[47] Monica Erwér, pp. 47.
[48] Interview 10 January 2005 with M.A. Aboobacker, Director (C.R.) in charge of five districts of Idukki, Kottayam, Ernakulam, Thrissur and Palakkad.
[49] Monica Erwér, pp. 55.

accentuates the presence of active agents or existing structures, which systematically disempower some social groups. The core aspect of power in empowerment is the ability to make choices and the practical access to resources. When pointing at the need of collective empowerment we admit that people are born into various social conditions; still the discussion about where this need derives from do not see a common ground.[50] Jo Rowlands argues in line with Kabeer that empowerment is a process that involves several aspects, and aims to social transformation. By considering women empowerment both theoretically and in practice Rowlands identifies three main areas in which it is essential for change to occur. According to her analysis empowerment requires change not only in the material side of life but also in personal life and in relationships. Rowlands bases her experiences of empowerment on two NGOs working in Honduras and expresses the meaning of empowerment as *undoing the internal oppression*, since her case studies and the literature referred to stress the inner aspect of empowerment as crucial for social transformation to take place. Collective empowerment and material empowerment are not considered as sufficient for sustainable change.[51] With a focus on the centrality of power Srilatha Batliwala considers the redistribution of power in the public as well as in the private sphere to be necessary in the process of empowerment. By questioning the automatic correlation between an improved economic situation and the ability to access power and agency she raises the discussion about constraints defined by social relations such as gender, culture, caste and class.

> "… [empowerment is] a process which must challenge and change ideology, the set of ideas,
> attitudes, beliefs and practices in which gender bias or social bias like caste, class, regionalism
> and communalism are embedded."[52]

 Batliwala emphasizes ideology as biased, claiming it reproduces and maintains power relations in social reality, which reveals the importance of challenging ideology as well as the control of material resources.

   We argue in line with Kabeer, Rowlands, Erwer and others for the necessity to assert the power analysis in the conceptualization and practice of empowerment to create and shape social transformation.

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[50] Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment", in Sida Studies, *Discussing Women's Empowerment: Theory and Practice* (Stockholm, 2000).
[51] Jo Rowlands, *Questioning empowerment.*
[52] Srilatha Batliwala, 'What is female empowerment?' paper for international seminar on women's empowerment in Stockholm 25th of April 1997, http://www.qweb.kvinnoforum.se/papers/RFSU1.htm, 2006-02-21.

# Illuminating Methodological Perspectives on Fieldwork

> "The strength of the ethnographic text lies in my opinion in its capacity of illuminating agency and subjectivity in social processes. The danger of the ethnographic enterprise is that very often its appeal to individuality decontextualizes lived worlds from its macro socio-political background. The story-telling form and the personalized ways in which ethnographies are written may obscure the link between these stories and macropolitics."[53]

Fieldwork is a multimethod research including both written and oral sources communicated through a plurality of methods such as observation, participation, archival analysis and interviewing. Combining the qualities and the weaknesses of each method, fieldwork forms an alternative to quantitative methods.[54] Not considered as inherently feminist, nor seen as the only research method suited for feminist knowledge production, however, fieldwork provides an opportunity to give new perspectives on old 'truths'. In comparison with conventional field methods, feminist field researchers stress "…*the necessity of continuously and reflexively attending to the significance of gender* as a basic of all social life and… *understanding the social realities of women as actors* whom previous sociological research has rendered invisible."[55] The fundament of fieldwork as a method is the participatory approach and the dialogue with the group in focus. Our study was formed through the conscious choice of a participatory approach including in-depth interviews and observations, which seeks to give knowledge, understanding and insight into the daily life of women in the Kudumbashree project, a knowledge formulated through our understanding of these women's situation.

In the process of entering the lives of 'others', the researcher undoubtedly meets with several unexpected dilemmas and makes choices that determine the outcome of her study. Shulamit Reinharz outlines the dilemmas of feminist ethnography and puts in focus three crucial questions; the problems of trust, the closeness/distance dilemma and the dilemma of the complete observer and complete participant roles. Problems of trust, inevitably, occur in the relationship between the researcher and the researched, due to differences in socio-economic status, ethnicity, class and caste. Trust does not naturally occur when women try to study women, but has to be earned. To gain access to the views of a diverse range of women the obstacles differences could produce must be overcome. The question of closeness/distance concerns the position of the researcher in a study to which the given answer has been the 'respectful distance' model, aiming to maintain

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[53] Diana Mulinari, pp. 44.

[54] For further reading about fieldwork, see for example, James Clifford, *Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century* (Cambridge, 1997).

[55] Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York, 1992), quotation Judith DiIorio, pp. 46.

objectivity avoiding the researcher to 'go native' or identify with the people studied. Yet, many feminist researchers assert the importance of closeness with women, claiming it is essential for the understanding of them. The third dilemma, concerning the dichotomy of the 'complete observer' and the 'complete participant', focuses upon the problems of to what extent the researcher participates in the activities of the group studied and how aware those observed are of them being studied.[56] Entering the field we became an active part in the knowledge production not only through our preferential right of interpretation but also through how our pure presence in the 'room' affected our empirics, as we became a part of the situation studied. The researcher's analysis of the empirics is a constantly ongoing process, which starts the very first day the field is entered. To locate what is happening in the field and to be able to make relevant interpretations of events taking place in a specific area a wide theoretical base is required, and knowledge about history, political situation and cultural codes are to be taken into account in the process of interpretation.

Feminist scholars emphasize the importance of revealing possible obstacles and constraints in the research work to involve the reader in the process of making knowledge - letting open 'the room of construction'. This process comprises not merely describing exactly what occurs during the interviews but also what occurs during the analysis process and showing a self-reflexive reporting of the work conducted in the field. The result that emerges from the study becomes a product combining writings about the self, the group studied and the relationship between the two. [57] For obvious reasons we used a qualitative method in order to document the daily life of the women we met and to get a perspective from below. Who are these women and what are their concerns? How do they receive the mission of Kudumbashree? What happens when theory become practice?

## A Multiplicity of Methods and Sources

Our concern in this study is to give space and voice to women usually not heard in development discussions. During the process of the study we realized that the questions of method are impossible to disconnect from our theoretic point of departure.[58] Conducting fieldwork requires a

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[56] Ibid, pp. 65 ff.
[57] Ibid, pp. 45.
[58] For a further discussion about the connection between theory and method see Karen Davies and Johanna Esseveld, "Teori och Metod", in *Kvalitativ kvinnoforskning* (Stockholm, 1989), pp. 9-17. Their point of departure is a Marxist theoretical framework through which they seek to understand what is behind the immediately visible by applying a

variety of analytical tools, methods, and sources while investigating material throughout ideologies and discourses. These include:

1. Printed and written sources.
2. In-depth interviews with women involved in the project and government officials.
3. Participatory observations (to some extent).

The written sources include reports from the Kerala government, the official homepage of Kudumbashree, information given to us by the official Kudumbashree office in Kakkanad, Ernakulam district, and newspaper articles. Earlier research on the topic linked to the work of Kudumbashree and the history of Kerala made it possible to get a broad picture of the today society in the region studied and was a complement to the reports made on Kudumbashree, which gave us a picture of how the material success is measured, how women's power and influence is quantified and who makes these measurements. To be able to situate and establish a social and material context, printed material is essential and useful while presenting 'hard facts' as numbers of women involved, loans, existing micro-enterprises in different professional categories, etc. An ideological analysis with an integrated discursive perspective is utilized to convey meaning of these written and oral sources.

Discursive practices have been studied in two areas:

1. How women involved in the project have been represented in contexts where information, statistics, and working conditions have been discussed and institutionalized.
2. The voices and experiences of women themselves.

Oral sources give perspective to the study and contribute with an inside understanding and a sense of the project not given by written reports and information on the website. By meeting the (male) district manager we also got the chance to experience a perspective from the border of the project, concerned about the 'face' of Kudumbashree. However, we consider the experiences of women in the project a main source and strive to listen to their voices to get information from the inside and from below. In-depth interviews were therefore conducted with women involved at various levels in Kudumbashree, yet, in addition with a few government officials. Certainly people's experience of something could sometimes be confusing and people do get things wrong, but yet they are exposing 'truths'. How they experience and interpret these experiences will reveal how they see themselves in society, and therefore explain who they are. A combination of

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feminist perspective and stressing the need of looking at the ordinary life. Women are subjects who actively reflect over their lives.

in-depth interviews and participatory observation provided a multiple perspective view of how the project is structured, how the theory about women empowerment is put in practice and how the women involved conceive the strategy of Kudumbashree. To establish a closer social contact with the interviewees and open up for a better and more equal communication we tried to meet the interviewees more than once. Multiple interviews offer a higher validity because of the opportunity to ask additional questions and to verify previously obtained information.[59]

Participatory observation was carried out to some extent, to learn more about the context and culture rather than to analyze everything we registered. This could be as simple as visiting the women in their houses or at their working places. Meeting their family members and seeing them interact with each other was therefore possible, but also to actually witness and experience their life environments. Britha Mikkelsen stresses the importance to remember that people are in control of their own lives while examining the concept of participation.[60] Even though our presence during the interviews may have affected the outcome of what the women chose to tell us and in what way to say it, it is necessary not to neglect and reduce their own ability to act. Mikkelsen asserts that:

> "At the roots of our behaviour lie **images** of 'the others' and 'ourselves'. The concept of 'participation' itself raises suspicion of an unequal relationship – i.e. who participates on whose conditions is not always clear. Interpretation by whom, about whom, with whom, from whom and why, are basic ethical questions in development cooperation. 'Dialogue' has the connotation of an equal relationship, but even the dialogue may be defined by the party who controls knowledge and resources."[61]

Yet, a central argument is that it is how people choose to express themselves about their lives and environment that is important rather than the outsider's predetermined point of departure.

## Entering the Field

In the end of November 2004 we arrived in Ernakulam District, Kerala, and quite soon we realized the width of Kudumbashree. What we expected to be a rather limited women empowerment program turned out to be a statewide poverty alleviation scheme, organizing women in regions all over Kerala. This encounter became an experience, by which we got to know the meaning of fieldwork - not only as a method, but also as an ongoing process. New

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[59] Shulamit Reinharz, pp. 37.
[60] Britha Mikkelsen, *Methods for Development Work and Research – A Guide for Practitioners* (New Dehli, 1995).
[61] Ibid, pp. 31-32.

conditions forced us to question and develop our methodology, and because of time limitation and the expected size of this paper we had to limit the extent of the study.

We came to Kerala and presented ourselves as students interested in studying the project of Kudumbashree. The women we met were willing to discuss their life in relation to the project and to tell us about their family history as well as about their daily life. While some of them hesitated when asked about the social and political situation in the State, others had strong opinions on the matter.

   Given the time and resource constraints of this study, it was decided to limit the field coverage to two wards (one Municipality and one Panchayat) and to focus upon a rather small number of in-depth interviews. Investigating the meanings of a project like Kudumbashree this might seem too limited. Yet, our intention is not to produce some kind of 'truth' about the progress that Kudumbashree has come to bring about in Kerala, but to make visible possible structural obstacles and social constraints that could affect the implementation and results of women empowerment. During a period of two months, we carried out the field study in Ernakulam district, and more specifically in Aluva Muncipality and Nedumbassery Panchayat. Aluva Municipality was chosen because of its geographical position, which was convenient for us as we were staying in the area. The closeness to the area made it possible for us to visit the interviewees several times though we had a limited period of time for the field study. Nedumbassery Panchayat was more or less given to us by the District Manager, as an opportunity to visit a very successful Kudumbashree area. Thus the selection is not to give an overall view of two areas that could be said to be representative for all districts in Kerala; rather it was done on the premises considering the advantages of focusing on two areas, which have reached different levels of success.

   Before conducting the interviews we had to face the first selection of respondents. When we visited different NHG:s and Micro enterprise units the women were asked if they were interested in taking part in personal interviews. A conscious effort was made to include working women as well as unemployed women and housewives.

The data collected could be crosschecked with the local bodies, such as the Municipality or the Panchayat office, which not only had all the information about the material and social situation of the families, but also had all details about loans and grants given to the participants. Thus, quantitative data could be double checked for reliability and credibility, but as the emphasis is on

the voices of these women cross-checking was made mainly on very basic facts to give us a chance to clarify possible confusion in further interactions with the interviewees. On the other hand, the fieldwork itself could be considered a crosscheck of the implementation of Kudumbashree and the stories told 'from above'. Rather than collecting statistics measuring exclusively quantifiable data, a participatory approach made it possible to get a picture that included also qualitative data such as changes in social life and social status. During the study we soon came to develop a comprehension for the gap between theory and practice. The information given by the website and government officials presented the idea of Kudumbashree in theory, while the voices 'from below' indicated a more complex picture of reality.

## Being an 'Outsider Within'

The choice of method was based on our intention to understand the meaning of Kudumbashree through experiences from the grass root level, and the in-depth interviews were considered by us a way of making visible voices from within the project. However, this was not as unproblematic as it may have appeared when we started the study. Trying to scrutinize the social and material situation of an individual through in-depth interviews and observations, obviously there are limits, especially as we were interested in the private sphere as well as in the public domain. These limits are not fixed but highly depending on the relation between the interviewer and the interviewee. Inevitably, power relations occur in any study made in the field. Though coming as a stranger, allotted the position of an 'outsider within', which could be advantageous in some aspects, the role of the researcher as being in control of what knowledge is getting produced and what definitions are made creates an unequal relation between the two. Although definitions of the outsider are often contextually presented, there are numerous aspects to take into consideration. In the following, Anna Lindberg's definition of the outsider will be employed.

> "Anyone who interprets other people's lives is an outsider, more or less, depending on gender, ethnicity, class, religion, age, education, or family background – to which may also be added language, ideology, worldly experience, and sympathetic understanding."[62]

Nevertheless, researchers working in their own societies face power relations and barriers to an understanding that may be less apparent. Monica Erwér emphasizes the privilege of *not* knowing

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[62] Anna Lindberg, pp. 62.

about unspoken rules and cultural codes of the society studied as advantageous, claiming the 'outsider' is placed in a position to ask questions 'insiders' would not be able to ask In the context of an interview, expectations and assumptions from both parts have an impact on the result. What level of cultural and political knowledge the interviewee expects from the researcher inevitably affects the way in which the answers are formulated and what explanations are left out. The advantageous aspects are found in the position of the 'outsider', as the interviewees do not leave certain details unmentioned however expecting the rest of their surroundings to already possess this knowledge. The ability to identify these preconceived notions opens up possibilities to analyze prevailing discourses. Yet, the main drawback of the outside position concerns the lack of nuances and the disability of interpreting 'cultural' codes affecting the interpretation of the empirics.[63]

## Working with an Interpreter

> "A 'researcher' descending on a village with a notebook and pen in hand, can often end up with responses which the respondents feel are 'right', and which the interviewer expects or wants to hear."[64]

Coming to India, carrying out a study and working with an interpreter required several obstacles to overcome. The constant feeling of being strangers, Westerners, women traveling on our own, and not a part of the Kerala society, followed us throughout the whole stay. Though questions whether it was even possible to understand the social codes when not being born and raised in Kerala came up already in our preparations, it soon became a motivation and inspiration to carry out and accomplish the study. Being born in the West does not necessarily mean that you are dressed in an essential and deterministic Western uniform and think and act like the stereotype picture of a Westerner. Realizing this, and at the same time being aware of the explicit situation we were being a part of creating when we met these women, we saw the possibility, not to overcome this set of problems, but to deal with it.

When entering the homes and the workplaces of the women studied our position, as outsiders, were more or less present. Primarily, there was a language barrier to overcome as we do not speak Malayalam, which is the main language spoken in Kerala. Thus our work was carried out

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[63] Monica Erwér, pp. 37.
[64] Sakuntala Narasimhan, *Empowering Women: An Alternative Strategy from Rural India* (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 59-60.

with the help of an interpreter, who also worked as an excellent informant with deep knowledge about the society, the cultural codes and the political situation. Indeed, working with an interpreter makes the risk of distortions inevitable, as a second language is added and a third person is intervening between two interlocutors. The question of trust is present in the encounter between the interpreter and the interviewee as well as in the dialogue between the interpreter and us - after all it was her words we had to rely on. Conducting the interviews together with our interpreter, though, gave us an imminent closeness to the interviewees, due to her ability to talk to the women in a common language and understand their stories through a to her well-known social context. Secondly, we were anomalies in the daily life of people in the society studied. As Westerners we became the absolute 'other'. To reduce the negative aspects of being ' strangers' efforts were made to establish a relationship with the women that could at least make them feel comfortable answering our questions about Kudumbashree as well as the ones concerning their personal lives. To some extent, we also came across the advantageous aspects of our outsider position, allowing us to ask questions regarding social codes and traditions, which might have been considered unsuitable or 'stupid' if asked by an insider. This showed to be especially convenient during the part of our interviews that concerned phenomena like dowry, caste and religion.[65]

Finding an Indian Christian woman in her forties living nearby the area we had chosen for our study, and her providing for our accommodation in her own house, inviting us in to her ordinary life, created an opportunity to be a part of the social context studied. She taught us about certain Keralite cultural and social codes, which we could not possibly have learnt about without the help of someone indigenous, and she also showed us the possibility for us as white Western women to have an equal relationship with a woman living in the Third World. Although we stress the relationship between the West and the Third World it is equally important to recognize diversity among women within the society studied.


## Situated Knowledge

The debate on objectivity and knowledge production has been intense among feminist scholars, and the problematic addressed in the debate have been central for feminist research and gender

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[65] We could for example ask questions like, "For us not being used to talk and understand things in terms of caste, could you explain the system to us?" From here it was easier to ask further questions about their experiences and opinions about it and how it had affected themselves and their family members, avoiding questions like "Is there a caste system influencing the social hierarchy?"

science. Feminist research emerged as an answer to the male-oriented "world of knowledge", where the binary concept of the man and his 'other' paved the way for reproducing the stereotype of women as constituting a deviation. Thus feminist theory was born as a criticism of an already existing way of making knowledge, trying to change and to question the focus of earlier studies. For a long period of time the spotlight for feminist researchers has been on making visible women in science through moving them from the margin to the center, revealing that "…claims of objectivity and universality have been made from a particular location, mostly from that of white, Western, heterosexual men."[66] However, a similar criticism emerged against feminist scholars. Just as feminists feel anger at women's constitution as man's other, so subordinated women resist their constitution as the 'others' of privileged women. 'Black feminists' questioned the unproblematized category 'woman', which in itself indicates that 'woman' is a homogenous group.[67] Revealing the diversity within the group without losing the sense of a common ground has been and is still today an enormous challenge to feminist theory. The main criticism has been against the Eurocentric and Western ideas about patriarchal structures and women oppression in different corners of the world.[68] Our choice of method is partly a product of this weakness in Western science, focusing mainly on studies done in the "rich world" and generalizing generously when talking about developing countries, but also a consequence of our interest for women's everyday struggle.

In research, representations of different perspectives on reality are formed, and the researcher find her-/himself in a superior position to the researched by being in control of constructing representations of people's lives and through defining similarities and differences from the diversity in the group. Claiming knowledge of differences means responsibility to construe social existence of others. Feminist researchers, as a part of the academic discourse, reproduce or contribute to knowledge that affect people's lives.[69]

> "Feminist methodology always entails some theory of power, since the power to produce authoritative knowledge is not equally open to all. Feminists therefore question who has the power to know what, and how is power implicated in the process of producing knowledge."[70]

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[66] Diana Mulinari, pp. 35.
[67] 'Black feminism' encompasses the criticism against mainstream Western feminism developed in the USA by Afro-American feminist researchers, see, Diana Mulinari, pp. 35.
[68] Caroline Ramazanoglu with Janet Holland, *Feminist Methodology. Challenges and Choices* (London, 2002), pp. 3.
[69] Ibid, pp. 107.
[70] Ibid, pp. 13.

Production of knowledge is not an objective process revealing all aspects of the world we are living in, rather it is a process deeply affected by the researcher who has the power to and is more or less forced to decide what questions should be asked, which indicators that are relevant to measure and whose stories that are worth listening to. The researcher is depending on what answer she/he is looking for, hence the result of a study is determined by the person behind - the researcher and the knowledge producer - and has been formulated under the influence of norms and values of the researcher. Out of this process of selection a gap is formed between the researcher's result and the reality studied. Thus, all knowledge is situated. Our way of thinking is shaped by our surroundings and how we interpret the world is through our own experiences. Though, it does not necessarily imply that we are unable to listen to other people's life stories, it might indicate that our understanding of the stories we listen to will inevitably reflect our own position. Donna Haraway provides a solution intimating it is time to abandon traditional claims on objectivity and to explore the notion of partial divisions and situated knowledge instead.[71]

> "Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as
> a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in
> his unique agency and his authorship of 'objective' knowledge."[72]

Still, we agree with the feminist claim that some partial visions are more 'true' than others and contribute to a complex view of social reality. This standpoint, however, leaves the criteria of 'science' as politically and epistemologically problematic. Our point of departure is a feminist epistemology that illuminates power relations, and acknowledges both the researcher and the researched as human beings. There might always be a gap between the theoretical result and the social reality studied, but somehow, by admitting power aspects of the research process and treating equally the diversity among women there is a way to minimize the reproduction of a stereotype depiction, not contributing to a *difference-from*-the-norm picture.

Feminists take different approaches to the problems of interpreting experience. As experience of material and social realities is expressed through language the debate tends to end up revealing an epistemological split within feminism. Some feminist scholars argue in line with a realist

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[71] Donna Haraway, "Situated knowledges: The science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", in *Feminist Studies*, 14:3 (1988), pp. 575-599.
[72] Ibid, pp. 592.

perspective that social relations can exist without people being aware of them. "People live in real bodies, in real social relationships, in real worlds reality. These realities cannot be reduced to the language in which they are expressed, or discourses through which they are constituted."[73] Others claim that 'reality' cannot ever be entirely discovered, as it is socially constituted, considering reality as an effect of language rather than a possible cause of experience. According to us, using experiences as a source of knowledge in an attempt to connect ideologies, experiences, and material and social realities, still provides a powerful challenge to male-centered knowledge and androcentric concepts.

## Summary of Main Theoretical Concepts and Methodologies

We have tried to position our study by a discourse on Marxist, development, postmodern, and feminist scholars. Above all, we have demonstrated our views on certain important concepts such as ideology, hegemonic domination, consciousness and empowerment.

In an attempt to make explicit the relationship between ideology and empowerment we stress the significance of power structures and the human ability to negotiate with these structures. However, the notion of consciousness is decisive in the process of empowerment as it aims towards social change, and the view taken here is that consciousness is shaped by both ideological structures and lived realities (i.e. non-told experiences).

The theoretical point of departure here has been an interdisciplinary approach, which requires drawing upon a multiplicity of methods and sources to analyze social, political and economic phenomena. From a theoretical perspective, oral narratives are taken into consideration at the level of subjective experiences of empowerment. Allotted the position of the outsider within, the unequal relationship between Western students and Third World women are not to be neglected. Yet, we have tried to deal with it rather than emphasize essential differences.

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[73] Caroline Ramazanoglu, pp. 134.

# III   A Paradoxical 'Development Model'

## Introduction

> "The myth that there is no alternative for the 'tadpoles' of the world (underdeveloped/developing countries) except to grow like the 'frogs' (the developed capitalist countries) has been successfully promoted as exemplified in the terms developing, developed and the like, widely used in development discourse today. The ideological hegemony and the move towards homogenisation of the cultures of the world implicit such a 'tadpole philosophy' of development remains almost unquestioned."[74]

The influence of the Western domination in development discourse has specifically been questioned for its homogenization of strategies towards development issues, ignoring contextual differences among developing countries. The development experience of Kerala repeatedly referred to as a deviation to this *tadpole philosophy*, somehow challenges the ideological hegemony of the West, and could be seen as a germ of contra-hegemony in the development discourse.[75] The development experience of Kerala exemplifies that an alternative course of development is possible; nevertheless, recent studies uncover the problems of women's low political activity and participation in the public. The 'Kerala model' includes contradictory elements, which render visible more than one development paradox. In order to understand the concept of the Kerala model today we want to locate the expressions of these development paradoxes, emphasizing the significance of illuminating influences from inside the State as well as from outside (i.e. the West) since the present situation does not exclusively derive from the local historical context of Kerala.

## The First Paradox – Rethinking Development

The history of Kerala has caught the world's attention not merely because of the political process in the State, but also because of what history has come to bring about for the Keralan people. Pre-modern Kerala was characterized by a strong social movement, including the caste based

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[74] M.A. Oommen, "Introduction", in M.A. Oommen (ed.), *Kerala's Development Experience I* (New Delhi, 1999), pp. xvi.
[75] See, for example, Mats Wingborg, *Kerala: alternativ väg till välfärd: rapport från en sydindisk delstat* (Stockholm, 1999).

movement among the lowest castes closely interconnected with the labor movement, which were active in the struggle for social reform and for changes in social practices.[76] The heritage of extensive social movements has entailed the belief in a decentralized political structure aiming to maintain participation and political mobilization in the State.

In comparison to the all-India level, Kerala is one of the better off states when it comes to the standard of living of people, although Kerala is ranked among the middle-income states in the country.[77] Hence the Keralan case challenges the assumption that economic growth and development come hand in hand, and has been a starting point for many scholars that are trying to find an alternative course of development. Attainments in high literacy, high social security, fertility decline, low infant mortality and increasing life expectancy form the basis for the celebration of 'the Kerala Model'.[78] UN establishes that the relation between the Human Development Index (HDI) and the level of development does not show any correspondence among the middle-income states in India. "Human attainments appear to be better and more sustained in those parts of the country where there is social mobilization for human development, and where female literacy and empowerment encourages women to have a say in the decision making process at the household level."[79]

Kerala differs from traditional development thinking in the West as it deviates from a development pattern edified on a homogenization of cultures. The historical background of social movements has facilitated a deeply rooted popular anchorage, and still affects the course of development in the State. The example of Kerala might be considered a threat to the ideological order of the West as it challenges the liberal thesis that economic growth constitutes the main generator in the process of development, and politics that emphasize redistribution of resources threaten the dominating development strategy.

## The Second Paradox – Adding a Gender Perspective

Though the sustainability of 'the Kerala Model' has not been left unquestioned, it is not until recent years that voices have been raised criticizing the structure of the model as such. Kerala has

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[76] V.K. Ramachandran, "Kerala's Development Achievements and their Replicability", in Govindan Parayil (ed.), *Kerala: The Development Experience* (New York, 2000), pp. 101.
[77] UNDP, *India National Human Development report* (2001), pp. 4.
[78] For further reading on the achievements of Kerala's development experience, see for example, M.A. Oommen (ed.), *Kerala's Development Experience*, 2 vol., (New Delhi, 1999); UNDP, *India National Human Development report* (2001).
[79] UNDP, *India National Human Development report* (2001), pp. 4.

long been praised for the high status of women in the State, and according to traditional development indicators (i.e. Gender Equality Index), which focus on health, education and demographic indicators, the high level of women's situation in Kerala, in comparison to other parts of India, is apparent. However, quite recently the 'official story' about the high status of women in Kerala has been questioned. Previous studies visualize that some of the contradictions in the situation of women in Kerala have been sidestepped in development reports, and the selection of indicators creates a misleading picture of reality, which masks the complexity of the situation. Focusing on some of the less acknowledged facts about women's situation in Kerala Joseph Ammu raises the question whether Kerala's development experience has been sensitive to the gender factor in development, or not. A discouraging result is given; strict cultural codes on femininity, including restrictions on women's mobility, strict dress code and gendered expectations on behavior, is reinforced by the deteriorated situation in the State and entails essential differences between women and men in freedom to move and freedom to choose.[80] Monica Erwér visualizes the contradictory indicators on women's status and women's reality in her theory about a second paradox - the gender paradox. Revealing that women's high status per se is not directly corresponding to their influence and power, the gender paradox illuminates a contradiction between status and power.[81] Although the main focus is on women in the public sphere (i.e. low political activity and high unemployment among women), and especially in the political field, the social control opposed to women is not to be ignored when analyzing restraints of women's choices and agency within the private sphere.[82]

During the early period of the 20th century women among the lower classes were workers and active in the social struggles, which demonstrates that women has not traditionally been restricted to their houses. According to Anna Lindberg, a process of *effeminization* started to take place during the same period, leaving women in a contradictory position, as they had to face both the oppression of capitalist forces as workers and the oppressive patriarchal structures.[83] Due to stricter gender division of labor advocated by the State government low-caste working women's position as breadwinners of their families was belittled, since the government repeatedly cited

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[80] Ammu Joseph, "Girls and Women in Kerala: Some Less Acknowledged Facts", in M.A. Oommen (ed.) *Kerala's Development Experience II* (New Delhi, 2000), pp. 479-489.

[81] Despite women's high status in Kerala, women's political activity and the representation of women in decision-making bodies is remarkably low. In the highest decision-making body at the state level, the legislative assembly, it has reached less than ten per cent since 1996. In addition, sexual violence and sexual harassment is increasing, which implies a backlash in women's struggle. See, Monica Erwér, *Challenging the Genderparadox..*

[82] Monica Erwér, pp. 10 ff.

[83] Anna Lindberg, pp. 338-339.

their husbands as the main breadwinner. This stricter gender division of labor led to a decline of women's wages, in comparison with men's, and also 'justified' seasonal employments. The worsened situation for women in Kerala is suggested to be partly a consequence of globalization and unfair trade agreements, and partly a derivation from the forming of the Keralan welfare state. Women's interests have been formulated by men, which reveal the lack of possibilities for women to act as a group in the political arena.[84] The ignorance of gender in the Kerala development experience could be resembled to the liberal assumption that formal equality leads to changes in power relations between women and men. The socialist welfare state's ability to eliminate inequalities between women and men obviously does not come automatically.

> "The gender paradox implies that women acquire a high quality of life in terms of social development index and access to practical interests. But women have a low level of participation and agency in the public and political sphere from the point of view of power to influence the development process to also include the diversity of women's strategic interests."[85]

In international terms the genderparadox can be expressed comparing the level of gender development index (GDI) and the level of gender empowerment measurement (GEM). But still the private sphere and social structures are partly left unmeasured. In the Kudumbashree case it became obvious that an analysis of the private sphere unveiled a further reproduction of power structures, which are often ignored in theoretical discussions concerning only the public and political spheres.

## People's Plan Campaign – Revealing a Third Paradox

Today Kerala is facing social transformations where political activities at grass root level has once again been put in the spotlight, yet, there is a crucial distinction of the origin of the mobilization as the initiatives are not primarily coming from below but from above. In the early 1990s the Indian central government in New Delhi initiated a decentralization process in India aiming to open up for liberalizations of the Indian economy. The Congress Party considered the decentralization to be an opportunity to stimulate the economy of the State through deregulations and privatizations, and the transformation of the country turned it into "a capitalist cash

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[84] Monica Erwér, pp. 302.
[85] Ibid, pp. 14.

economy".[86] In Kerala, however, the Left chose an alternative strategy, instead of liberalizations they brought about the radical reform 'planning from below', a strategy to strengthen and vitalize politics at the local level.[87] Crucial for the campaign was economic reallocation from the federal state to the local panchayats, as every panchayat was responsible for the planning on local level. People's Plan Campaign was an enormous project that engaged thousands of people working at the local level to realize the implementation of the decentralization reform. The Left side, conscious about the need of participation at every level in society for the reform to be sustainable, made huge efforts to reach out to the grass root level. However, the political process in Kerala has been under constant fluctuation due to the frequent switch in power between the Left and the Congress Party, and consequently, as the political wills represent opposing ideological forces, there has been difficulties for the Left to realize its reform.

With a history of large-scale foreign trade the Indian government has been criticized for exploiting Kerala's agricultural resources without allocating enough government grants for investments in industry and infrastructure. Thus, despite of Kerala's rich agricultural resources there has been an increase in dependence of imported provisions. The strained relations between the central government in New Delhi and Kerala government has a long history of repressions and attempts of interventions in Kerala politics. Today Kerala is facing difficulties to maintain its welfare system due to an imposed adaptation to the economic politics of the Indian government, which promotes cooperation with liberal market forces.[88] Consequently, the ideological struggle in Kerala also witnesses the hegemonic forces of globalization. The expansion of the Western market and the strengthening of the positions of capitalist interests (e.g. multinational companies) have come to influence local politics in many developing countries, and Kerala has not been able to withstand against the pressure of Western ideas and beliefs in the necessity of opening up the borders to capitalist interests. Yet, the local experience of political activity on grass root level still reinforces an ideology that focuses on people's lived experiences and everyday lives, rather than the voices from above. Based on a participatory approach aiming to include people's life experiences in the political process the strategy behind People's Plan Campaign is about making possible change 'from below' through identifying social and material needs at the local level.

However, the decentralization reform apparently includes contradictory elements, revealing a third paradox in the structure of the development experience of Kerala. The decentralization

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[86] Anna Lindberg, pp. 13.
[87] Mats Wingborg, pp. 23.
[88] Ibid, pp. 29-30.

process and People's Plan Campaign, both initiated 'from above', aimed to transform the State 'from below', but still ignored power relations in society. Capitalist forces cannot be totally neglected, not even by political leaders striving to please the local hegemonic discourse. Somehow Kerala politicians end up in a position wherein they are standing at a point somewhere between local ideological forces and pressure from interests outside the State. Drawing on Gramsci's discussion about the ruling classes' struggle for consensus to legitimize their ideological dominance, Kerala politicians to some extent act as 'functionaries' of the Western hegemony although they are trying to maintain welfare politics and to encourage people's participation in political activities. Hence the strategy of planning from below is quite problematic, and we want to emphasize that the participatory approach entails incongruous strategies, as long as the initiative descends from above and not from those who it concerns. In this sense, the development project of Kudumbashree is not separated from the general political thinking in the State, as the idea of decentralization is forming the very base of the project. By putting the local level in focus, revealing that priorities must be made based on the life experiences of 'the poor women', one step towards a more complex understanding of the reality of poverty is taken. At the same time, such projects create or reproduce dependence between the poor and the project, which may be problematic, regardless of the agent behind. The project of Kudumbashree is to be seen as a part of Kerala politics, however, is the idea of participation sufficiently established among those who it concerns? In order to understand Kudumbashree and its initiatives we will analyze how power structures work at different levels, forming a complex and sometimes paradoxical set of ideas specific for every single historical and cultural context.

# IV  Women Empowerment As a Development Strategy

## Introduction

> "Because we face poverty – we want to get rid of poverty."
> – Radhamani, lease-land farmer, born in 1961[89]

Women have been identified as carrying the burden of poverty and apparently this seemed to be the reason why they have been put in the spotlight of development agencies. Drawing on women's identity and social status, social empowerment has been highlighted as a base for change in gender inequalities. In this sense, social dimensions of inequality are viewed as the cause of economic inequalities, stressing that social factors determine oppressive structures.[90] Without denying the importance of social empowerment, we argue that the possibility to explore the access to social and economic resources could be found in the interconnection between the two. The strategy of Kudumbashree is particularly interesting as it aims to address poverty through different dimensions of women empowerment. On the basis of participation among poor women the strategy covers both aspects of agency as well as consciousness. Why are women defined as the way out of poverty? And how essential is the question of equality? Does women empowerment improve poor women's social and economic status and is the aim to challenge prevalent power structures?

## A Brief Overview of Kudumbashree

> "To eradicate absolute poverty in ten years through concerted community action under the leadership of Local Self Governments, by facilitating organization of the poor for combining self-help with demand-led convergence of available services and resources to tackle the multiple dimensions and manifestations of poverty holistically."
> – Mission Statement of Kudumbashree[91]

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[89] Interview 10 December 2004.
[90] Sakuntala Narasimhan, *Empowering Women.*
[91] Kudumbashree website: http://www.kudumbashree.org/ 2005-03-27.

In 1998, the Government of Kerala decided to extend the development experiences in Alappuzha and Malappuram to the entire state under the name 'Kudumbashree'. Emphasizing non-economic indicators to identify poor families and implementation of poverty alleviation scheme through community participation, Alappuzaha had taken an alternative course of action towards poverty in urban areas, whereas 'the Malappuram model' organized poor women in rural areas through participation in Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) in co-operation with UNICEF. Hence the mission of Kudumbashree emerged as a comprehensive strategy, including experiences from both urban and rural areas, to be applicable on Local Self Governments throughout the whole state.

The focus of Kudumbashree is upon eradication of the most extreme poverty in the state of Kerala within a period of ten years. Earlier poverty alleviation programs in India had been criticized for applying a strict 'top-down' approach, which was said to limit the practices and progresses of the programs.[92] In contrast, the main idea of Kudumbashree was to change the situation of the poor 'from below' by giving support and to make possible incentives for action on grass root level through a participatory approach. The 'top-down' approach was no longer considered to be an efficient strategy in sustainable poverty alleviation. Instead, Kudumbashree aims to form opportunity structures for the underprivileged to improve their economic and social situation.[93] In the case of Kerala today the underprivileged in focus are the poor, and especially poor women. The feminization of poverty visualizes the fact that women constitute the group hit hardest in periods of economic crisis and employment shortage. The recognition of a gender aspect on development is partly answering to why Kudumbashree is exclusively organizing women with a family based strategy. The strategy of working through women to reach the families is a way to reach the society, and to achieve this Kudumbashree works with a participatory approach focusing upon different dimensions of women empowerment: social and economic empowerment.

## Building a Platform for Agency

The implementation of women empowerment requires a structure built as a platform that opens up for agency and participation. In the process of applying theoretical concepts in practice the concept often changes character as a result of contextual causes. Development schemes are in most cases designed to suit the structure of a society, in the sense that it should make possible fast

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[92] Sakuntala Narasimhan, pp. 35-36.
[93] Interview 10 January 2005 with M.A. Aboobacker, Director (C.R.).

achievements. In the case of Kudumbashree the notion of agency is essential due to the aim to promote agency of poor women and to change their position as passive receivers into a position as active agents. Thus, when addressing agency to be the primary goal of participation, the structure of Kudumbashree has to be revealed in the light of decentralization.

## Social dimensions of agency

The idea of decentralization permeates the structure of the Community Based Organization (CBO) in Kudumbashree and attempts to secure participation at grass root level through division of the project into three levels.

4. Neighborhood Groups (NHG)
5. Area Development Society (ADS)
6. Community Development Society (CDS)

At the first level the Neighborhood Groups (NHG) constitute the main body and form the arena from which poor women can be an active part of society. Every Neighborhood Group includes 20–40 women from different families who meet at their weekly gatherings to collect thrift and to discuss what needs that exist in the neighborhood and in the families. The experiences of the women in the Neighborhood Groups form the basis of the micro-plan, which is the name of the local action program in Kudumbashree. In each Neighborhood Group five volunteers are selected to form a committee with a President, a Secretary, a Community Health Volunteer, an Income generation activities volunteer and an Infrastructure Volunteer.

At the second level - the ward level - is the Area Development Society (ADS), which is constituted by representatives from a federation of 8-10 Neighborhood Groups. The Area Development Society function through three distinct bodies:

1. The General Body – consists of all Presidents and Secretaries of the federated Neighborhood Groups along with representatives of Resource Person selected from that area
2. The Governing Body – constituted by electing a President, a Secretary and a five-member committee from among the General Body
3. The Monitoring and Advisory Committee – formed under the chairmanship of ward members of the Local Body to streamline their activities with the activities of Local Self Governments.[94]

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[94] The Kudumbashree Mission, *Kudumbashree –Concept, Organisation and Activities*, State Municipal House, pp. 5.

At the third and final level in Kudumbashree the Community Development Society (CDS) is registered under the Charitable Societies Act and consists of representatives from Area Development Society. Basically, the structure is the same in the two upper levels of Kudumbashree. The micro-plans constituted in the Neighborhood Groups form the basis of a mini-plan at the level of Area Development Society. After further discussions and prioritizations the mini-plans are consolidated into the "CDS plan", which is also the "anti-poverty sub-plan" of the Local Self Government.

> "Community based organizations will be the tools and devices to bring about these changes among women folk of the poor class. One woman from every identified poor family will be made a member of a Neighbourhood Group. The NHGs will be federated into ward level Area Development Societies (ADS) and ADSs will be federated into town/panchayat level Community Development Societies (CDSs). Thus this three tier CDS system of poor women will be coming up all over Kerala. These organizations and their activities will empower the poor women of the State to fight against poverty and social evils."[95]

The three-tier CDS system constitutes a platform based on actions among the participants, and notably the poor women are portrayed as active agents (of the State) in a position to *fight poverty and social evils*. Characteristic for the project is the point of departure, which transfers the identification of poverty to those who it concerns. This exposes the main idea with the structure of Kudumbashree, to channel the voices of poor people and realize action programs based on poor people's reality and daily problems.

## Economic dimensions of agency

> "The empowerment of women is sought to be achieved through the CDS strategy, which is an exclusively women-managed programme. Frequent group meetings, sharing of experience and training would broaden their outlook. Improved economic status of the women gained through CDS thrift and self-employment will boost their status in their own families and community. The enlightened, income-generating women will refuse to accept poverty as their destiny. Once they realize their collective strength, they will fight poverty and atrocities against them most valiantly."
> – General Concepts of Kudumbashree[96]

While the Neighborhood Group system is the primary tool to engage women and to achieve social empowerment among poor women, the basis for economic empowerment is formed by co-

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[95] Kudumbashree website: http://www.kudumbashree.org/ 2006-01-17.
[96] Kudumbashree website: http://www.kudumbashree.org/ 2006-01-21.

operative micro enterprises. Kudumbashree encourages women to start different micro enterprises collectively, and if possible in a branch that is traditionally male dominated, by offering a variety of training programs and by giving economic support through subsidies and loans. To fulfill the criteria given the group has to consist of ten members from the BPL category who are willing to go through the training program and are ready to take the risk of a loan. The idea is to create work opportunities for these women to give them a possibility to contribute economically to the family. The investment could be as small as 5000 rupees up to 2.5 lakhs depending on business activity. As a matter of fact, 50 per cent of the investment is given by Kudumbashree (or the State) as subsidies, while the other half is given as a bank loan. The micro enterprise development is seen as an emerging process starting with low capital, low risk and low profit at the initial stage, which is suggested to change into a medium level business that is more profitable, yet, at the same time more risky for the women. Entering the market, these micro enterprises have to compete with other small businesses to gain space in the margins of the market, and marketing could be a problem. Although there are obstacles to overcome, the belief in the economic empowerment strategy is immense. In theory, this is how Kudumbashree accomplishes the mission to economically strengthen poor women and enforces their ability to contribute to the well-being of the family.

Another side of the economic empowerment is collective thrift accounts, which adds an economic dimension to the three-tier CDS system. In every NHG women collect a small amount of money on weekly basis, and they are joined into a thrift and credit society. The amount could vary between 5-20 rupees depending on the individual group and the individual capacity, and in some NHGs the women had decided on having a fine for those who could not attend the meeting.

> "Small savings generated at the families are pooled at various levels as thrift and used to attract credit from banks which will operate as 24 hour Informal Bank for the Poor, linking with financial institution etc. / … / Through the Thrift and Credit Society financial capability, security and feeling of secured will be imparted to the poor women."
> – Activities and Women empowerment in the SJSRY-Kudumbashree website[97]

The collective saving funds provide access to a solid credit system to a marginalized group often denied access to the official banking. Though some women ran credit systems in the form of so-called 'chitty businesses', Kudumbashree provided an opportunity to take loans in a more safe

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[97] Kudumbashree website: http://www.sjsry-kudumbashree.org/ 2006-01-29.

way.[98] The idea of collective spirit emerged from the NHGs is supposed to constitute a basis of security and trust, and to replace the vulnerability of private borrowers. Thus collective saving brings an economic aspect to social networking and generates social safety, something not provided by private or official banking, e.g. in case they fail in repaying the loan or if they go bankrupt. It could also entail an individual sense of economic independence and initiate economically based actions.

Combining social and economic dimensions the structure of Kudumbashree aims to tackle two essential aspects of poverty. It is an attempt to overcome former failures and to establish sustainable development. Yet, the project is partly a product of the Kerala society, and has to be practiced within the frames of prevailing structures. Several of the women interviewed highly valued the strategy of including both social and economic empowerment, which provided them the opportunity to economically strengthen the position of their family and, at the same time, increase their personal social status – in the family as well as in the rest of the society. On the other hand, they had to face a number of challenges in their everyday life, which Kudumbashree, to some extent, contributed with. Nevertheless, Kudumbashree is based on participation of women below a poverty line, which entails their preferential right of interpretation concerning the process and the 'true' results.

## The Creation of Women Empowerment

> "Status of women in the society is still secondary and their role in developmental process is deplorably marginal. While social taboos, practices and lack of awareness and exposure smother their selves and spirits exploitations of all sorts are going on in all walks of life at their expense. The Project [Kudumbashree] proposes to enable and enlighten the women to realize their own latent potentials, and strengthen them to contribute to the development of their families and community."
> – General Concepts of Kudumbashree[99]

Kudumbashree's mission to *enlighten* and *strengthen* the women illustrates the goal of material change through social transformation, and visualizes the connection between economic and social empowerment. As a limited social space tends to enforce economic differences, social empowerment is suggested to open the door to a new 'space of agency' for poor women. The

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[98] So-called 'chitty-businesses' is another word for private saving founds, which could generate some profit/money for the women running it.
[99] Kudumbashree website: http://www.kudumbashree.org/ 2006-01-21.

dimension of social empowerment has several aspects, and women could have more or less social space regardless of their access to the public domain. However, the opportunity to contribute to the family also opens up for social and economic independence, but without necessarily challenging prevailing patriarchal structures in the family.[100]

Central to Kudumbashree in their approach towards poverty is the social position of women in society and how to secure active participation at a local level. The neighborhood group works as a platform wherefrom women's agency is expected to emerge, and a common opinion among the women we met was the significance of not being restricted to their houses. Even though a diversified range of topics were discussed at the gatherings it seemed to be the prospect of socially interacting with women in the nearby area that opened up for concrete changes in their daily lives. One woman experienced the impact of NHG as a great change in her ordinary life.

> "We women were always at house. We never know each other, so shy to face people, never knew to assess situation or people. We meet in different houses and thus come to relate with many people and news. This is helping us to relate to the world outside."
> – Mariamma, tailoring unit, born in the 1960s[101]

Discussing present news and daily life issues somehow created a public arena wherein women could relate personal experiences to a wider context – it helped them *to relate to the world outside*. The possibility to share personal experiences gave perspective to the individual situation of many women, which transformed the personal feeling of hopelessness into a feeling of being part of a collective spirit.[102] The constant interaction challenged the foundation of the family unit since the women, by getting together, recognized common experiences and interests, which reinforced the solidarity in the group.[103] By sharing the experiences of poor women and locating common worries these women developed a social network in the neighborhood area, which to some extent evoked a social security for these women where society had failed. It could be as simple as the prospect of discussing everyday issues like health related problems, financial matters, Kudumbashree and Panchayat activities, with equals.[104] In this sense, the ability to identify society related problems had more of a practical meaning in these women's ordinary life.

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[100] Intra-household relations seemed not to have changed notably as the women tended to maintain their responsibility for household related work.
[101] Interview 8 December 2004.
[102] Interview 8 December 2004 with Mariamma, tailoring unit, born in the 1960s.
[103] Interview 2 December 2004 with Sindhu, computer unit, born 1973.
[104] Interview 8 December 2004 with Mercy, tailoring unit, born 1967; Interview 2 December 2004 with Liza, paper-bag unit, born 1968.

Thus while Kudumbashree aims to enable poor women to form a collective force against poverty, this collective spirit rather seemed to help the women to manage their daily life struggle.

During the interview, several of the women hesitated when asked to describe their attitudes towards the outside world. The general political situation seemed to be perceived by a feeling of powerlessness and many women found it difficult to relate their daily life to a political discourse; i.e. some women willingly told us about their daily life and their lived experiences, whereas others considered themselves not to be in a position to reflect on the political situation. Their doubt was not a matter of the ability to make assumptions about their social situation, rather, it reflected different courses of interpretation. In fact, our pre-understanding of the political situation in Kerala unveiled how our position as outsiders within affected the choice of questions and how our lack of experience of poverty resulted in narrow answering options.[105] Concerning the tradition of party politics activity, and which party to vote for, it appeared to be family-oriented as women often voted for the same party as their family members. One woman even asserted that women were forced to take the opinion of their parents when they were young, or the opinion of their husband when married.[106] Despite the high participation in elections among the women, their marginalized position in the political discourse could be a reason why they did not express daily concerns in relation to a political context.

> "Yes, I do vote. I don't vote for Communist. I vote only for Congress. All my family always vote only for Congress. /…/ Kerala women have a though time. It's really difficult. It's mainly because of poverty. There is no enough food."
> – Lilly, candle unit, born in the 1950s[107]
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> "I vote. I vote for Marxist. It's a family connection. All my family is always with Marxists. And I too do the same. /…/ I don't know anything about politics.
> Yes there is a change between now and earlier. Earlier it was land of slavery for us, but now things are different. Now we have more freedom."
> – Radhamani, lease-land farmer, born 1961[108]

Lived experiences and daily concerns undoubtedly corresponded to an awareness about the material situation. Most apparent were concrete material shortages like sanitary facilities, drinking water, food deficiency etc, while there were still many 'non-told' experiences of

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[105] Starting off in a predetermined definition of politics with focus on party politics, we somehow reduced the meaning of lived experiences in parts of the discussion about the political situation.
[106] Interview 8 December 2004 with Mariamma, tailoring unit, born in the 1960s.
[107] Interview 10 December 2004.
[108] Interview 10 December 2004.

oppression left out. The lack of social security enforced the feelings towards the marginalized position of the women, yet, these experiences get signification through different forms of exposure and are too important to ignore. Noticeably was the notion of increasing harassments towards women, which was illuminated and discussed continuously during meetings. The concern about the safety of their daughters enforced them to take stands and to form opinions.[109] The fact that the subject of sexual harassment was brought up to discussion demonstrates a change in what used to be accepted to talk about and what was considered to be a family business. In this sense, violence against women was manifested in the way it became a collective concern, and exemplified a transformation of awareness into collective agency. Thus lived realities are in the highest possible degree active in the formation of social consciousness; i.e. consciousness regarding oppressive structures and social position.

While some women appreciated the broadened social space and possibility to interact with equals, others were said to attend the meeting with purely economic interests. One side of the NHG was the social betterments, i.e. the creation of a forum for discussions and the channeling of information; the other side was the collective saving funds, which implicated an economic security for the group. The most 'needy' could get a low interest loan for certain social and material scarcities, e.g. medical expenses and repair costs of the house.[110] Collecting small amounts of money on weekly basis worked to strengthen the feeling of belonging to the group and the essence of collective agency, which could lead to further action initiated by the women (themselves). One NHG evolved the economic commitments further by introducing a fine for those who did not attend a meeting, while another NHG started a medical fund especially to address health problems.[111] The thrift accounts undoubtedly added an economic ingredient to the social empowerment that appeared to be of high value for the women and their participation in the project.

   According to previous studies in Kerala the focus on education has been criticized for being too strong, and today women organizations in the State emphasize the economic autonomy of women

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[109] Interview 8 December 2004 with Mariamma, tailoring unit, born in the 1960s. Yet, they did not particularly discuss sexual harassments directed against them and women in general. This could of course have several reasons, but one interpretation could be that they did not value themselves in the same way as they valued their daughters, and therefore did not reflect over situations they had been raised to accept.
[110] Interview 8 December 2004 with Mariamma, tailoring unit, born in the 1960s.
[111] Interview 10 2004 with Radhamani, lease-land farmer, born 1961; Interview 3 2004 with Ammini, housewife, born 1958.

and women's participation in the workforce as prior questions for empowering women.[112] Kudumbashree has incorporated this claim for shift in focus, which implies that women issues are somehow discussed in the political agenda of Kerala.

Although the link between the three-tier CDS system and the micro enterprises was easier to understand in theory than in practice, there was a strong belief in the importance of these two dimensions of women empowerment. As a matter of fact, we met NHGs where only one or two of the 'members' had joined a micro enterprise unit, but we also interviewed members of NHGs where a majority of the women were in one way or another involved in Kudumbashree related economic activity. However, the link between NHG and micro enterprise units was rather ambiguous.[113] This could be due to the fact that the women could start units outside their original NHG, since the application for training programs involved co-operation with women from other NHGs.[114] The training programs were arranged on regular basis, and the communication between the women and the District Kudumbashree Mission was channeled through female representatives on CDS-level, who gathered on monthly basis.[115] Yet, the participatory approach showed a practical dilemma, which became most evident in the process of initiating new micro enterprise units and in the work of engaging the participants in different training programs, as few units appeared to emerge 'from below'. Instead, initiatives were often channeled from the Kudumbashree Commission, through CDS and ADS, to the grass root level. Somehow, the prospect of choosing what business to start was limited by the access to training and to the capability of carrying out a certain job, but in fact, Kudumbashree seemed to capture the thoughts of the women who actively pushed the start of a micro enterprise unit.[116] The units covered areas like tailoring, candle making, computer business, lease-land farming, paper-bag production, soap making and catering. More or less, the common ingredient was small-scale businesses dealing with difficulties of attracting customers due to e.g. limited resources for marketing.

While most of the women we interviewed appreciated the opportunity to contribute economically to the family, and especially to the future of their children, we experienced their new 'profitable' position as extremely vulnerable and insecure. Taking into consideration the size of the loan and the fact that it also had to be repaid within approximately six years, the women had to manage a profitable business for a number of years before accessing the profit of their

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[112] Monica Erwér, pp. 126.
[113] Follow up interview 3 January 2005 with Gracy, computer unit, born 1952.
[114] Interview 8 December 2004 with Mercy, tailoring unit, born 1967.
[115] Kudumbashree district meeting in Kakkanad 9 December 2004.
[116] Interview 2 December 2004 with Liza, paper-bag unit, born 1968.

work.[117] The social commitment to the unit and to Kudumbashree was suggested to ensure this process, and little was said about units that may have failed or were having a hard time as Kudumbashree officials rather chose to focus on success stories. However, listening to stories told by the women, in fact uncovered the complexity of the process and the difficulties in the implementation of women empowerment.

## Intra-household Relations and Social Status

The structure and practice of Kudumbashree disclose a resolute desire to attain the mission statement and to realize the goal of Kudumbashree – eradication of absolute poverty in the State within a ten-year-period. Through the implementation of a rather complex strategy the aim to achieve social and material betterments for poor families is somehow concentrated on the public domain, yet, it also makes invisible important aspects of power relations in the private sphere. Looking back on Kudumbashree's mission to reach out to families *through* women, it became evident that the focus on changing these women's position *within* the family does not automatically challenge patriarchal structures *inside* the household.

> "Woman is the light of life at house. Men don't know much about family. So Kudumbashree is gathering women. Family is for women. So she has to take care of that."
> – Mariamma, tailoring unit, born in the 1960s[118]

The traditional image of the interconnection between women and family was reflected in several women's narratives, confirming how presumed family responsibilities tie women to domestic work. At the same time as the economic empowerment offered a prospect of employment and economic autonomy, the workload of the women increased as they were still in charge of household related work. Starting four o'clock in the morning, to manage to finish all preparations for the daily needs of the rest of the family, was for many women a necessity if they should be able to match household responsibilities and working days.[119] Indeed, many of the obstacles revealed in the process of Kudumbashree could be linked to intra-household power relations in one way or another. Strict cultural codes on the gender division of labor in the private sphere were not easily challenged by social and economic empowerment, as it was not part of the

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[117] Interview 8 December 2004 with Mariamma, tailoring unit, born in the 1960s.
[118] Interview 8 December 2004.
[119] Interview 6 January 2005 with Lizzy, CDS-president, born 1960; Interview 8 December 2004 with Mariamma, tailoring unit, born in the 1960s.

strategy. Several of the women expressed openly that they didn't want their husbands to help them e.g. in kitchen work or washing, as they considered it unsuitable for a man to carry out such work.[120] Yet, there were nuances within the range of gendered domestic duties, but even if getting some assistance in the kitchen was not a strict social taboo there were still those who had second thoughts about it, and the man was still considered to be the head of the family. A gender division of labor clearly restrains the process of women empowerment, and if not approached the workload of women redouble.[121] During the interviews, considering women's situation in Kerala, the main obstacles were expressed as economic and material, whereas talking about positive changes brought about by Kudumbashree social aspects were highly valued, which revealed important aspects of the intra-household relations. The gain in social space generated a feeling of an ability to act, and the prospect of higher social status.

"I am very happy now, because even though very small, I am having an income of my own. My life has changed much, I used to spend my time sitting idle and watch TV and I had many health problems because of that. Now things are different. Now there is a discipline in my life.
Yes, there are changes. Everyone is seeing us going every day. People are asking about the work and working conditions, and generally appreciates the situation. And husband's family treats me with respect these days. And now I am capable of communicating and have some nerve to assert my stand."
– Liza, paper-bag unit, born 1968[122]

"Yes, there are clear changes after Kudumbashree. Earlier we were so shy and very reluctant to meet people or talk to them etc. Now we are rather confident, I feel I am an individual, these days we are talking and facing lots of people."
– Mercy, tailoring unit, born 1967[123]

The social and economic empowerment brought about a strengthened self-esteem in the process of entering the outside world, and somehow a belief in these women as agents. Nevertheless, the question about changes in intra-household relations remains unanswered and many women experienced doubts from their family/husband. The doubts occurred during the initial stage when the women first got in contact with Kudumbashree, yet, most of their husbands had been supportive when realizing the benefits of the project. Bringing much-needed resources into their families and communities, the women got access and contributed to a common interest that

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[120] Interview 2 December 2004 with Sindhu, computer unit, born 1973; Interview 2 December 2004 with Liza, paper-bag unit, born 1968, Interview 5 December with Gracy, computer unit, born 1952.
[121] Monica Erwér, pp. 198.
[122] Interview 2 December 2004.
[123] Interview 8 December 2004.

economically strengthened the family. In this sense, their engagement did not challenge patriarchal structures in the private sphere, but rather encouraged a common class interest.

The question whether the economic changes for these women were big enough to change power relations within the family, and if employment and income entailed a stronger bargaining position and sense of autonomy in the household, is interconnected with reproduction and the social hierarchy in society.

   In fact, the earnings from micro enterprise activities were rather limited, partly due to the repaying of the loan and partly due to problems of finding a space of agency in the margins of the market. However, the possibility of becoming an earning member involved a positive change, as the ability to contribute economically could entail modifications in attitudes within the family. On the other hand, there was at least one distinct structural obstacle, which affected the economic empowerment of women – the dowry system. Although India formally legislated against the dowry system, and dowry is now forbidden by law, it is still practiced in most of the states and there is a widespread acceptance of dowry and the dowry system. As the women cared for their children, and especially for their daughters, they saved their earnings for educational costs and dowry for their daughters. In this way the income did not strengthen the economic position of the women, but somehow implied a better life for their daughters.

> "Arranged marriages are more lasting and secure. Most of the love marriages fail immediately. Mutual respect is needed. Love marriages don't have that mutual respect. I am talking about life around me. Whatever we talk about dowry, it's going to continue. If woman does have independency, dowry can be avoided. Otherwise, the girl has to suffer and be like a slave."
> – Mercy, tailoring unit, born 1967[124]

Arranged marriages were considered to be the sustainable alternative, in comparison to love marriages, which were expected to fail or put the family in trouble if not accepted by the parents.[125] Nevertheless, an essential part of most arranged marriages was the size of the dowry, and without dowry there could be no marriage. The size of the dowry also influenced how much respect the girl would get from her husband and his family. Thus, it was obviously high priority for several of these poor women, who had experienced a lack of respect due to small dowry, to

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[124] Interview 8 December 2004.
[125] For a historical overview of the traditional caste system in Kerala, which unveils special features in systems of marriage, inheritance and succession, see, V.K. Ramachandran, "Kerala's Development Achievements and their Replicability", pp. 88-115.

improve the conditions for their daughters. Arranged marriages also had an ethnic aspect as families were truly concerned with marrying off their children within their own religious community. Inter-caste marriages were still social taboo, and could involve marginalization, or even exclusion from the paternal house. Ethnic segregation was of decisive importance in maintaining the basis of a prevalent caste system, most significant in the private sphere (e.g., marriage). The caste system constituted for a long time the main structure of division in the Kerala society, and though many scholars assert the historical change from caste to class as political and social categories, caste is still of great importance, even if it might be less politicized and visible today.[126] Thus, the dowry system contributed to the reproduction of gendered, as well as ethnic and economic, power structures. In terms of economic agency, the women interviewed were limited due to gendered traditions, i.e. dowry, which diminished the result of the economic empowerment.

Women empowerment obviously did not automatically trickle down to the private sphere, even though social and economic changes reached the family to some extent. The fact that these women started to have an income of their own, maybe due to the relatively small wage and difficulties to manage a profit, did not markedly affect gender relations in the household. A strict cultural code of femininity is reproduced within the private sphere, which is illuminated through intra-household relations upholding the *effeminization*, and obscuring a possible common interest among the women.

## Giving Development the Face of a Woman

Women empowerment is a process with women in focus, placing men in the periphery. The economic and social strengthening of women is estimated to alter intra-household relations and to result in decreased inequality between women and men. Despite the strong critique of previous poverty alleviation strategies' belief in a 'trickle-down' theory, Kudumbashree still adapt an anti-poverty strategy in which the progress of social and economic changes in the public arena and among poor families are expected to result in a further change in the private sphere and in the intra-household relations. These equality progresses are approached as a logic consequence, or preferably, a 'trickle-down' effect of the process of these two dimensions of women

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[126] See, for example, Anna Lindberg, *Experience and Identity*; M. A. Oommen, *Development experience of Kerala I.*

empowerment applied in the project.[127] However, the purpose of organizing only women appears to be twofold. First and foremost, by visualizing the feminization of the poor there is a discursive pressure from outside to engage women in society and to promote gender equity.[128] The strengthening of women is considered to be a way out of poverty, as development must reach the poorest of the poor (i.e. poor women) to encourage change. Secondly, although many flattering words could be dedicated to the implementation of women empowerment, in the Kudumbashree case, this strategy undoubtedly relies on the stereotypical link between women and family, and is a way to secure the resource allocation and to make sure that the project benefits the whole family.

> "Family is the responsibility of women. If they have some money they can look after the children and maintain the house. Men are always working and not much worried about family matters. When Kudumbashree organizes women, income goes back to family. Men take eighty per cent of their income for personal needs. That's not the case with women."
> – Liza, paper-bag unit, born 1968[129]

Previous studies also establish unequal patterns of contribution to the household, a feature also confirmed by the women interviewed. Whereas men withhold part of their income for personal use, women invest their total income in the household and the family.[130] The consent on prevalent gender relations was not challenged by Kudumbashree, neither was it openly questioned by the women interviewed.[131] A dilemma, however, was unveiled when approaching the issue of dowry. In contradiction to the claim for securing the well-being of the family by economically empowering women, the concern about the marriages of their daughters made the women put aside money to ensure the prospect of their child rather than investing the whole amount into the present well-being of the family. Thereby, indicating that the women, somehow, experienced a distinct interconnection between economic standard (e.g. dowry) and social status in the private sphere. In the interviews, we recognized a widespread consciousness about the oppressive dimension of the dowry system, but still, they did not consider themselves to be in a position to challenge it.

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[127] Interview 10 January 2005 with Mr M.A. Aboobacker, Director (C.R.).

[128] Kudumbshree website: "Strategies", http://www.kudumbashree.org/ 2006-02-05.

[129] Interview 2 December 2004.

[130] See, Leela Gulati, "Women in the Unorganised Sector with Special Reference to Kerala", in Sharma and Singh (eds), *Women and Work* (New Delhi, 1993), pp. 263-265. The matter was also confirmed by several of our respondents, Interview 2 December 2004 with Sindhu, computer unit, born 1973; Interview 8 December 2004 with Mariamma, tailoring unit, born in the 1960s; Interview 3 December 2004 with Ammini, housewife, born 1958.

[131] According to Monica Erwér, the discourse on women's high status, within the frames of prevalent gender roles, grants the State a female consent, due to the internalization of patriarchal ideology. See, Monica Erwér, pp. 305.

On the one hand, illuminating social empowerment as a way to make poor women aware of their exposure and encourage collective thinking through group sharing activities Kudumbashree approached an inner aspect of empowerment and a strengthening of the self. In this sense, the project somehow challenges the social control of women, as it breaks up the restrictions of women's mobility. On the other hand, the strategy involved a gender consent that restrained the process of further improvements in terms of gender equity. For example, the phenomenon of the double burden (i.e. employment and household work), has been revealed in previous studies in Kerala where women's average working day had been estimated to 16 hours per day. The lack of spare time deprived the women of the possibility to sit down and reflect on everyday experiences. Monica Erwér has noted how women's low political activity in Kerala is due to this dimension of social control, covering the heavy workload and the restrictions on mobility. In this sense, women get an expanded mobility only when it comes to leaving home for work, and are still confined to strict social codes.[132]

The notion of the interconnection between social control and social status was crucial when it came to representation available for women in the upper levels of Kudumbashree. Being selected into ADS or CDS involved both aspects of increasing social status and possibilities to interact with government officials and local/state authorities, and a non-paid voluntary commitment based on accountability towards the women represented. During an interview with a CDS-president, she explained how her position required a fulltime engagement as the responsibilities covered her accessibility towards the grass root level as well as government officials. She had unregulated working hours and had to be available almost every hour of the day, as there was always someone needing her assistance.[133] The gain in social status therefore prevented a possibility of profitable work and economic independence, which did not change the economic dependency upon her husband. Thus his support and consent became the basis of her engagement. Even if the representation includes a full employment it is still a voluntary engagement without any prospect of payment. According to the Director (C.R) of Kudumbashree it is due to preventions of corruption.[134] However, due to the fact that the women elected representatives were unpaid in contrast to the payment of the government officials, the economic gap presumably had some

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[132] Monica Erwér, pp. 198.
[133] Interview 6 January 2005 with Lizzy, CDS-president, born 1960.
[134] Interview 10 January 2005 with M.A. Aboobacker, Director (C.R.).

impact on the power relation between the representatives and the officials and restrained the channeling of poor women's voices.

Giving development the face of a woman the Kerala government has tried to adapt a gender sensibility to the decentralization process in the State. The utilization of low paid/unpaid work is portrayed to promote opportunity structures and to move women from the margins. Yet, the focus on women is a prerequisite of the realization of the Kudumbashree project, as such exploitation would never be accepted if the subjects were men.[135] Some scholars have asserted that women as a low paid resource is not a new phenomena, and is not a pure Third world issue as the same phenomena could be spotted in the West.[136] The fact that unemployed women are not in a position to pick and choose among income opportunities is nevertheless profitable to the global market.

## Negotiation With Power Structures

The picture of poverty painted by Western media is that of starvation, illiteracy, oppression, abuse, etc., which depicts a homogenized group of people too uneducated to question their own destiny. Yet, it is a picture without an individual face as the image of poverty is an image of millions – a victimized group with no names, no identities and not enough information to realize their exposed situation. Recently, this picture of poverty changed to have the face of a woman, but still indistinct and not apparently portrayed as human beings. Seeing this impersonal face of poverty makes it extremely difficult to take seriously and relate to, as impersonality does not have a voice (i.e. non-told experiences). The creation of the other is rather convenient for the Western political discourse as it both aims to help the poor younger sister through political decisions and to break new grounds for the expansion of the capitalist market. It is a strategy to include development support and its outcomes in global liberalization.

Although Kerala is not spared from Western influences and ideological forces, the State still has its 'alternative' experience of development, which aims to a decentralized structure of politics and development. In this sense, Kerala forms an example deviant from the accepted course of

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[135] Interview 8 December 2004 with Mariamma, tailoring unit, born in the 1960s; Interview 6 January 2005 with Lizzy, CDS-president, born 1960.

[136] The intimate connection between the position of the housewife and the lowest paid women's employment in the Third World has been noted by Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, "Why do Housewives continue to be Created in the Third World too?", in Mies et al. (eds), *Women: The Last Colony* (New Delhi, 1988), pp. 159-167, see also, Maria Mies, *The Lace Makers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market* (London, 1982).

development, and contra-hegemonic forces are received with mistrust and disapproval from ruling interests.[137] What is mentioned as the Kerala model is considered to be an unsustainable course of development, as economic growth is suggested to generate new opportunities and better conditions for poor countries. Not outspokenly argued is the interest of the West, longing to break through the frontiers of 'untouched' markets offering cheap labor. The economic growth is suggested through an 'open' market including far reaching privatization, whereas anti-capitalist strategies are identified as old-fashioned and reactionary. Women empowerment, however, combines the radical thought of democratic decentralization and reliance of the market as such. The strategy of Kudumbashree is focused on a decentralized structure to include the participants in the process, giving the development experience a gender sensitive face *through* the voices of women. It is a well-thought out strategy since it aims to approach empowerment through different dimensions, and significantly is taking social aspects into consideration. In this sense, Kudumbashree is forming a middle-way applicable within prevailing structures – both locally and globally. The 'alternative' aspect lies in the historical context, which has constituted the foundation of local participation during decades forming a specific hegemonic discourse in Kerala.[138]

   Local participation is an absolute condition to be able to carry through a large-scale project like Kudumbashree, which requires a large machinery of (public) administration. The project could be apprehended as an outcome of the far-reaching decentralization process in the Kerala history due to local activity and democratic intentions at several political levels to perceive local support. Thus, Kerala has developed a contra-hegemonic discourse standing in contrast to the domination of Western hegemony. The local hegemonic discourse and its ideological origin reflect material conditions in which social groups and classes exist, whereas development schemes emerging in this context are presumably both represented through local ideas and global political and economic pressure. Kudumbashree could be seen as an attempt to create consent between ideas of the ruling class and ideas of the dominated (poor) class, in which they present tools to the poor women for 'self-emancipation'. However, this process is controlled within the frames of the project and its mission is a convenient way to decrease the gaps in society without challenging ruling ideas, as the women are depending on the tools given. Similarly, the case with women empowerment in Kudumbashree seeks a spirit of understanding/mutual understanding among the

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[137] Mats Wingborg, *Kerala: alternativ väg till välfärd.*
[138] Compare with discussion regarding if the development experience of Kerala would be considered as a model or not. See, Chapter III.

sexes. The project emphasizes the significance of the husband's consent to facilitate involvement among women, yet, no gender analysis is offered and patriarchal relations not questioned.

> "Patriarchal system is well accepted in this society. If Kudumbashree starts challenging that reality it's not going to get wide acceptance as it's getting now. Kudumbashree mission has never discussed the reasons for "feminization of poverty" or tried to challenge patriarchal values at any point of time. Kudumbashree is trying to provide job opportunities and to make them [the poor women] earning members and thus giving them social status both within and outside family. There is always a difference between earning and non-earning woman status."
> – Lizzy, CDS-president, born 1960[139]

The aim to make the poor emancipate themselves appeared to depend on certain criteria of how to define liberation. While poor women were identified as the way out of poverty, their agency had to unite with prevalent 'reality'. If we use Minh-ha's critique towards Western hegemony it appears how the strategy of Kudumbashree incorporates the dominating masters' tools, which intensify the state of dependence between the West and the Third World, as well as between the project and the women involved. The economic empowerment approach mainly focuses on micro enterprises and is realized through an open market strategy. The women are supposed to adapt to the economic system without expressing critique towards its prevalent structure, and making them accept the preconditions. Thus, changes *within* prevailing power structure will always be 'colored' by the dominating hegemony.

  The economic strategy of Kudumbashree tends to coincide with interests of the West, giving the participants hope of a strengthened position through the market. In this way, the project leaves poor women with one solution, which reinforces liberal ideology in the economic discourse. As the economic discourse (i.e. the Kerala market) has already opened up and accepted privatizations, it is not surprising that development schemes support the ideological switch in Kerala politics. In this sense, the women do not necessarily choose to support the prevalent ideology, as they have no or few alternatives, and in this way the economic discourse may influence them beyond their consciousness.

In studying Kudumbashree, we experienced rather concrete obstacles to the process of women empowerment, which undoubtedly could be understood in the light of power structures. Although women empowerment aims to promote the agency of an oppressed group, the fact that

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[139] Interview 6 January 2005.

Kudumbashree allows itself to act as a potential savior reproduces the image Western media uses to represent poverty, and at the same time produces an image that the poor women are supposed to identify with. Similarly, Hall's notion that inscriptions affect how people define and act in certain situations responds to the victimized depiction given to a specific social group.

The women we interviewed did not totally identify themselves as being poor women with common interests even though they were conscious about their common material position (i.e. class consciousness). On the contrary, they identified themselves, in many cases, out of other categories, such as religion and caste (ethnicity). If a consciousness is not related to identity the possibility of collective agency is missed, and instead of feeling connected to a group identity (i.e. class) the women are reduced to being just 'poor'. The stereotype representation of the poor is reinforced by de facto that Kudumbashree obscures class, i.e. the poor women are ascribed a passive and victimized 'role' as being poor. This depiction of poor women corresponds to the representation of Third World women pictured by the West, and according to Mohanty, the victimization reproduces an image of hopelessness and powerlessness.[140] Most of all, it confirms an image that they are in need of help – a help defined from above. Although Kudumbashree emphasizes the idea of assistance supplementary to one's own efforts it is still a poverty eradication project initiated at state level. At the same time as women are being helped out of poverty, they are deprived of the possibility of acting as an agent, or at least this possibility is diminished, since the rules of negotiation with oppressive structures are predetermined by the project. Nevertheless, how to perceive the material position is characterized by a hegemonic impersonation of the poor. This substantiates Kabeer's argumentation about the systematic disempowerment of existing structures, which will affect some social groups' ability to make choices. The framework of Kudumbashree builds platforms for agency that offer both opportunities and constrains for these women to act as autonomous agents.

The concept of false consciousness would imply a power relation based on inequality in consciousness level which certain classes and certain groups would be deliberately excluded from. In this sense, the poor women would be the others, suffering from such false consciousness. The concept of false consciousness could be resembled to the negotiation with power structures since the alternative given enforces a spirit of consensus, which in a close future might entail material and social betterment – opening up for collective action – but in a long term future rather favors interests of the ruling class. Thus, Kudumbashree loses credibility in its aim to empower,

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[140] Chandra T. Mohanty, pp 23-26.

when ignoring its position of power in relation to the participating women as it accepts dominating ideology rather than challenges it.

The question whether it is possible to expand the space of agency through negotiation with existing power structures depend on difference and the creation of the other. The reproduction of stereotype images constrains the prospect of creating a sustainable solution of disempowerment, reducing the women space of agency to merely include predetermined tools and achievements. Western depiction of Third world women has great impact in the preservation of the victimization of poverty permeating all dimensions of development, and Kudumbashree is active in reproducing the stereotype of powerless women in need of enlightenment.

# V Conclusions

The last preceding sections have concerned women participating in Kudumbashree and their experiences of women empowerment. The topic was chosen because of Kudumbashree's intention to create opportunity structures for poor women to increase their social and economic status, but also because of the fact that these women did not seem to suit the stereotypical view of Third world women pictured by the West as victimized and unaware of their social situation. This study has been built upon interviews and written reports to cover the ideological analysis of lived experiences and material realities. Women empowerment is discussed both as a process and an outcome through different dimensions, including changes in the public and private spheres.

To understand the platform wherein social and economic empowerment is supposed to emerge the structures have been analyzed through cultural and historical contexts. Paving the way for women empowerment Kudumbashree has been guided by the thought of participation through the Kerala backwaters and steered by winds from the West. Although the development experiences of Kerala has carried the heritage of participation from a historical background of social movements, poverty alleviation schemes are still under great influence of those in control of the international (political) agenda. Therefore we have argued that the decision of implementing the concept of women empowerment must be understood on the basis of at least two dimensions – the specific historical context of Kerala and the Western hegemony.

An understanding of ideological forces analyzed through dominant discourses has been a major concern of this study, to locate these women's lived experiences in a macro socio-political context, i.e. in a global development perspective. The exploitive nature of capitalism has crossed the borders of development schemes, since there has been a shift in attitudes towards sustainable (liberal) development. Nourished by the hands of the Kerala government and celebrated by international agents Kudumbashree has been stated as a good example of how sustainable development is achievable. The limited ten-year-period is notable in its sense that the State needs to improve in a set period of time – pushing the State to achieve its goals of poverty eradication – but it has also presumably affected the structure of the project, making it suitable in the social context of Kerala. Even though participation on grass root level constitutes the basis of the project's idea of sustainability, the initiative is nevertheless engaged from above. The concept of

empowerment is suggested to create self-dependent agency and increase the level of consciousness among the participants to make them self-reliable, yet, the predetermined frames of attainments make the aim of Kudumbashree quite ambiguous. Hence, rethinking the paradoxical relationship between agency and participation reflects power structures in society as participation assumes predetermined conditions for space of agency and demonstrates the third paradox, which is visualized in the power relation between Kudumbashree officials and the participants, and the creation of women empowerment entails a new situation in which the women are dependant on the project. We have argued that the critique against the 'Kerala model', pointing out that there has been no real increase in women's influence and power (i.e. gender paradox), does not consider the width of the impact of Western interests and Kerala's adjustment to a 'globalized' market. In this sense, participation and agency must be analyzed through the interconnection between ideological forces and social practices. In particular, patriarchal ideologies and gender discourses have been strong forces in maintaining the subordination of women due to the fact that Kudumbashree promotes economic autonomy while not questioning intra-household relations.

   The concept of women empowerment as a development approach towards poverty indicates both social and economic dimensions. Nevertheless, it is a 'tadpole philosophy' which presupposes a homogenization of cultures of the world, resulting in an ignorance of specific historical and cultural contexts. In the Kudumbashree case the implementation of social and economic empowerment made the contradiction between the significant gender traditions in Kerala and the approach against the global feminization of poverty obvious. Most important, the ignorance of visualizing power structures related to the private sphere obstructed the attainments of the empowering process. The dowry system unveiled strict gender traditions restraining the women both socially and economically, and as an essential ingredient in the maintenance of patriarchal relations in the private domain. Stressing the importance of approaching power structures in intra-household relations, and Kudumbashree's lack of acknowledging such normalized traditions, could partly explain why social and economic empowerment did not change non-outspoken cultural codes and traditions.


The link between lived experiences and consciousness has been addressed in order to explain how ideologies, agency and power, social and cultural constructions of gender are closely interconnected. During the interview process it became obvious that the women interviewed were conscious about their situation and position as being poor, in contrast to the stereotype of Third

world women. Many women illustrated disempowerment in how they were facing poverty and constantly being denied access to social and economic resources. Without neglecting the experience of poverty we have drawn attention towards the construction of the poor in relation to empowerment where we have pointed out two dimensions of consciousness – material and social – i.e. the lived material reality and how it is experienced. During this study we had to revise our understanding of false consciousness, as these women illustrated how consciousness made more sense in terms of a pronounced relationship between a lack of awareness *and* the opportunities to choose. Kudumbashree left them with one solution, a predetermined way of emancipation out of poverty by offering tools of the master. Reinforcing a dependency towards the project left many women without a choice of questioning the tools given, which confirmed Kudumbashree's role as a potential savior.

The aim of this study is not to present solutions and to give instructions of how development schemes *should* be designed, but is an attempt to visualize how development schemes are *influenced* by dominant hegemonies, which will both affect the process of development and the outcome of women empowerment. Therefore we have argued for the importance of being aware of the interconnection between prevalent ideologies and hegemonic domination, as trends in development theory could never be fully understood without taking the global capitalist market and Western hegemony into consideration. In combination with a historical and cultural understanding this forms a point of departure from where women can listen to other women's life stories and relate to common experiences across cultural borders.

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