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Empowerment, Participation and Influence in Practice

– A Minor Field Study of the Empowerment
Process from the Perspective of Rural Indian
Women



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Abstract

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Title: *Empowerment, Participation and Influence in Practice: a Minor Field Study of the Empowerment Process from the Perspective of Women*

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This bachelor essay is a result of a minor field study for two months the spring 2011. The aim with my study was to explore a deeper understanding of empowerment as a tool in solving the Indian rural woman's problem. To what extent is empowerment a symbolic, top-down action and to what extent does it, in practice, empower the women participating in the projects? The purpose of this study was to highlight how the experience had been from the women's point-of-view. Empowerment seems widely regarded as the ideal solution for development projects in India, but still there is a lot of criticism, as to what empowerment really is and if it actually works, in practice, for the target group. My research questions were:

- 1) How do the women describe their participation and influence in a decision-making body in relation to the non-governmental organization (NGO)?
- 2) How do the women experience and describe the meaning of their own empowerment process?
- 3) Has empowerment had any impact on women in everyday life after the withdraw phase of the project?

The methods I used were observations in two different self-help groups and qualitative interviews with five women. I aimed to reach a deep understanding of the women's point-of-view. In the introduction section I connected postcolonial feminism and intersectionality to show the structural influence of Indian rural women. The theory I used in relation to my results and analysis was the empowerment project, which the NGO used in their projects, from the perspective of Malin Arvidson's (2003) dissertation. Arvidson (2003) argues that the empowerment tool is a symbolic, top-down tool, which does certainly not help the target group in the long-term.

The results were overall decent and the women thought they had been able to participate and influence the development- and community work. Their relations with their families and the community people were improved and they enjoy their lives much more now. They have a higher self-confidence and courage to fight for their rights. They also believe that they have established a good unit among the women in the community. Overall the women think that they have developed a lot in their mind but also in society (social, political, psychological), but still they cannot imagine their own NGO as disconnected to the NGO that started the community work. In this aspect I could easily connect my theory to the result.

Key Words: empowerment, participation, influence, postcolonial feminism, intersectionality, women in India.

Content

ABSTRACT	1
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	1
1. INTRODUCTION	2
<u>1.2 THE PROBLEM FOR INDIAN RURAL WOMEN</u>	2
2. PROBLEM STATEMENT	12
<u>2.1 PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS</u>	12
3. RESEARCH METHOD	12
<u>3.1 METHOD</u>	12
3.1.1 <i>Observations</i>	13
3.1.2 <i>Interviews</i>	15
<u>3.2 SELECTION AND THE METHOD’S STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS</u>	16
<u>3.3 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY</u>	19
<u>3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS</u>	19
<u>3.5 LITERATURE SEARCH</u>	20
4. THEORETICAL ASPECTS	21
<u>4.1 THE EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY</u>	21
5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS	23
<u>5.1 THE OBSERVATIONS</u>	23
<u>5.2 THE INTERVIEWS</u>	26
5.2.1 <i>How do the women describe their participation and influence in a decision-making body in relation to the NGO?</i>	27
5.2.2 <i>How do the women experience and describe the meaning of their own empowerment process?</i>	32
5.2.3 <i>Has empowerment had any impact on women in everyday life after the withdraw phase of the project?</i>	34
6. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION	37
<u>6.1 FURTHER RESEARCH</u>	41
BIBLIOGRAPHY	42
APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW GUIDE	44

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1. Introduction

1.2 The Problem for Indian Rural Women

In her book *Feminism and Indian Realities* (2002) K.A. Kunjakkan argues a case for the typical Indian woman and the Indian Womanhood. I just want to emphasize that I disagree with Kunjakkan (2002) that there is nothing essentialistic with Indian Womanhood, since women are different depending on growing conditions and social context. However, just like Kunjakkan (2002) implies, I agree with her that every country has its own history, culture and traditions that is necessary to consider when trying understanding the conditions surrounding a woman's situation. It is of great importance to study her social background, cultural traditions and beliefs. Kunjakkan (2002) argues that these circumstances have not attracted enough attention from Western researchers studying the Indian woman. There are, of course, many educated women in India but the population majority of Indian women are living in poverty, unawareness, bad health and illiteracy in rural areas. The majority of rural women live together with their families, act as the household's housewife and is extremely dependent on their husbands. A way of changing the situation for these women is to empower them. S.L. Doshi and P.C. Jain (1999) give a number of concrete reasons to empower the Indian rural women. A prime reason is their health problems. S.L. and P.C. (1999) also explain that women are discriminated in terms of medical treatment. The illiteracy rate is also very high among rural women and for those who go to school the drop-out rate is still very high, and thus the absence of literacy forces women go to work in the fields as labour workers. According to data from the Indian census in 2011, among women above seven years of age, there are around 176 million illiterate women in the whole country compared to around 97 million men (Times of India, June 9th, 2011). Another reason that makes the empowerment of women essential is their economic situation. As mentioned, women are still dependent on their husbands. S.L. and P.C. (1999) claim that only a small percentage of rural women are beneficially employed. A male is still the dominant head of the family and a woman believes it might be difficult to make a decision that contradicts her husband's will.

In addition, in India religion and local traditions still play an important role for people, especially for women. Indian culture is centuries older than Western culture and there are very few similarities regarding the traditions, and as Kunjakkan (2002) argues "you cannot look forward without looking backward". Kuiper (2011) explains that the family is the most fundamental social unit of Indian society. There is a clear order of social priority, power and

influence based on gender and age within the Indian family since thousands of years back. One can make a simple distinction here. Indian Womanhood is based on customs related to religion and tradition (and mythology to some extent). A base, which is deeply rooted in society, a status no one questions due to its powerful religious fundament. In the *Laws of Manus*, which is an Indian textbook of customary law, there is a description of the role of women solely in relation to men. Kunjakkan (2002) refers to the Laws of Manus, as she argues that a woman is a part of a man and that an uncontrolled and “uncultured” woman is a danger both for the men and human society. Further on, she says that this is why a man should control and discipline a woman for her own sake, for human society and for a peaceful life. It is deeply rooted in society, both among women and men that the woman is at the bottom of the Indian human hierarchy.

The rural Indian woman continues to live under these conditions and I want to try and answer the question by drawing on some theories of postcolonial feminism and the concept of intersectionality. There is no single definition of intersectionality. De los Reyes and Mulinari (2005) depicts it as a logical tool to study how different forms of discriminatory power structures interact in a society. An example for this could be how the discrimination of gender interacts and strengthens the discrimination of the cast and class and vice versa. By claiming that there are multiple power structures that are dependent on each other, we can open up an intersectional perspective in order to dissolve the boundaries between different social categories to draw attention to how they interact. For example women are never seen as only women because the gender order as a separate question gives an inadequate perspective to explain how inequality emerges and how power is executed. Power structures cannot be ranked, no power structures stand above any else and there are also power structures within power structures (De los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005). This is one of the wider problems for Indian rural women since very few people take into account those social, economic and psychological differences among the women. And if we do not consider this we contribute to that the majority of rural Indian woman continues to live under these conditions.

According to Safia Mirza (2009) postcolonial feminism situates the power of colonial times as it progresses and gives long lasting effects, such as economic, political and cultural, among marginalized and gendered others in new present times. De los Reyes and Mulinari (2005) they refer to Ashcroft et al (1989:2):

“We use the term postcolonial, however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the movement of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a

continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression” (De los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005, s. 62).

This cultural process has of course also naturalized relations of dominance and inequality among colonized and subordinated groups such as people with low class, cast and of course a huge group of women. De los Reyes and Mulinari (2005) believe that we always need to explain why there are differences and inequalities among people and how they are related to each other. Laskar (2006) refers to Chandra Talpade Mohanty as she explains that the concept of *double colonization* depicts in feminist postcolonial thoughts. It refers to both the colonial and national liberation movements’ male-centred representations of gender. The colonizers spawned stories where women were represented as subordinated and passive mothers. The colonizers also implemented gender-based power systems in the colonized areas. Thus this sometimes destroyed social systems in which the indigenous women had a higher value than European women. Double colonization also refers to that the colonized themselves had systems that subordinated and limited women's movements. National liberation movements that fought for the abolition of colonial regimes have ironically often followed the colonizers’ path and arranged the same power structure as during the British rule. Both colonialism and resistance to colonialism may therefore conclude from a male perspective that subordinates different women (Laskar, 2006). Indian rural women therefore still live under oppressed conditions and also because these women are often born into low castes. Though the problem is not with the women, it lies with the professionals who identify the needs, but they often forget to classify the problems through an intersectional approach. For instance, in some cases a non-governmental organization can work with untouchables women (casteless) who already live on rather good conditions instead of focusing on women from a low caste with poorer conditions. This is one of the reasons for large gaps in the power structures among women only.

Narayan (1998) implies that postcolonial feminism directs some critic to Western feminism as it often uses the term ‘woman’ as if it is a universal concept. Western feminism tends to forget to explain women’s various social classes and ethnic characteristics, and only focus on the gender aspect. It is important to consider how the gender, class and ethnicity go hand in hand to avoid generalizations about women’s various problems.

Postcolonial feminism reveals how gender, ethnicity, class and other power structures intersect. The critique against the western feminism’s content has been an important element

in the postcolonial feminism. De los Reyes and Mulinari (2005) argue that this means that we reveal women's different actions among the colonized as well as among the colonizers, but also in particular, how gender ideologies and discourses imbued colonial structures, metaphors and symbolism. Just like Kunjakkan (2002), De los Reyes and Mulinari (2005) write about how the colonized were recognized to womanhood's attributes, such as nature, emotions, intuition and irrationality. And this is in line with the colonial self-image as superior, rational and civilized. Therefore the situation of Indian rural women got worse in the post-colonial period and that there is a duality when professionals come to "fix" their contemporary situation as they excludes from new-formed groups at the same time as they increase their economic situation.

Post-colonialism paired with feminism problematizes the cultural, linguistic, historical and psychological boundaries as created by the Western colonization, which is the focus of the post-colonial thoughts. The condition is that colonization has brought not only a new economic and social importance, but has also raised a European model for the entire world humanity. This process has in turn led to the systematic anonymization, devaluation and marginalization of people, among those Indian rural women, in the so-called Third World (Laskar, 2006).

Lykke (2003) argues that the concept of intersectionality has a long and complicated history within feminist thoughts. Colonial discourse may have linked gender, ethnicity and nature through biology, natural history and anthropology creating a hierarchy of coloured women at the bottom, followed by coloured men, white women, and finally white men at the top. In this case, the low caste Indian rural women would be at the bottom of the ranking.

De los Reyes and Mulinari (2005) believe that intersectionality demonstrated how different historical and situation-dependent power relations are created in and through the simultaneous effect of gender, class and ethnicity. In the area where I was doing my aforementioned internship, there were also clear patterns of who came from a high respectively a low caste. By this I mean that behind the category of gender (female) there is always a set of different social positions imbued with particular class and caste. It appears that gender and class do not have an absolute value, but must always be related to the historical and intellectual context.

De los Reyes and Mulinari (2005) refers to Charles Tilly (2000) who introduced the concept of '*persistent inequality*', which focuses on how the systematic differences between groups and individuals are created and maintained in different historical periods. For instance, the

caste system in India is an ancient creation that can be traced to the ancient Vedas dating long before our era. The caste system is a form of class division, and the only way to rise through the positions is to be faithful to their caste and thus to be reborn in a higher. Even if one tries to use intersectional approaches this caste system is deep embossed in the Indian society, especially in the Indian rural areas. There are many who are actively working against the caste system and there is a constant enhancement, but it is an extremely long process that is still a '*persistent inequality*'.

Material richness brings significant symbolic resources, such as education, knowledge, control over the societies different systems et cetera. Other variations are created in the tension between the collective and the individual. The ability to form collective alliances, such as self-help groups, that can negotiate better terms for a specific organizational problem results in a stronger position. In that way you can achieve change at different levels (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005). The important here is further on to enrich on, in this case the Indian rural women, that everybody are equal, regardless of caste. To create collective alliances it is necessary to join people from all castes and classes.

Inequality is, according to Tilly's (2000) theory, not something that exists in society's production of people's differences. The differences are created in the relationship between different groups in the processes of deprivation of resources, and exclusion from power and influence. In Tilly's (2000) reflection it seems to be the context that determines which relations and processes that is definitive for either the maintenance or the change of unequal relations.

As mentioned, it is important to highlight the power structures not only between men and women, but also between women. According to de los Reyes and Mulinari (2005), there are enormous gaps between women's lives and the power, resources and influence are extremely unevenly distributed. Nor can one ignore the discrimination and subordination that exist between women only. Many women are very often "told about" instead of giving them a chance to define themselves. Charles Tilly (2000) argues that there can often be a "normalizing desire" of women, because the subordinate groups also seek to gain power and influence. From a feminist standpoint only, it is easy to look on all women as victims because there is an emphasis on gender and less focus on other social relationships. In the long term, some women are therefore excluded from participation in the exercise of power, and this is a current process in the Indian rural areas from the consequences of many NGOs social work

models and their approaches to the target groups. Leonardsen (2006) argues that it is of importance to build networks and form alliances among the excluded. His strategy would be to support the self-help groups and at the same time motivate the women to act as an organized group. Leonardsen (2006) declares that human beings are social beings, and that is why they are dependent on each other. De los Reyes and Mulinari (2005) thereafter believe that if one does not see the power structures that create the individual's vulnerability this leads to a stigmatization among groups, families and individuals. To not see the specificity of the individual's vulnerability in these structures leads to a discriminatory that both hides people's historically different experiences of oppression and prevents the formulation of collective approaches to power. It is therefore essential to be aware of the background and thus highlight alternative voices, such as excluded women's, that can tell about something we do not know that can change the normative thoughts.

The Indian rural woman seems to be excluded from power and economy because of the lack of intersectional approaches but especially due to the countries structures (at macro-level) and the traditions that the woman is at the bottom of the hierarchy in the Indian society. India has an abundance of NGOs. Jönsson (2010) refers to Pearce (2000) when she writes that the state's role has diminished and family boundaries in society have resulted in an increasingly bigger role for civil society and the great NGOs, to compensate for socio-economic inequalities and social problems. The state-organized welfare is still relatively immature and it is rather NGOs, which have to carry this role. The increase of non-governmental organizations during the past 20 years has mainly been based on the need to reduce the social costs of economic tolerance, such as growing social problems. Arvidson (2003) indicates that NGOs have a structure that focus into grassroots participation and empowerment projects. The empowerment strategy could, as above-mentioned, be a change to the Indian rural woman's situation and NGOs all over India tries to put this method in practice.

Empowerment is often associated with social change and social movements (Askheim, 2003; Askheim & Starrin, 2007; Payne, 2006). It was first used in the scientific literature in the late 1970s, when women's movement, the liberation movements in former colonies, different types of self-help organizations, social activism, social mobilization, protest movements, et cetera (Jönsson, 2010). In "Beyond Empowerment: Changing local communities" (2010) Jönsson also argues that empowerment is closely linked to participation, power, control, self-expression and influence.

By researchers the term empowerment has become a high topic since it is used in several contexts. There are a variety of meanings of empowerment and most of them have a very vague explanation. This may explain why so much criticism about the working method has taken place, because people interpret the term differently. John Friedmann suggested in his text *Empowerment: The Politics of Alternative Development* (1992) three different types of empowerment: Psychological, social and political. Stephanie Riger clarifies through her article "What's wrong with empowerment?" (1993) that it is important to not forget the psychological empowerment since it includes beliefs about, in this case the woman's competence, effectiveness and willingness to become involved in activities to apply control in the social and political environment. Friedmann (1992) continues with that social empowerment is about access to information, knowledge, skills and participation, and political empowerment is finally about control over decisions that affect both the household and community. In order to increase people's participation/empowerment in issues of sustainable development and to change people's fundamental values requires a long process and all the different sorts of empowerment approaches should interact with each other.

It is a long-term process, but Friedmann (1992) argues that information, training and communication can facilitate the possibilities to overcome internal problems and change attitudes. Empowerment can take place at various organizational levels, from individuals by households to communities (Lyons, Smuts & Stephens, 2001). In both cases, I accept empowerment as a major influence and control through an achievement of knowledge and skills.

Forsberg (1997) indicates that empowerment also emphasizes an increased level of awareness that leads to confidence and self-reliance. All over the world vulnerable groups use the empowerment method to increase their participation and influence at both individual and collective levels. By joining together collectively shape social mobilization and through collective actions these vulnerable groups involve in different activities to increase their participation and influence. They use their collective spirit to expand their power to affect other groups in society and even the so-called Gram Panchayat in the Indian society. They believe that when they are together they are stronger.

Many NGOs attempt to achieve empowerment through increasing people's participation in the community/society. Empowerment is very often connected with participation, as if

changing processes will automatically lead to changes in the situation and context. It is not necessary that participation results in more influence, power and control.

The Gram Panchayat is a local self-government body at the village level consisting of five members. The old Indian Panchayat system was revived by the Congress party around 1960 under the name of Panchayat Raj in order to decentralize the union- and state governments to transfer power and decision-making functions to local level. In 1993, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment adopted, which mandates direct elections every five years to the Council (National Encyclopaedia, downloaded: 2011-05-06). Thereby, an individual is able to express his or her own interest and ideas, and can with the group manage to accomplish goals. S.L. Doshi and P.C. Jain (1999) believe that the empowerment action has an increasing effect. When a woman in a village receives more influence from the Gram Panchayat she becomes automatically more powerful in the family and in the village. Certainly she cannot do everything by becoming a member of the Gram Panchayat but for example, she may be involved in installing a water pump on a special place in the village, or she can influence which roads need to be rebuilt et cetera. This process has for instance contributed to the marginalized women's empowerment. However, S.L. Doshi and P.C. Jain (1999) also direct some critique of the 73rd Constitution Amendment act. One of the critiques has to do with the unfairness towards elites and middle class. Though the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act focuses on women and weaker sections of society, the beneficiaries have always been the higher classes among the weaker sections. So the Act might direct its benefits to the higher class of women of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and as S.L. Doshi and P.C. Jain (1999) say, "*the weakest of the weak, the poorest of the poor would continue to suffer in the new patterns of Panchayati Raj also*" (s. 343). To recap, the postcolonial feminism and the intersectional concept underscore the same dilemma when discussing women's situation.

Arvidson (2003) argues that with the empowerment project it is the target group that should be in focus and take advantage of the approach, not the social workers / the NGO. A problem with many NGO's working with empowerment, according to Arvidson (2003), is that they often do not take advantage of local knowledge that the target group already have. When you have a model with a strong social (positive) value as *empowerment* you often choose to present a ready solution to a local problem that the target group should decide on (Arvidson, 2003). Even if the staffs are committed of some ideas and appropriated solutions it should not be imposed on the target group.

Arvidson (2003) declares that NGOs are often accused of using the participatory and empowerment concept primarily as a way of conducting knowledge through top-down direction instead of trying knowledge from bottom-up direction. She shows that the empowerment project is more like an advocacy to the target group than a genuine empowering affect. Alveson (2006) further on shows that the concepts may have a symbolic meaning for the NGOs and that this even indicates to the outside world, including the target group. Arvidson (2003) indicates that participation and empowerment over time have come to be associated with good intentions, when it actually is a top-down approach to the target group.

The NGO where I did my internship runs some very long-term projects. In the area where I worked, the project had existed in seven years. The NGO uses an *empowerment* based working method in their community work. During my internship, I was puzzled by the manner in which the NGO took advantage of empowerment as a concept for a more symbolic purpose (Alveson 2006; Bolman & Deal, 2005). In both empowerment and community development the professionals are supposed to work to get the target group involved so they can participate, share the knowledge and contribute with their own suggestions to their own local problems. However, it has directed an enormous amount of criticism both to community work and empowerment. (Adams, 2003; Arvidson, 2003; Askheim & Starrin, 2007; Friedman, 1992; Payne, 2005, 2006; Lyons, Smuts & Stephens, 2001). Clinard, Marshall B. (1966) refers to a United Nations report on when community development in rural areas has emphasized its competence: community self-help and technical assistance.

“The term “community development” has come into international usage to connote the processes by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of countries, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation, and to enable them to contribute elements fully to national progress. This complex of processes is then made up of two essential elements: the participation by the people themselves in efforts to improve their level of living with as much reliance as possible on their own initiative; and the provisions of technical and other service in ways which encourage initiative, self-help and mutual help and make these more effective” (Clinard, Marshall B., 1966 sid. 117).

This NGO, for example, works with sponsorship for children, nutrition for children, health programs, educational support programs, livelihood programs and land development programs. These various projects they call Community Based Organizations (CBO's) since there are different units and responsible groups for each project, and in these units you find the target group itself. You can easily compare it to different service user organizations since

the target group shall participate in the social care themselves. CBO's are important community based institutions as they are the main actors in sustaining the development benefits even after the NGO withdraws from the project areas. The idea behind this concept is that communities are seen as the centre to create the future of the children and the community as a whole. These different CBO's are the Self-help groups (SHG's), the Cluster Level Associations (CLA's) and the Women Federation. I worked in a rural area where the NGO had been working for almost seven years; they had only the withdrawal phase left and were going to leave the project in March 2011. Eriksson & Karlsson write in their book *Att Utvärdera Vårdförarbete* (2008) that it is very legitimate to focus on the situation after the intervention, the outcome, to the target group. The intention is that the target group shall cope with life without or with the minimum the support of social welfare activities, and that the desired situation will remain for some time to come (ibid.).

Empowerment as a more symbolic character creates a legitimacy for the NGOs, thereby contributing to the NGOs' stability and in many cases to their survival, as many NGOs are not subsidized by the state but operated mainly due to national or international sponsors. The problem is that the efficiency, quality and the very meaning of empowerment is lost when the professionals are focusing more on the symbolic rather than reality (Alveson, 2006; Bolman & Deal, 2005). When doing my internship I got a feeling that the staffs were having a more positive view of the project achievements than the actual target group had.

The NGO where I did my internship use *empowerment* as a central concept connected to participation and social mobilization. The NGO believe that by making the women to *participate* in the community work, contribute to various programs and train in maintenance gives them a sense of obligation for the future, which in turn will shape the basis for sustainability. They also use the participation strategy, which according to them, in the long-term will empower women. The NGO consists of some social workers but the majority of the staffs are volunteers and together they want to correct and "show" the target group how to do to develop in a socio-economic condition and increase their empowerment and influence in society. This is typical for the kind of NGOs I have discussed above.

2. Problem statement

2.1 Purpose and Research Questions

With my study I want to explore a deeper understanding of the empowerment tool in solving the Indian rural woman's problem. To what extent is empowerment a symbolic, top-down action and to what extent does it, in practice, empower the women participating in the projects? The purpose of this study is to highlight the empowerment process from the Indian rural women's point-of-view. Empowerment seems widely regarded as the ideal solution for development projects in India, but still there is a lot of criticism, as to what empowerment really is.

- 1) How do the women describe their participation and influence in a decision-making body in relation to the NGO?
- 2) How do the women experience and describe the meaning of their own empowerment process?
- 3) Has empowerment had any impact on women in everyday life after the withdraw phase of the project?

The first research question will investigate how the women have experienced their influence in relation to those solutions that have been taken together with the NGO. The second research question clears itself and aims to enrich the women's point-of-view when describing their own empowerment process. Finally, the third research question I used to explore how the empowerment project has affected the women, but also to analyse how all the criticism of empowerment look in relation to my case study.

3. Research Method

3.1 Method

According to Aspers (2007) some kind of interaction on the field is necessary if you want to reach the authenticity that the theory sets. In my research I intended to examine how the empowerment process was, after the withdrawal of the project, from the perspective of women. My interaction on the field was in this case through observations and interviews. The interviews were based on a qualitative approach in the form of semi-structured interviews. The choice of method was to me obvious, because I believe that this applied to most of my questions when I wanted to take part of my informants' opinions. I aimed to find out their

experiences regarding their own feelings of their participation and influence in the community development. The ambition was to reach a deeper understanding and I did not strive towards presenting general patterns. To collect my data I intended to use interviews, starting with observations in order to bring an understanding of the field and the new culture I was facing. The interviews were carried out once I was more familiar with the environment, and the progressive forces behind it. It was also necessary that the informants became familiar with me through more or less informal conversations since these led to more casual interviews. Aspers (2007) indicates that respondents may facilitate the researcher's work and therefore I spent a lot of time and effort to establish contacts with people who could act as informants.

When exercising the methods I had to reflect and be aware of my pre-understandings in the field through both my earlier visits and the theories I was studying in relation to the essay. According to Aspers (2007) this is both a necessary and inevitable part of an effort to understand. But since I had also read the theory and become socialized into the scientific understanding in this subject it was a certain degree “theoretical” (Aspers, 2007). Theory allows a degree of understanding, but it can also delay understanding. The reason, according to Aspers (2007), is that theories put focus on certain aspects, while excluding others. I was in need of a fairly firm basis to move ahead in the research process. Thus, I had to be aware of what I take for granted when compiling this study.

3.1.1 Observations

The observations play an essential role for my essay since that process shaped my interviews but also some of my theoretical aspects.

During the research I spent a lot of time in the village together with the local people and this was the opportunity for me to make observations. Through observations in the women's self-help group meetings I had to make field notes. Aspers (2007) argues that the quality of the field notes depends on the different situations the researcher is in, but I did not believe that it would feel strange to do field notes while the women were having their meetings since everybody was sitting with their own saving books and the meetings were fairly short in time as well. In the observations I also asked all the women if I was allowed to use video camera. In terms of visual impact and visual sources, I intended to use this in my research process (Aspers, 2007). Since I understand the local language (Kannada) fairly well I wrote down

what the women were discussing in the meetings, but also what the surrounding looked like and how I interpreted what the women were discussing. I am aware that the performance from the local people might have derived from a natural way, to a more structured one (Punch, 1998). The essential in this is that I am aware of this but I believe that I could not affect it differently than I did.

I made the observations during the whole research process but more frequently in the beginning. The observations gave me the understanding of the village environment and how the women participate, influence and cooperate in the meetings and thereafter contribute to the community work. This facilitated my research but it was also important that I kept this in mind when analysing the material I had investigated. Becoming a part of the environment in which I was doing my research might have affected me when interpreting the data and could contribute me to criticize the results in a different way (Punch, 1998). Therefore it was of great importance that I tried to keep some kind of distance at the same time I wanted to build a good relationship to the women.

I am aware of that even if I have tried to get my impressions, experiences and observations written down the situation that I have been through cannot be signed off in its entirety. Aspens (2007) argues that this is because the field notes can be ambiguous, but also that through the reading of them I will interpret what is in part based on the whole material. So there is no possibility to reach a full inter-subjective understanding of an event. Aspens (2007) suggests that this problem is universal. The notes will also be theory-driven, although the theory itself is not directly present in a reading of the notes. To reduce this so-called "overcoat problem" that Jönson (2010) describes as a way to simply confirm theories on, I have as far as possible, as Jönson (2010) also points out, tried to make use of the theories as a tool in the analysis rather than as a confirmatory device. Aspens (2007) therefore contend that it does not work with genuine reliability when coding the field notes.

The process of finding the village I wanted to do my observations (and later on the interviews) in was actually by coincidence since I came the same day and in good time for the beginning of a meeting. Here I also met the woman who works as the resource person in the different communities. I then asked her and the other women about another SHG nearby themselves. That is how I chose the second SHG for my observations.

3.1.2 Interviews

The observations have many advantages but it often requires that you conduct interviews to understand what you see or observe and to understand what you are talking about (Aspers, 2007). Since I intended to go more in-depth in my questions in the interviews it was suitable for me to use the qualitative method (Aspers, 2007; Punch, 1998; Trevithick, 2005). The interview was a way for the informants to speak about their experiences and feelings thus, it was an appropriate way for the woman to present her perspective. I tried to have as mixed sample as possible of informants to try to get a high validity and reliability, but at the same time I had to think more about the quality and depth in the study than the quantity and wideness.

Another aspect I had to be aware of was that the informants may have a careful and non-criticizing perspective towards the NGO that had been working in the area. I was in the village with a well-known person from the NGO, this because it was safer for me but also because it was easier to build a relationship to the women. When I started with the interviews (after the observations) I had it together with the same person since I had some difficulties to understand the deeper questions and answers. First I was supposed to have the interviews with another interpreter because I thought there could be a lot of loyalties between the earlier field coordinator and the target group. But since I had no opportunities to find another person for this I had to do the study in these circumstances and at the same time be aware of it. After the study I believe it was a suitable idea to do the interviews with a well-known person in the community since she made it easier for to establish a more open climate in the interviews.

I used semi-structured interviews because I wanted the women to be able to speak openly about their feelings and opinions (Payne & Payne, 2004). Through semi-structured interviews, I had much more freedom to deepen the questions and answers in a way that the requirements of standardization, comparability and so even quantitative questions not would have allowed. Tim May (2001) also argues that semi-structured interviews make it possible for the informants to answer the questions in their own words and terms. The quantitative interviews do not allow this. If I got more interested in a specifically theme in the interviews I could through the semi-structured method look more into this. However, I had to keep a focus on my research questions so these would make a structure for the interviews.

I have coded the empirical data for the essay. Jönson (2010) writes that the coding is to organize the material and highlight patterns and relationships or categories and concepts. I

have chosen to highlight the women's own opinions of their empowerment process, their influence and participation in relation to the NGO and in relation to their own Women Groups/Women Federation, but also what their everyday life looks like after the withdrawal phase of the project. Jönson (2010) argues that the coding may be based on competitive conditions that become apparent in the data collection or repeated briefings of the material. I have tried to be as open as possible during the data collection in order to thus make the coding work while the material is processed. The coding part is the basis for creating new theoretical categories. Aspens (2007) argues that the quality of the field notes and the interview transcripts are essential for a qualified and relevant coding and analysis to take place.

Since I used a voice recorder in my interviews I have transcribed the data before coding it. I had to put a little bit more effort in the transcription since it was in two different languages (English and Kannada). In a qualitative study you can do the analysis with either, paper and pen or with help from a computer program (Jönson, 2010). I used the usual Microsoft Word when coding my empirical data and highlighted themes and other interesting aspects in different colours. While coding, the various themes I intended to study I compared and tried to find interesting similarities and differences in expressions and stories (May, 2001).

3.2 Selection and the Method's Strengths and Limitations

Aspens (2007) implies that selection is made in relation to the empirical material and analysis of it. Selection is when the researcher has identified a number of features based on the theory during the fieldwork, and that cases that take these characteristics should be further examined. When I did my research I chose to do my observations in two different Self-help groups in the same village in the rural area. Since I did not strive for expansion and general answers I believe this information gathering provided interesting results. From the very first observation in a self-help group meeting I asked them if they were aware of another self-help group in the same village where I could do observations. This was, according to Aspens (2007) a random selection from someone's social network. The danger with this kind of method is that the selection limits to a specific network even if I am interested in a whole domain. However, I believe that the study does not need to be limited because of this since the next self-help group consisted of a completely different context with its own participants, but both the self-help groups "belonged" to the same NGO. From the observations I chose persons who I would like to interview, and the women I chose depended on what the

observations gave me. My empirical data consists of five informants, but according to Aspers (2007) it is the total quality on the interviews and the observations that you have to be focused on. For a closer study and a more specificity of understanding the answers/issues, I chose to make one of the informants to a key informant (KI) and the remaining four informants as they are by age, e.g. woman 60, woman 29 etc. The reason I chose to have one key informant is because she is a very essential woman among the other women in the 14 different villages. She, a local villager, comes from a low cast and is a member of a self-help group but she does also belong to the Cluster Level Association. She attends to the Community Managed Resource Centre (CMRC) meetings together with 11 other women, each woman has a specific responsibility, and my key informant's responsibility is to act as a *Resource Person* in all the 48 different self-help groups. Through this she has an insight in all the villages and SHGs.

The observations made it possible for me to understand how the self-help group meetings work and what the women do there. In these observations I also had the opportunity to reflect on how the women participate and cooperate in the group, by then I could furthermore observe which of the women that took more space in the group. The observations made a base and thereafter facilitated for me when doing my interviews. In the observations I used a video camera. Aspers (2007) declares that the aid of a video camera could help one to interpret field notes. Since it was rather dark when observing the SHG meetings I also took photographs and it actually helped me when going back to the field notes. Obviously, technology has also disadvantages. The first is that people are reasonably less inclined to "act naturally" in front of a camera, compared to if the researcher just observes. I could easily identify this by first observing the meetings without using a video camera. At the second observation in same SHG I could use the video camera and I got a feeling that the women also forgot me after some time in the meeting. I was aware of the need for a close and trusting relationship between the women and me when filming the participants, which, according to Aspers (2007) takes time to build.

As mentioned, I used semi-structured interviews. The limitation with this is that I might have focused too much on the themes and decided questions without listening enough to the informant. This is something you always have to have in mind, but I put a lot of effort into really trying to listen to what the informants had to tell me. How I interpreted the answers and understanding of the interviewees are based on my own experience and knowledge. This implies some restrictions, because I have not been in the situation of the women that I was

interviewing (Aspers, 2007). Aspers (2007) argues that it is important for me as a researcher to make follow-up questions to the informant to show my interest while to get deeper in my interviews. Therefore I tried to listen carefully, since this is also a quality that is important for my future work as a Social Worker. However, I had to assume my own horizon at some points, with my questions, and this limited the ability of the person being interviewed to lift up her perspective. Otherwise the interviews could have been both too long and irrelevant for my study.

Just like many other NGOs in India, the NGO where I did my internship use *empowerment* as a crucial concept connected to participation. The NGO believe that by making the women to *participate* in the community work, join several programs and train in maintenance gives them a sense of obligation for the future, which in turn will shape the basis for sustainability. Due to the criticism of the term empowerment and its approaches to the target group I have made the selection to what degree empowerment is a symbolic, top-down movement and to what extent it, in practice, does empower the women participating in the projects. However, I will focus on the women's point-of-view.

The area where I did my research the informants were not able to speak English and this limited my understanding to some extent. I can understand the local language to some degree, and the informants were also able to understand me, to some point. However, we were not able to discuss in detail the profound things I am interested in discussing. Therefore, I was forced to use an interpreter that I will have to rely on (Aspers, 2007). This is obviously a limitation for me in my choice of method, but I had chosen to observe the women when they had meetings as well. As I understand the local language more than I can speak it, and that body language always emerge, I think this probably backed up my interviews.

Another limitation in my study is that I had to use the earlier field coordinator as an interpreter, and I had to be aware of this when analysing the answers. But since the field coordinator was not the one who transcribed the interviews I could get an idea of how she asked the informants in a particular way to get a desired response. I could do this with the help of disloyal persons who helped me with the transcripts and it turned out to work fairly well.

3.3 Reliability and Validity

By combining the observations with the interviews the validity will increase. Aspens (2007) emphasize that an essential aspect is that people very often "says one thing while they are doing another thing". Through both observing and interviewing it was easier for me to understand the meaning with these processes. This method also helped me through situations that were difficult to put into words. Aspens (2007) claims that this is about the quit, incarnate and implicit knowledge. The validity will also extend since I aimed to operate the women's perspective and thereafter I put their words through the research process and discuss the different results in the analysis. It was important that I really focused on what kind of questions I asked the women, what I observed and how I used this in the analysis.

The reliability will enhance when using voice recorder when I did the interviews and video camera when I observed the meetings. I also intended to make truthful field notes, code in a systematic way and discuss different interpretations to increase the reliability. Since I used a semi-structure method when having my interviews I also had an interview guide that gained the reliability. Through the whole study I tried to behave neutral and be vigilant against my own views on the crowd in the data processing to increase the reliability. I also tried to discuss my empirical data with other persons such as my tutors, the earlier field coordinator and the key informant.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Before I went into the field it was relevant to reflect on my own role and how this can affect the ones I am interacting with and what kind of consequences this might lead to in the result/analysis- and discussion section in the essay. Aspens (2007) claims that a condition for the researcher to conduct interactive research is *acceptance* in the field. Therefore, it was also important to consider *withdrawing* from the field as much as *entering* the field as this affected those that I interacted with. Before you go into a field, it is therefore particularly important to consider the ethical rules and that the researcher talks to others about what she will do.

Something that I think is incredibly important and that one also should keep in mind is that there was some kind of beholden to the people who helped me in my study. I could not in advance know whether people who are part of my research would have had the expectation that I will resolve any questions or help them in different ways. It can be both difficult and

highly inappropriate if I try to live up to those expectations. It is common practice in social work that you are working with the weak and vulnerable people and it is my responsibility as a researcher to not create expectations that lead to disappointment. Therefore, I think it was important that I was clear about my role in the field. Aspers (2007) discusses that the researcher may do well to get some distance from the field. This also facilitated in order to analyse the empirical data while providing the ability to process my experiences from the field. Since my study was to reach the women's point of view regarding their own empowerment process we had very warm and strengthening conversations. This established a strong relationship between us even if I tried to keep the professional distance. When taking photographs I therefore decided to share the pictures to the informants. Something I can do is also to share my essay, but maybe that will be more to the NGO since the informants in field cannot read English.

When implementing a research project regarding social work, it is important to have several ethical considerations in mind (Vetenskapsrådet, downloaded 23-3-2011). I am aware of that I might affect my informants and that is why it was essential to discuss this openly if possible. It was therefore vital to take in to consideration the benefits of the research and the necessity of the exceeding the eventual impact the research might have on the informants. In my interviews, I explained that I must follow the ethical principles and described to my informants what I meant. I began by talking about *transparency requirement*; it means that I informed my informants about my research task order and how I will use it. *Self-determination* implies that the informants in my survey had the right to self-determine their involvement. I told them that at any time during the interview they could choose to discontinue if they did not feel comfortable. I also informed that the questions were voluntary to answer, and if they thought any of the questions were worded weird, we could together come up with a better formulation. By *confidentiality requirement*, I informed that my informants' personal details would not be kept in such a way that unauthorized persons could benefit from them. *Autonomy* implies that the data that I collected on my interviews may only be used for research purposes (Vetenskapsrådet, downloaded 23-3-2011).

3.5 Literature Search

Articles that I have used, I have downloaded from both international and Swedish researchers. It was very easy for me to find research about empowerment, feminism and international development in developing countries with the explanation that it is a subject that

has been widely written about. It was more difficult to define the subject, but with much reading I finally solved it. Something that I also found more difficult was to find good research about postcolonial feminism. This seems to be a subject that has many different researchers who focus on very different aspects in the postcolonial feminism. I have used a variety of keywords in the library service LibHub such as socINDEX, EBSCOhost and SwePub. My search terms were: *empowerment, power, participation, influence, postcolonial feminism, intersectionality, and women in India, NGO* in conjunction with *social work*. To supplement my material, I used literature such as Paulina de los Reyes and Mulinari's "*Intersektionalitet*" (2005), but I also utilized the NationalCyclops LinkedIn electronic services and libris [<http://libris.kb.se/>] where I found a dissertation by Arvidson – "*Demanding values: participation, empowerment and NGOs in Bangladesh*" (2003) which had great relevance to my purpose and its final results.

4. Theoretical Aspects

Aspers (2007) describes that the theory plays a fundamental role in determining what method you use, as how to design and carry out your study, for how the empirical material is analysed and for how an explanation is build-up. That is why it was essential to think about the theory already in the beginning of the study, even though of course I was free to change my theory if it was not suitable to the empirical material. The purpose of using a theory is therefore to deal with the empirical domain, which the theory covers in an economic and precise way (Aspers, 2007). This essay switches between induction and deduction since the study is a starting point that is connected with some theoretical discussions, while it went through a modification of the theory over time. The theory can be primarily described as a framework within which the study is conducted while the parts will change according to the empirical study. The empirical data examines the theories that have created the starting position while there will be an openness to the data collected to find new theoretical points (May, 2001).

4.1 The Empowerment Strategy

A problem with many NGO's working with empowerment is, according to Arvidson (2003), that social workers often do not take advantage of local knowledge that the target group actually have. Obviously the women feel more empowered when they can vote and decide regarding an important matter, but in fact, many times it is actually the NGO that has directed

the suggestion and that is the reason to why the self-help groups loose their influence in society when the NGO withdraws from the project. If they do not loose their influence they have certainly a dependency to the NGO and the social workers after the project's end. It is a long-term project to try to get individuals to be active and knowledgeable to imply their own suggestions instead of the social workers themselves and it requires patience, humbleness and tolerance. I agree with Arvidson (2003) when she explains this has to do with time, energy and recourses, but even if the staffs are convinced of some ideas it should not be imposed on the target group. Ready-made solutions are of no use since the target group in the future won't be able to learn from mistakes.

It is very usual that the empowerment concept is related to participation. As Riger (1993) argues it is not necessary that participation results in more influence, power and control. He explains that it is some kind of "*false consciousness*" that describes an individual's increase in terms of empowerment that does not all the time reflect an increase in genuine power. This relates easily to Arvidson's (2003) theory of ready-made solutions, because the women obviously feel strong but in fact they do not receive any influence from this model. Riger's (1993) answer for this is that a sense of empowerment could be an illusion when so much life is controlled by the politics at macro level. As mentioned, India has a totally different welfare system than Sweden and the country do also have other traditions that are deeply rooted in society. That is why it is of value to keep the empowerment projects at both micro (psychological) and macro (political/social) levels. Arvidson (2003) explains that many professionals use the participatory- and empowerment concepts as tools to manipulate the target group through top-down approaches. By pointing to the target groups' participation the NGOs gain recognition as being democratic, but in fact the community project is already determined by the NGOs. There is, as mentioned a plethora of NGOs in India and Alveson (2006) argues that the needs of NGOs, therefore, are met by comparisons with other standards. Participation and empowerment are approaches that seem to have legitimacy and respect from both sponsors to the NGO but also from the target groups in the rural areas (Arvidson, 2003). According to Alveson (2006), participation and empowerment could be explained as the organization's grandiose and glamorous concept that gives a vision of better treatment to the target group, but when the NGO and the professionals do not live up to the grandiosity they make, intentionally or not, use of the illusion as a means to improve the genuineness of the impression level. The grandiose concepts of participation and empowerment can also provide a supportive self-esteem and pseudo-structure to the

professionals themselves (Alveson, 2006). Alveson (2006) argues that the focus is often on creating right image in form of right scenes and therefore the professionals do not care about how the effects actually look like. By resemble other NGOs in the same area the NGO will be rewarded by the outside world and attributed the legitimacy, which, however, contributes to many processes within an organization that is primarily of symbolic significance.

As mentioned, Arvidson (2003) argues that NGOs are often accused of using the participatory model primarily as a way of conducting knowledge through top-down direction. Arvidson (2003) shows that the idea of empowerment has an idealized statement that the women will be prepared to participate in a democratic involvement, with a similarly democratic sharing of the benefits of the project. Of course they will be involved in the project and participate, but moreover, they will not have the control or influence to sustain the work since the NGO comes with ready-made solutions within the project. Earlier when an NGO furthermore starts a participatory- and empowerment project Arvidson (2003) claims that the ‘local elite’ in the community has taken advantage of it and grown even bigger. Thereby it is of importance to emphasize the already marginalized and excluded ones - *“the weakest of the weak, and the poorest of the poor”*. To take any consideration to if the woman is of higher intersectionality is nothing the NGO necessarily does and that is the reason to why local elites grow even bigger.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1 The Observations

The observations were made in one village outside Bangalore in two different self-help groups. In each self-help group there were about 15 women who participated. Totally I made five observations and I think I have got a deep and vivid picture of how the women discuss with each other during the SHG meetings. One of the observations were made in the so-called head-committee were totally two women from each self-help group attend ones in a month. Below you can read some parts of my observations and how I chose my informants.

One of the self-help group meetings in SHG 1

All the sixteen women who are participating in the meeting sit at the ground at one of the terraces of the houses in the village. There is only a small lamp enlightening the faces of all the women. Some of the women’s children come and go, but they keep silent while the women are having their meeting, with sheer respect. One of the women starts with a prayer before the meeting starts. After the prayer the secretary starts to speak by welcoming everyone, including me as a guest. My key informant is participating in the meeting as well, she is the *resource*

person in the community. She explains why I am participating in the meeting and what I am going to do with the information I receive.

The women later on start to talk about various problems in the village and the secretary keeps notes through the whole meeting. They speak about the problem with attendance to the meetings... about how they are going to save a deposit in each member's name, an old age security... In the end of the meeting two members from another SHG also joins to tell the other that they are going to arrange for a legal awareness camp for the community people. They ask for Rupees 500 from each SHG in the village. This SHG do also agree that an awareness camp would be good for the local people... *"and if all the other SHGs have put the amount we also must do it! We have to be as good as the other SHGs!"*

The meeting ends with some kind of prosper hope in the expressions of the women's faces. They do in deed act very professionally at the meetings, with the exception of some jokes, which often seems to smitten them all with genuine joy. After the meeting I was invited to a late dinner by the resource person and enjoyed a traditional Indian meal.

One of the self-help group meetings in SHG 2

This meeting takes place below a balcony and the light is slightly dim, almost identical setting like the previous meeting, only difference being that the women here sit in a perfect circle, instead of a messy square. No children running around, but men pass the group walking by, and some even listen to what the group is discussing... Religion is present, as the women sing a traditional Hindu song instead of praying like the other group. Then the meeting starts.

Two representatives from the CLA meeting explains that the CLA members want to take bigger loans for the improvement of agriculture... but the SHG cannot afford this. They have discussions regarding saving more money each week to manage, but there are two members who absolutely do not want to save more than they do at present. One of the women is from the middle class but she stays home as a housewife and she does not always get money from her husband. The other woman is very poor and work as a labour worker; hence she is a genuine case for the SHG. Suddenly the women decide that they are going to raise the amount every week for those who are able to save more, nothing should be compulsory...

The meeting ends with me and the SHG members taking pictures of us together, as for remembrance of this visit. I come to think of the fact that this group was different from the other one in a major element. At the previous meeting, all the members took space and had a solid word for their various comments, a sort of equal opportunity to express their thoughts. But here, only six or seven out of 17 women dominated the commentary and discussions.

(Field notes taken from two different observations).

In the beginning of my observations I always noticed the surroundings, the environment and the people around. This helped me to remember more of the meetings when I added field notes after the event. The surroundings were relatively similar even if there were small differences, but I interpret the small differences as good and that it makes the group more personal and unique. I think that the women themselves have established their own comfortable zone in the group. When the women discussed about contributing Rupees 500 for the awareness camp they first wanted to know how all the other SHGs had done. By

keeping contact with the other SHGs leads to a unity among all the different groups as well. When the women got to know that the other SHGs also were going to pay they decided to do it too. They did not think about if they could afford it or not, they just explained that they could not be worse than anyone else. This has both its advantages and disadvantages; the self-help group will be pushed and motivated by other self-help groups and might create a solidarity, that together with other self-help groups can make a change, but it can also turn into a competition and struggle between all the self-help groups. If the competition proves too strong, the women might end up only caring about how the SHG is perceived by the public and shift focus from creating a community foundation, to only inflating a grandiose perception of the group (Alveson, 2006; Arvidson, 2003). In these times of modernity, India is going through fundamental social changes, with prosperity and hope for a better future. One method of making people believe in the future is to spread information and images of an exclusively positive future. Great efforts are made to polish the surface of all social entities and bodies, which might give the local NGO the idea that having a modern and “clean” social image is all it takes to be accepted as a respected social entity. It is not easy to describe the concept of “Empowerment”, but it has an all-positive social recognition. Much like the all-positive recognition many NGOs thrive on, through the use of positive imagery and information (Alveson, 2006; Arvidson, 2003). It is therefore important for the recourse person to link all the self-help groups to a unit and consequently contribute to a functioning NGO. Even if the women had these kinds of discussions I also felt that they had the empathy and compassion for those women who could not save as much as everyone else.

Hence I noticed that not every woman took as much space as she wanted or wished to, I wanted to talk more about this in the interviews. Since self-help groups are supposed to get the women more influenced in society, give them the equal opportunity to express their thoughts and make them participate more through their empowerment process I wanted to investigate if it really is like that.

Everything seemed to be slightly organized in both the SHGs and the majority participated in the discussions, some participated more than others. For example, the ones who were literate could focus more in to taking notes, but since they were more educated they could furthermore take extra space, and they were also given more space in the meetings. Illiteracy can moreover exclude women from participating as much as literate women. In one of the SHGs, an old and small woman in green saree (*woman, 55*) kept relatively silent through the whole meeting while the secretary, who is a young woman (*woman, 29*), took a lot of space

in the group. In the other SHG there were two older women; one was fairly silent (*woman, 70*) and the other one (*woman, 60*) certainly expressed her feelings and did also interrupt the other women. In general there were a lot of older women who took this kind of power, also since there is a tradition to listen to older women before younger women. There was also the key informant (*woman KI, 27*), whose responsibility is to help out in the different SHGs; I would say she has a position like a chairman. Everyone were each others opposites when I analysed them one by one, and that is why I asked for separate interviews with them for a deeper understanding of their own empowerment processes.

5.2 The Interviews

Since I am following the ethical aspects from Vetenskapsrådet - *Forskningsetiska principer inom humanistisk-samhällsvetenskaplig forskning* (downloaded 3-23-2011) I have chosen to not expose any names of the informants, neither the village's name. I will call the women by age and the key informant (KI). Instead of presenting the NGO by name I will instead just call it *the NGO*. When I executed the interviews I was looking for a deep and qualitative approach to my informants and that is why my interviews were roughly one to one and a half hour long each. Here below I have concluded some of the main aspects of the answers for my research questions. I have of course selected the most important results even if I wanted to put all the information in the essay. Through the concluded answers I have also connected them to my theoretical aspect and the sections about intersectionality.

Most of the women I had conversations with had a very positive view against both the NGO that started the project but also against their own new NGO. There were some differences among the women's thoughts though, but no apparent and I have chosen to present the result in the way that gives the answers to the different research questions. The main difference among the women's answers was that the older women focused more on materialistic empowerment and also wanted the NGO to stay in the community for more training programs. Therefore I interpret the older women as more dependent and it can also be a result of that it is more difficult to change things/situations as they already are. Another explanation can be that they feel that it is not a need for them or that they may not have any energy. Though, when I talked with them about the future they were in agreement when explaining that they wanted their children and grandchildren to have a better life than they had themselves. The reason for being more negative to materialistic empowerment is because it

does not connect in the same way to social and psychological influence and participation, which is a requirement for duality in the community work.

Since I got interested into the power structures between women I could not ignore the environment the women had in their homes. The secretary had a rather big house (two floors) with nice interior, the key informant was in the process of building a nice house and she was going to keep the old house as well for the animals. One of the older women also had a beautiful house but with less furniture and the other older women had very poor conditions and more members in the family. Since the older women had worse conditions and humbler situations this might also be one of the reasons for being more materialistic.

5.2.1 How do the women describe their participation and influence in a decision-making body in relation to the NGO?

How women participate and influence in a decision-making body and what the relations look like to the organization and to each other is an enormous task to investigate and of course every woman has her own perspective and thoughts. Since I have only interviewed five women I obviously do not have any general answers, but I believe that you can apply many of these women's answers to other women in a similar setting and situation.

After I had established a relation to my informants I started to talk with them about different turning points in their lives. All of the women then explained about their contact with the NGO that started having a project seven years ago. They clarified how their various relationships to other people changed and improved.

“I give my daughter-in-law and children a lot of awareness and knowledge about what I know and what the NGO has taught me. I also tell them about how easy it is to get the loans now”
(Woman, 55).

“The NGO has done a lot of work in the head-committee and also in our committee... we have gained awareness and knowledge which lead to the development of our lives.... I want them to continue their work here...but if we need to run this independently we will... we will never desert this committee.... We will ask our children to continue it too.... But all the women need to deposit our savings regularly, take care of agricultural fields... Everybody needs to help everybody”
(Woman, 70).

“To organize these committees help to improve the knowledge of women. Because of politics the programs will not be that successful... But now the higher politicians ask for our help. And we are able to provide all the schemes to the required people...

Now the family respects me more... Earlier I didn't take part in any decisions; it was only the men and their mothers" (Woman KI, 27).

Through all the women, I got to know that a genuine and sustainable relation had established to the NGO and everybody was very grateful for the help they had received. The women explained how their relationships had improved within the family and they felt more complete as a family. Something that was very focused on was the social and economic/political empowerment that had emerged. To take control over decisions that affect the entire household or community seems to be the main effort to do for the women (Friedman, 1992). I assume that the women focusing a lot on loans and materials they can get by saving together as a group is one of the most obvious reasons for having the self-help groups. It feels quite natural that the households' economy dominates every day since the Indian welfare system cannot create the sustainable social security that the family has for example in Sweden. The state-organized welfare is still relatively undeveloped and there are instead, as mentioned, NGOs who receive this role. As declared, it appears that there is a pattern among the women focusing on the economy and the material and I think it relate a lot to the above.

It could also be relevant to use the postcolonial thoughts in the way that the NGO, which ran the project in the community, has had a similar role of a colonizer since it is established in the inner city of Bangalore. To be a colonizer you do not necessarily need to come from West, especially not since Bangalore as a city nowadays is immensely influenced by Western culture among the people who live there. However, one must always remember that the norm in big cities differs from the norm in rural areas. When the NGO began to work in the community at the countryside they started a new cultural process and, as mentioned, this has also naturalized relations of dominance and inequality among subordinated groups such as people from low class, cast and unquestionably a huge group of women (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005). When the social workers from the NGO came to explain power structures and that the women should fight for their rights to get what they want they also contributed to the dilemma the Western countries already have; to just have more, and more and more. And the cultural process is therefore still concluded from a top-down male perspective that subordinates women to some degree. I do not argue that the cultural process is totally wrong since it has actually brought a new economic and social importance for the women, but as Laskar (2006) writes I argue that it has also brought a new marginalization of people where there is a materialistic competition involved.

When interviewing the women I also asked about the women's participation and influence in relation to the NGO and written below I have concluded some of the answers:

“They have conducted these programs for our goodness. Why should we disagree? We won't... Whatever program they organize it is for our welfare... But they also asked for our opinions.

If any problem occurs all the members discuss and come to a single decision. We call *the representative* and sort out the problem. Everyone will agree for her decision. She will help us a lot. She helps us in availing the loan from the head committee. All members of the village will attend the meeting and try to solve the problem by ourselves” (Woman, 60).

“We all come to a single decision and agree upon it.... we all aim to develop any program and think positively..... We want Madam (the last social worker from the NGO) to be in our committee.... she has helped us to become more educated and we are quite unhappy about sending Madam to another place.... If she is with us she'll always be with us and suggest us to do the right” (Woman, 70).

From the text above you can assume that not all the members have the same influence as the *key informant*, and they really do have trust in her, just like they developed a trust in the NGO. Ones again, ready-made solutions should not be imposed to the women (Arvidson, 2003). Ready-made solutions are more a form of an *advocacy project* than an *empowerment project* and depict a top-down technology. One can also analyse the language of how the women spoke to the social worker by “*Madame*” and this likewise refers to a top-down approach. The essential when this occurs is to think about how one can facilitate the choice but not to impose the answer. Despite ambitions to break the traditional top-down model approach to development, I believe that there is a patriarchal behaviour among the social workers, consciously or unconsciously - a belief that the target group indicates an ignorance and must be enlightened. Intentionally or not, I believe that the project already has the framework for how to do in advance. It is obvious that the professionals just mean well, but one also has to remember that the professionals always have a prejudice when visiting field. That the professionals come to a new area to change norms and values is something that one easily can connect to the postcolonial thoughts as well. In these modes is one possible conclusion; that the target group sit in a seat where they want to be and do not want to risk it, which in turn means that they often adopt the solution that the professionals featured without evaluating it more closely. The target groups therefore end up in a kind of dependency as the professionals most likely not wanted them to get into, but they give in to their fear of being without the help they can receive in the future (Arvidson, 2003). All the women told me that they had been participating in the project, but it also seems like they many times have just trust the NGOs different models without any questioning, just listened to their suggestions

and decided. The seventy-year-old woman even expressed that she did not want the social worker from the NGO to leave after seven years and all the women communicated that they wanted the NGO to stay to have more training programs for the community members.

“If we wanted to give our opinions they would co-operate with us and if we had any problems they would solve it.

Some women have more influence because they go around and visit other committees and enrich their knowledge from them... They make sure that they share their thoughts with other people and encourage them. The women who don't have as much influence also express their thoughts but they are a little less talkative... and they are not totally sure about what they are talking about all the time” (Woman, 29).

“Firstly we debate about the matter that we have... Then we decide of what is wrong and right. We see that no one has a problem with it. Even if one person has a problem, it becomes a very big issue... So we see that it is useful for everyone... If we do something unsatisfactory they will put us out of the village...

If there are any discussions in the committee they value my words. They have trust in me. They have noticed how I have worked for the betterment of the village. So they believe that I give them the right information, since I explain everything to them very well... And I also take care of the correct transactions of the money. Everybody does not have the same influence like me, only to some extent they have... I think they are just thankful, because we help each other... and everybody cannot take as much space...” (Woman KI, 27)

From talking to the women it feels like they have always been able to participate in the NGO's development project, but I can also read out that a lot of women trust more in the NGO and the people with influence without any questioning. *“If we wanted to give our opinions they would co-operate with us and if we had any problems they would solve it”*. The young woman talks about how the NGO would solve any problem that would occur in the community. This naturally contributes to a dependency to the NGO, even through conversations together with the *key informant/recourse* person I can perceive that she really wants the last social worker in the area to stay, even if I feel she can manage to be the recourse person by herself. In fact many of the other self-help group members have a very high trust in her just like she says above, and this has both its negative and positive aspects. She, as many other in the head committee, is a very significant person who can influence a lot in the community and she can by herself admit this. When I attended the meeting of the head committee I got to know that they select new members to their committee every year, this means that you only sit for a year. When other women will be selected to this committee it will be a must that they have the self-esteem and courage to manage the work, otherwise the work might get destroyed. If other women will not be selected to the head committee I

assume that those women in a long-term perspective will lose their interest and commitment and therefore remain excluded from the group (Arvidson, 2003).

Something that I have been mentioning earlier is that the Western feminists often use the term 'woman' as it is a universal group. When I was attending the different self-help group meetings I could without any doubt analyse different power structures, and that is the reason to why I chose to conclude the postcolonial feminism and the intersectionality that also try to explain women's various social classes and ethnic characteristics. Just like De los Reyes and Mulinari (2005) writes it appears that gender and class do not have an absolute value. When I had my interviews the women explained that not all the women have the same influence, but that the ones who have influence and self-confidence help the other ones. This is of course a good idea, but in the head committee there is only a few members and they can by no means manage the whole community work by themselves. To manage a community work I believe that everybody needs to have the courage and confidence in themselves and not only to the women who have the most influence. It is of importance to reveal the women's different actions among the ones who do have influence, but also in particular, the ones who do not have as much influence. It is therefore essential to be aware of the background and thus highlight alternative voices that can tell us about something we do not know that can change the normative thoughts and thereafter change the attitudes of the community people. Here it is important to not say: "*... they are a little less talkative... and they are not totally sure about what they are talking about all the time*" without saying that 'we support each other and try to influence everybody in the group'. When I asked the woman if the influenced women try to help the other less influenced to take more space I got the answer that it is better that the women who have more knowledge and encouragement do the work. As mentioned it is essential not to forget the people who do not participate in the community project since the areas where NGOs are having community development are very much undeveloped and if other people cannot support the community work it will not work in the long term.

In the text above I have also mentioned that women were focused a lot on economic and materialistic importance for them, and as declared, this could be an explanation from the NGOs model according to Laskar (2006) since they might use Western models as aforementioned. Tilly (2000) argued that with material richness also significant symbolic resources come, such as education, knowledge and control over society's different systems. This could naturally be an explanation to why women focused on material empowerment

instead of their social and psychological empowerment. It might be a long-term process to shape a social and psychological empowerment, while a materialistic empowerment establishes faster and appears earlier. This process has in turn also led to a systematic anonymization and marginalization of the women who do not have as much influence/material as other women, who do not attend the meetings and even against women who are not members of any self-help groups. It is thereby important that women work together and form a collective alliance that results in a stronger position. Women with more influence also understand that they do have more influence and power, and that is why it is important that they will let in the other women and try to give tools to them so that they also can participate and influence the development work.

Another reason why women think in a materialistic way could also be due to the caste system. All the women came from very low castes (that also explains that all of them were Hindus) and the only way to rise through the ranks is to be faithful to their caste and thus to be reborn in a higher. According to this the women can never rise through the ranks in the same life so the only thing to get respect and esteem is through money and materialistic belongings.

A lot of social, economic, political and psychological improvements have happened, but with this cultural process where people have been participating new inequalities and differences have been created. Earlier the women did not participate in society, but they might have been more equal and now they can participate in society, but to different degrees. The differences are created in the relationship between the different self-help groups in the processes of deprivation of resources and exclusion from power and influence.

5.2.2 How do the women experience and describe the meaning of their own empowerment process?

When I asked women about their experiences of their own empowerment process I received very different answers since the women interpreted the definition of empowerment in different ways. I assumed this before I started to ask them and I did not want to tell my definition since everybody has different interpretations of the word and I think they should explain their own version. Since the purpose with this research question was to get the women to describe the meaning of their own empowerment process I have chosen to add as much information as possible from their answers. It seemed to be very difficult for them to

speaking about their own empowerment process. How hard I twisted and turned the question it was still difficult for them to speak about themselves and I interpret this as, to some degree, lack of psychological empowerment.

“Now the woman has developed making better transactions regarding money. This is what I think is the women empowerment.

The committee has helped us in our needs and we have got the courage to face any problem. It has helped a lot of children. It has also helped us to develop a unit among ourselves and we participate in all work.

I would like to improve the conditions in under-developed areas in our village and increase the frame of this committee... We want to invest more money and conduct some programs by inviting powerful persons” (Woman, 60).

This woman focused in general a lot of the material empowerment and as mentioned it seems like by material wealth the symbolic wealth also comes. She also explains that the empowerment process has developed a unit among the women and the political empowerment is well connected to social mobilization, which all the women argue that has established. The woman feels like she participate in everything, but when I asked her about different achievements she explained that they had taken the decisions together with the NGO and this do not have to result in more influence and control according to Riger (1993). Of course she has received more empowerment than she had before, but maybe it is the *false consciousness* – the illusion of a feeling, which describes that her empowerment is stronger than it really is. The empowerment that does not increase in genuine influence, power and control. In this case study I have only interviewed five women, but if this is a general answer I would be worried for the sustainability in the community project. It was however, very positive for me to hear that the women wanted to contribute to the betterment of other women’s lives.

“To be equally treated in the society is our aim... Coming out of primitiveness and taking part in the actual world and having the attitude that we are not inferior to anyone is women empowerment. We can also achieve, grow and learn. We are capable of solving any problem that arises” (Woman, 29).

“According to me empowerment is development of women... And also increase in our self-confidence. Now we are able to take up any activity and can successfully accomplish it. That is empowerment! Before it was only home and family... Now I have the responsibility of being part of various meetings and activities. Before I was isolated only with the house, now I have the chance to socialize and work with them outside the house. Now I even have the opportunity to be a part of other’s thick, and help them solve their problems... There has been a lot of change... Before we were only busy with the household chores and confined to homes. Now everyone has learnt to socialize and take part in the activities... Our life would be like... No one would have even noticed my capabilities. We used to always stay at home

without any knowledge of what's going on in the world. I would just remain as good wife and good mother...

My confident level is too high now! Now if I want to do something I see that I will accomplish it" (Woman KI, 27).

The two youngest women were in the whole interview very concentrated on social and psychological empowerment. They believe it to be very important with information, education and communication and they know that the community members need to change attitudes to change society (Friedman, 1992). When I had conversations with these young women I could really feel their spirit and that they truly wanted to change their and others living conditions. Furthermore, I do not know if the women have more concrete suggestions of how to do. The resource person has a very high self-confidence and she can naturally accomplish a lot from that, she just need to not forget that they will be stronger as a group. Overall the women think that they have developed a lot in their mind but also in society. They feel that they have been enhanced with psychological, social and political empowerment, but still they cannot imagine their own NGO as disconnected to the NGO that started the community work. Ones again, I relate this to Arvidson's (2003) theory of that the professionals using a top-down model and contributed the target group as dependent to the NGO.

5.2.3 Has empowerment had any impact on women in everyday life after the withdraw phase of the project?

The development project and thereby the empowerment process has changed and improved a lot of the women's and their families' lives. Even though all the women came from scheduled castes they felt very strong. *Persistent inequality* seems to be able to change, even in some parts in the deeply rooted Indian caste system and traditional system (Tilly, 2000).

"My life has been greatly impacted by the XXXX-project. Men go outside for work and go to banks to avail loan. To buy pesticides or seeda I can get loan from the committee at a very cheap rate of about 2% interest while outside the interest is 5% or 10%. We are now able to carry out our agricultural deeds and at the same time we deposit the money regularly and we are not finding it problematic. At the end of the day we are left with a secure feeling about our deposited money" (Woman, 55).

"In terms of financial problems we have got the faith and confidence that this committee will sort it out. Earlier only we by ourselves had to solve our problems but now the other members in the committee also help us in solving our problems and we are able to notice the problems in other families of the society... Earlier we didn't have the courage to face the difficulties in life. Now we have got that strength. We ourselves had to find the solution to a problem. Now all of us stand united and sort out the problem... Earlier we used to work as

labourers. But now we take loan from the committee, which helps us to come forward in life” (Woman, 60).

A reason why older women do not focus that much on the psychological and social empowerment could be what Kunjakkan (2002) talks about when she refers to the Laws of Manus. There she argues that the woman is a part of the man and that an uncontrolled and “uncultured” woman is a danger for both the man and human society. Many women talked about that it was very difficult for them to attend the meetings in the beginning. It is still deeply rooted in society, both among women and men that the woman is at the bottom of the Indian human hierarchy. Maybe it is more difficult for older women to change their attitudes since they have lived much longer with the old traditions. Something that one must be observant on is that the benefits of availing loans to a low interest is for women, but it is difficult to really show that it is the woman who wants to take the loan and not her husband who wants to take it. Something that the 60-year-old woman emphasized was that the women have actually also found solutions to altered problems by themselves.

“Before joining the committee we were ignorant and were under the hands of our husbands. We were not allowed to get out of our houses and we had to eat what our husbands gave us. After joining the committee we have become financially independent and can work like our husbands. We have realized the importance of cleanliness and we have kept the surroundings and ourselves clean.

We want to prove to others that we are no less than them... We also want to be a model to other committees. There are other committees as well who have enough knowledge and capability to make a change... We want to be a source of motivation to them” (Woman, 29).

As mentioned Charles Tilly (2000) argues that there can often be a “normalizing desire” of women, because the subordinate groups also seek to gain power and influence. In the long term, some women therefore excludes from participation in the implementation of power. Even if women have developed a lot within the community, family and themselves I could clearly figure out that they seek after more. The women do not only want an improvement just for themselves, but for other women as well. In addition to this, one can analyse it through Alveson’s (2006) model since the empowerment impression would be of a more symbolic technique, namely that the women want to demonstrate and spread information and images of a solely positive future. This because their Women Federation at this moment would be a self-composed NGO, which is in need of companies that give sponsorships for its survival.

“Other women take loan and engage in income generating activities like rearing cows, buffaloes, goats and support themselves..... Also used this loan for various agricultural activities like for digging bore wells etc... We wouldn't have come forward in lives without this opportunity..... this committee has shown us the right direction and we all feel united and take part in these developmental activities...and we have become more knowledgeable and aware” (Woman, 70).

“If there is any program in the village people walk up to me first... every person of the village notices me... They come to me for making the right decisions. This is only because of the committee... Before this no one even recognized me. Earlier I was really poor and no one listened to me... because I come from the Scheduled Caste.

Now all the women take part in every activity, and every program meetings... They look after the household chores as well as take part in all the village development activities. They have much more work now than they had before, but we enjoy it because now we have the courage to take more space.

My beliefs are that we can take care of the committee very well. That we can do some income oriented plans. We can become like a role model to everyone. I believe in unity to do something... To do personal work it's easy to do alone... But the committee-work requires unity!” (Woman KI. 27).

Since the key informant is the resource person she also has a good contact with the local Gram Panchayat and even there she feels that she is able to express her own awareness and ideas, and can with the group manage to accomplish goals. Here she really feels that the empowerment actions have an increasing effect. Just like S.L. and P.C. (1999) explain, she clarifies that when a woman in a village receives more influence from the Gram Panchayat or in the head-committee she becomes automatically more powerful in the family and in the village.

Empowerment has become a universal concept that many NGOs are using as it is proved to have positive effects in many other cases. The question is for whom... In many ways, recognition of the importance of participation/influence and empowerment in society is established among policy makers and researchers. Arvidson (2003) argues that professionals use the participatory model as a way of conducting knowledge through top-down direction, which in some cases are inevitable. The fact that when an NGO well initiates a project in a certain village, it often attracts the “local elite” - those who have a better financial situation or who have political and social influence. They would like to be involved with the professionals and then there is the risk that the local elite can benefit personally from either economically, politically or socially advantages. Though I also believe that it can be inevitable to ignore the local elite and sometimes the local elite can even be a positive group that contributes a lot to the community. Here it is easy to link the intersectionality between

women since the NGO turns with their development project to the women with low cast, but they forget to look on the other aspects such as class, social and political influence. This means that even if the project turns to scheduled castes there are different levels within the scheduled castes. Just like the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act says; the beneficiaries have always been the higher classes among the weaker sections. With the pace that society is evolving, the professionals also change their working methods to adapt the outside world. However, it is sufficient if it occurs at a superficial level, for example, a concept like empowerment. According to Alvesson's (2006) symbolic perspective, of course an organization's effectiveness can be measured accurately in terms of how the organization *appears* instead of how their official goals really meet (Bolman & Deal, 2005).

In the self-help group meetings I could clearly see power structures and the ones who talked often got their will. This concerned me since the ones who talked rather often also already had a well-developed social, political, psychological and materialistic empowerment. The 27-year-old woman, who in this case is the recourse person, is however a person who almost did not have any influences in the community seven years ago. She did not have a proper house, she was a housewife with three children and her husband was a labour worker. She was the typical Indian rural woman that Kunjakkan (2002) talks about. Now she can proudly tell what she has accomplished in life and that she is aiming for even greater changes in the area where she lives but also in other areas where women are in need of economic, political, social and psychological empowerment. The remaining question now is if it will sustain like this or if she and other women in the community will become typical "local elites" with symbolic and top-down activities and thereby contribute to even greater contrasts between rich and poor, influential and non-influential in the Indian society.

6. Concluding Discussion

By trying to understand contemporary forms of exercise of power and inequality created by the post-colonial thoughts we can together identify and prevent the domination in time. Inequality is worldwide and it is therefore extremely relevant to note unfairness, no matter where ever you are. Intersectionality can be crucial in several different theories, especially in the empowerment project and in postcolonial thoughts, and I believe that a dialogue between different theories can contribute to a deeper and more dynamic understanding of the forms of domination that exist globally.

Fixed and constant categories such as gender, class and even the caste ignore the unequal historical causes and its social construction. To make these categories' complexity visible, historical roots and social character is an important part in the project of interventions for the worried living conditions and rights of our time. This makes it impossible to highlight how these differences construct each other and how to formulate dialogues and strategies that exceed established limits. What one should do first is to change the approach we have on inequality and equality, since these differences are often taken for granted and are not expected to stop or change. The next thing one should do is to highlight and spread this to the target groups and their environments.

So, in what extent are the empowerment approach symbolic and a top-down technology, and to what extent does it, in practice, empower the women participating in the projects?

Examples of NGOs that idealize the reality on the impression level is something I have mentioned already, and this happens for example when the NGO must send evaluations to the company that sponsors the NGO. My personal experience is that the NGO where I was very often spent too much energy and time to give a better impression of what they actually had done. The professionals often idealized the report and should essentially minimize this effect since it does not really lead to anything substantial. By talking to marginalized women that have been a part of a community project led to knowledge that says social workers who cooperate with these groups should give the individuals as a collective group increased confidence, such as valuating their abilities higher. The professionals need to allow room for local priorities, knowledge and empathies for social change. To be able to act together requires unity and a common definition of the situation, and as I feel it the women realize this to a minor extent. If a social problem occurs, it has to be addressed as a challenge to create a collective awareness that prepares for collective action. The understanding of empowerment should thereby relate to the capacity to be able organize and inform people so that they can eliminate the unfair context. The group of, in this case, women should not only be the ones who have the capacity of influencing this unfair context, but it should also include women who can contribute with alternative voices to change societies' normative values. To manage a community work I believe that everybody needs to have the courage and confidence in themselves and not only the women who have the most influence. If the professionals only focus on a specific or small group from the whole target group, women may loose interest in the project and thereby the project won't be sustainable. If the group in the future also wants to make a change it might be a slight impact when situated in a broader context, since they

have to consider the structure at macro-level and other current traditional structures. To change the local community it is of importance to clear the relationship between empowerment and community and we should start to consider *connection* as important as *empowerment*. An empowered group may find it difficult to sustain in a context that embraces provocative power structures. After all, human beings are ultimately social beings, and as such they are dependent on others. Personally, I think the NGO that has been running the development project in the area also should have analysed power structures among the women and educated the influenced women about the advantage with more women as a unit and not only a unit among a few strong women. Because the women still do not realize the essential in engaging *all* the women. The NGO should have emphasized this more in order to avoid effects like: “... *they are not totally sure about what they are talking about all the time*”.

Given the issues presented in terms of power structures and dependence, one may wonder how it affects the sustainability when an NGO leaves the project to be sustained by the target group. The idea is that the target group should be socially self-sustaining but if the basis has not been properly founded no one will know how the target group will fare in the future. One risk is if the local elite emerges and takes on the policy-makers role when an NGO leaves the target group. The risk for an outside observer is that one can only see an illusory world and one might think that the target group has a responsibility to take a more active and independent role when the NGO has left the project. However, the real occurrence often presents a possible local elite that have established themselves and created relationships with NGOs and presumably taken on an even more dominant social, political and economic role than before. The relationship based on learning the women had with the NGO might transform to a relation based on fear as the local elite succeeds the NGO's absence. Protesting against the new authority is not an option due to sheer fear for the people in power positions. In short-term it might be easiest and more effective to use the top-down approach, but in long-term, when the NGO realizes that the target group is still dependent, one should understand that the bottom-up approach is of more relevance. Something that the professionals need to rethink in regard to the concept of participation and empowerment is that the target group should be involved in its practice and that this development is as important as the method itself. Riger (1993) claims that participation is not necessarily connected to empowerment and that is why one has to make sure that empowerment and influence is an aim of participation. Otherwise the concept of empowerment goes lost and it

solely becomes an expression to accumulate a *“false consciousness”* as mentioned earlier. The expression might strengthen the women temporarily as a social structure, but often becomes gradually worthless as they are left to become independent without the support of the NGO.

Among other, Jönsson (2010) and Arvidson (2003) writes that many NGOs regard schools and education as the locomotive for change and this is something that I clearly know from my own practice in field. Of course, this is not a malicious plan of any kind. In fact, we believe that young people are better off if they are educated and have better prospects. Suppose we have an NGO that operates in an impoverished village, where living standards are below average with no clean water and house heating. Should education be the first priority in this case? Could it not be a more reasonable manner to improve infrastructure and possibly collaborate with construction companies, to try to achieve a normative standard of living? Or maybe there is some sort of local raw material or resource that can be extracted, which can make the village self-sufficient? If we take the example of the impoverished village again, and assume that children and young people had the opportunity in school to educate themselves, thanks to an NGO. They realize quite soon that there are no future prospects in the village, which means that they ultimately move to cities where there are jobs. The family, which is left in the village, is in a dependent position vis-à-vis those who trained and relocated, as they earn more and can send money home to support the family, which is considered to be common practice if you have the ability. Here is one more reason to prioritize local knowledge, but since the NGO approaches as patriarchal - “we are here to teach and give you the knowledge” - the target group do not even get the chance to show what they already know and want. By this top-down approach the target group might feel overwhelmingly dominated in the beginning, but after a while they might feel that the situation is comfortable when the NGO presents a plan for practice, serving the solutions for the villagers. The experience of an NGO often dominates the creativity of the local people. Since the NGO has approached the women through top-down technologies this could also lead to the women not knowing how to handle things in the future. The risk here is the “monkey see, monkey do” idea - that the women who have worked with NGOs approach a top-down method from their side when teaching and relating to others, when in fact empowerment is a process grown through relationships between NGOs and common people.

It is interesting to speculate on the future for target groups with the help of NGOs, but the actual impact is however not fully visible until 10-15 years after the project’s end. Then we

can analyse whether the whole target group grasped the knowledge the NGO contributed with and if they provide these properly to the next generation.

6.1 Further Research

In performing research within the social field I believe it to be difficult to discuss both results and the future in advance, but in my results I expected to find that the women have received enough with interventions to have the self-esteem to sustain the community work in the future and I really hope they have. After all, to be a part of a project for seven years, I have faith in both that the NGO and the women have taken it seriously. Optimistically, I hope with the help through the empowerment process that the women have built-up a unit within themselves where they feel strong, believe in themselves and raise their voices, all the women, when necessary in the future. I also believe that my results show that empowerment and the community work have made a difference in a woman's or in her family's lives, though it is more difficult to show if it will sustain in the future. It is problematic to predict on what level this work has taken place and if all work genuinely have a sustainable effect in the women's new NGO. I have the deduction that being involved in decision-making through participation and influence empowers women and I really hope I will see this if I return to this rural area in the future.

In the future it could also be interesting to find out how women feel about not being a member in a self-help group in the same area, or even try to see if there are women who are unsatisfied with the development project and why. One could also talk to women that have resigned or become excluded from a Women Federation and form efficient interventions. All over the world one can analyse inclusion and exclusion of people, so that kind of research is not only relevant on a national level, as this is an on-going global process.

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Appendix A – Interview guide

(Possible questions depending on theme and focus)

“Ice Breaking” and Basic Facts

1. Name? Age? SHG? CLA? Members? Meetings?
2. When did you decide to join the women in the SHG?
3. How long have women in your village been practicing these kinds of meetings?
4. Who took the initiative and how was it organized? What made the women in this village to organize it like this?
5. Have you heard about CSA?
6. How did you come to know CSA and when?
7. Have you taken part in other SHGs than CSAs?

The Participation and Empowerment in Relation to the NGO

1. Can you tell me about some “turning points” in your life?
2. Can you describe how you have participated in the work together with CSA?
3. How were you received (the treatment) by CSA when they started working with you?
4. How would you describe the interaction when expressing personal views and opinions with CSA? Explain in detail.
5. How would you describe the opportunities to influence the activities by CSA? Explain in detail.
6. Can you explain the process when making various decisions and actions in the group?
7. How does the process look when addressing local issues with the support of CSA?
Describe your personal participation in this matter.
8. What would you like to improve within the frames of the project objectives/intentions? (If so, how? Examples?)
9. What is the highlight achievement that your CLA/SHG has accomplished (during the last three years).

The experience of her own Empowerment Process

10. What is empowerment for you?
11. Describe how your everyday life has changed due to the establishment of CBOs in your village? Explain in detail.
12. How have you experienced how the establishment of CBOs has affected other women's lives?
13. How do you think your life would have been without the presence of CBOs?
14. How did your husband/husbands/other family members respond to you joining the SHG?
15. Do you feel that you have more access to knowledge / education now than before CSA came to your village? If so, how?
16. Do you think that it is important for women to organize themselves? If so, why?
17. What are your personal goals with the CBOs?
18. What needs to change in society in order to improve women's situation even more?
19. Do you think it is important to continue the work/project in the future? If yes, why? If no, why?

Relationships with the NGO and the Community Members after the Withdraw Phase

20. How has the empowerment process affected your family and its relationships?
21. Have you recruited any other women to SHGs/CLAs? If so, why?
22. What role does the women have in the village today?
23. Do you have a specific position in the SHG/CLA? If so, how did you get that position?
24. Are there more influential women in your SHG than others? If so, what makes them the most influential individuals?
25. Do you feel that you have the same influence as other women?
26. What role does the men have in the community today?
27. What role does CSA play in the community today?
28. Do you feel that you have the capacity for running the CBOs independently in the future? If so, why? If no, why? Explain in detail.
29. What kind of requirements do you have for the independent functioning of CBOs?
30. What are your beliefs and hopes for the future regarding the development of women's empowerment?

31. Tell me about what kind of actions you wish to do in the future independently that you cannot do now?
32. Do you have any plans, ideas or strategies of how to increase your own independence or other women's independence? If so, what are they?
33. Do you want to say anything more? Please feel free to express yourself openly.