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# Editorial

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‘Gender and Development’ is a popular phrase today in the world of donors, development policy and planning. Though arising from within a specific school of socialist feminist thought, the nomenclature is now generically used to cover anything and everything related to the question of women in the development process. Gender and Development (GAD), in its initial conceptualisation, situated within feminist theory and praxis, engaged with both Marxist theories and theories of patriarchy to understand gender relations within productive and reproductive spheres. While acknowledging the imperative of radical transformation of society, it did not, unlike the Marxist feminists, dismiss the need for negotiations with the state and supra state organisations (like the UN) on the woman’s question. Effectively, it meant that while giving a critique of social structures and international economic-political order, it emphasised on legal, political and economic reforms within given structures to enable better participation and inclusion of women. Predictably, it is only the liberal politics of inclusion that has been co-opted by development agencies and state planning bodies to articulate the question of women’s relation to development.

Meanwhile, social science scholarship has gone through a number of turns and feminists too have actively drawn from and engaged with these new questions. Dependency and World System theorists have critiqued the notion of a single path of evolutionary development for all countries, pointing specifically to the relations between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ that sustain ‘underdevelopment’ in peripheral locations. The Women and Development (WAD) school, influenced by dependency theory, focussed therefore on these transnational processes in explaining the We

are agreed that for the entire work you will receive the sum of Rs.20000/- (Twenty thousand only) as a consolidated amount. We will be grateful if the work can be completed by 26 December 2009. subjugation of women in specific locales, for example in the case of 'third world' women workers in multinational companies. Further, authors like Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson have produced a powerful critique of 'developmentalism', emphasising that 'development' is a discourse and therefore a construction, not something that is natural or universal. The cultural turn in social sciences has focussed on cultures, identity formation and their articulation and negotiation in geo-political and socio-economic contexts, for example the issue of ethnic identities in the North Eastern region of India. Originating from Black feminist movements, multiculturalism has busted the idea of the woman as a homogenous category and established the need to situate women's lives within specific contexts. Contemporary scholarship on gender and development has therefore moved a long way from Ester Boserup's seminal exploration of the effects of modernisation on women in African communities, to a cognisance of these diverse questions and challenges.

Unfortunately though, or perhaps deliberately so, gender and development as discussed within policy frameworks, remains largely embedded within the 'modernisation' discourse and simply talks of inclusion. Moreover, this inclusion is often imagined in terms of the 'public' i.e., in terms of access to economic, social and political resources and power in the public realm, without any reference to restructuring gender relations within the 'private' or the home. Similar to the 'trickle down' theory of growth, it is assumed that changing gender relations in the 'public' will percolate to the 'private'. As the policy of reservation for women representatives in India's local governance institutions or the 'microfinance revolution' the world around demonstrate, this has not happened most of the times. Elected women representatives become puppets of male members of household or male members of political groups. Women members of microfinance organisations lose control over their loans to male members of household and so on and so forth. Despite a larger recognition of women's role in the economy and society, gender relations are showing great resilience to change. Patriarchal control over fundamental issues such as women's sexuality and sexual division of labour, remains entrenched. In our preoccupation with negotiating a larger share of the cake with the state and international development agencies, are we perhaps forgetting our fight for radical restructuring, be it gender relations within the household or the specific location of women in capitalist patriarchy? Is the language of inclusion replacing the language of struggle? In this great hullabaloo of women as 'agents of change' (read development), we need to ask ourselves whether it is all about 'women for development' or 'development for women'? When 'third world' feminists articulated the concept of 'agency', they were certainly not thinking in terms of the World Bank's notion of women as the 'best managers of poverty'!

This issue of *Global South* builds on some of these reflections. There has been a conscious effort to select articles across a wide range of perspectives and issues. The concept of 'development' here does not restrict itself to socio-economic dimensions. It travels wider to encompass questions of culture, identity and subject formation. It looks at histories of movements, organisations and political processes that shape and situate women's lives. Another focus of many of the articles has been a seamless movement between the public and private, in an effort to re-imagining both the spaces.

The article 'Gender Dimension of Dam-Related Displacement in Kachin



State, Myanmar' by May Sabe Phyu and Kyoko Kusakabe focusses on the aftermath of displacement for development, a major issue in contemporary global and national development discourse. The authors look at the multiple processes that uproot people not only from land and livelihoods but also from customs and value systems. Though this has multiple possibilities, in most cases, as in the case discussed in the article, this leads to narrowing choices for women, draining whatever semblance of control they had over their lives and massive fall in indicators of well-being such as health. The article suggests that displaced communities should be provided with alternative livelihood opportunities as well as decent living environments, including social services specific to the needs of women.

Although I have spoken at length about the limitations of the modernising logic of donor-driven development programmes, it is important to note that it opens up certain windows of opportunities in specific cases, especially in relation to its ability to command interventions in areas that traditional/local inequalities and entrenched power relations will not normally allow. The article "The Days of the Project are Over": Women Health Workers and the Politics of Development in Yemen", by Marina de Regt points to one such specific project in Yemen that not only offered health service and awareness but also utilised and developed local capabilities of poor women residing in squatters. However, when such a project interfaces with national governments and local power politics, ripples are created. The article shows how the process of merging the programme with national institutions led to a total distortion of the original vision and praxis. Nepotism and corruption in governance took away from women and the larger community, all the benefits that had been so painstakingly built over the years. The article makes me pause and think for a moment: If the programme had been built through a people's movement, instead of exclusively through foreign funding, might it not have dislodged some local power relations in its momentum, which would then have better assured its continuity?

The article 'Pilgrimage and Business! Springboard for Senegalese Merchants in the Dynamic of Globalisation: A Historical Perspective', by Laurence Marfaing Giga, is a historical study of Senegalese merchants, a dominant proportion of whom are women. Here, we find an interesting interplay of religion and trade. While religion and religious associations have been generally understood to constrain women's lives and capabilities, especially in the public sphere, this article brings out how the Senegalese women have marvellously utilised that space to their advantage. Using the religious networks as means of safe passage as well as social visibility, the women have successfully carved out an important position in the economic life of the community. Instead of acting as an impediment to development, these networks have provided religious and social sanction to women's mobility, economic transactions and interaction with the outside world.

Women's participation in productive activities has time and again been valourised as the key constituent of women's emancipation. The article 'Continuity and Change in the Gender Relations of the Tangkhuls of Manipur', by Shangpam Kashung questions this received wisdom. Discussing the different socio-economic and cultural dimensions in the life of Tangkhul women, the author points to the fact that despite an active economic role, Tangkhul women continue to be subordinated in other spheres. She also critically questions the impact of women's inclusion in public life on gender relations in the private or domestic sphere. The author

explores religious symbols, idioms in language and ritualistic practice along with socio-economic issues to bring forth the connectedness of these dimensions in perpetuating women's subordination.

The article 'The Making of an Archive: Memory, Movement and the Mahila Samiti in Assam, India', by Hemjyoti Medhi records memory, history and sentiments of a hundred-year old women's organisation. It traces the journey of the organisation from the time of the nationalist movement till the present day. In the process, it raises some important methodological questions such as the disjunction between memory and documentation. The story of the organisation and its people offers important glimpses into the changing texts of women's issues, politics of articulation and mobilisation, and the perception of the community about the organisation. Some important moments in the life of the organisation, captured by the author, reflect some of the major issues around which women organised: Child marriage and women's right to leisure. The latter especially points to the fact that there were attempts to at least renegotiate, if not radically alter gender relations within the households of the members of the women's organisation.

The specific ways in which activism by women in the public brought about a serious questioning of their own gender location within the household and intimate relationships is further elaborated in the article 'Under the Wings of Life, On the Arms of History: Feminine Leadership, Formation and Action in Social Movements', by Christiane Santos Souza, Ediane Lopes Santana and Haroldo Silva Barbosa. A significant contribution of the article is in how it looks at the construction of feminine leadership in the context of social movements in Railroad Suburbia of Salvador, Bahia. This process of construction erases the artificial boundaries of the private and the public; especially in the way values of care are brought into the imagining of the movement. Further, this article, based largely on the narratives of the women leaders, is part of an ongoing process of rewriting history and reclaiming history from a gendered perspective.

In the *Across the South* section, Madhurima Mukhopadhyay reports on a workshop on *Awareness Generation and Sensitisation on the Issue of Domestic Violence* organised by the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India. The *Reviews* section contains a review by Nighat Gandhi of a novel *The Search* by Shaheen Akhtar which focusses on the search for love, dignity and acceptance by war-ravaged Bangladeshi women. There is also a review of a report titled 'Food and Agricultural Organization, Gender Dimensions of Agricultural and Rural Employment: Differential Pathways Out of Poverty', by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, Rome, 2010. The report, by Estella Musiwaa, notes that despite the overwhelming role of women in rural economies, their efforts are hampered by persistent gender inequalities that limit their access to decent work. Finally, work on this issue has been a very interesting journey for everyone in the editorial team. I sincerely hope that our readers will find it equally engaging. Saluting people's struggles for a better world...

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# Continuity and Change in the Gender Relations of the Tangkhuls of Manipur

Shangpam Kashung



# Continuity and Change in the Gender Relations of the Tangkhuls of Manipur

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Shangpam Kashung

*This paper discusses the continuity and change that have taken place in gender relations among the Tangkhul in the state of Manipur, India. With the advent of Christianity and modern education, many changes have occurred among the Tangkhul. However, some patriarchal norms and gender relations show great resilience even in changing contexts. The paper aims to look at certain socio-economic and cultural spheres in the lives of the Tangkhul first to assess the claims of a higher status of Tangkhul women (in comparison to some other Indian cultures) and second to examine the changes in that status in contemporary times.*



## Introduction

Tangkhuls are predominantly settled in Ukhrul district of Manipur covering an area of 4544 sq. kms. Ukhrul district is surrounded in the north by Nagaland and the Mao hills of Manipur, in the south by the Sadar hills and Imphal valley. In the east lies the Kabo valley of Burma and in the west lies the Tengnoupal hills. Tangkhul is one of the major tribes of Manipur. The Tangkhuls belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of Mongoloid. Tangkhul, (phonemically *tankhul*), belongs to the Naga sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family.<sup>1</sup> According to IHA (Immanuel Hospital Association), the Tangkhul population in the year 2010 is 1,42,000.

Tangkhul society is patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal. The head of the family, clan, village, and priest are all exclusively male. They worshipped several deities but there was no female deity except for one. It is thus clear that the Tangkhul society is a male dominated society. Women play a very important role in family in particular and society in general but their contribution to the society is set aside from the public domain.

There is no doubt about gender stratification among the Tangkhuls, but the traditional Tangkhul women were not status conscious and they were apparently happy and satisfied with their position in society. Their status outwardly appears to be lower than men's but they did not feel that way. But in contemporary times, there is a consciousness among Tangkhul women about gender disparities and they are articulating a need for a gender egalitarian society.

## Status of Tangkhul Women

"Many women in more civilised parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free and happy life; and if you measure the cultural level of a people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as 'savage'".<sup>2</sup>

It may be true that the Tangkhul women have higher status in comparison with women in other cultures. For example, they may have bride price in contrary to dowry. However, a deeper analysis shows that women are often deprived of various opportunities and responsibilities, especially in the public domain. The only prominent role played by a Tangkhul woman in the public sphere is the role of *phukreila*.<sup>3</sup>

## War

The Tangkhuls practised head-hunting (*mikui-kharang*) as part of their culture. Consequently, each village was perennially at war (*rai*) with other villages due to issues of sexual harassment, assault, theft, failure to keep the agreement, encroachment on land etc. The headman of a particular village with the help of other village authorities took decisions pertaining to inter-village disputes. If his decision was unacceptable to other concerned villages, this would imply the onset of war and the associated headhunting. When the war was too heavy and either party retreated then it was the duty of the *phukreila* to stop it. No warrior could touch her and she had to be obeyed. Therefore she had all the privilege to live a safe and respected life. She was safe and secure in both the warring villages. She was the ambassadress of peace and was free to move around in these villages without arousing any suspicion.<sup>4</sup>

## Religion

The traditional Tangkhul religion is known as *Hao*. There are different deities for different places like the deity of house, field, jungle, river, stone etc. and rites are performed accordingly. Tangkhuls worship several deities but all the deities are male except *phunghui philava*.<sup>5</sup>

In the same way women have no role in religious activities except in *Chumphu*.<sup>6</sup> The religious

specialists like *khanong* (Exorcist, Prophet and Medicine man are also categorised under *khanong*), *sharva* (priest) etc. are all male. They perform various rituals in different activities like construction of houses, agriculture, rite of passage ceremonies, festivals, etc. In all the religious activities, it is the male responsibility to take care of various rituals. However, after embracing Christianity, women have also started taking part in religious activities though not equally with their male counterparts.

Sources: 1. Pettigrew centenary celebrations committee Manipur. 1996. Rev. William Pettigrew (a pioneer missionary of Manipur), Fraternal Green Cross VVD, Imphal.

2. Census of India, 1961-2001.

\* Literates exclude children in the age group 0-6 who are treated as illiterates in the census of India. In the 1961 census, literates exclude children in the age group 0-4 years. The percentages have been calculated on the total population inclusive of the population in age-group 0-6.

## Social Dimensions: Education and Decision Making Within the Household

When modern education was introduced, the parents sent some of their boys to school without knowing its importance, but girls were not given the opportunity for the simple reason that boys had more leisure time. 'The idea of a female going to school, to leave the home and give up the work in the fields and in the home was another of those almost impenetrable walls that took long to batter down...' <sup>7</sup> However, the education of girls began with the night school. 'It took Mrs. Alice Pettigrew fourteen years to persuade the parents, mainly husbands, to send the girls to school like boys.' <sup>8</sup> The disparity in educational opportunity is captured by the difference in literacy rates as depicted in the following table.

Year	Total Population			No. of Literates*			Percentage of Literacy	
	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male
2001	140946	73413	67533	61345	35469	25876	25.16	18.35
1991	109952	58563	51389	55254	34448	20806	31.33	18.92
1981	82946	43273	39673	34833	22540	12293	27.17	14.82
1971	62229	31612	30617	21220	14451	6769	23.22	10.87
1961	48590	23890	24700	12715	9082	3633	18.69	7.47
1911	27500					10		
1909					56			0
1897					24			0

From the above table it is seen that there is a wide gap of literacy rates between men and women. Gradually however, the female literacy rate is rising, pointing to the fact that the Tangkhuls have realised the importance of educating women. At present a good number of Tangkhul women have become educated but not to the point of being egalitarian.

In a traditional Tangkhul family, the men take almost all the major decisions. Issues such as whether the children should be sent to school or engaged in household activities, which boy should be a match for a marriageable daughter etc. are decided only by men. Women are rarely or never consulted on these important affairs. However, this scenario has undergone some changes in the modern times. Men seem to have understood that their decisions are not always perfect and women seem to have gained in confidence and information about various issues. This has led to a greater possibility of arriving at decisions through

consultation and discussion between men and women in the household.

### Economic Dimensions: Labour and Inheritance

The Tangkhuls are mainly agrarian. As their economy is primarily based on agriculture, both husband and wife work as bread earners. Gender stratification decreased when men and women made roughly equal contributions to subsistence. Scholars argued that gender stratification was greatest when the women contributed either much more or much less than the men did. But these findings seem to be fallacious in the case of the Tangkhul society where men and women contribute almost equally for diet except during the childbearing period.<sup>9</sup>

In Tangkhul society, division of labour between the sexes is scrupulously maintained. There are specific activities for the men like hunting, ploughing, woodwork, metal work, stonework, house building etc. Similarly, certain spheres like baby-sitting, cooking meals, laundering etc. are exclusively meant for women. Women do all the household chores and also work in the field equally with men. A husband who helps his wife in performing any household work is ridiculed by society. They are called *mayar makashok*, which means lack of masculinity. In fact, the Tangkhul women work harder than their male counterparts. They were exempted only from war. The logic of war also operated as the logic of protection. Only men went to wars and therefore were the legitimate protectors of women and children from outside aggression. In exchange of this protection, women were expected to bear a more than equal share of work comprising both productive and reproductive spheres.

In contemporary times, the economy no longer revolves around only agriculture. Because of modern education and changes that are taking place in the society, many women have gradually stopped doing work in agricultural fields and have engaged in government and private jobs. But women continue the traditional ways of doing the household duties all by themselves. Men do not go to war anymore. The headhunting culture which was an exclusive male realm and which justified the division of labour through the logic of protection is a thing of the past. But division of labour remains unchanged. The stereotype of housework and care work as a woman's duty continues.

Another very important economic dimension is the question of inheritance. All immovable property is meant only for the male child. If there is no male child, the next heir is the closest male relative. Women inherit some movable property like *kongsang* (traditional necklace made out of beads and shells), *zeithing* (walking stave), shawl, *sopthem* (basket) *har* (armlets made of lead), *kazao* (bangle made of brass) etc. There is a saying, *Mayarnao mathameilungna Shanao mazungmuiyana* (Men are rock, women mists). This means that, once a woman gets married, she becomes a member of her husband's family, a different clan (marriage within the clan is incest). Hence, a woman has no right to inherit her father's property.<sup>10</sup> However, a Tangkhul woman inherits the property of her father-in-law through her husband. It is seen therefore, that while there is a claim that hundred percent of the Tangkhuls of Manipur are now Christian, the Tangkhul's rule of inheritance is not compatible with the Christian rules of inheritance.

Today some rich people who live outside the Tangkhul territory have started giving property to both – son as well as daughter. If the girls have an equal right to inherit property – movable and immovable – there will be less gender inequality. Having no right to inherit immovable property by daughters becomes one of the reasons why parents in patrilineal societies prefer a male child.

### Polity

Tangkhul women had no place in the field of traditional administration. However, the trend has changed and with the introduction of a modern political system, the Tangkhul women along with their male counterparts have equal political rights and freedom guaranteed under the Indian Constitution. Tangkhul women now enjoy adult franchise and participate in the voting process for election of the members of the District Council, Legislative Assembly, Parliament etc.



## Ceremonies

The naming ceremony at birth is known as *naomingkaphok*. Occasionally it is observed by a family which is blessed with the birth of a son after begetting many daughters. This indicates that they prefer son to daughter for ensuring the continuity of the family line. It is believed that the mother is relieved of her pain on the sixth day in case of a boy and on the fifth in case of a girl.<sup>11</sup>

Ear piercing is also a ceremony practised among the Tangkhuls. It is usually done when the child is 2/3 years old. If ear piercing was to be done on a girl, five pieces of yarn would be tied together and kept in the hole and in case of a boy it would be six. It was considered that five is the number for the female sex and six is the number for the male sex. With the coming of Christianity, some significant changes have occurred in this particular ceremony. For example, ear piercing is no longer practised with the boys though it is continued with the girls.

For a marriage to happen, a bride price has to be paid by the groom in Tangkhul tradition. Perhaps, it is with reference to such a practice that scholars must have accorded a high status to the Tangkhul women. But this claim is not significant because there is '*shimlam*' which, on the contrary, is brought on the wedding day by the bride.

On the day of wedding, wrestling is considered as important event. If the bride's party wins the wrestling match, it is believed that the life of the couple may not be a prosperous one, but if the groom's party wins, it is believed that the life of the couple will be a prosperous one.<sup>12</sup>

## Idioms: Reflecting Gender Relations

A mother blessed the son before going to war-

*'Nali mahaimeiranu, sarada sahaola mayarnao kashungda ngararlu, shunao thada mahanwungalu, mayarnao kashungda ngararda akui khuiwunglu, mayuimada thihailala chi khaya kamei'*. It may freely be translated as, 'Wish you all the best, since you have decided once, fight like a man, and don't come back like a woman. Fight like a man and bring the head, even if you die in the war field for the cause of righteousness you die a noble death.'<sup>13</sup>

'Knowing that a woman's life is short in a family, her life is compared to the cloud of the sky and the man's life to the stone of the hearth of a house. A local proverb runs like this: '*Mayarnao matha-meilungna, kha shanao hiya mazung muyana*'. It means 'Man is the stone of the hearth, but woman is the cloud of the sky.'<sup>14</sup>

If there are many brothers, such a family is regarded as one of the best families and is termed as *Chinao Khamathasi*, meaning 'a good brothers' family.' In short, a family that has many sons it is regarded as a good family.<sup>15</sup>

## Gendered Taboos

Taboos that exist for men and women in the Tangkhul society also point to a process of gendering. Following are some of these taboos:

- A woman should not yell in public.
- A woman should not climb over roofs, trees etc.
- A woman should not walk across a man while sleeping or sitting.
- Ill luck will fall upon a man if he walks below a woman's clothes line.
- It is forbidden for men to eat meat hunted by women. In other words a woman should not go for hunting games.

- It is a taboo for women to sit cross-legged.
- Women are not allowed to eat sacrificial meat.
- Women should not sit on the tools (like knife, dao, hoe, etc.) or sharpening stone
- A woman should not visit her parent's house immediately after getting married without her husband. There should be at least a month's gap from the time of marriage.
- A woman should not destroy her husband's spear or anything which is used for warfare.
- It is not allowed to wash woman's wrap-around (*mekhala*) in the pond.
- Tangkhul view women as polluting, at particular times. The concept of pollution is established for women during her childbirth, menstruation etc. Further, a man should not have sexual intercourse with his wife during the period of war or before going to war.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

With the advent of Christianity and modern education, many changes have taken place among the Tangkhul. However, some patriarchal norms and gender relations show great resilience even in changing contexts. This is aptly brought out by the strict adherence to sexual division of labour. Irrespective of the peculiar and revered position of the *phukreila*, Tangkhul women have by and large been kept outside the public domain. In contemporary times, when more and more women enter the public sphere of education and employment, gender relations in the 'private' refuse to budge thereby adding on to the expectations from women without restructuring existing norms and rights. '*Shimlam*' exists alongside bride price, women's inheritance rights accrue to a privileged few, son preference prevails and masculinity continues to be defined in terms of the language of physical prowess and war. Thus women's participation in productive activities, that has been a historical tradition of the Tangkhul, does not necessarily challenge patriarchy or the subordinate status of women in society.<sup>17</sup>

"... Horam, when he says that in the traditional as well as contemporary northeastern hill societies the women, have the same status as men and suffer no discrimination on account of sex... Unlike the so-called advanced women, tribal women do not need liberation; and the much-publicised women's 'lib' contributes nothing to their lot".<sup>18</sup> The previous discussion has shown the complete falsity of this perception. Moreover, even before women could realise their subordinate status, Christianity, which is also very patriarchal, crept in to their society. 'The Christians, the Hindus and the Islam religion have obedience laws which subscribe women's place as subservient to their husband. Women can therefore have little say or control over household or family decision. Therefore, they cannot be socially or politically active without the consent of their husbands. Thus, the impact of religion is another hurdle for the growth and development of women in the world.'<sup>19</sup>

The Tangkhul women's position needs to be understood therefore not only with reference to the position of women outside that society, but also with reference to the position of men within that society. Neither tradition, nor modernity, has brought any radical transformation of gender roles and responsibilities. An active articulation of feminist politics from within the Tangkhul society therefore is the need of the hour.

- 1 S. Arokianathan, *Tangkhul Folk Literature*, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, 1982.
- 2 C. Von. Haimendorf-Furer, *Naked Nagas*, Thacker Spink, Calcutta, 1962.
- 3 Any girl who gets married outside her village is known by the term *phukreila*, which means an ambadress of peace. She played an important role during the period of war and head hunting. During this period *phukreila* acts as the mediator for her father's and her husband's villages.
- 4 Khashim Ruivah, *Social Change Among the Nagas (Tangkhul)*, Cosmo Publication, New Delhi, 1993.

- 5 *Phunghui Philava* (deity of wealth) is associated with the fertility of the paddy field. It is considered to be different from other deities for the simple reason that it has feet unlike other deities. The Tangkhul religious notion says that if *Phunghui Philava*, a deity with a long flowing hair down the feet, passes through a paddy field, the place receives a good harvest in that year. It is counted a harbinger of fortune if her footprints are found stepped-in, in the granary and vice-versa. Therefore, rites and rituals are performed for the fertility of paddy.
- 6 *Chumphu* is a festival in which the womenfolk play the important part and it is spread over for four days. It is the festival to mark the beginning of taking out newly harvested rice from the granary. This new rice eating festival begins with a taboo for the male members and they spend their night outside the village gate. At the time of taking out the paddy from the granary the women offer prayer to the Supreme Being, so that she may have enough food for the whole year round. While taking out the paddy, if she happens to meet malefolk, ill luck would befall for both of them throughout the year. Thus every one tries their best not to meet any member of the opposite sex on that day.
- 7 William Pettigrew, "My Twenty Years 1897-1922 – At Ukhrul Mission School", in Pettigrew Centenary Celebrations Committee Manipur (eds), *Rev. William Pettigrew (a pioneer missionary of Manipur)*, Fraternal Green Cross VVD, Imphal, 1996.
- 8 Shining Keishing Byrne, "Rev. William Pettigrew as I knew Him", in Pettigrew Centenary Celebrations Committee Manipur (eds), *Rev. William Pettigrew (a pioneer missionary of Manipur)*, Fraternal Green Cross VVD, Imphal, 1996.
- 9 C.P. Kottak (ed.), *Anthropology: The Exploration of Human Diversity*, Mac Graw Hill, New York, 2002.
- 10 Y.K. Shimray. "Customary Laws of Tangkhul Tribe", in Jyotsna Chatterji (ed.), *Customary Laws and Women in Manipur*, Uppal Publishing House, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 1-6.
- 11 Ruivah, *Social Change*.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
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# Gender Dimension of Dam-Related Displacement in Kachin State, Myanmar

May Sabe Phyu  
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# Gender Dimension of Dam-Related Displacement in Kachin State, Myanmar

This article is about Kachin Internally Displaced persons who have been forced to relocate due to Irrawaddy-Myitsone Dam construction project in Kachin State, Myanmar. More than 15,000 Kachin people were compelled to relocate from their land and that led to damage of their livelihoods. This article describes the problems they faced and the adjustments they had to make. The subsequent health problems from the combination of their adjustment to the change in environment, the challenges they faced, and the changes in lifestyle behaviours after displacement led the vulnerable groups, especially women to suffer increasingly from health problems and risks.



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## Introduction

Myanmar<sup>1</sup> has the highest estimated number of internally displaced persons, reported between 600,000 and 1 million according to the world refugee survey<sup>2</sup> done in 2002 by the U.S. Committee for Refugees. Internal displacement in Myanmar is categorised into three types: Armed-conflict-induced displacement, state-society conflict-induced displacement and livelihood vulnerability-induced displacement.<sup>3</sup> Infrastructural development projects such as construction of mega dams, roads, bridges and gas pipelines are identified as state-society conflict-induced displacement which is carried out by states causing involuntary population to be displaced from homes. This paper looks at such state-society conflict induced displacement by examining the livelihood and health situations of women and men who were displaced by dam construction in Kachin State, Myanmar.

Displacement devastates livelihoods by expelling people from their places of origin, and affects people at the lower level in the society.<sup>4</sup> Displacement is not just a transitory event. It is a destructive transformation of an individual's life leading to landlessness, unemployment, loss of one's home, marginalisation, food insecurity, poor health due to disease, deprivation of access to common resources – all of which are often withstood with a sort of social and cultural resilience. Loss of livelihood often causes more suffering to women than to men, because of their heavier responsibilities to support the family and their higher dependence on natural resources.

This study examines displacement by the dam construction in the Irrawaddy River in Myanmar. The Irrawaddy River is one of the biggest and longest rivers in Myanmar, passing through six major divisions and draining into the Andaman Sea. Myanmar's Department of Hydropower Implementation signed an agreement in 2009 with China's state-owned China Power Investment Corporation (CPI) for construction of seven dams – one of them at the confluence of the Irrawaddy River.<sup>5</sup> According to Myanmar Times, 'Irrawaddy dam projects would make the biggest hydro-power venture in Myanmar, surpassing the power capacity of the country's biggest hydropower project, the 7110 MW TaSang Dam in the Shan State.'<sup>6</sup> This mega dam was constructed in Kachin state, which led to a large scale relocation of Kachin people in that area. Nearly forty per cent of Kachin state's population is ethnic Kachin (37.8 per cent), who are one of the major ethnic groups in Myanmar. Most of them are Christians (95 per cent).<sup>7</sup> Kachin ethnic includes six ethnic sub-groups of Jinghpaw, Rawang, Lisu, Zaiwa, Lawngwaw and Lachyit. Kachin State is rich in natural resources and famous for its gold, jade and teak-timbers.<sup>8</sup>

Displaced people, who used to be engaged in agriculture, lost their land after the relocation and have now turned to mining industry for their employment. However, being mining workers, they are exposed to various risks such as drugs and alcohol abuse, increased sex work and gambling, which did not exist in their community before. This paper examines the changes in their livelihoods, impact on their behaviour, health risks and their coping mechanisms.

## The Study Area

According to Myanmar government, 48 hydroelectric dam construction projects are currently under stages of implementation including the seven mega dam constructions in the Kachin State.<sup>9</sup> The impact of large dams on people's livelihoods, health and social systems has become a serious issue for the Myanmar people due to the increased numbers of internally displaced persons affected by those dam projects.



Location of Irrawaddy Dam Project Sites on the N'Mai and Mali Rivers



**Source:** <http://www.burmariversnetwork.org/dam-projects/irrawaddynmalmali.html>

The study area is the relocation people who have been displaced by the Myitsone dam project of the Irrawaddy River in the Kachin State.<sup>10</sup> The largest of the seven, the Myitsone dam project started in May 2007. The dam's annual production would be 16,634 Gwh and the poser will be worth an estimated US\$ 500 million per year.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 1 Myitsone Dam Specifications Comparing with Other Dams in Myanmar**

Name of the Dam	Installed capacity (MW)	Height	Length	Max water depth	Surface Area	Remark
Yeywa	790	134 m	690 m	180 m	59 km <sup>2</sup>	Finished biggest dam in Myanmar
TaSang	7110	228 m	NA	NA	870 km <sup>2</sup>	Planned Hydroelectric Dams
Weigyi	4540 – 5600	168 m	NA	NA	NA	
Myitsone	6000	152 m	152 m	290 m	766 km <sup>2</sup>	

**Source:** Burma Rivers Network <http://www.burmariversnetwork.org>

The dam will be the third largest of planned hydroelectric dams in Myanmar (Table 1). The dam location is at the confluence of the Mali and N'Mai Rivers where the Irrawaddy starts flowing and it is one of the most significant cultural heritage sites for the Kachin people and an important landmark as well as a tourism site for all of Myanmar. The dam will flood 300 square miles in Kachin State, an area larger than Singapore, inundating 47 – 60 villages. As a consequence of which, between 10,000 and 15,000 people have been forcefully displaced. The inundated villages are relocated in two relocation sites under the government's resettlement plan since May 2010. The study selected Aung Myin Thar village, one of the resettlement sites as the main study area because this site had the larger population between the two relocation sites. It is located around thirty kilometres from the Kachin state capital town of Myitkyina, and fourteen kilometres from Myitsone, where the original villages are located. Estimated 328 households and total of 2513 people were residing in the study village in 2010. They had come from five different villages, which will all be inundated. Villagers are predominantly Kachin ethnic group who are Christians and primarily agriculturalists. The study took place between August and December 2010.

### Methodology

Exploratory research method with non-experimental design was applied to explore the changes experienced by displaced people in their health and livelihoods before and after displacement. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. Among the total population of 2513, three hundred respondents were selected randomly (125 men and 175 women) from a list of people registered in the relocated village. A semi-structured questionnaire was administered to these three hundred respondents. Informal group discussions were carried out with the relocated women and men to obtain their views about the effects on health after displacement. Interviews with health experts were also conducted to have an overall knowledge of the health problems among the relocated villagers. The first author is herself from the Kachin community. She has knowledge of the area and is familiar with the people living in the villages. Such a relationship and careful observation have helped us gain valuable insights into the suffering and agency of women and men in the area.

### Changes in Livelihood

The respondents' homes in their place of origin were mostly made of wood or bamboo and thatch but normally they were living in a very big compound so that they could cultivate different kinds of vegetables and breed domestic animals for their consumption in their backyard. Before the relocation, the villagers relied on farming, vegetable gardening, fruit trees, fishing and small-scale gold extraction from the river

for their livelihood. More than 55 per cent of men were farmers cultivating their own land before displacement, while women were not only engaged in own land cultivation but also in non-timber forest products (NTFP) collection and also worked in rubber plantations. Collection of NTFP is an important source for home consumption as well as cash income. Women were also engaged in small trade, selling grocery and food in the villages or souvenirs at the tourist places in Myitsone. The average net household income before displacement ranged between one to two hundred thousand Kyat<sup>12</sup> (equivalent with 105-205 US \$) for men headed households and fifty thousand to one hundred thousand Kyat (equivalent with 55-105 US \$) for women headed households according to interviews with the villagers. Aside from cash income, they also produced their own rice and vegetables in their back yard.

After displacement, villagers received one hundred thousand Kyat (equivalent with 105 US \$) and one television for each household as compensation. Based on the number of household members, 24 viss<sup>13</sup> of rice was provided for every resettled household on a monthly basis for one year from the time of displacement. According to their land holding and condition of house in their place of origin, the displaced were categorised into different groups to be allocated three different types of housing and four different types of house compound. Through informal group discussions, the villagers mentioned that the actual value of land holding such as perennial trees and garden were not calculated accurately for compensation purposes. For instance, one fully-grown orange tree was valued for only 135 Kyat (equivalent with 0.14 US \$). Hence, the compensation was far from enough for the displaced people to build and restart their new lives in the relocated village.

In the resettlement village, the houses were built very close to each other and therefore the respondents felt a loss of privacy. Furthermore because it was congested, communicable diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis and other seasonal flu would get easily transmitted. The house compounds were on rocky red soil, so it was not possible to do vegetable gardening in the back yard.

**Condition of Housing in Resettlement Zone  
After Displacement**



The available livelihood options in the relocated village have been limited. The activities that they used to do such as farming and gardening, growing fruit trees, fishing and hunting have become extremely limited for both men and women, since they have no land and forest around their resettlement zone. All they can do is to search for employment opportunities in gold mines, teak business and work as casual labourers. Number of women working in alcohol shops and small traditional food stalls around the gold mines and teak business area has increased. Some of them are also working as casual labourers which used to be an unusual job in their places of origin. Table 2 illustrates different occupations of men and women before and after displacement.



**Scenario of Gold Mining Business at  
Myitsone After Starting the Dam Construction**

**Table 2. Occupation of Respondents Before and After Displacement (N = 300)**

Occupation of Respondents			Farmer	Gardner	Miner	Shop keeper	Trading in border areas	Hunting/ Fishing	Other <sup>14</sup>	Total
Before Displacement	M	f	72	25	13	5	5	5	0	125
		%	57.6	20.0	10.4	4.0	4.0	4.0	0.0	100.0
	F	f	50	30	5	30	2	0	58	175
		%	28.6	17.1	3.0	17.1	1.1	0.0	33.3	100.0
	T	f	122	55	18	35	7	5	58	300
		%	40.7	18.3	6.0	11.7	2.3	1.7	19.3	100.0
Chi square value 84.124, df = 6, significance 0.000 (p<0.001)										
After Displacement	M	f	17	5	72	1	25	1	4	125
		%	13.6	4.0	57.6	0.8	20.0	0.8	3.2	100.0
	F	f	5	4	87	8	22	0	49	175
		%	2.9	2.3	49.7	4.6	12.6	0.0	28.0	100.0
	T	f	22	9	159	9	47	1	53	300
		%	7.3	3.0	53.0	3.0	15.7	0.3	17.7	100.0
Chi square value 45,856 df = 6, significance 0.000 (p<0.001)										

**Data source: Field survey, November – December 2010**

The changes in livelihoods have depressed incomes of the respondents. There is no land near the villages where they can either buy or rent land, since this is a very high-demand area dominated by contract farming and plantation projects owned by Chinese companies and people from central Myanmar. The displaced men and women have to work as daily wage labourers in these farming projects and get average monthly cash income ranging between 75,000 to ninety thousand Kyat (equivalent to 70-85 US \$), same rate for both men and women. In Table 2, farming and gardening of men and women after displacement refers to such kind of agricultural labour jobs on daily wages. Not only have their net cash income decreased but they have also lost their sources for supplementary food which they used to get from their own farms and home gardens.

**Men and Women on the Move for Traveling to Goldmines After Displacement**



Due to food shortage in resettlement zone, men started to migrate to work in gold mines, jade mines, and illegal teak business, while women started to work outside village including traveling to Chinese border areas to do business such as drug smuggling and sex work. Mining is the most desired occupational category for both men and women after displacement because it gives better pay than other occupations. Mostly, men miners are involved in large scale mining ventures with high-equipped companies. Their work is much harder and more dangerous (such as the divers) but marvelously paid by local standards. The



work of women in mines varies from men. Some women are involved in small scale mining for extra income where muddy soil and stones are disposed from high-equipped companies. The percentage of women and men working in mines has increased significantly after the displacement as seen in Table 2.

### Life in mining areas

According to the report by Images Asia and Pan Kachin Development Society 2004,

The mining areas are now plagued with narcotics dealing, heroin and amphetamine drug abuse, spread of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, increased prostitution, and corruption. Trafficking of women and girls is said to be a major industry in this area, with victims often younger than 13 years.<sup>15</sup>

Since men have lost access to farm land, they have become paid miners in gold mines and jade mines, casual labours in construction sites and illegal teak business. On the other hand, women, who were earlier engaged in traditional farming and gardening, are now working in gold and jade mine areas, as shop assistants in alcohol and food shops, service girls for Karaoke bars, massage parlours, gambling centers, illegal drug trade, shooting galleries and brothels. The pay by working in mining area is higher than alternative options, with a starting salary of two hundred thousand Kyat (equivalent with 205 US \$) or more. The sudden access to cash income has led to changing consumption behaviours of women and men, and often money is spent on risky activities, such as drinking, drugs, gambling and unprotected sex. 'Money easily comes and goes for the miners', said a male mine worker.

The place of mining changes as resources in one area gets depleted. The mine workers need to move along with the mining area. It is usually near the river banks or forest which is normally far from their villages and it is impossible to commute daily. The workers go back to the villages only when the mining business owners settle their labour fees. Both women and men who are working in the gold mine areas live together in small barracks provided by gold mine owners. The living conditions in the mining areas were observed to be insecure and not favourable to women. The living quarters are crowded and without partition. Most of the mine owners do not consider separate or special living quarters for women. In order to protect themselves from sexual harassment, women in mining areas often start living with temporary male partners even without knowing their background.



**Needles and Syringes Found Near the Goldmine Areas After Using for Drug Injecting Purpose**

Drug market has been flourishing for many decades in Kachin state's gold and jade mine areas and drug addiction has always been high in these areas. With displaced women and men losing their traditional income source, some do not have any other choice but to be engaged in drug smuggling businesses. Women are more likely to be involved in drug smuggling business since their mobility is less restricted by authorities than men and they have better negotiating ability in order to pass the check points – including offering sex to the authorised persons. Not only do they trade drugs, in order to endure the hard working environment in the mining areas, the workers take recourse to substance abuse such as alcohol, opium, amphetamine and heroin.<sup>16</sup> Unsafe practices such as sharing injecting instruments are prevalent. Other studies in Southeast Asia show that nearly half of mining workers share syringe and needle in drug use.<sup>17</sup> We studied such health risks in further detail.

## Health Risks in the Mining Area

Kachin State has one of the highest rates of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis<sup>18</sup> according to the Myanmar Department of Health reported in 2007. In 2004, the government declared the malaria prevalence rate of Kachin state as epidemic, with morbidity rates ranging from twenty to 29 per 1,000 and mortality rates of eight to ten per 100,000.<sup>19</sup> The Kachin state's gold mining operations create pools of stagnant water in which malaria-carrying mosquitoes can breed. Gold mining takes place in regions where malaria is highly endemic.

The rise of prostitution, drug use and the migration of labour to mining areas have accelerated the rate of HIV/AIDS infection in Kachin<sup>20</sup>

*It is very hard to get specific and reliable data on HIV/AIDS prevalence in Kachin State. Therefore the risk is greater than the estimation of respective departments and organizations,* said the Project Coordinator of MSF-Holland/AZG.

Both men and women who work in mining-associated business were found to lack knowledge of communicable diseases especially HIV/AIDS, according to the key-informant working with HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support project.

Moreover, miners are often not aware of the threats posed to their lives and health from pollution in the mining areas such as serious long-term risks from mercury poisoning, cyanide release and dangerous handling of mining chemicals. Safety standards in mining areas are low. Gold miners need to dive in the water in search for gold, but their equipment is poor and they work eight hours a day under water. Despite such high risk, many men work as divers, since the job is very well-paid by local standards. There are no safety precautions, no legal recourse for workers and no workers' unions. Myanmar mining law and rules are very poor and consequently no mining company is at risk of prosecution or fines. Then again, almost all gold mining companies in those mining areas are operated by Chinese and local Myanmar businessmen who are business partners of powerful military officials. Therefore, there is hardly any accountability of the businessmen to the workers.

Polluted mining environment may cause not only occupational hazards but also other infectious diseases for workers such as tuberculosis and diarrhoea which are considered as opportunistic infections to create severe health problems after being infected by HIV.

Bad sanitation and unhygienic environment are other problems in the mining area. Poor sanitation results in gynecological diseases for women miners. In the absence of access to information on safe practices, brothels in mining areas are breeding grounds for HIV/AIDS. Moreover, casual cohabitation and changes in partners among men and women miners are very common in mining areas. In that context, existing gender relations make it impossible for women to negotiate safe sex.<sup>21</sup> After displacement, without access to land, women are more dependent on cash income. Since their own income is not enough to support themselves and children, women are financially more dependent on men than before relocation. This leads to men's decision to be put as priority for all aspects including sexual relations, use of protection, access to information and health care services.<sup>22</sup>

Six kinds of common health problems are discussed by respondents before and after displacement. These are described in Table 3.

**Table 3: Common Health Problems of Respondents Before and After Displacement (N=300)**

Common health problems of Respondents			Malaria	Diarrhea	HIV/AIDS	TB	Unidentified <sup>23</sup> sickness	Common cold/Flu	Total
Before Displacement	M	f	67	14	1	16	5	22	125
		%	53.6	11.2	0.8	12.8	4.0	17.6	100.0
	F	f	74	17	1	19	31	33	175
		%	42.3	9.7	0.6	10.9	17.7	18.9	100.0
	T	f	141	37	2	35	36	55	300
		%	47.0	10.3	0.7	11.7	12.0	18.3	100.0
	Chi square value 84.124, df = 6, significance 0.000 (p<0.001)								
After Displacement	M	f	78	12	3	19	6	7	125
		%	62.4	9.6	2.4	15.2	4.8	5.6	100.0
	F	f	92	20	1	19	40	3	175
		%	52.6	11.4	0.6	10.9	22.9	1.7	100.0
	T	f	170	32	4	38	46	10	300
		%	56.7	10.7	1.3	12.7	15.3	3.3	100.0
	Chi square value 45.856 df = 6, significance 0.000 (p<0.001)								

*Data source: Field survey, November – December 2010*

Malaria is the most common health problem both before and after displacement but it is more prevalent after. Respondents do not report HIV/AIDS as their critical health problem but this might be because of the stigma attached to the disease or because they are not aware of it. The high prevalence of TB might include some cases of HIV/AIDS, since most AIDS cases are related to TB. Noting that prevalence of HIV/AIDS among intravenous drug users is 43 per cent and among sex workers 32 per cent in Myanmar<sup>24</sup>, and noting the increase in drug use and sex work in the mining area for relocated women and men, higher prevalence of HIV/AIDS can be expected. As interview with an outreach worker from MSF-Holland/AZG stated:

*For the time being, it seems nothing is happening among people, but due to individual risk behavior, HIV/AIDS issue will rapidly become the biggest health and social problem among displaced people since the location of that resettlement zone is closely situated with the most famous three drug smuggling villages within the area. (An outreach worker from MSF-Holland/AZG).*

Health care services in Myanmar are usually poor and the new relocated areas do not have any public health care facilities. Because of displacement, traditional medical practices are no more available since their place of relocation does not have forest and forest products. Changes in livelihood, increase in risk behaviour, lack of access to traditional medicine and low income which prohibit them from access to other healthcare options, all lead to higher incidence of disease among the displaced.

In terms of access to health care services in gold mine areas, government health services from rural health centers are not accessible to the mine workers. Usually, inadequately trained medical resource staff, who normally are men, are there to provide unreliable but expensive health care services in the gold mine areas especially for emergency purpose. But, women who have gynecological problems feel uncomfortable to consult these men and the high cost is a further deterrent for women to get treated properly. Men have less problems in getting treatment from these men, partly because they do not feel shy and partly because they have more money at hand to spend for their healthcare.



## Conclusion

Displacement by dam construction has robbed the Kachin women and men of their land and forest. They have been relocated to an unfamiliar place and left without any land for agricultural work. Without any productive resource to work on, many displaced women and men have started to work in mining sites. The physical and social environment of the mining sites have increased risk behaviour among women and men and both have become more vulnerable to diseases, especially malaria and TB. The risk of HIV/AIDS has also increased because of increase in drug use and commercial sex. What is worrying is that the awareness of HIV/AIDS still seems to be low among the displaced women and men.

Women suffer more from the drastic change in livelihood because of increased financial dependence on men and also because of the threat of sexual harassment and assault in the mining area. Inability to negotiate for safe sex, unsafe substance abuse, poor working conditions and lack of access to health care services are increasing the health risks for women. This is all the more alarming when we consider the high social status of Kachin women in the place of origin. In the place of origin, women owned land and business and were independent income earners. All that has changed with displacement and work in mining areas.

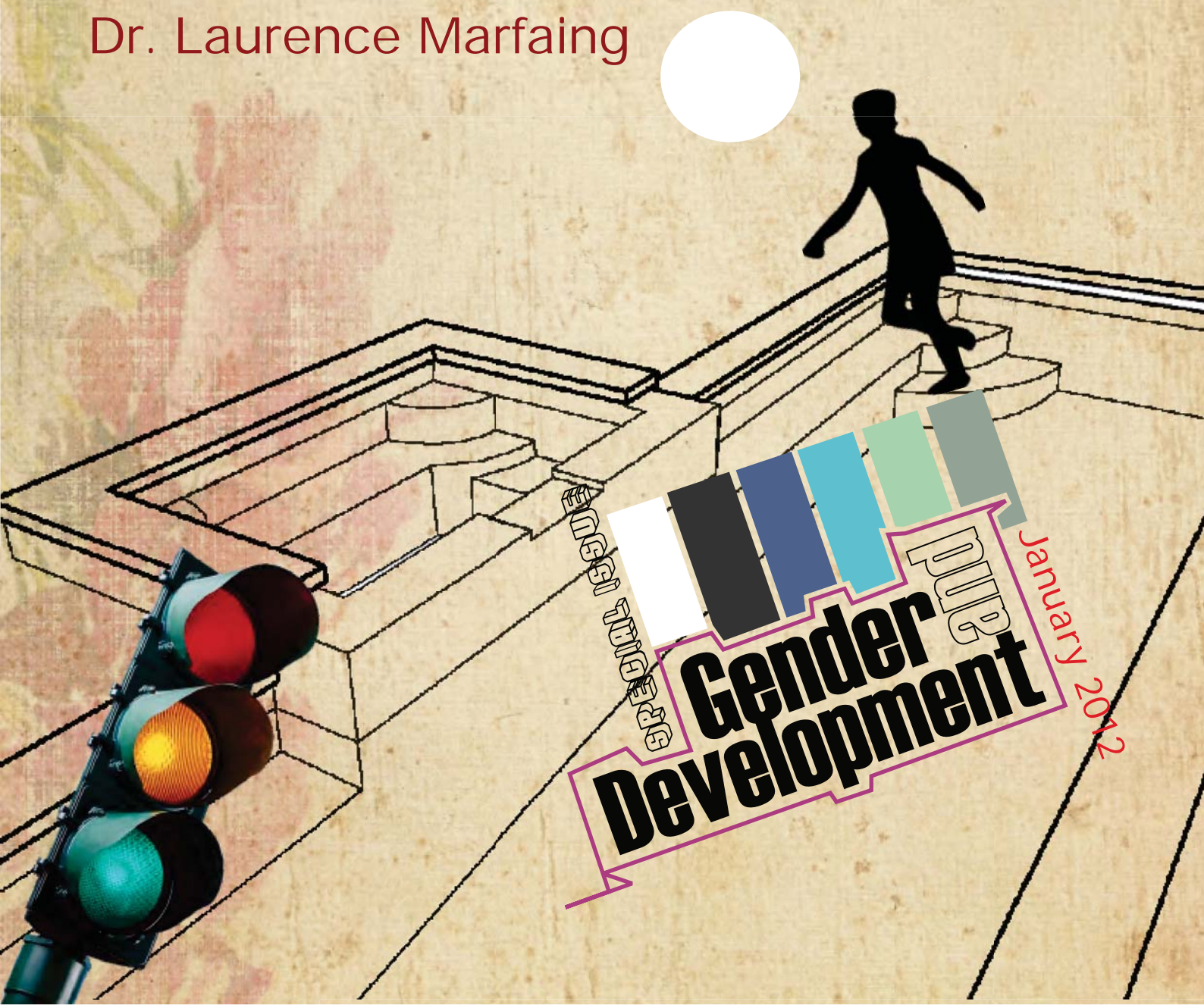
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# Pilgrimage and Business! Springboard for Senegalese Merchants in the Dynamics of Globalisation - A Historical Perspective

Dr. Laurence Marfaing





# Pilgrimage and Business! Springboard for Senegalese Merchants in the Dynamics of Globalisation - A Historical Perspective

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Dr. Laurence Marfaing

*This article traces the growth of Senegalese trade from the colonial period to the present day. It looks at the way the traders have responded to demands of international trade and globalisation through an ingenious interconnection between the spheres of religious action and economic imperative. Importantly, Senegalese women have been at the forefront of the trade. Using networks of association, these innovative women have not only become successful traders but have also reconstituted their lives in the interstices of tradition and modernity.*

This article focusses on a process that increases African participation in globalisation from the perspective of Senegalese stakeholders. The term globalisation is used in this context as a process of increasing international complexity. Historical research is based on the general consensus that Africa has been integrated into European globalisation in the Atlantic region after the encounter with the Arab world and the Indian Ocean. Historical, political and economic studies suggest that Africa has suffered more from this than from the consequences of slavery, colonial capture, decolonisation and contemporary global economy. I would like to show in this paper that Africa's role in globalisation was and is much more active. Using the example of Senegalese merchants I shall illustrate that they have connected spheres for religious action and economic possibilities, cleverly using these for business. Furthermore, I would like to show the background of these connections in a long-term perspective. This will make apparent the procedures which accompany the expansion and reformation of these connections between religious and commercial spheres in terms of an economic boost to the informal sector.<sup>1</sup>

Behind this dynamic lie religious and social behaviour and networks i.e. certain forms of social and religious interaction that can be explained by endogenous systems and structures of this region. Senegalese merchants use social and solidary<sup>2</sup> economic circumstances of their culture<sup>3</sup> as well as networks that originate from the circulation of the Tijaniyya brotherhood, such as, the related pilgrimage from Senegal to Fez, the religious centre in the North of Morocco, or rather behind Mecca.



**Female Traders in Rosso**

The central concept of 'merchants' is part of a concluded analysis on Senegalese trade between Senegal, Mauritania and Morocco.<sup>4</sup> Those observations showed that women have not remained restricted within the inherited system of home economics, a phenomenon brilliantly explained by Meillassoux in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> Senegalese merchants, as stakeholders of globalisation, have accommodated themselves again and again into the historical, cultural, economic and political context through flexibility, innovative behaviour and mobility in order to find their place within the whole process.

First, I will explain the method of analysis in order to focus on three main parts: Fez and the Tijaniyya as background motifs, pilgrimage and economic relations in colonial times and today, and finally the integration of trade structures of Senegalese merchants into the process of globalisation.

Methodologically, I position myself at the point of intersection of general history, workaday and contemporary history, economic and social history. I have decided to start from a historical analysis that emanates from trade relations in the West- and North African region since the end of the nineteenth century. In my opinion, this approach allows for a focus on trade relations within a historical framework as well as their evolution and parallel developments. Besides, this approach illustrates how certain decisions have either led to shortages or by contrast opened up new opportunities. In order to illustrate the emergence of interdependencies between political and economic circumstances and stakeholder strategies, it was necessary to look at aspects of everyday life through interviews, biographies and memoirs. However, the different perspectives of particular stakeholders were not neglected, acknowledging that everybody counts on a plurality of perceptions and feelings depending on one's education, personal curriculum, cultural milieu or position within the group,<sup>6</sup> or depending on competence and habitus. Later propositions have been integrated into the social and historical context, as they become apparent in colonial archives and then verified. This order of examination was important to me in order to work from

a perspective of the stakeholders rather than reproducing colonial and European perceptions. Thereafter, new analyses of international trading activities of Senegalese merchants were considered. They can be interpreted as a result of historical structuring and as a component of how global history constitutes itself.

### Fez and the Tijaniyya as Background Motifs

Fez, the eighth century first capital of Morocco, was a trading town and a point of intersection for caravans from the South. Since the capture of Almoravides in the ninth century, hailing an important starting point for the Arabicisation and Islamisation of northwestern Africa, it became a town for academic and religious currents. In the course of the eighteenth century, Fez played an important role in the circulation of Tijaniyya, a Sufi-brotherhood<sup>7</sup> whose founder Shaykh Ahmed al-Tijani had been inhumed there. Mosques and mausoleums became places of religious initiation and mystical experience and emerged as centres of studies and collective assemblies. Fez became a pilgrimage site for Tijanes creating customs that continue to this day, (meetings, mawlud, ceremonies etc.). West African pilgrims interrupted their journey to Mecca here; others, who did not have enough means for this long trip, started their 'little pilgrimage.'

In the course of the nineteenth century, several factors proved to be beneficial for the circulation of the precepts of the Tijaniyya in West Africa. One factor was the work of Hajj Umar, member of the resistance led by a huge West African empire against French colonial endeavours. When he met the successor of Shaykh al-Tijani during a journey from Fez to Mecca, he was appointed as caliph of Africa and conferred upon him responsibility of circulating Tijaniyya in West Africa<sup>8</sup>. Another factor was the increase in rubber trade in the Senegal valley which was organised by the colonial administration of Saint-Louis and which led to boom years of economic exchange. Finally, in contrast with other Islamic movements, in the Tijaniyya brotherhood economic success and wealth are not frowned upon but are perceived as grace or blessing of God. Having joined the Tijaniyya, one cannot be a member of another brotherhood at the same time, thereby strengthening relations between members and enhancing solidarity amongst each other.<sup>9</sup>



Market in Dakar

### Economic and Colonial Contexts

For centuries, commodities such as salt, sugar and especially slaves from the South came to Fez, so that at the end of the nineteenth century, Fez was not just the religious capital but also a commercial centre of caravan trade from West Africa. This trade was dominated by men from the North and controlled, taxed, and saved by the state systems. Trade relations extended to Europe via the ports, especially Essaouira, over the Tafilalt and the desert, over today's Mali down to Timbuktu and Senegambia. The descriptions of travellers, bazaar and slavery market visitors as well as rich merchants, tell of the glory of Fez.<sup>10</sup>

However, from 1903 to 1935 and later, nomad members organised raids in the Mauritania-South Morocco-South Algeria region against nomads or pilgrim caravans who, as subjects of the colonial power, were suspected of unsettling colonial rule. Thereby caravan trade was affected and destabilised. In the West-Sahara-Sahel region, Mauritanian members of resistance exploited the various approaches by colonial powers, especially by the French, Spanish and British but also the German trade enclave in



Morocco and the disagreement among them. The colonial system was economically oriented and extraverted towards the metropolis. The French colonial administration went for controlling the commodity traffic.<sup>11</sup> It aimed to determine which goods would be designated for traffic, and built up an infrastructure to guarantee control over this economic region. African trade was rerouted and merchants had to restrict themselves to certain areas which did not stand in the way of colonial interests.<sup>12</sup>

African trade therefore emerged on the brink of the colonial system where goods, trading structures and bearing were endemically fixed and where the state was perceived as an illegitimate and aloof entity. As a consequence, this kind of trade slid into informality. For economic reasons but also due to colonial interests targeting at the isolation of Islamic Sub-Saharan regions from Arab-Islamic core regions, any relation between the West African, Sub-Saharan population and the North was regarded with distrust. Thus, pilgrimages to Fez as well as to Mecca were created anew and caravan trays were bypassed and blocked.

Caravan trade, which had strongly competed since the Atlantic and European opening of Africa and was impeded by struggles of resistance and colonial policies, was threatened with decline since the beginning of the twentieth century as the African economic system underwent major changes.<sup>13</sup> First, the seaports Tanger and then Casablanca experienced boom years at the expense of old transit stations of trans-Saharan trade like Fez. The port of Dakar as well as the railway had already been built before the end of the nineteenth century. From 1920, the construction of port and railways led to development of an infrastructure which turned Casablanca into one of the most modern seaports and economic centres. Thus a maritime trade route between Senegal and Morocco could be established. The French colonial administration in West African colonies was now able to control the traffic of goods as well as the pilgrimage from Senegal across the sea. Accordingly, the French colonial administration organised for the pilgrims, a bus connection between Casablanca and Fez. African trade between Senegal and Morocco, however, was still able to survive despite these controls because of considerable gaps in them.

### About Trade During Pilgrimage in Colonial Times

Using the disguise of pilgrimages to Fez, Senegalese merchants defied the rules from the 1930s onwards and continued trading when they passed Casablanca. In general, these travels took place every two months and lasted for about fourteen days. From Dakar they brought a box of mango or pineapple and a small budget (of 300,000 FCFA) in order to buy goods. By the boat *Le Lyautey*, it was possible to re-export about ten boxes of 100 kilos each.<sup>14</sup> Thereby relations between Fez and the Tijaniyya brotherhood from Senegal became even closer, especially after the Second World War and in the 1950s during the nationalist and independence movements in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria.<sup>15</sup> The goods were sold in the market of Sandaga in Dakar which was built in 1930. In the beginning, merchants stayed overnight in hotels on site, but more and more they were accommodated by their business partners as if they were family members. Women were often allowed to live with their *marabouts*. Later the Maison du Sénégal in Fez, which had been established by King Mohammed V, offered accommodation for the transmigratory Senegalese.

### Profile of the Traders: Then and Now

Women participated in the trade during the pilgrimages of the 1930s, but this increased since the 1950s. They were generally illiterate and belonged to an older age group, because younger women were not allowed to take part in pilgrimage or in international trade due to social reasons and Senegalese traditions. Culture, values, and lifestyle were considered similar between Morocco and Senegal. Because of existing traditional ties, families and husbands trustfully allowed the women to travel. By passing between Senegal and Fez, one acquired devoutness which led to an increase in social status in the place of one's residence. Additionally, this trade led to a rise of social prestige in Casablanca. It was socially appreciated and did not interfere with the relations given by the social structure.

The affiliation to the confraternity and their networks secured the journey and deepened relations with their members, which were based on trust and a sense of togetherness. To do business, the women organised themselves within the confraternity. A chosen representative purchased for the group. In

Casablanca, they negotiated relations with middlemen to attend to their orders and organise the back freight. The most successful of them had the chance, by and by, to directly negotiate with the Moroccan wholesalers, who were members of the Tijaniyya or their network, in order to dictate all stages and even to venture into wholesaling. Their success was noticed in economic circles within the confraternity, as well as within the district of Dakar and opened up possibilities of even more independence and mobility for the traders. Thus, the organisational ability of the traders increased and led to a transfer of proficiencies to their daughters.

The pilgrimage to Mecca also served the purpose of trade. Casablanca and Marseille were the first interstations on the way there and back. During stopovers, the traders purchased goods and by selling-on, they financed the pilgrimage and the purchase of other goods which were exported to Senegal. These dealings follow the logic of long distance trade, in which the frequency of rotation of the invested capital stock increases the total capital.

The first Senegalese traders met in Marseille as early as the 1960s. Marseille, both an industrial centre for Senegalese peanuts and a city of colonial entrepreneurs, was known to the Senegalese since 1848. First, seamen remained there, who were then accompanied by soldiers of the two wars and guest-workers at the beginning of the 1960s. These communities organised in a way that enabled the traders to use such networks for their transit to Mecca.<sup>17</sup> In course of time, the importance of this pilgrimage compared to the trade definitely declined. The informal trade relations were (and are) extremely dynamic, particularly with regard to the export to Senegal: Slippers (*Babuschen*), women's clothing, djellabas, and gabardine are desirable and essential<sup>18</sup> for the Friday prayer, as well as for the festive dresses of the Senegalese Muslims.

The traders adapted to the situation as maritime trade lanes were replaced by air connections. As charter flights were established for pilgrimages to Fez or Mecca in the 1970s, they joined the organised transportation of pilgrims. To give time for merchandise purchase, the flight Dakar – Jeddah was established for the pilgrims with a 72-hour stopover in Casablanca. Today, the flight is linked with a 24-hour stopover in Casablanca, as is the flight to Dubai for 500 € (RAM and Emirats arabes). Trade is still taking place on the way between Dakar and Casablanca every month or every other month, but Casablanca serves more as a stepping stone for the enlargement of dealings nowadays.

In this context 'the way to Morocco – and thus to Fez – was the way to the liberation of women'.<sup>19</sup> Nowadays, female traders of Casablanca are often well educated and constitute a much larger group than men. Duties are separated by gender. Women are more mobile and travel more regularly between Dakar and Casablanca than men who, for their part, live in Casablanca and work as middlemen, although, even here, they are increasingly being pushed aside by women who have begun to invade that territory, too.

The trade possesses a professional structure nowadays. Still however, purchases made by groups open up negotiations of prices and the way of transport, in which individuals cannot compete. During ceremonials held by confraternities of women – 'women rounds' (rotating savings clubs) – credit, savings, and investment-strategies are calculated. Dealings are organised from Dakar. To negotiate goods and prices and to place offers, the traders directly call their wholesaler or middlemen. When they arrive in Casablanca, their commodities are commissioned. The rest of the days of their stopover in Morocco, they spend time to initiate future dealings and to maintain their relations. Also, many of them take the time to visit Fez.

### Integration of Trade Structures of the Senegalese Traders into the Process of Globalisation

The initial gain of some capital from retail trade in Senegal, Mauritania as well as Gambia, followed by Morocco, can be considered the first step towards internationalisation.<sup>20</sup> The gradual accumulation serves to bridge financial shortages as well as social coercions. When a trader leaves her reference group to expand, she will be replaced by a 'daughter', a partner, who has been inaugurated and 'educated' by her, and has particularly been integrated into the network. The migration of West Africans during the 1970s, financed by informal trade, established new business locations and gave new stimuli to international trade.<sup>21</sup> New routes supplemented the old. The way to New York was opened, where 'little Senegal'

currently competes with 'China Town.' Marseille, which became the European hub for West African wholesalers during the 1960s, has slowly become less important due to the implementation of visa and a stringent migration policy. The traders have moved to more flexible countries like Spain, Italy, and even to Istanbul.<sup>22</sup> The economic situation has been ideal for the Arab Emirates to flourish. Dubai<sup>23</sup> is considered at its peak of success and has become the dream for the young Senegalese traders from Casablanca. They are aspiring to capture the trading point of informal trade after four to five years<sup>24</sup> and become the first suppliers of gold jewellery<sup>25</sup>, thereby earning a circulation of money of 'six to seven million FCFA, but which could easily reach 100 million FCFA (153.000 €) as well'; all in cash.

Between the 1970s-1980s, the trade did not exclusively belong to the followers of the Tijaniyya. The economic success of the other Senegalese confraternity, the Muriden, was clearly noticeable immediately following their international wave of emigration. With the deterritorialisation of the confraternities, the particular affiliations become diffuse and the contours between them blurred. Apparently, this is not a problem for the followers of the Tijaniyya and the Muridiyya, confraternities that originally belonged to the Qadiriyya. Their networks and interconnections allow the women to interact, seize trade opportunities and realise possibilities of the carriage of goods and new social investments.

Although collective behaviour is at the centre of the economic and social vitality, decisions are made individually. A woman's success in trade entails social capital and therefore social appreciation for her.<sup>26</sup> Because her reputation of generosity is measured through her social aura, she, as well as her lifestyle, will be accepted as long as she shows religious behaviour and success in her dealings. In this way, women have the chance to partly disengage from coercions of their society, but in turn to show a more active social and innovative behaviour. Membership in one of the religious groups brings solidarity and identity-related fixed-points. However, the group possesses the social control by which the traders are continuously subordinated. Because mobility is for them the key to success, they show an innovative behaviour to carry on with the values of the confraternity while at the same time easing its customs. Simultaneously, restaurants, hotels, cafés and habitations become social and business locations which are only known by insiders and thus excused from their original function. Both the public and the private spheres are mixed. In the hubs of Rome, Dubai, New York, and other metropolises, Senegalese traders can find security and channels linking them to middlemen. For them, these are places to retreat, i.e. hideouts where they can store their goods, but also where they have the chance to 'reconstruct their world' that they have carried around with their luggage.

Selling Chinese Shoes in Dakar



## Conclusion

These women are wholesalers and entrepreneurs.<sup>27</sup> Some of them diversify their business to micro-enterprises. Trade union organisations, besides confraternities and their religious values, offer some additional networks and are situated both in Africa and in the large trading towns (recently, a women's union in New York was established – 'le soleil'). They are responsible for financial and technical information and represent the interests of the traders both at home and abroad. Thereby, not only Senegalese traders benefit but so do traders from Togo, descendants of the famous 'Mama Benz', or from Nigeria. These latter traders are also well known to trade internationally and even compete against



Chinese trade, especially against the Chinese drapery trade.<sup>28</sup>

The traders find themselves caught between the economic system inherited from the domestic economy and the liberal interdependencies of the global economy. Due to their references and network that offer protection, the followers of the confraternities have the opportunity to travel. Thereby, they do not ask the question of integration or exclusion abroad. The religious system of the confraternities does not deny modernity to the protagonists, but creates equilibrium between the alien and the local. With their networks or groups, the women confront the others in the trading context. They use the local structures but do not take part in them. They preserve their own social and cultural order.<sup>29</sup> These traders are located between religiousness and sociableness, between global and local. Determined, they show their 'otherness' and are successful in that, which is a value within globalisation, as well as a subject matter for world history.

There have been no regular maritime connections between Casablanca and Dakar for a long time and it is often difficult to transport cargo in between them. If there is a demand, only the large freighters land for loading and unloading and the storage and freight facilities of the large international shippers are used. Nowadays, the traders do not attend their goods like in the days of caravans. The goods are autonomous. Thus, not only humans but also the goods are moving in the chain of interstations.

- 1 We find several approaches to the phenomenon of informal sectors, in Keith Hart, "Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 11, 1, 1973, pp. 61-89, and Kaete Maegher, *Identity Economics. Social Networks & the Informal Economy in Nigeria*, James Currey, London, 2010. We want to bear in mind: 'The key issue is not the boundary between the official and unofficial spheres, but the distinctive organizational dynamics and power relations that characterize non-formal forms of order', Maegher, *Identity Economics*, p.16.
- 2 "L'économie sociale et solidaire par exemple a toujours été à la fois celle du partage et de l'accumulation, du profit monétaire et des plus-values symboliques" (approximately: 'The social economy, for example has always been both the sharing and accumulation of monetary profit and symbolic capital gains'), Abdou Salam & Cheikh Gueye, "Derem ak ngerem – Le franc, la grâce et la reconnaissance. Les ressorts d'une économie sociale et solidaire en Afrique de l'Ouest 2005", p. 2. . [http://www4.uqo.ca/crdc-geris/richesses /prodscien/ESS\\_ Afr\\_Fall.PDF](http://www4.uqo.ca/crdc-geris/richesses /prodscien/ESS_ Afr_Fall.PDF) , accessed on 26 December 2011.
- 3 Abdou Salam Fall & Omar Saip Sy, "Les économies domestiques Ouest-Africaines dans un contexte de mondialisation, 2003, l'Observatoire en économie sociale et en développement régional", p. 7. <http://www4.uqo.ca/observer/EconSoc/Solidarite/Initiatives/domestique.pdf> accessed on 26.12.2011: also: Abdou Salam & Cheikh Gueye, "Derem ak ngerem – Le franc, la grâce et la reconnaissance. Les ressorts d'une économie sociale et solidaire en Afrique de l'Ouest 2005". [http://www4.uqo.ca/crdc-geris/richesses /prodscien/ESS\\_ Afr\\_Fall.PDF](http://www4.uqo.ca/crdc-geris/richesses /prodscien/ESS_ Afr_Fall.PDF) , accessed on December 2011.
- 4 62 Interviews that were conducted between 2002 and 2005 in Dakar, Saint-Louis, Nouakchott, Rabat, Casablanca and Fez (s. homepage on ZMO in Berlin: [http://www.zmo.de/forschung/projekte\\_2004\\_2005/translokalitaet.html](http://www.zmo.de/forschung/projekte_2004_2005/translokalitaet.html), accessed on December 2011.
- 5 Claude Meillassoux, *Femmes, greniers et capitaux*, Maspero, Paris, 1975.
- 6 Sophie Caratini, *L'éducation d'un képi noir, Mauritanie 1933-1935*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2003, p. 24.
- 7 Amadou Makhtar Samb, *Introduction à la Tariqah tidjaniyya, ou Voie spirituelle de Cheikh Ahmad Tidjani*, s.n., Dakar, 1994, p. 55; Triaud, Jean-Louis & Robinson, David, (Ed), *La Tijâniya. Une confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l'Afrique*, Karthala, Paris, 2000.
- 8 Samb, p. 59.
- 9 Jean Schmitz, "L'Islam en Afrique de l'Ouest: les méridiens et les parallèles", *Autrepart : Afrique Noire et monde arabe: Continuités et ruptures*, 16, Paris, 2000, p. 123.

- 10 Pierre Loti, "Au Maroc", in *Voyages (1872-1912)*, Paris, 1991 [1889], pp. 161-310.; Meyer, Franck, "Die Fasi. Ein Beitrag zu Eliten, Modernisierung und sozialem Wandel in der marokkanischen Gesellschaft", *Orient. Deutsche Zeitschrift für Politik und Wirtschaft des Orient*, 38,4, December 1997, pp. 693-717.
- 11 Triaud & Robinson, RomanLomeier, "Die islamischen Revolutionen in Westafrika", in Inge Grau, Christian Mährdel & Walter Schicho (Hrsg). *Afrika: Geschichte und Gesellschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Wien, 2000, pp. 53-74.
- 12 Laurence Marfaing, "Relations et échanges des commerçants sénégalais vers la Mauritanie et le Maroc au 20<sup>e</sup> siècle", in Marfaing, Laurence & Wippel, Steffen (sous la dir.), *Les Relations Transsahariennes dans un espace en constante mutation*, Karthala, Paris, 2004.
- 13 DAN E/2 136, Archives Nationales de Mauritanie : Bulletin de renseignements économiques, Agadir.
- 14 Pour remplir un container, une dizaine de commerçants s'associent – dans un container de 50 millions on a à peu près 8 ou 9 tonnes de marchandises – ils en font partir 1 tous les deux mois à peu près – A l'approche des fêtes (Korite et Tabaski) ce sont a peu près 5 containers qui partent dans le mois. Alors qu'à l'époque de Air Afrique c'était 10 à 15 tonnes qui partaient par semaine... (female trader, n° 67 (Casablanca 2005) int.).
- 15 Oumar Kane, "Les relations entre la communauté tidjane du Sénégal et la Zawiya de Fes", in: *Fes et l'Afrique, Relations économiques, culturelles et spirituelles*, Actes du colloque international organisé par l'Institut d'Etudes Africaines et la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines. Sais – Fès, Fès 20-30 octobre 1996. Publications de l'Institut des Etudes Africaines de Rabat, Série colloques et Séminaires, 3, pp. 13-28, p. 20.
- 16 About female traders' strategies in Casablanca, Laurence Marfaing, "Constructions spatiales et relationnelles dans un espace urbain : commerçantes sénégalaises à Casablanca", in : Boesen, Elisabeth & Marfaing, Laurence: *Les nouveaux urbains dans l'espace Sahara-Sahel. Un cosmopolitisme par le bas*, Paris, Karthala, 2007, 159-186.
- 17 Dahira was built in 1940 by the Tdjanes in order to receive travellers, most often traders. This system has become widespread. Today, there are dayiras in all the cities, where the confraternity is present. Although today not only religious discussion and ceremonies take place here but also business interactions.
- 18 From Senegal, peanuts, gummi arabicum and leather were imported. (Archives Nationales du Sénégal, Dakar: ANS, 8 Q 87 [19 (anciens fonds K): relations commerciales entre le Maroc et l'AOF 1925-1935.)
- 19 Fatou Sarr, "Emergence de l'entrepreneuriat féminin et le senjeux socio-économiques", in: L. Harding, Marfaing, Laurence & Mariam Sow (Ed.), *Les opérateurs économiques et l'Etat au Sénégal*, Lit-Verlag, Münster-Hamburg, 1998, pp. 51-72. Also Sarr, *L'entrepreneuriat féminin au Sénégal*, Paris, 1998.
- 20 Capital rotations make accumulation possible: On commence petit ; quand on a plus, on va plus loin ! (female trader, n° 9 (Dakar 2002) int). When Senegalese women say 'capital', they mean 'turnover.'
- 21 There were big waves following the drought of the 1970s and the SAPs 1979-1992.
- 22 Actuellement je remplis en gros 2 container/mois – le bénéfice frais de transport et de voyages + douane déduits (en gros jusqu'à 40% du prix de la marchandise): en gros 20 à 25 % à partir de l'investissement initial (female trader, n° 34, (Dakar 2003 int.). See also Sophie Bava, "Entre Touba et Marseille : le mouride migrant et la société locale", in Moumar Coumba Diop: *La société sénégalaise entre le local et le global*, Karthala, Paris, 2002, pp. 579-594, p. 582.
- 23 About Dubai, s. Marchal, Roland, Dubaï cité globale, CNRS-Editions, Paris, 2001.
- 24 Quand tu payes un billet 1 million [FCFA], il te faut 20 millions en poche pour le business – seules les grandes commerçantes peuvent se le permettre (female trader , n° 23, (Casablanca 2003) int.). Or as

said a Senegalese woman: Tu dois avoir au moins 3 ou 4 millions de FCFA; en moyenne les femmes ont 6 à 7 millions, même jusqu'à 100 millions de FCFA en Euros : « même 100 millions, ce n'est rien pour la marchandise ! elles portent tout en liquide sur elle (female trader, n° 34 (Dakar 2003) int.).

- 25 Jewels come from Europe, Milan or Anvers. But Dubai is the world market for jewellery in Senegal because one can buy small quantity for little money in Dubai (*Le Quotidien* –Dakar- 7.03.08): Senegalese traders pay ca. 2 milliards FCFA/a month in Dubai (more than 3 millions €).
- 26 Fall & Saip Sy, “Les économies domestiques”, p. 3.
- 27 The concept of entrepreneur contains the idea of production, social change, progress and innovation.
- 28 For example, in Benin, 88 % of shoes are imported from China of which only 29.4 % from Chinese traders. 89 % clothes are imported from China of which only 6.7 % from Chinese traders.
- 29 ‘Vernacular cosmopolitanism’, Mamadou Diouf, “The Senegalese Murid Trade Diaspora and the Making of a Vernacular Cosmopolitanism”, *Public Culture*, 12, 3, 2002, pp. 679-702, p. 702 or ‘locale cosmopolite’, Eva Evers Rosanders, “Cosmopolites et Locales: Femmes Sénégalaises en Voyage”, *Afrique & Histoire*, 2, 4, 2005, pp. 103- 122, p. 117, <http://www.cairn.info/revue-afrique-et-histoire-2005-2-page-103.htm>, accessed 26 December 2011.



# Under the Wings of Life, On the Arms of History: Feminine Leadership, Formation and Action in Social Movements

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# Under the Wings of Life, On the Arms of History: Feminine Leadership, Formation and Action in Social Movements

*This paper is based on memories of social movements led largely by women in the Railroad Suburbia of Salvador, Bahia in the last decades of the twentieth century. By focussing on the formation of the woman political subject in the interface of the public and the private, the authors write a new history of movements that is different from official records of events. The paper explores the gendered location of women leadership, their reading of the movement and the rupture points created in familial power relations*



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## Introduction

This article aims to reflect on the political formation and action of women in social movements for housing, education and access to improved public services in the Railroad Suburbia of Salvador, Bahia, in the last decades of the twentieth century. Our intention is to signal to some factors that shaped women as 'social leaders' specifically through the interaction between the private and the public spheres. We evoke the memories of some women activists about the limits and scope of a gendered location and its relation to class, formal education and religion, the conflicts in the domestic context and the articulation of the movement through a lens of *maternalism*<sup>1</sup>.



Map Showing Railroad Suburb

The paper analyses the interviews produced in the research on 'The Memory of the Social Movements from the *Railroad Suburbia of Salvador, Bahia, 1970-1980*', conducted between the years 2010-2011. To identify the nodes of the network studied here, we started from a set of references and contacts with these leaders, previously built through other academic research, projects of university extension and by social activism undertaken by us. Thereafter, utilising the methodological procedure of snowballing, we arrived at a set of thirty-four interviews, in which we sought to explore the plurality and breadth of social movements in the studied period.

Railroad Suburbia is an area stretching for 41.5 kms.<sup>2</sup>, inhabited by approximately three hundred thousand people on the shores of the Baía de Todos os Santos. This region begins at Baixa do Fiscal and includes neighbourhoods, such as, Lobato, Novos Alagados, São João do Cabrito, Plataforma, Alto da Terezinha, Rio Sena, Escada, Praia Grande, Periperi, Coutos until Paripe. Railroad Suburbia acquired its name from the railway line that skirts these places. Many of them were for a long time used as places of rest and recreation by people from elsewhere in the city.

A summer vacation destination for the middle classes of Salvador until the mid-twentieth century, the Suburb<sup>2</sup> started being occupied by migrants from different places from the *interior*<sup>3</sup> of the state, who came in search of employment. Regular employment could be found in housing projects promoted by the state and private sectors. But in areas not targeted by the real estate market such as wetlands, mangroves, marshes and hillsides, employment opportunities were irregular.

During the 1970s, the struggle for housing prompted the emergence of the important social movement of '*invasions*'<sup>4</sup> witnessing great popular participation. Decentralised and multifaceted, the movement later expanded and diversified, covering issues related to family, childhood and youth, gender relations, violence, access to public services, training for the labour market and racial discrimination. Importantly, women participated massively in the movement.

The history of social movements in the Railroad Suburbia of Salvador in this period is part of the prehistory of the so called new social movements<sup>10</sup> that spread widely in Brazil over the next decade. Although this phenomenon has been reasonably well studied, since then, research has tended to focus on the context of its emergence and dissemination, as well as on its macro-political implications.

In general, we can observe that the claims and the process of seeking access to social and symbolic



goods emerged in modern society as a phenomenon of great importance in the search for reformulations and social changes.<sup>6</sup> In the mid-1980s, new spaces for social participation started being created. Endorsed by the principle of democracy, these spaces within civil society were composed mainly by the popular and pluri-classist movements – women, black, ecological, indigenous, migrants, children, youth, elders, among others.<sup>7</sup>

During Railroad Suburbia's recent history analysed here, we observe the trend described above. In Suburbia, we see the presence of CEBs in the constitution of movements and their influence on the formation of leadership and on the practices of many of our interlocutors.

I attended much of the basic education movement and then the Catholic Agrarian Youth and with this process of the Dictatorship at the pre-coup and post-coup, I mean, I've participated as a teenager... I was already involved in Cachoeira,

says Antônia Garcia, ex-resident of Plataforma, when she begins her narrative about her struggle (as part of the social movement) for housing at the Railroad Suburbia in the 1970's. Her relations to the ideology and practice of popular action of the Catholic Church points to the important role of this institution in her political formation since the days she lived in the city of Cachoeira.

But the intention was much more the political process, and then I went and did a stage at Feira de Santana, and then the staff called me and I started to participate in the organisation process, that was required travelling a lot, to accompany the groups formed by the Catholic Action,

Antônia continues. She also signals to the fact that her connection to the church and its influence on her political subjectivity made her circulate through different spaces in the 'interior' of the state, and then brought her to the capital and to new fronts of struggle.

### **The Public Space as Extension of the Private: Peculiarities in 'Being a Woman' and 'Leadership'**

The existence of a separation between public and private domains and the defining of the latter as a special space of women's activity has produced critical reflections both within humanities and the social sciences. The dichotomy of the two spheres, public and private, serves only didactic purposes. In everyday life, both spheres are mixed.

From an analysis of the interviews, we observe that the positions of feminine leadership carry influences – sometimes subtle and sometimes direct – from the domain of care. This is reflected in how they think their action space and in the way they perceive themselves as leaders when they act in public spaces. This is manifested in the way they bring values of emotion, beauty and self esteem into movements. Public space and public action are not simply separate and objective categories. These are shaped by subjectivities of care as in the movement around children's education in the kindergarten or in the solidarity expressed towards local unemployed women who have no option but to seek jobs as maids in Pituba.

The discourse of maternalism also finds resonance with the leaders of the movement. Maternalism is a cultural construction, that is, the societies within their peculiar sociocultural aspects, organise and guide the social locations that will be assumed by men and women. This does not mean that these locations are natural. On the contrary, they are naturalised by men and women within particular power relations of gender.<sup>8</sup> Consider the following quote from Cecília:

Because women are always those who create children, isn't it? In most cases it is the wife... It is the woman who creates children... But the woman cannot do something bad, wrong, if she has a home, if she has schooling, if she has a job. If she has a job to earn her salary, she... for example, a structure, as I said, putting children in a nursery school and then go to work... She gets some money, she has a place to leave her son, to go to work. She has her own house, to live, she won't hurt anyone, she will only do good! (claps her hands and laughs).<sup>9</sup>

This reflection of a feminine 'biological potential' – the act of giving birth and to breastfeeding –

on the social action of women in social movements and in other spaces, is what we can call maternalism. The speech of Julieta (from AMPLA) demonstrates one form of maternal care:

We had already thought... Seeing the community situation, understand? The risk of life that it was... It is... The mothers working without conditions... I mean, what was their work? Washerwoman, working with seafood, handyman, you know? And the poor children, within home... And we had already thought of setting up an association with these three women, you know?<sup>10</sup>

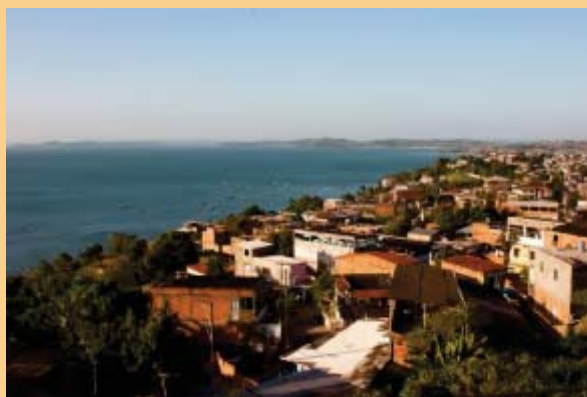
Despite holding a smaller share of power in the public space of our society, the possibility of keeping this space mobilises some women to organise and to struggle – sometimes without even realising it – to the continuity of their social location. They fight for what is socially costly to them and for what belongs to them: Their social location. Maternalism in the public sphere is succinctly captured in Mãe Vicélia's narrative:

Look, for me a leadership is that person that commands a group. So, I think that it's like being a mother or a father, right? That guides the children. I believe it's this, but if it really is or not, I don't know.<sup>11</sup>

Understood as a space of intimacy, protection and subjectivity, the domestic sphere has been socially marked as the domain of feminine care. Simultaneously, the public space is socially designed as the preferred space of masculine action. The rupture of this model is recent and strong vestiges of the separation of different social locations continue.

In the case of Suburbia, many of these women had to postpone the dream of studying in childhood, because even before finishing the first grades of school they were forced to leave and work at home and take care of their younger siblings. In adolescence, many were directed to domestic work out of home. They were married young, sometimes before reaching adulthood, and were forced to live a premature life as mothers, wives and housewives. Some of them even went through the experience of having to bury their own children that died of malnutrition and other diseases. The following narrative reflects these experiences.

When I started my family I was fifteen years old and I got pregnant, got married. I was pregnant with Carla. Already five months pregnant, I got married. Then I stopped studying. At that time, we were doing the old *primeiro ano básico* that is now called the first year of high school (...) I worked for a long time as a seamstress, I still work today, but I got back to school (...) I've done Pedagogy, you know? By UNOPAR, thank God! I am already a Pedagogue and education is an area that I really like. I've worked a lot with education, but communitarian education, right? Then, with the communitarian school, everything there, I've always liked, and always loved children<sup>12</sup>



Panoramic View of Neighborhoods Platform, Praia Grande and Paripe.

The construction and fixity of femininity limits women and makes it extremely difficult to rupture the expectations of femininity from them. No matter what they do, they are supposed to carry the identity of the feminine to all places, at all times. Vanity, being 'good-natured', exemplary behaviour as students, daughters, sisters, wives and mothers are elements that make up the universe of femininity. A displacement from this essentialist model sometimes generates disorders, in particular, with the closest partners, leading even to cases of domestic violence. This was the case of Dona Railda, commenting on

her difficult relationship with her partner, upon her participation in the *Movimento em Defesa dos Favelados*, or Movement in Defense of the Residents of Slums (MDF)<sup>13</sup>:

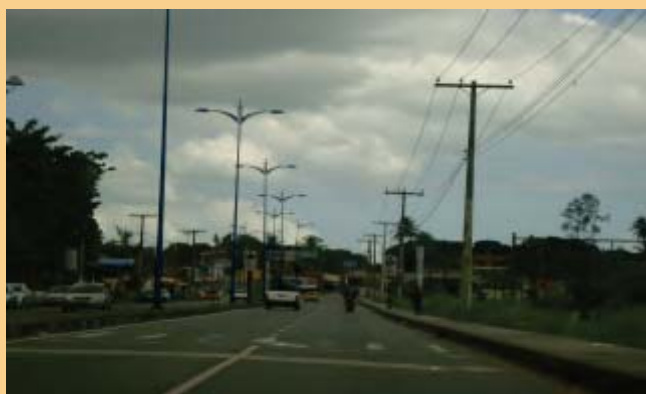
Two years later we went to Lobato, then we broke up. When I joined the residents' committee he would not accept. He thought that what we did was something useless. Then a disagreement started. He started going to the church and then decided to be baptised. Then he proposed me to marry him, and I said: 'Look, I'm not interested in marrying, but if you want, fine. But with a condition, I marry you, but I'm not going to the church.' Then he also imposed a condition, that we had to get married and I had to go to the church and stop going to the meetings, because I wouldn't earn anything with that. Then I said: 'Well, I do not want to marry and I'll keep going to the meetings, whether you want or not.' (...).<sup>14</sup>

As we see in Dona Railda's example, although most women are far from the political sphere, it is important to note that, while adhering to a public/political movement, women are put under new tensions either within family, at work or in other affective and neighbourhood relationships. Such situations also hold a possibility of breaking old power relations within the family. In Railda's narrative, we find an example of such a rupture:

When it was morning I said 'apois', today is you or me. It's you or me. Then we began to fight, he hit me, I was not easy, then I took a stick and gave him a bludgeon and then he went to the police station and filed a complaint against me; I made a complaint against him too. Then there was the audience and it was decided that we were going to share the shack, as the ground was from the state we could not sell it, just the material over the ground. It was something like, or I'd give him my part of it or he'd give his part to me.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, it is important to note that the presence of women within social movements do not necessarily transform them into feminists, but can transform their networks of relationships and power relations within the family and the community. In this sense, we understand that the presence of women within public spaces could bring about, even momentarily, a change in established power relations. The participation of women in these movements turns them from subjects of the private sphere into subjects of the public sphere, raising new questions and disputes regarding unequal, gendered social locations.

The internal dynamics of the social movements from Railroad Suburbia of Salvador has been always marked by women's intense 'anonymous' participation as recorded in the official history of social movements. But, these women have written their own stories, seeking to break with the socio-cultural and economic barriers imposed on them.



Suburban Street

### Paths Taken and Future Steps: Concluding Considerations

The plurality of social movements opened up a range of questions on political practice and ways of thinking and acting in society. This plurality is also present in the movements in the State of Bahia and is reflected in the daily life of Railroad Suburbia of Salvador. This paper, given its specific purpose, cannot cover all this plurality. In this sense, we confine ourselves to reflect on the formation and actions of women's leadership, something that has great relevance for the history of these social movements.



Our goal, therefore, was to signal some factors that have shaped these women as ‘social leaders’ in the transition between private and public spheres. To this end, we appropriate the memories of some of our interlocutors with emphasis on the way women produced themselves and were produced in the context of leadership. Along this narrative trajectory, we seek to highlight the limits and the scope of the feminine condition, articulated through dimensions of social class, race, gender, religion and formal education as well as conflicts within the domestic and neighbourhood relationships. These dimensions are often realised through solid social demands that move the disputes in Railroad Suburbia of Salvador.

Within these demands, the struggle for housing is at the core of the relationship between private and public. It has characterised social action for a long period, both in the city of Salvador and in Railroad Suburbia because this was one of the sites with the largest land reserves and was consolidated as an area of urban sprawl. In the studied period, the growing migration that occurred towards Salvador had generated a demand for housing in the capital of Bahia. This process generated in Suburbia a set of other needs such as recreational areas, educational spaces, child care, transportation, health and security services. Although these are social demands that inspired everyone who was involved in the struggles, it was observed that they crossed women’s trajectories in a different way by the social location of gender. This observation was reinforced by most of the voices of men and women who have granted interviews. This confirms the importance of research like this, that makes visible the subjects that are involved in the struggles but are often hidden by an excluding official history.

The results of this research reinforce, therefore, the importance of these social movements and the actuality of their goals within the communities that make up Railroad Suburbia. These movements have contributed in many ways to new struggles, creating new perspectives and strategies, within and outside the actions of ‘militancy.’<sup>16</sup>

The arguments posed here, even in a preliminary form, point to the need to deepen our understanding of the socio-cultural relations that promote micro-power<sup>17</sup> relations in the context of political action. Therefore, we reiterate the need for new research that take cognisance of the influence of the public-private relationship on social movements from peripheries and suburbia, especially pertaining to the experience and social practices of women within these movements. It is in this context that women will be making, unmaking and remaking their subjectivities in the exercise of everyday struggles, at home, in the neighborhood, and in other social spaces, be they institutional or not.

1 This notion of maternalism was used by authors such as Tania Swain, in Tânia Navarro Swain, “Meu corpo é um útero? Reflexões sobre a procriação e a maternidade”, in Cristina Stevens (org.), *Maternidade e Feminismo – Diálogos Interdisciplinares*, Editora Mulheres, Florianópolis, 2007, p. 201-246. Feminists such as Swain consider that motherhood is a social construction. Like sex, motherhood is defined and has varied according to the society and historical period. We think that the definition of maternalism helps us to understand the social construction of the subject woman tied to the obligation of ‘being a mother’ seen as synonymous with caregiver, around its biological potential to generate another being. It is in this sense that the definition of maternalism – or mothering – interests us in this article. For more information on maternalism, see Elsa M. Chaney, *Supermadre. La Mujer dentro de la política em América Latina*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1983.

2 A generic expression utilised by the city’s residents to refer to Railroad Suburbia of Salvador.

3 A generic classification utilised by the residents of Salvador to refer to other places within the state of Bahia, but outside the capital, even if they are coastal areas.

4 See Maria Raquel Mattoso Mattedi, “As invasões em Salvador: uma alternativa habitacional”, Dissertação de Mestrado, Universidade Federal da Bahia, 1979; Milton Moura, “Organizações populares, cultura e habitação em Salvador” in Ângela Gordilho-Souza (org.), *Habitar contemporâneo, novas questões no Brasil dos Anos 90*, Faufba, Salvador, 1997; and Milton Moura, “Notas sobre o verbo invadir no contexto social de Salvador”, *Cadernos do CEAS*, 125, 1990. See specifically, sections on women’s participation in popular movements in Salvador, Antônia Garcia, *As*

*Mulheres da cidade d'Oxum: relações de gênero, raça e classe e organização do movimento de bairro em Salvador*, Edufba, Salvador, 2006; and Cláudia Pacheco & Célia Santos, “Rompiendo las amarras: el movimiento de mujeres em la periferia de Salvador”, *Cadernos África-América Latina*, Madrid, 1992.

- 5 The new social movements, different from those which were informed by the theoretical and scientific schools of European-Marxist thought, are of a ‘metapolitical’ order, that is, ‘more guided by values than by negotiable demands.’ See Ana Maria Doimo, *A vez e a voz do popular: movimentos sociais e participação política no Brasil pós-70*, Relume-Dumará/ANPOCS, Rio de Janeiro, 1995, p. 352.
- 6 These movements demanded access to collective consumption of goods, whether in education, health or housing, and intangible entities such as identity, values or culture. In Brazil the social movements will have different moments in their constitutions and practices. See Cristiane Souza & Lidice A. A. Paraguassu, “Entre os de dentro e os de fora, um empreendimento turístico: formas de organização e participação sociais no Litoral Norte da Bahia” in SUPERINTENDÊNCIA DE ESTUDOS ECONÔMICOS E SOCIAIS DA BAHIA, *Turismo e desenvolvimento na Área de Proteção Ambiental Litoral Norte – Bahia*, SEI, Salvador, 2009, pp. 251-267. (Série estudos e pesquisas, 82).
- 7 Maria da Glória Gohn, “Cidadania. Campinas/SP”, *Revista Textos*, 1, maio, 1994.
- 8 See Ediane Lopes de Santana, “Em nome da família, da moral e da propriedade: Amém! As mulheres baianas na organização da Marcha da Família em Salvador (1962-1964)”, Dissertação de Mestrado, UFBa, Salvador, 2009.
- 9 Interview with Cecília, Salvador, 8 October 2010.
- 10 Interview with Juliet, Salvador, 22 October 2010.
- 11 Interview with Mãe Vicélia, Salvador, 20 September 2010.
- 12 Interview with Olganita, Salvador, 25 February 2011.
- 13 The Movimento em Defesa dos Favelados was an important movement to confront the military regime and contributed to the democratisation process of Brazil in the late 1970s and 1980s, which signalled a set of social demands that helped to form the 1988 Constitution. In Salvador the MDF was quite active and marked the history of many other popular movements and the trajectory of the participants of these movements.
- 14 Interview with Railda, Salvador, 10 November 2010.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 For example, the Movimento dos Sem Teto da Bahia, or the Homeless Movement of Bahia.
- 17 Here we refer to the contributions of Michel Foucault, *Microfísica do poder*, Graal, Rio de Janeiro, 1979, about the importance of the practical exercise of power. Specially in the case of the gender relations within domestic relationships, see Maria Lúcia Rocha-Coutinho, *Tecendo por trás dos panos: a mulher brasileira nas relações familiares*, Rocco, Rio de Janeiro, 1994.



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Women Health Workers and the  
Politics of Development in Yemen  
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Marina de Regt





# 'The Days of the Project are Over': Women Health Workers and the Politics of Development in Yemen

*This paper traces the dynamic journey of a health sector intervention from the stage of an independent donor funded project to the stage of being integrated with the Government Health Ministry in Yemen. The interpretations, status and outcomes of this health initiative change with changing politics, policy and administration. The paper shows the widening gap between a linear donor driven development logic and the specific local realities that harbour completely different aspirations and perspectives situated within particular political regimes. The central characters of this health initiative are women health workers recruited from local squatter colonies. With changes in the stages of the journey, the lives, roles and status of these workers undergo major transformations not only in terms of what they receive but also what they can give. The paper argues that although 'sustainability' and 'ownership' were prime motivations in ex ante integration with the Ministry, corruption and nepotism became the prime movers in ex post integration. In the process, community participation suffered and women health workers were dislodged from their positions of importance and responsibility.*



Marina de Regt

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## Introduction

Yemen is a country that speaks to the imagination. Scattered villages on high mountain peaks, men with daggers chewing *qat*<sup>1</sup> and heavily veiled women are very common images of this country situated on the south-western edge of the Arabian Peninsula. These images often go hand in hand with statements that Yemen can be compared to a medieval country, isolated from the rest of the world until it started to 'develop' after the revolution of 1962. Whereas very few people outside Yemen have in-depth knowledge of the country, foreign media attention has increased since 9/11. Yemen would be a safe haven for Al-Qaida; a number of bombings, attacks and kidnappings enhanced that image. President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was in power since 1978, supported the US in its 'War on Terror'. Strategically positioned on the Arabian Peninsula, the country has been a 'donor darling' for decades. Western development organizations have invested in numerous projects in the field of infrastructure, education, health care, water and sanitation, garbage disposal, small scale enterprises and democracy, but recently also in anti-terrorism programmes such as the training of security and police forces.

Despite the large scale development aid that Yemen has been receiving since the early 1970s, a large part of the population lives below the poverty line; illiteracy rates, in particular among women, in rural areas, are very high; infant and child mortality rates are some of the highest in the world; and there is a high level of unemployment, especially among youth. In February 2011, countrywide protests against the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh started, inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. Widespread corruption, mismanagement, and inflation have led to increasing frustration and despair among the Yemeni population. Women play a large role in the protest movement as they have not benefited from forty years of so-called development. On 7 October 2011 Tawakkul Karman, founder of the non-governmental organization Women Journalists without Chains and spokeswoman of the Yemeni Revolution, even received the Nobel Peace Prize for the peaceful way in which she tries to bring about change in Yemen.



The Logo of the  
Hodeidah Urban Primary Health Care Project

In this paper I would like to analyse the failure of 'development' in Yemen by focussing on an urban primary health care project which was established with Dutch donor aid in the 1980s in the city of Hodeidah on the Red Sea coast. This project was seen as one of the most successful development projects in Yemen and functioned as an example of Yemeni health care policies. Yet, in the years after the ending of Dutch aid, the women who were trained and employed in the project expressed their frustration about increased bureaucracy, mismanagement and corruption. In their eyes, the primary health care system that was established during the project period was gradually breaking down, and they blamed the corruptive practices of male Yemeni health administrators. 'The days of the project are over' was an expression I heard often during my visits to Hodeidah after the end of Dutch funding in 1999. Between 1993 – 1998, I had worked as an anthropologist on the project, mainly responsible for applied research and community participation. My contacts with Yemeni women, and in particular with my colleagues in the project, inspired me to return to the Netherlands to write my dissertation. This paper is based on my Ph.D. research on women health workers and the politics of development in Yemen.<sup>2</sup>

## The Project

The Hodeidah Urban Primary Health Care Project (HUPHC) started as a small project in a health centre in one of the squatter areas of Hodeidah in 1984. The project was a bilateral project between the Dutch Government and the Yemeni Ministry of Public Health. The project aimed at improving the health care situation in the squatter areas and in particular of women. The main activity was the provision of primary health care services with a special focus on mother and child health care. Young women were trained as primary health care workers (*murshidaat*) and employed in the health centres. A primary health care system was developed with core activities such as the weighing and vaccination of children, pre and post-natal care, the provision of family planning methods, and health education. Simple curative services were available for the treatment of minor common diseases. An important part of the work of the *murshidaat* consisted of home visits for advising and educating mothers at home. A health information system was designed for the follow-up of families at particular risk, such as malnourished children and young mothers. In order to improve the position of women in the squatter areas, literacy and sewing classes were set up in the health centres.



One of the Health Centers in Hodeidah

In 1989 a second health centre in another squatter area became part of the project. In an impact study done in 1990, the achievements of the project were evaluated very positively: eighty to ninety per cent of the mother and child health care needs in the two areas were covered by the project and the two health centres were visited by many people from other areas. In view of these positive results and the dramatically increased health needs as a result of the sudden influx of thousands of returnees from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States during the Gulf crisis in 1990<sup>3</sup>, it was decided to extend the project activities to all governmental health centres in Hodeidah. The project became an integrated part of the Hodeidah Health Office, the governmental office of the Ministry of Public Health. In the second phase of the project (1993-2000), improving curative services in the health centres and establishing a cost-recovery and community participation system received a lot of attention. Since the Yemeni Ministry of Public Health did not have sufficient funds to continue the project activities after donor support would have come to a halt, a cost-recovery system was introduced in the form of fees-for-services. Local health committees, consisting of five community members, became responsible for the management of the cost-recovery money. An essential drug programme was established that guaranteed the availability of essential drugs for minor diseases. In the second period, the project's achievements were recognized by the Yemeni Ministry of Public Health and the project management obtained an important role in advising the Ministry on the formulation of national health care policies. In 1999 Dutch funding came to an end and the management of the Hodeidah Health Office became technically and financially responsible for the provision of urban primary health care services.

## From Project to Programme

The first project period (1984-1993) was a clear example of the 'project approach' that dominated Dutch development aid in the 1980s. Development projects were established in cooperation with national



ministries but the implementation of these projects was in most cases done in a very independent way. The Hodeidah Urban Primary Health Care Project functioned as a separate entity: Although the project activities were in line with Yemeni policies on the provision of health care, there was little contact with Yemeni health administrators working in the Governmental Health Office. The project was popularly called 'the Dutch project', and seen as a separate project functioning independent of the Yemeni Ministry of Public Health. Yet, the Yemenis working in the project were employees of the Yemeni Ministry of Public Health, and the Dutch-Yemeni management had to reconcile the project activities with government rules and regulations. One of the consequences of this project approach was that the notions of development of the Dutch donor prevailed, whereas local notions of development, of the national authorities or of local health workers, were of less importance or even neglected. Examples of these 'donor' notions of development are the emphasis on preventive instead of curative care and the emphasis on equity, which manifested itself in a focus on poor squatter areas. These notions ensued from the primary health care approach as developed in Alma-Ata in 1978, with its basic principles of equity, prevention, community involvement, appropriate technology and an intersectoral approach. Yet the meaning of these concepts was based on Western interpretations and often not congruent with local notions. In Yemen, for example, curative care was much higher valued than preventive care, and highly advanced medical care instead of appropriate technology was people's first priority.



A Murshidah at Work

A similar issue was at stake with the growing attention paid to gender issues in international development discourses. Whereas the project was first and foremost designed as a health care project and not as a women's project, training and employing women from the squatter areas as *murshidaat* was seen as a way to bring about change, in the lives of the squatters as well as in the lives of the women trained as *murshidaat* themselves. Paid labour was seen as beneficial for Yemeni women's emancipation. In the project, the *murshidaat* were put on a pedestal. They were seen as the first professional health care workers with strong community links and therefore able to bring about change. But in the eyes of (male) Yemeni health administrators, who were mainly medical doctors and pharmacists, *murshidaat* were only a temporary solution: As soon as the educational level of women would be higher, nurses and midwives were to be trained instead of *murshidaat*. Moreover, they looked down on the *murshidaat* because they came from the lower social classes.

A strict procedure was developed to guarantee that the right women were selected to become *murshidaat*: They had to have finished primary school, they had to show commitment to working in health care, and they had to come from poor families in need of an income. The *murshidaat* received important incentives, such as the provision of transport to and from their houses, uniforms, a special bonus for Ramadan, a heat allowance for doing home visits in the hot summer months, overtime for working afternoons, English language courses and trips to other projects. Moreover, they gained an important voice in the project and were consulted about project affairs. Regular meetings took place between the project team and the *murshidaat* and their opinions were highly valued. Many people outside the project envied the *murshidaat* because of their high status in the project and the incentives they received. The 'Dutch project' was seen as a symbol of wealth and modernity, with its four-wheel-drive cars, its well-organised office and well-provided health centres.

In the early 1990s, Dutch development aid changed from a 'project approach' to a 'programme approach'. Instead of supporting isolated development projects, development aid was now given in the form of technical and financial support to government programmes. The reason for this shift was that it had become increasingly clear that many development projects could not sustain themselves after foreign funding had come to an end. The main aim was to improve the sustainability of development activities by integrating them in national policies and programmes. In August 1993 the project in Hodeidah became a programme and a second period in the project's history started. The urban primary health care approach developed in the two pilot health centres was extended to all thirteen governmental health centres in the city. In order to make clear that the project had been integrated in the Health Office, and to give the Health Office a sense of 'ownership' over the activities, the designation 'the Dutch project' was replaced by the name 'the urban programme'.

### The Consequences for Women Health Workers



Going on Home Visits

For the *murshidaat* working in the health centres, the integration in the Health Office had several consequences. First of all, they were distributed over all the health centres in the city and even appointed as heads of these health centres. On the one hand their status increased due to their management responsibilities; on the other hand it meant that their contacts with men increased. For many *murshidaat* it was a new experience to deal with men in a formal setting outside the family. Some of the men had little respect for the low educated women working in the health centres. Moreover, very few of them knew what primary health care was. They often valued curative activities higher than preventive health care, and saw the *murshidaat* as the lowest level of health personnel.

A second consequence of the integration in the Health Office was that the (financial) advantages the *murshidaat* had had in the project diminished. In view of 'sustainability', it was decided to stop these financial benefits because the Ministry of Health would not be able to continue to pay these benefits after donor support would have come to an end.

A third consequence was that the selection procedure of *murshidaat* changed. While in previous courses, young women living in the area came to the health centre to register for a training course, or were approached by the heads of clinics and the *murshidaat*, now young women from all over town came to the Health Office to have their names registered. The Mother and Child Health department was responsible for all training courses for *murshidaat* in urban and rural Hodeidah. Having the right contacts in the Health Office became increasingly important to become registered for a course and having a *wasta* (an intermediary)<sup>4</sup> became one of the main ways in which young women could enter a training course. Since the outbreak of the Gulf crisis in 1990 and the subsequent social, economic and political problems, corruption and nepotism flourished in Yemen.<sup>5</sup> Due to the bad economic situation every opportunity to earn money was being used, and the *wasta* system entered almost every part of society. Young women were continuously approaching the administrators in the Health Office to get access to a training course, and those coming from richer families or having the right contacts were able to enter training courses while those without money or lacking contacts failed.

## From Programme to Sector

Although the project had become an integrated part of the Health Office, it continued to be regarded as a foreign project with a lot of money and the differences with other departments in the Health Office remained big. The building of a separate wing to the Health Office for the programme in 1996, completely furnished with desks, chairs, carpet and curtains, and equipped with photocopy machines and computers accentuated these differences. Health Office employees often envied the people working for the Urban Primary Health Care Programme, and requested money when they were asked to cooperate with the programme. The shift of a project approach to a programme approach was, in the eyes of the project management, a way to integrate the project activities in the Yemeni public health sector and in doing so achieve sustainability. Yet, in the eyes of Yemeni health administrators, integration meant sharing in the assets of the project.

In the meantime the programme had become an example for the formulation of national health care policies in Yemen. In order to reorganise the public health sector following recommendations of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, health sector reform (HSR) policies were introduced. Health sector reform programmes have been developed in many developing countries, and are often put forward as ways to bring about fundamental changes in the health sector and make it equitable, efficient and effective.<sup>6</sup> The main elements of the health sector reform strategies in Yemen are decentralisation, a redefinition of the role of the public sector, a district health system approach, community participation and cost-recovery, an essential drug policy, intersectoral collaboration and a sector-wide approach to donor funding and programming, with a stronger role for the Ministry of Public Health in coordinating donor assistance.



A Meeting of Heads of Clinics

These last elements are in line with the so-called sector wide approach, which gained importance among donor organisations in the late 1990s. The basic idea of the sector wide approach is that foreign donor organizations financially support governments of developing countries with activities aimed at public sector reform and leave the technical implementation of these activities to the national Government. The aim of the sector wide approach is to increase the level of 'ownership' and to decrease the power of donor organisations in order to guarantee sustainability of development activities. The sector wide approach was formulated by the World Bank and adopted by many donor countries. The Dutch Government also shifted its approach from a programme approach to a sector-wide approach. In addition, 'good governance' became one of the criteria on which aid-receiving countries were selected. Yemen was selected as one of the nineteen target countries, although heated debates followed about how good its governance was.

In September 1999 Dutch funding to urban primary health care activities in Hodeidah came to a halt. A primary health care system had been established in the thirteen health centres of the city, more than 120 *murshidaat* had been trained and were employed in the health centres, a cost-recovery and community participation system had been set up and Health Office staff had been trained in managing the activities. It was now the task of the health staff of the Yemeni Ministry of Public Health to maintain the activities and implement the Health Sector Reform strategies.

## Political Changes

‘The days of the project are over’ my former colleagues said to me, emphasising that much had changed since 1999. Although the *murshidaat* were still in function, and were able to carry out their basic work consisting of weighing and vaccinating children and offering pre- and postnatal care to women, they lacked the means and support to sustain the other activities. The health information system was not functioning anymore because the Ministry of Public Health did not supply the required cards. There was no transport to carry out home visits because the cars assigned to the health centres were now being used by (male) health administrators. There were no essential drugs to hand out to poor people in the squatter areas because of changes in the revolving drug fund. Further, the role of the *murshidaat* as providers of basic health care was undermined due to a breakdown of the referral system in the health centre.

In addition, subtle ways of corruption were introduced. Female health workers, who for example, earned an additional income as teachers or trainers, had to hand over a percentage of their salary to administrators in the Health Office. The bureaucratic level increased dramatically and every person involved in this bureaucracy developed his own ways of earning an additional income on top of his government salary. Moreover, the cost-recovery system and the revolving drug fund were easy targets for those interested in increasing their income. The local health committees, which had been in charge of managing the health centre’s income and functioned independent from the Health Office, lost their decision making power. The health administrators were interested in the large amounts of money that entered the health centres. Whereas local community members used to have a say in the management of the health centre’s income, now, community participation was reduced to the community participating in paying money for health care services. New people replaced the health administrators who had been in charge of the revolving drug fund during the project, and the *murshidaat* lost grip on the financial management of the drugs.

One of the main reasons for the increased bureaucracy, mismanagement and corruption was the fact that political changes at the level of the Hodeidah Health Office had led to the replacement of health administrators with experience in urban primary health care activities. Soon after Dutch funding stopped, the director of the Health Office was replaced and the newly appointed director decided to change almost all department heads, as the previous ones, according to him, were too closely linked to the previous director. Nepotism is a general feature in Yemeni politics: Political changes often lead to the replacement of all the people associated with the person replaced. Administrators of different backgrounds and consequently with different notions of health care development replaced those who had been closely involved in the project. The previous department heads, all of them male, found other positions outside the Health Office. The only two women who had occupied responsible positions during the project period, continued to work in the same departments. They were already in function when the previous director had come to power and were therefore not seen as part of his ‘clan’.

The new health administrators regarded the end of Dutch funding as the end of the project, and therefore as the end of the system that was established during the project. Instead of maintaining the established system they found it more important to establish something new. Whereas Western donor organisations promote a linear view of development, in which an accumulation of knowledge is seen as leading to higher stages of development, a circular view of development prevailed among Yemeni health administrators. New systems, structures and persons replaced the old ones, but not necessarily building on previous experiences. The aim was to establish something that is new, and in the eyes of those who introduced it, it was also better. According to many women health workers, the main motivation to replace previous systems and persons was inspired by self-interest: The idea was that a certain group of people had technically and financially benefited from the Dutch project. The new health administrators in the Health Office accused the previous staff of the project of ‘licking honey for years’, and openly said that it was now their turn to benefit. Development, in the eyes of the new health administrators, was not an end in itself, but the means to accumulate wealth. The poor economic situation in Yemen and the dependence on foreign aid have resulted in serious competition over scarce resources, and therefore over development projects



In addition, whereas gender equity had been an important goal of the Hodeidah Urban Primary Health Care Project, gender inequality increased after the end of Dutch funding. The women working in the Health Office and in the health centres complained that they did not receive any support from the new management. They had the feeling that their work of preventive services at community level, was not valued anymore and that they were punished for having been part of the project. The two women who had been closely involved in the project and who had long-standing knowledge and experience in primary health care services, lacked the means to carry out their responsibilities and were sitting empty-handed behind their desks. They did not have a budget to carry out their work and the project cars were now used by the new management team.

Summing up, the sustainability of the activities established during the Hodeidah Urban Primary Health Care Project was limited and there was little sense of 'ownership' of the project activities amongst the new health administrators. This was understandable because most of them had not shared the history of the project and only became involved in primary health care after the end of Dutch funding. Many of them did not know what primary health care was because they had been working in hospitals before. In addition, many of the new health administrators were more interested in the assets of the project than in the project activities. Decentralisation, transparency and good governance, the celebrated terms of development aid in the late 1990s, were basic elements of Yemeni health sector reform policies but the way in which these terms were interpreted at the local level of Hodeidah differed from the interpretations of the Dutch donor.

## Conclusion

Whereas the project's main goal was to improve the health care situation in the squatter areas via a primary health care system and the training of women health workers, the side effects of the project were equally important. The presence of the Hodeidah Urban Primary Health Care Project may have worked towards more equity in the provision of health care services, but also contributed to increasing power differentials among people working in the public health sector. The presence of a foreign financed project with its budget for transport, furniture, materials and equipment, training and topping up of salaries, contrasted sharply with the poorly equipped Health Office where people hardly had a chair to sit on, let alone have a budget and transport to carry out their job. These inequities coupled with the already existing system gave rise to corruptive practices. Many male government officials in Yemen are interested in the technological and material aspects of foreign funded development projects but they do not want to change administrative structures as reflected in concepts such as 'transparency', 'good governance' and 'equity'. Although they subscribe to these concepts in official development discourse, they interpret them in their own ways when it comes to implementation. What inspires rejection of Western morality is not an adherence to religious or traditional values but rather the benefits they derive 'feudal administrative system' in which having the right political connections guarantees access to the cash economy.

The few individuals who do not share these views are within a short period of time replaced. Political changes at the Government level in Yemen often mean that people at other levels in the ministry are also replaced, and not everybody is in favour of reform. For some people, it may be more beneficial to keep existing structures in place. One of the basic elements of health sector reform is decentralisation, which implies handing over responsibilities to lower levels of the organisations. The aim of decentralisation is to improve efficiency, management and responsiveness of governmental health services. Yet, decentralisation may also lead to more inefficiency and inequity. The management capacity at lower levels of the health establishment in Yemen is weak, and the majority of the current health personnel are curative rather than community oriented. Moreover, health sector reform implies a redistribution of power and is therefore threatening for those who are benefitting under the old system. This is particularly so for health administrators who have private interests in health care.

While the experiences in the Hodeidah Urban Primary Health Care Project became an inspiration for health care innovations at the national level, the situation in the governmental health sector in Hodeidah after the end of Dutch funding shows that the attitudes of the different actors involved at the local level often work against reform. While women health workers had achieved a high status in the

project, and benefitted from their favourable position in many different ways, the end of the project meant that they were put back in a subordinate position where both the spaces of benefits and contribution were constrained.

### Postscript

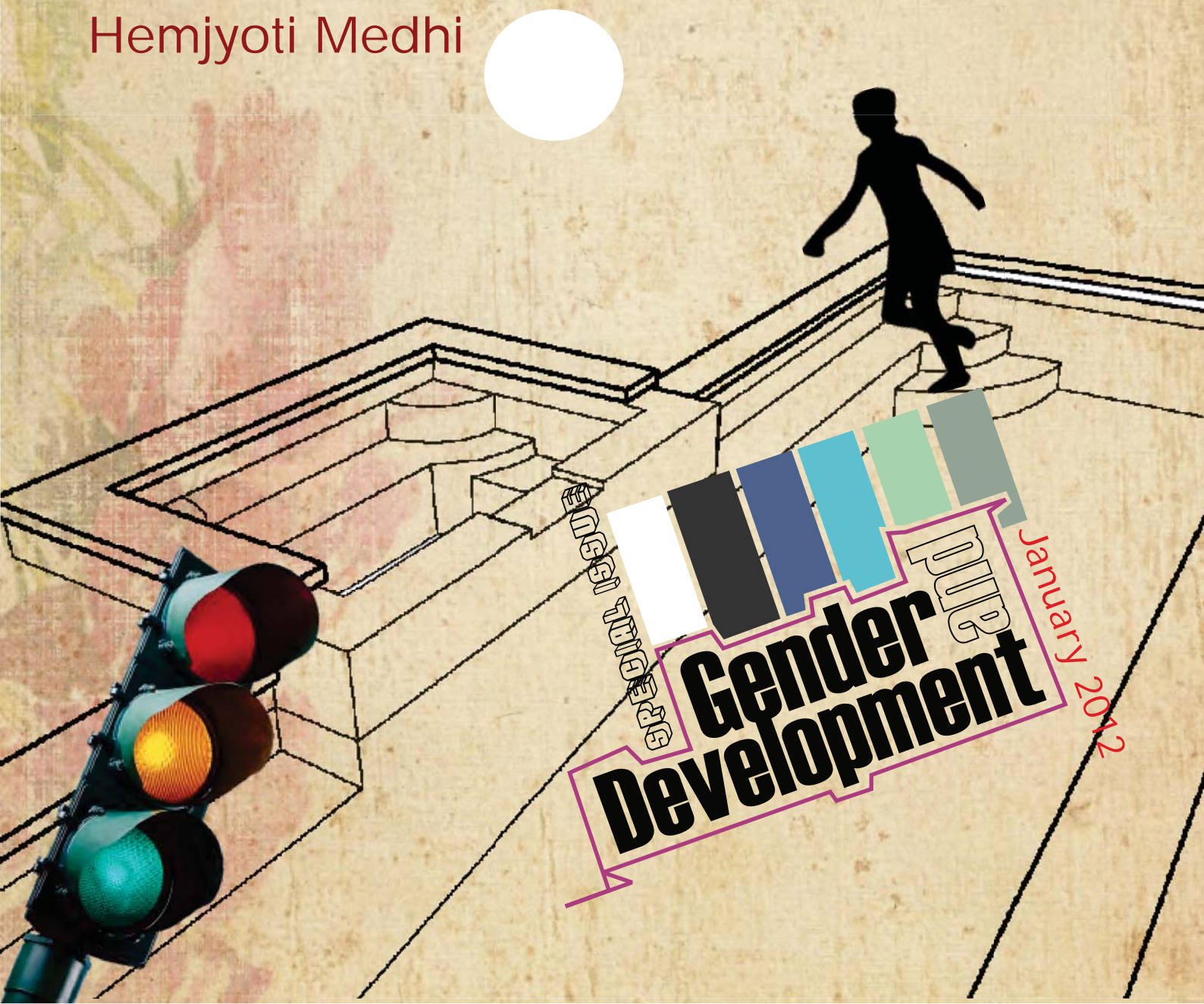
In November 2011, President Ali Abdullah Saleh signed an agreement in which he agreed to step down in exchange for immunity. The Yemeni protest movement continued its demonstrations because it would like to see Saleh trialled. For the protesters, Saleh is the main person responsible for the killing of hundreds of citizens in the past year and for the numerous people that have been killed and displaced as a result of military attacks in various parts of the country in the past ten years. In addition, they blame him for more than three decades of poverty, underdevelopment, corruption and mismanagement. On Sunday 22 January 2012, Saleh left Yemen for the US. He is replaced by the vice-president, and a new government, including opposition members, has been installed. On 21 February, elections will take place.

- 1 Qat is a shrub whose leaves have a mildly stimulant effect when chewed. A large part of the Yemeni adult population, in particular men, chews qat in the afternoon, alone or with others.
- 2 Marina de Regt, *Pioneers or Pawns? Women Health Workers and the Politics of Development in Yemen*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 2007.
- 3 When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990 the government of Yemen made a plea for an Arab solution of the Gulf crisis and against military attacks on Iraq, with the result that the governments of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States changed their residence rights for Yemeni migrants and almost 800,000 Yemeni migrants were forced to return home.
- 4 See for more information Robert B. Cunningham and Yasin K. Sarayrah, *Wasta: The Hidden Force in Middle Eastern Society*, Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 1993.
- 5 Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 183-214.
- 6 A. Cassels, "Health Sector Reform: Key Issues in Less Developed Countries", *Journal of International Development*, 7, 3, pp. 329-347, 1995.



# 'The Making of an Archive: Memory, Movement and the Mahila Samiti in Assam, India'

Hemjyoti Medhi





# The Making of an Archive: 'Memory, Movement and the Mahila Samiti in Assam, India'

*This paper addresses some of the contingencies of archiving and recording testimonials and retrieving history from print and individual memory as experienced during a project titled 'Memory, Movement and the Mahila Samiti in Assam, India', funded by the 'Preserving Social Memory' Grant (2009-2011) of the SEPHIS Programme of IISH, the Netherlands and supported by Tezpur University, India. The anti-colonial struggle that informed women's entry into the public through mahila samitis in the early decades of the twentieth century in Assam generated a consciousness of a gendered subjectivity. We argue in this paper that this desire and praxis of belonging to a collective is not sustained successfully in recent years. One of the ways of engaging with this change is to connect women's withdrawal from a more socially conscientious role to a growing consumer culture that has gripped the larger socio-political landscape.*



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The project 'Memory, Movement and the Mahila Samiti in Assam, India' (2009- 2011) began with an objective to record memory, history and sentiments of the hundred year old Mahila Samiti institution by digitising archival documents and conducting audio visual recording at three samitis spread across the state of Assam: Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (hereafter APMS) at Guwahati, Dibrugarh District Mahila Samiti (hereafter DDMS) at Dibrugarh and Tezpur District Mahila Samiti (hereafter TDMS) at Tezpur. Mahila samitis or women's associations were formed as local associations in urban centers of Assam in the first two decades of the twentieth century (Dibrugarh 1907, Nagaon 1917, Tezpur 1919).<sup>1</sup> This mobilisation attained a momentum with the establishment of Assam Mahila Samiti (hereafter AMS) in 1926 under the patronage of Assam Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Society) and its growing association with the Indian nationalist movement in the 1930s and 1940s. In the current organisational hierarchy, the APMS is at the helm of affairs at the provincial level followed by 25 district mahila samitis and more than a thousand primary samitis at the village/local level. Our project has digitally scanned fragile handwritten minutes of meetings and proceedings, books and documents such as cash registers, audit reports, photographs at three selected samitis. The earliest document scanned and digitally preserved is the minutes of a meeting of Tezpur Asamiya Mahila Samiti on 15 January 1928. There is also an audio-visual archive of interviews/conversations with past and current members, office bearers of mahila samitis and people who have had a sustained engagement with questions of equity and justice for women in Assam.



**Bina Hazarika (sitting) with the  
Project Coordinator, DDMS Office, June 2010**

The only available historical overview of the movement is a slim text Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti Itibritta (History of the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti), 1961, written by the founding secretary, Chandrabhabha Saikiani (1901-1972). Thus, documentation of the larger historical process has remained uncharted. This paper will address some of the dilemmas and challenges of the field researcher in recovering histories of the movement through print and women's memory. I will specifically address, among other issues, a crucial point about re-reading traditional performance of womanhood such as performing domestic roles and upholding nationhood to reassess women's participation in a new emerging public. One of the sustained criticisms of the mahila samiti has been that it is an organisation run purely by middle class women retaining every ideological baggage of that class and reinforcing them.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the popular imagination about the samiti nowadays is to see it at best as irrelevant. But its origins in the anti-colonial nationalist movement in the 1920s and 1930s Assam seemed to have had a wider public support and significance.

This project seeks to address a crucial gap in developing an archive of material about the mahila samiti both for future academic research as well as to enrich research pursuits such as this, through an engagement with the activism of various samitis in recent times. Many documents including personal letters and periodicals have been permanently lost. My preliminary research on the Assam Mahila Samiti has unearthed historically valuable finds, such as lists of the members of Assam Mahila Samiti during the late 1920s that comprised women belonging to a cross-section of caste, class, ethnic and communal background.<sup>3</sup> Through this process of retrieval (whether from print or memory) and documenting, we hope to offer a historical understanding of the movement. At this stage there is also a need to address and understand the crucial disjunctions and shifts that mahila samitis experienced in the past.

Mahila samitis moved from an initial phase of being local issue specific associations to a mass based mobilisation forum for women during the Indian national movement with the stated objective of ‘overall development of education, health and so on of the Assamese woman’.<sup>4</sup> They were pushing for a greater role and participation of women in the public that the nationalist movement was unwilling to share very easily. Mapping this convergence of the local, the regional and the national would enable us to rethink our own conceptualisation of these categories and contextualise women’s claim to equity and its implications for the new Indian nation state post-1947.

But before we go ahead here is a qualifier. As older women re-organise their memory for audio-visual recording for a project that had ‘recovering [mahila samiti’s] contestations ....with the state’ as one of the stated agendas, the imminent danger of radical re-imagining is acute.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, except one interview (Meenakshi Bhuyan, TDMS) there is often a disjunction in women’s received understanding/remembering of the mahila samiti’s work in the past and what other sources like print and archival documents reveal. And often that loss of memory reinforces a complacent reading of the past. What does it mean to forget/silence subversive and controversial moments in the history of the movement? As against the reluctant and limited disavowal of patriarchy in general in the present, the mahila samiti’s history retrieved in print and in unpublished minutes of meetings relates several moments of subversive activism. These moments problematise the connection between memory and history and raise crucial questions about situating the archive and the stories that these sources reveal. We shall have to guard against accepting any of these events/utterances recovered in print and minutes of meetings (written sources) as unproblematised facts of radical activism and acknowledge that these are products of the very structures that they seek to critique. However this caution should no way undermine the activism of the individual woman who transgressed contemporary norms of gendered subjectivity. The mahila samiti’s attempt to ‘implement’ the Sarda Act by serving a legal notice to a groom in 1934 or a proposal for ‘fixed meal times’ to facilitate women’s leisure in 1948 are moments worth investigating. The examples cited here may not be representative but they are definitely symptomatic of a movement that is struggling to engage with questions of rights, justice and women’s space in the polity.



**Presidential Address of  
Ratnakumari Rajkhowani, AMS Second Annual Conference,  
Jorhat, 1929.**

### Lost Memory of Resistance

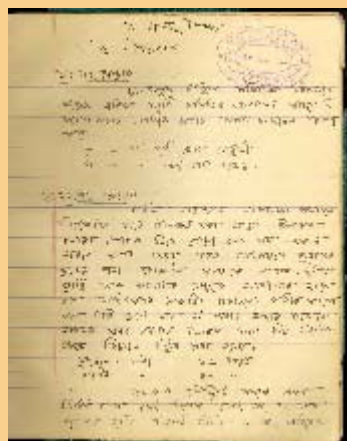
One of the defining moments in the history of the mahila samiti was the call for a boycott of twelve year old Mini Goswami’s marriage citing the Sarda Act or the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) in Guwahati in 1934. I call it defining because this event was a synecdoche of sorts. According to Hiranmoyee Devi, the mahila samiti in the initial years was nicknamed the ‘biya bhonga samiti’ literally ‘marriage breaking association’.<sup>6</sup> Devi does not mention any specific origin for this nickname but this controversy could be a key pointer. Both Rajabala Das and Nalini Bala Devi in their respective autobiographies mention this controversy. Swarnaprabha Mahanta revealed in her interview how at a later period the samiti mobilised against old men marrying much younger women (briddhasya taruni bharjya). The sources have to be seen in a context as the current office of the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti has no documents from this period in its possession. This aspect is crucial and adds a whole new dimension to attempts such as ours in historicising organisational mobilisation of women in the early twentieth century India in non-metropolitan contexts.



The controversy was reported in *The Assamiya* (weekly) on 3 march 1934 covering three columns on page 4 with the headline ‘Sarda Aainor Dohai Di Bibahor Pratirodh: Guwahatit Bishom Chanchallya’ (literally ‘Obstruction in Marriage citing Sarda Act as an Excuse: Great Sensation in Guwahati’). An AMS delegation requested the bride’s family not to go ahead with the marriage of the 12 year old Mini Goswami. The samiti did not find a favourable reply and the secretary Rajabala Das sent a letter to the groom saying ‘I request you not to marry Mini Goswami, twelve year old daughter of Ambika Goswami by breaking the [Child] Marriage Restraint Act. The Assam Mahila Samiti *has directed me to take necessary legal action if you disobey the law and go ahead with the marriage.*’<sup>7</sup> (Emphasis added).

The AMS came under tremendous pressure and after hectic meetings and consultations the executive body had to call off its agitation against this particular marriage. Key social leaders like Bhubaneswar Barua and Omeo Kumar Das impressed upon the samiti not to pursue the ‘legal method’ but build ‘strong public opinion against such marriages’.<sup>8</sup> A Sarda Act Committee was formed immediately after the event. The Committee declared that all mahila samiti branches must take up the cause of the Sarda Act and AMS would provide both moral and material support for the same.<sup>9</sup>

We shall have to locate the members of the samiti to see why this motion could not be pushed to its logical conclusion. It is important to register here that though a great majority of primary members belonged to villages, the samiti’s executive committee at this point was led by middle class urban women who defined the agendas and resolutions. At this particularly sensationalised and poignant moment, Kamakhya Prasad Barua draws attention to both these aspects of caste and urban context of the samiti’s activism. Barua’s name was dragged into the controversy as someone who initially supported the Sarda Act delivering lectures in public meetings but later got his own minor daughter married against the Act. In a letter to the editor of the *Assamiya*, he writes, ‘We believe that it has not been a very appropriate act towards social reform to invoke the Sarda Act only to obstruct the marriages of girls in a few Brahmin families of Guwahati.’<sup>10</sup> Barua in one stroke demolishes the samiti’s claims of mobilising for social reform in general by indicating the two key but supposedly limited constituencies that the samiti’s activism involved: Firstly they would have only disturbed a few marriages among the Brahmins and secondly, their field is limited to Guwahati, one of the urban centers only. If the affected constituency as Barua claims is so limited after all, one finds it difficult to explain the corresponding magnitude of the controversy. It is a well established fact now that child marriage was common not only among Brahmins or the upper castes but it was also widely practised by most upwardly mobile castes as a mark of maintaining caste purity. Therefore the impact of the protest is phenomenal both in terms of the affected constituency and in terms of the assertion of power by an organised women’s movement as they invoke legal proceedings appropriating powers of the patriarchal head and subverting in the process the rules that govern the family and the domestic. The disturbingly subversive aspect of the Sarda Act controversy in Assam in 1934 was that the nationalist discourse that had framed a certain legitimate space for women’s activism almost as a second fiddle to anti-colonial nationalism was under threat here as women began to mobilise not so much against colonial powers but to challenge patriarchal authority within the domestic.



Food Control. TDMS Resolution for fixed meal time, July 1948.

Mrinalini Sinha has explored Muthulaxmi Reddy’s nuanced and complex reading of obstacles in

the passage of social reform Acts in colonial India. According to Sinha, Reddy argued how 'the colonial state and the British-controlled press were bolstering the orthodox opposition to social reform in India for the sake of political expediency instead of encouraging progressive Indian public opinion as represented in the all-India political parties and the independent women's movement in India.'<sup>11</sup> However there is a need to recognise the difference between a sophisticated conceptualisation of the Act by Reddy and women's groups' attempt to actually push the law towards its logical conclusion. The politics of both Reddy's critique of the colonial government and the AMS's challenge to the groom to go ahead with the marriage need to be enmeshed within the discursive space of the social and the legal in a colonial situation. AMS's intervention in Mini's marriage problematises an easy reading of law either as a tool of social reform or a tool of patriarchy, seems to be very much within the 'protectionist' phase of legislation for women

The mahila samiti at this point seems to be very much within the 'protectionist phase' of legislation for women as we do not have any evidence at this moment that suggests that the samiti made any sustained critique of the protectionist logic of the law granting the state power to control the social regulation of the female body. However, we need to recognise that the law is protectionist and within a liberal framework of reform from 'our' retrospective gaze. The AMS case history may open new ways of looking at the construction of the gendered legal subject in a colonial society. So a law that was part of a 'protectionist' measure to restrain child marriage in colonial India, when taken up for a radically subversive act of physically challenging a particular marriage by women's group, the issues thrown open may no longer be framed within the hegemonic legal discourse or that of middle class milieu of 'respectable' activism for women. The movement itself is under tremendous pressure as the motion for the withdrawal of the samiti's intervention in Mini's marriage is supported by all but one member of AMS. The mahila samiti's activism may be read at one level as naïve because such liberal reading of law does not recognise the power assigned to the state over the bodies of its colonial female subject. But we shall have to acknowledge what activism meant in the immediate context as the dominant male political leaders never sat complacent. In fact the hectic rescheduling of mahila samiti executive body meetings and interventions of key social leaders suggest how threatened the contemporary urban elite felt at the possibility of such a direct affront.

The second incident that I would like to cite is recorded in the minutes of the meeting of the Twentieth Annual Conference of Tezpur District Mahila Samiti held on 11 and 12 July 1948. The minutes record as its twelfth Resolution, a proposal for 'fixed meal times' in families to facilitate 'women's leisure to pursue cultural activities.'

Nowadays in urban areas women without domestic help hardly have time to come out as she is preoccupied with the kitchen. However to participate in cultural activities one needs some leisure time. Considering these situations, this sabha (meeting) proposes that the following time table should be accepted in all the towns of Assam as fixed meal times – Lunch 12 noon and dinner 10 pm. No meal should be served after one hour of the proposed time. . . We shall need a strong movement to implement these provisions. The sabha calls upon the women of Assam to take the initiative by discussing these proposals with men and facilitate their implementation in different towns of Assam.<sup>12</sup>

While the class (lack of domestic help) and community space (towns) within which these proposals are made may be problematised, it is worthwhile to try and understand women's attempts at gendering social practices and claim for leisure to pursue cultural activities. One of the crucial aspects that the proposal raised was to recognise the domestic as a place of work rethinking some of the fundamental paradigms of constructing womanhood in colonial modernity and the nationalist resolution to the women's question in the domain of a glorified home. The placing of the domestic as a site of work rather than the conventional trope of care and nurture is rethinking categories of private and public, home and the world while maintaining masculine and feminine domains intact.

### Retrieving Memory, Recovering Agency

Our documentation project aimed at foregrounding materials that would help us understand the movement better in its complex negotiations with the state, its policies and the public sphere in an increasingly

violence-torn society in India's north-eastern state of Assam with its fault lines in ethnic and communal politics. Many mahila samiti members including the founding secretary Chandraprabha Saikiani were politically active in the anti-colonial movement, and were imprisoned, and their contribution is often read in terms of a nationalist framework without challenging the gender logic of the nation itself. It seems equally surprising that great moments of contestations such as the Sarda Act controversy of 1934 do not feature in the samiti's history published in 1961. This silence may not be explained by 'lost memory of resistance' alone but by the textual surfaces on which dissent may or may not be written. Saikiani could well argue for radical transformation of social roles for man and woman in the mahila samiti's mouthpiece *Abhijatri*, but the same textual freedom is absent in the official history of the mahila samiti and she steers clear of controversies.

In the first workshop of our project, 'Making Connections' held on 4 February 2010, an overwhelmingly complacent reading of social and state support emerged from some of the current samiti members and office bearers. Except for two out of the fifteen members present at the workshop most spoke eloquently of how men have always supported the samiti wholeheartedly. This was not only a tribute to an individual man who may have been instrumental in facilitating change, but there was also complacency about patriarchy and power. The question before us is – why can an oral history project not do here what it has supposedly accomplished rather easily elsewhere? This takes us to theoretical aspects of recovering a sense of agency through memory especially while dealing with marginalised groups like women in an already marginalised geopolitical landscape of north-east India. I am trying to conceptualise how women's memory functions within systemic structures of accommodation as well as rupture by sharing field notes here. I would like to cite Bina Hazarika's interview to try and understand the different discourses that inform and intersect the process of retrieving women's memory. The transcript of a part of the interview reads thus –

B.H:- [When we joined the samiti in 1974], it was almost dead. There was no office, no maintenance of documents.

H.M:- You had a very difficult time.

B.H:- I must acknowledge the help of Chief Engineer Hiran Bhuyan when we started this building in 1978. Gyanadalata Duara, Sulakanti Duara, Nirmala Dutta bought the land from Mr. Jalan. I think, I can share this with you - this piece of land actually belonged to the Sahitya Sabha (Dibrugarh Literary Society). And the plot near the main road where the Sahitya Sabha Building stands today was for the mahila samiti. They (the Sahitya Sabha members) were very clever and our seniors were naïve. They (senior mahila samiti members) were convinced by some Sahitya Sabha members that this plot has more land and thus the Sahitya Sabha took the high land near the main road in exchange of this one. This is a glaring example of how women are always cheated in a patriarchal society. (laughs). We had to spend a lot of money filling up this plot to bring it to the road level. Look at them (Sahitya Sabha), they went ahead and built a beautiful house in our land.<sup>13</sup>

The problematic<sup>14</sup> of the interview with Bina Hazarika is partly what I would like to highlight here. Out of a range of forty audio-visually recorded interviews long and short, one-to-one and group, my selection of one among many raises certain questions. Firstly, what does Hazarika say in those two minutes that find a special privilege of being highlighted and commented on? Secondly, how does her statement 'connect' to the project paradigm, ideological and otherwise? As oral history interviews are seen as constructed and ordered by the active intervention of the researcher, it is important to factor in the 'human relationship' behind the interview. Thirdly, how far is her statement made in a given context of reception? Both the broad project paradigm and the actual interview space of the Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti office room – amidst fellow samiti members and the project team, an all female group except for the cameraman. Fourthly, are there 'hidden levels of discourses' in her statement not available in a printed transcript but can be heard, seen and felt in the audio-video clip? Dan Sipe has argued that the richer detail of videotaped interviews record more fully the expression and process of memory generation, 'The goal is not .... [the] displacement of the printed word, but rather to have the moving images of film and video recognised as generating discrete modes of discourse with their own ways to encode information,



express concepts, and embody ambiguity and certainty'.<sup>15</sup>

What seems to be at work in Hazarika's interview is both an acceptance of dominance as systemic in patriarchy and an ability to see that as endemic to women's mobilisation and access to the public. But the most disturbing factor for me listening to her was her disarming laughter. She is neither laughing at the actual manipulation leading to the loss of the better plot of land nor is she unaware of the irrevocable state of affair. Her gesturing towards the manipulation itself is so rapturous that it has to be garbed in laughter? She is certain of the support to her statement in a given context as she looks at her fellow samiti members outside the purview of the camera but unsure of its implications for a wider audience. This is significant because as I mentioned earlier we have had a series of assertions of assistance from male politicians and leaders including Hazarika's own interview. Those moments where women gesture towards unequal structures of power and its operations are rare and significantly when they come they are shrouded in laughter – laughter that is not violent, disruptive or subversive but harmless in acceptance but at the same time registering inequality.

One of the crucial details that emerge from the interview does not come from individual memory alone. What is the samiti's allegiance to Sahitya Sabha? The answer lies not in individual memory, but is complimented by print sources. We know that right from its inception in 1926 till the early 1930s, Assam Mahila Samiti had always held its annual conference at the Assam Sahitya Sabha Annual Conference venue. It was formed under the patronage of the Sahitya Sabha and was accommodated in its pandals for meetings and so on. Given this history of patronage, it may not be surprising that the Dibrugarh Sahitya Sabha too had effective control over the functioning of the mahila samiti there. This no way condones the alleged appropriation of the better plot of land by some members of the Sahitya Sabha but it does open a new perspective onto a simple statement of patriarchal exploitation. We see how mahila samitis function in far more complex and layered systemic and material conditions that include actual practicalities of registering a plot of land, running around complex bureaucratic mechanism and so forth where traditionally women would be at a clear disadvantage.

How do we reconcile lost memory of resistance to what we read as contemporary complacency – the transformation from a revisioning of domesticity by fixing meal times in the household in 1948 to an unproblematised acceptance of women's domestic role by urging samiti members to fulfill these before coming to the mahila samiti office in 2010? In many ways, the fixed meal time resolution continues the domestic as the domain of women instead of challenging it. However recognising it as work generates new meaning for gendered domesticity. In the contemporary context, the acceptance of the domestic in unequivocal terms reinforces stereotypes about women's role. But this also reveals the centrality of these norms in defining women's activism in the mahila samiti today. It is significant that archiving women into straightjacket of radical and submissive on the basis of these affiliations may be as reductive as trivialising the domestic vis-à-vis 'larger' issues i.e. nation, community, public and so on in reading women in history. Simultaneously, we need to be aware of the role of the reader and the researcher in facilitating the creation of the archive that would always interfere with the process of what is projected to us and what do we 'project'. How far is it a legitimate exercise to highlight a few women's subversive statements vis-à-vis an entire archive of women's acceptance of conventional gender equation? Katherine Borland says, 'To refrain from interpretation by letting the subjects speak for themselves seems to me an unsatisfactory if not illusory solution'.<sup>16</sup> Feminist re-reading is crucial to locate transcripts and translations, slippages and interpretation and therefore not to be abandoned for 'objectivity' as such. While it is true that many members in various samitis accept women's fulfilling of traditional roles in the family, society and the nation state etc., it is equally worthwhile to explore the gendered logic of participation in and engendering the public.

One of the ways of engaging with this transition is to explore if anti-colonial struggle that informed the nascent mobilisation of women in mahila samitis facilitated an understanding of gendered subjectivity that some later activists have neither lived through nor conceptualised. We must also remember the class positions of most of the women in mahila samiti leadership position and the increasing depoliticisation process that is linked to a consumer culture in post-liberalisation period of Indian economy and globalisation. The mahila samiti does not function outside these larger political and economic forces. The

increasing transformation of some samitis into NGO activism receiving grants from international funding agencies like Ford Foundation (TDMS) is one set of transformation that we see in recent years. Simultaneously most mahila samitis are struggling to find voluntary service of women that was the primary driving force till recent times. Meenakshi Bhuyan and Lily Saikia echoed these sentiments and said that women in recent years have moved more inward into the domestic and the family where work related to the larger society does not figure in. This is an important point to factor in our assessment of the mahila samiti. While we may be reluctant about the complacent reading of patriarchy in a few contemporary members, we nonetheless must recognise their motivation and desire to do something (*kiba eta koribo lage*) for society. This is not the same as reading mahila samiti work as morally superior social work but to recognise that many women seemed to have found meaning for themselves and for other women through samiti work whether done in the mode of charity or as social justice, internal hierarchies notwithstanding.

This aspect is pertinent to our project as the samiti has a largely negative and/or indifferent 'image' in contemporary popular imagination. We must acknowledge that it is in this context of skepticism and indifference of popular imagination that we were welcome with open arms by all the three mahila samitis when we contacted them with the project proposal. There has been a great amount of enthusiasm about the project among individual members. This desire to be part of the visual archive – some family members even asked us in which television channel we are going to telecast this, a few members were accused of by more active members as appearing in a certain samiti office after a gap of two/three years when they heard recording is being done and so on – is part of the baggage that the project carries. We must reflect on these methodologically in our re-reading of memory without being disrespectful to any of the participants who shared crucial details of their lives with us. We become aware of the contingencies that inform the creation of an archive – human and technological, academic and logistics without blurring crucial distinctions between voices and visuals, memory and history – where women's memory transforms the very essence of how we attempt to understand women's agency then and now.

- 1 Chandrababha Saikiani mentions 1915 as the foundation year of Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti in her book *Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samitir Ittibritta* (History of the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, 1961) and this is generally accepted. However, we have now accessed sources that reveal that Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti was established in the first decade of the twentieth century which was effectively revived since 1907. "*Bibidh Toka: Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti*" (Miscellaneous Notes: Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti), *The Assam Bandhav*, IV, 1, Phagun 1319 (February-March 1913), pp. 33-34.
- 2 Aparna Mahanta, *Journey of Assamese Women: 1836-1937*, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, 2008, p. 90.
- 3 "Assam Mahila Samitir Mahila Member Sakalar Naam O Daan Baranganir Nirikh". (Name and Contribution of Women Members of AMS), *Ghor-Jeuti: Mahilasakalar Mahekia Aalochani* (Ghor-Jeuti: A Monthly Magazine for Women), I, 5&6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, Magh 1849--Bhada 1850 (January-September 1928), pp. Oporonchi (Appendices).
- 4 "Assam Mahila Samitir Uddeshya" (Aims and Objectives of Assam Mahila Samiti), *The Assamiya*, 11 March 1928. Microfilm Division, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (hereafter NMML), New Delhi.
- 5 I am thankful to Professor Mary Nash for suggesting this in response to my paper at the "Women's Memory Work: Gendered Dimensions of Social Transformation" Conference at University of Limerick, August, 2010. She gave an example from her own work among women activists in Spain over a period of time. The same women comrades who spoke in hushed tones about the lesbian status of a woman leader in the 1970s were very celebratory of the leader as a lesbian in the 1990s. Ironically, to the initial disappointment of this coordinator, out of the 15 participants in the first workshop of the project held on 4 February 2010, only three participating members (all from TDMS) indicated that structural difficulty was a great hindrance in executing mahila samiti's resolutions in the public sphere.
- 6 Hiranmoyee Devi, *Mukti Sangrami Chandrababha* (Freedom Fighter Chandrababha), Lawyers Book

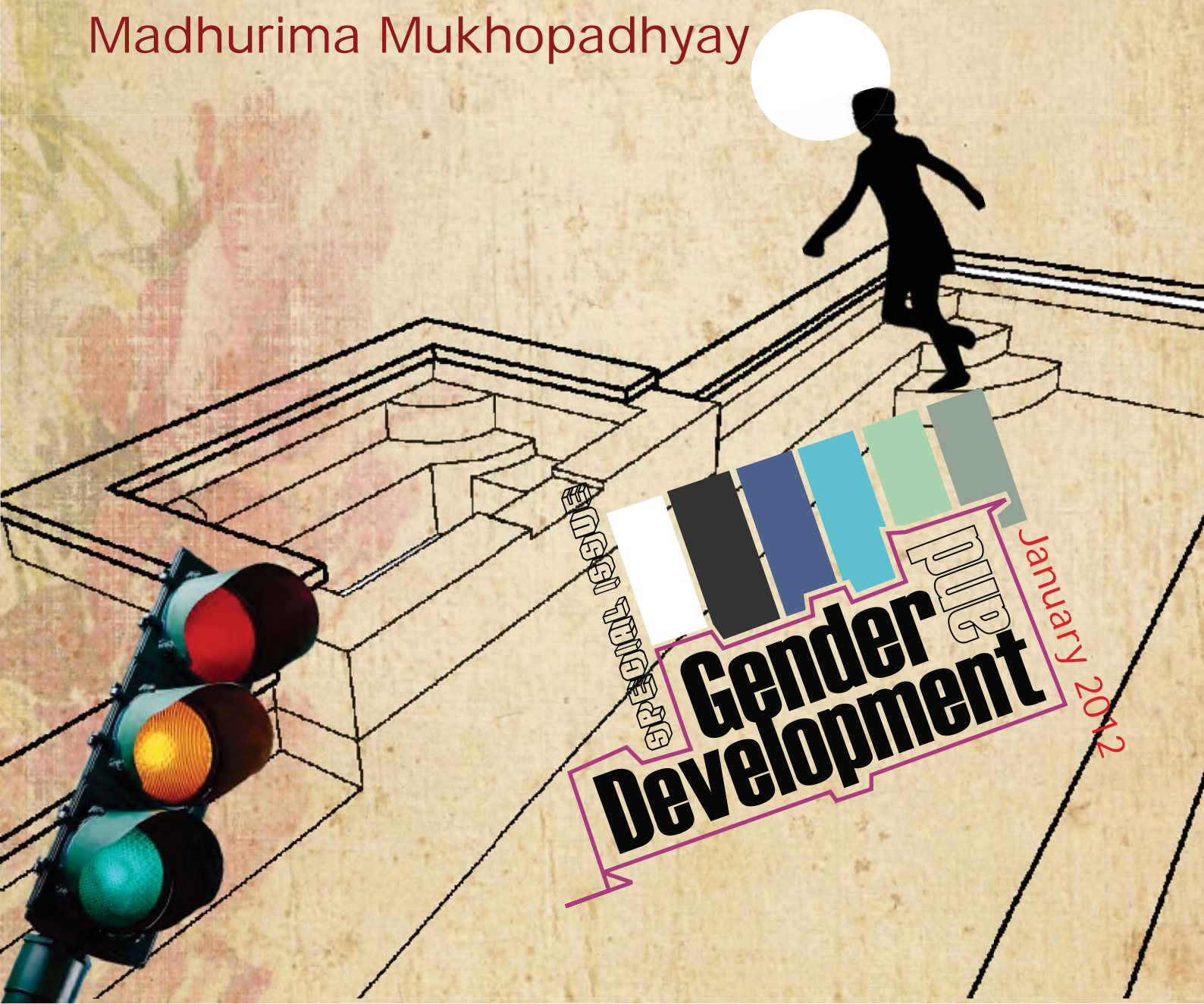
- Stall, Guwahati, 2002, p. 59.
- 7 “*Sarda Aainor Dohai Di Bibahor Pratirodh: Guwahatit Bishom Chanchallya*” (Obstruction in Marriage citing Sarda Act as an Excuse: Great Sensation in Guwahati), *The Assamiya*, 3 March 1934. Microfilm Division NMML, New Delhi.
  - 8 Ibid.
  - 9 “*Assam Mahila Samiti Aru Sarda Aain*” (Assam Mahila Samiti and the Sarda Act), *The Assamiya*, 17 March 1934.
  - 10 Kamakhya Prasad Barua, “*Sampadakaloi Sithi: Sarda Aain Sambandhe Baktabya*” (Letter to the Editor: Remarks on the Sarda Act), *The Assamiya*, 12 May 1934.
  - 11 Mrinalini Sinha, “Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and Nationalism in Late-Colonial India”, *Feminist Studies*, XXVI, 3, *Points of Departure: India and the South Asian Diaspora*, Autumn, 2000, pp. 623-644.
  - 12 SEPHIS, IISH and Tezpur University Project. Hemjyoti Medhi. “Memory, Movement and the *Mahila Samiti* in Assam, India”, (2009-2011), TDMS Proceedings, 1941-54, scan 0227&0228.
  - 13 DDMS Interview, Bina Hazarika, DVD 1, Title 02 Chapter 01, 00:11:17-00:13:25.
  - 14 Ronald Grele argues, “If read properly, they [oral testimony] do reveal to us hidden levels of discourse—the search for which is the aim of symptomatic reading. If read .... again and again, not just for facts and comments, but also, as Althusser suggests, for insight and oversights, for the combination of vision and nonvision, and especially for answers to questions which were never asked, we should be able to isolate and describe the problematic which inform the interview.” Ronald J. Grele, “Movement without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical problems in Oral History”, in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, pp. 38-52.
  - 15 Dan Sipe, “The Future of Oral History and Moving Images”, in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, pp. 377-398.
  - 16 Katherine Borland “That's not what I said: Interpretive conflict in oral narrative research”, in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, pp. 320-332.

(All translations from Assamese to English cited here are mine)



# Workshop Report on the Awareness Generation and Sensitization on the Issue of Domestic Violence in West Bengal, India

Madhurima Mukhopadhyay



# Workshop Report on Awareness Generation and Sensitisation on the Issue of Domestic Violence in West Bengal, India

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Madhurima Mukhopadhyay

Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (henceforth PWDVA) was passed in 2005 and implemented on 26 October 2006. Before PWDVA, the only legal provision dealing with violence on wives was Section 498A<sup>1</sup> of the Indian Penal Code. PWDVA was designed as a civil law with a provision to provide multiple reliefs (compensation, protection, shared residence and maintenance) to any aggrieved woman in a domestic relationship- wife, mother, sister, children<sup>2</sup> and live-in partners within a short-period of sixty days. This Act was said to be path-breaking for providing multiple reliefs to women in a short span of time. However, the functioning of this Act has been affected due to multiple reasons including an absence of a central system for monitoring and evaluation of the Act. The project 'Awareness Generation and Sensitisation on the issue of Domestic Violence' conducted by the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, and funded by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Germany was directed towards understanding the implementation and effectiveness of the Act in the Southern districts of West Bengal<sup>3</sup>. A Local Networking and Dissemination Workshop was organised by the School in collaboration with the West Bengal Commission for Women (henceforth WBCW) on 3 December 2011. The objective of the workshop was three-fold:

- To disseminate the findings of the two-year (2010-2011) project to the stakeholders of the Act (protection officers<sup>4</sup>, lawyers, service providers<sup>5</sup>, counsellors, aggrieved women) and people from the academia.
- To provide a platform for an exchange of dialogue between the various stakeholders of the PWDVA.
- To finalise a list of recommendations to improve the overall functioning of the Act. The list would be further sent to various national and local planning bodies.





The Research Team at the Workshop

The Director, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, welcomed the participants (mainly stakeholders of the Act, academicians, researchers, members from the NGOs) to the workshop in the first session. She gave a brief background to the two-year project that the School had conducted and explained how this project emphasised action research to spread awareness regarding PWDVA to various groups of students (college/university), NGOs and certain other groups (e.g. rag pickers, SHG<sup>6</sup> women). She highlighted two major outputs of the project: A Legal Handbook for women published by the School in August 2011 and a Resource Directory on various agencies working on women and violence in nineteen districts of West Bengal. The latter is forthcoming in January 2012.

A member from the project team presented the findings of the project. It highlighted the major themes for discussion during the following sessions of the workshop. Some of the major findings of the project were:

- The infrastructural problems faced by all the stakeholders of the Act.
- Lack of networking among the functionaries of the Act.
- The wrong usage of the term 'counseling' by the various groups of stakeholders
- The general lack of knowledge and awareness among the stakeholders under the Act, mentionable among them are the members of the judiciary.

A major part of the discussion in the workshop focused on the lack of infrastructural facilities:

- lack of a proper work contract
- lack of office set-up
- lack of conveyance to remote villages
- lack of proper training and knowledge
- problems related to release of salary, travel allowance and miscellaneous expenditure

These were problems common to the group of protection officers and counsellors. Service providers mentioned the non-allotment of funds for carrying on their duties while the lawyers under the State Legal Aid Services<sup>7</sup> mentioned the delay in receiving their fees and miscellaneous expenses after the final resolution of cases.

There was a substantial discussion on the devaluation of 'counseling' as service. Each group of stakeholders claimed to be doing counselling in the name of fact finding or negotiation, to reach an amicable settlement in a situation of violence. The counsellors of the Family Counseling Centres (FCCs) who were trained in counseling and had a degree in psychology alleged that their work was being devalued since counseling was a specific therapeutic process that needed training and skills which the other stakeholders lacked. The Chairperson of WBCW also supported this issue by emphasising that counseling was a skilled, professional service and the term should not be used loosely. It needed skills and expertise which many NGOs or individual service providers did not always have and therefore a separate list should be prepared on NGOs which would describe their field of work and expertise. In this context, she also highlighted the ambiguity in the Act regarding the duty of service providers and the need for more specific guidelines in the Act to make them function effectively.





Participants at the Workshop

Research Team Presentation



Another issue discussed in the workshop was the lack of awareness among the general public and also among the stakeholders regarding the provisions of the Act. It was found that there was a lack of awareness and training among the protection officers, service providers, members of the judiciary and the police regarding the provisions of the Act. An advocate of the Howrah Court commented on the ignorance of the judiciary regarding the Act and the general patriarchal attitudes that prevail amongst the members of the judiciary who are most often upper caste and upper class Hindus. Due to their caste and class affiliation, they are generally found to be insensitive to the cause of women.

Finally, a set of recommendations which the project team had gathered in its two-year association with the PWDVA was presented before the participants. A number of issues regarding the changes in certain provisions of the Act for improving the infrastructure of the courts, increasing the budget and monitoring its proper allotment, proper maintenance of records, training and sensitisation programme for stakeholders and increasing public awareness were discussed.

The overwhelming presence of people right from the first session to the last pointed to the requirement for a common platform for exchanging views and discussing problems. It signalled the need for networking and communication among groups to make any pro-woman legislation effective in the



A Session in Progress

Participants at the Workshop (R)



- 1 Section 498A provides that 'Whoever, being the husband or the relative of the husband of a woman, subjects such woman to cruelty shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years and shall also be liable to fine.'
- 2 Both boys and girls below eighteen years.
- 3 South and North 24 Parganas, East and West Medinipur, Hooghly, Howrah and Kolkata.
- 4 Protection Officers are contractual government officers appointed under Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 to look after cases filed under the Act. Their main duties consist of filing the Domestic Incident Report (DIR), an official format which bears the complaint of the aggrieved woman, assisting and aiding the victim with medical and legal facilities, assisting the Magistrate.
- 5 NGOs registered under the Companies Act, Societies Registration Act, having experience of working on issues related to

women for at least seven years can be enlisted as Service Providers under this Act.

- 6 SHG is an abbreviation for Self Help Group which is a small collective of women who practice micro savings and micro credit under some microfinance programme run by government or non-governmental bodies.
- 7 State Legal Aid services are to provide free legal aid and services to women in need. It has a list of empanelled lawyers who file cases on behalf of the aggrieved and receive fee and miscellaneous expenses from the government after its resolution.



• Book Review

Conference of the Opressed  
Nighat Gandhi





# Conference of the Oppressed

Nighat Gandhi is writer and mental health counsellor. She is the author of *Ghalib at Dusk* and other Stories. Her travelogue/memoir based on the lives of South Asian Muslim women is forthcoming from Tranquebar Press, New Delhi, in 2012.  
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Nighat Gandhi

## • Book Review

**Shaheen Akhtar, *The Search***, Translated by Ella Dutta, Zubaan, New Delhi, 2011, INR 395/-, ISBN: 978 8189013 691

*The Search* is the English translation of Shaheen Akhtar's novel, *Talaash*, which won the 2004 *Prothom Aalo* Best Book of the Year Award in her homeland, Bangladesh. *The Search* could be described, to borrow Shaheen's phrase, as the 'conference of the oppressed' — a relentless search for dignity, love and acceptance by Bangladeshi women, a search that continues three decades after their homeland was liberated. This is the only novel about the liberation war written from the point of view of women raped during the 1971 civil war with Pakistan. Estimates vary, but more than 200,000 Bangladeshi women were allegedly raped by the Pakistani army during the nine-month long Liberation War.

The raped women were awarded the dubious title of *Biranganas* or war heroes by the newly formed government after the war. Mariam, aka Mary, is the novel's central character. Her life is a series of betrayals which begin even before the war. It is ironic that Shaheen nicknames her Mary, suggesting a life gone awry, a mishmash of wronged innocence. It is difficult to say who leaves a greater blot on Mary, the enemy's men or her own countrymen. Her betrayal begins on the eve of the liberation war, when a young and pregnant Mariam, approaches her lover. Abed Jehangir is an opportunistic freedom fighter with more important business to take care of than a pregnant girlfriend.

Mary is plunged into the war against her will: Repeatedly raped and victimised by the enemy, she emerges from the war traumatised, despised and destitute. Mary cannot return to her family home in the village even though she is a *Birangana*. Her father tries to marry her off. Mary escapes, but is always on the run to save her independence. She approaches her ex-lover, Abed for a job. The ex-freedom fighter has prospered after the war and feels threatened by Mary's new assertive 'whorishness' and instead tries to get her arrested for pretending to be a pseudo *Birangana*.

War and rape are old bedfellows in a patriarchal world order. Mass rape has historically been normalised as a shaming tactic, a surefire way of emasculating the enemy. Rape is still not accorded the status of a punishable, violent, sexual crime against a person's dignity and bodily integrity in Bangladesh. Tuki Begum, another *Birangana*, is not cynical when she says:

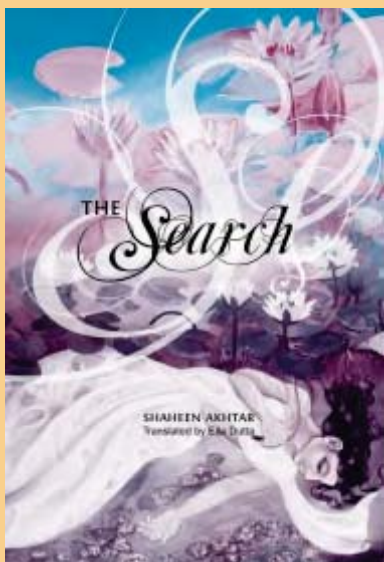
'I was called a prostitute even though I wasn't one. What is the purpose of my

life? What did I gain by remaining a virgin all my life?’

Why should rape victims get blamed for rape? Why does the woman’s dignity not reside in her work, her aspirations and her values? Why does her virginity define her dignity? *The Search* compels us to confront these difficult questions. It is doubtful if women would be treated differently today if there were another war. Shaheen comments: ‘If such a situation should arise again, there’s no guarantee that [society] is not going to behave the same way.’ Her assessment of our skewed moral values is not far from the truth. In February 2011, a fourteen-year-old Bangladeshi girl, Hina, was sentenced to 100 lashes in a fatwa issued by village clerics. She was repeatedly raped by her forty year old cousin, but the council found her guilty. Unable to survive the flogging, she died a few days later in a Dhaka hospital. Bangladesh is a democracy and its constitution is based on secularism and fatwas are illegal!

The search for love and acceptance ends for Mariam with death. Implied is the impossibility of finding one’s search for meaningful love in a transient world. An almost mystical beauty and ambiguity hovers over the concluding chapter, carrying within it the promise of fulfillment for the broken-hearted in another world.

Contemporary South Asian women’s writing has veered away from romance and disillusionment which depicted women as helpless creatures within the confines of domesticity. ‘The canvas of Asian women’s writing has expanded to reflect socioeconomic change in the region, its political implications for these societies, and the new identities that arise out of the resulting contextual complexities’ writes Devina Shah in an article on Asian women’s writing in the twenty first century.<sup>1</sup> The role of political events such as wars, nationalist struggles and the resulting poverty and dislocation are being articulated by South Asian women writers through the sensibility of their female subjects. The emotional and psychological scars on women wrought by war, militant nationalisms and increasing economic disparities as a result of globalisation and militarisation have yet to be fully explored in world literature. Efforts by writers like Shaheen Akhtar to uncover the complex emotional, economic, political and existential struggles of women in conflict-torn areas must be accorded their rightful place in the global literary canon.



Cover of the Book

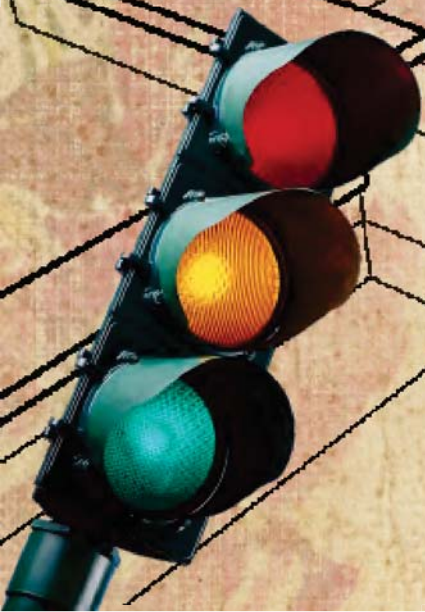
<sup>1</sup> For full text of Devina Shah's article see <http://www.festivalofasianliterature.com/>



• Book Review

# Exploring Dimensions of Gender and Poverty

Estella Musiiwa





# Exploring Dimensions of Gender and Poverty

## • Book Review

***Gender Dimensions of Agricultural and Rural Employment:  
Differential Pathways Out of Poverty,***

**Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, 2010, pp. 209.**

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Estella Musiiwa

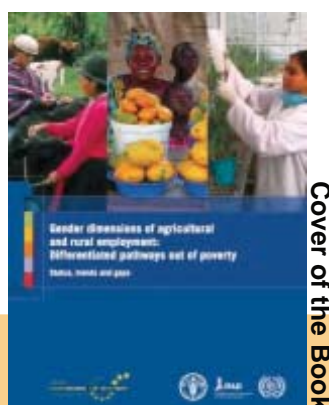
This report is one of the few that touch upon gender dimensions of the southern global rural economies. The report notes that the role of women in rural economic growth and poverty reduction cannot be overemphasised. However, their efforts are hampered by persistent gender inequalities that limit their access to decent work. They lag behind men in access to land, credit, broad range of technologies, information, advisory services and training, and are shut out of social capital such as farmers' organisations, workers unions and community networks. The report is divided into three parts.

Part 1, Section 1 pays attention to ways in which gender inequalities and policy options affect rural employment. Women and men occupy different positions in rural labour markets. Further, the scope and nature of paid work are influenced by age, ethnicity, social structure and roles in the households. Patterns vary across countries and socio-economic settings in response to new challenges such as international trade, migration, HIV/AIDS and feminisation of agriculture. Although women contribute immensely to the welfare of their households and communities, they encounter constraints that should be addressed by policy makers. It is noted that the gender dimension is important because women are disproportionately represented among the poor.

Part 1, Section 2 focusses on ways in which globalisation transforms gender patterns in rural economies. Although there is an increase in numbers of women and men in rural wage employment, especially in corporate farming, gendered constraints affect

women more than they affect men. The burden of unpaid household and agricultural work falls on women, but that kind of work is neither recognised nor valued. Other constraints include limited or lack of access to land, credit and financial services, education and export markets. Women are also disadvantaged in male dominated rural development groups.

Part 2 discusses the impact of gender inequalities and policy options for equitable rural employment. It is noted that seventy per cent of the rural poor are women and girls. The high degree of poverty is accounted for by failure to recognise the amount of work they do, lack of access to land and inputs, and the feminisation of agriculture among other factors. Their disadvantaged position is explained in terms of patriarchal cultural ideologies that accord subordinate positions to women and girls. The global corporate sector takes both women and men but women are relegated to the lowest paid jobs.

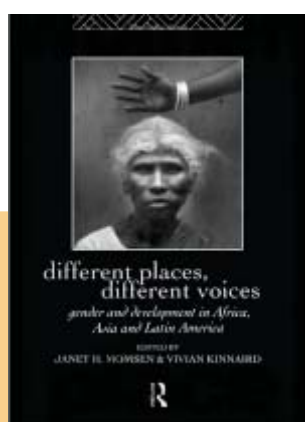


Cover of the Book

Part 3 is a combination of papers dealing with various cases of gender inequality in rural economies. The first paper (macro-economic perspective) is on economic liberalisation, changing livelihoods and gender dimensions in rural Mexico. The Appendix notes that cash crop production has expanded at the expense of food crop production and this production has mainly targeted the international market where it has faced international competition. She takes note of how peasants have lost out because of trade liberalisation to the extent that incomes hardly sustain families. Such economic strategies affect gender relations. However, basic infrastructure has eased the burden of women's domestic work, women have fewer children and the drudgery of providing food and undertaking daily chores are a thing of the past. Access to public health services and schooling have notably improved the quality of life in general. Women, in particular, have benefitted through access to birth control, physical check-ups and medical attention for children. The second paper addresses issues of wage disparities in rural and urban areas in fourteen developing nations. The authors note that rural wages do not appear to display any greater pro-male bias than do urban wages. Economic growth tends to bring convergence between male and female wages. The paper by Maertens explores the implications of high value horticulture supply chains on gender inequality. She argues that expansion of modern supply chains has significant potential for increasing agricultural profits, raising rural incomes and alleviating rural poverty. Contrary arguments focus on how modern supply chains can have adverse development effects by exacerbating existing inequalities in rural areas because the poorest farmers are either excluded from the chains or exploited by large, often multinational, companies dominating the chains. Thus, although the impact of the modern chains is controversial, the fact remains that modernisation of food supply chains has significant gender implications because women play an extremely important role in agriculture in poor countries. The paper analyses how women in Sub-Saharan Africa are specifically affected by the emergence and spread of modern high-value horticultural supply chains as a result of the process of globalisation and modernisation. The conclusion is that women benefit more from agro-industrial production than from small-holder contract farming. Mashiri, Chakwizira and Nhemachena focus on gender dimensions of rural unemployment in agriculture and public works programmes in South Africa. The participation of women and children in building infrastructure such as roads and irrigation facilities is an important way of addressing the poverty question. Paris et al. focus on the impact of labour migration on income, labour productivity and gender roles in the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Migration increases incidence of female-headed households and affects management of farming systems and rice production. Women's

farm management responsibilities increase with migration leading to a growing need for providing technical knowledge and skills to women. The last paper addresses the impact of gendered labour markets in rural Philippines. The authors conclude that women's participation in off- farm paid jobs can be considered an important pathway out of poverty in rural areas, not only because of its direct contribution to family incomes but also because of its impact on child nutrition.

The report makes an invaluable contribution to gender and development studies by highlighting the feminisation of poverty within the context of global rural development policies. The report is extremely significant for preparing policy papers that seek to address poverty in developing countries. There is an effort to identify male participants but women have been presented as the outstanding disadvantaged group. The report gives critical insight to policy makers by identifying what should be done and who are the real actors that should be taken into consideration when designing pathways out of poverty. Graduate students of rural development will benefit from empirical evidence that identify women's problems and needs in the effort to achieve poverty alleviation by 2015.



A Book Cover





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