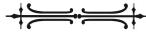


MARGINALIZING ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES, PROFITING FROM LITERACY CLASSES



Literacy and Economic Resources

Empowering women in the rural area of the Lumbini region was the basic rationale of the Gender Activities Program embedded in the Bhairahawa Lumbini Groundwater Project (BLGWP), an agricultural enterprise. Located in the Rupandehi district in the Tarai, the irrigation project extended over 20,800 hectares of irrigable land. A formal document states that by 1999, when it was slated for completion, the irrigation project was intended “to raise the standard of living of the rural population living within its boundaries, most of which are farmers, and the status of women in particular, so as to enable them to contribute more effectively to the economic development of the area” (Tahal and the Ministry of Water Resources 30 January 1997: 1).

In this chapter and the next I will describe and analyze the negotiations that took place in regard to the conceptualization, budgeting, and implementation of the program during 1996 and 1997. I will refer to two sets of sources: my predecessor’s and my own project proposals, which will be delineated in this chapter; and the documentation arising from my visits to the villages, which I will consider in the next. In analyzing the programs’ proposals, reports, and cost estimates I follow Harold Garfinkel’s (1967) argument that documents reveal much more than they explicitly suggest. It will be demonstrated how both the written documents and my field encounters entailed intensive social engagements and effectively ended up without results. The reports Tovi Fenster and I submitted to the Israeli irrigation company, the Nepali government, and the World Bank were found to be invaluable in terms of the project partners’ interests in preventing the project’s implementation, and deceitful in terms of the manifest purpose of the project’s aim of empowering women in rural Nepal.

I suggest, more generally, that development project reports can be manipulatively used while being presented as genuinely needed for promoting social change. The implication of the self-evident need for reports emerges indirectly from various studies. One such example is Judith Justice’s study of health development in Nepal, in which she discusses the different kinds of information

planners need about the recipient country (Justice 1989). She stresses the fact that government and donor agencies produce many kinds of reports, “often voluminous: background papers, feasibility studies, annual reports, progress evaluations, and project proposals” (ibid.: 112). Nevertheless, although she indicates the reports’ limitations and weaknesses, she firmly recommends another kind of information that should be sought in planning social programs—that is, “detailed cultural information” (ibid.: 111). I would argue that it is not a matter of ensuring that the “right” kind of information is prepared that explains the conspicuous role of reports in development agencies’ operations, but rather it is the latent organizational needs involved in negotiations over contracts and in the ways agencies can extract profits. Thus, the written documents of the women’s project were needed for pursuing policy makers’ aims “rather than [to] inform” (Apthorpe 1997: 43).

Bargaining over content, essence, extent, timing, and so on was a dominant feature of daily encounters involving the women’s project, which took place in various settings: in the irrigation project offices, in the bachelors’ house, in the villages, and also in random locations. Two foreign consultants—my predecessor Tovi Fenster, who worked for the women’s project in 1996, and myself, who did so in 1997—played the chief role in the women’s project affair. We both submitted reports, including recommendations for implementation, to Tahal, to Nepal’s Ministry of Agriculture, and to the World Bank. Fenster had also carried out a survey of village women’s situation and needs.¹ Both of us traveled to dozens of villages, meeting the women there, listening to their expectations, and writing them down. The two of us presented our ideas and proposals to the women in the villages concerning their literacy potential and economic opportunities, and responded to their queries. We were involved in daily interactions with the irrigation project’s managers and staff, representing our ideas and the women’s responses, struggling continuously over acknowledgement and cooperation.

Although we differed with regard to the conceptual and financial emphases that should be placed on various activities—mainly in relation to literacy and the economic sphere—we both ended up recommending a vast project of literacy classes for some three hundred groups in the irrigation project area. Only ten classes were established. Tovi’s main achievement was a gender awareness-raising workshop for high-ranking officials of the irrigation project and others from local government offices and directors of women NGOs. She also succeeded in recruiting eight Women’s Groups Organizers (WGOs). The WGOs gathered together some thirty groups of women, who were expected to join the women’s program. My only substantial achievement was a course (the seminar) for a group of ten women from villages in the region, who were candidates for teaching literacy in their villages. Hence, the Gender Development Project turned out to be a fantasy, existing mainly in Tovi’s and my own reports. Having come to Nepal motivated to contribute to women’s advancement, this revelation shocked

me. This phantom project, and the story of the literacy classes for women as it emerges from various documents, is the focus of the present chapter.

Recommending Literacy: Fenster's Report

As self-evident as the gender activities project's purpose might appear to be, its purpose was ambiguous. Comparing Fenster's and my own definitions of the women project's aims, it appears that these entailed a certain vagueness and ambiguity. Fenster wrote: "The main objective of this Program is to find out ways and means to increase the standard of living in the Project area by looking at the needs of the population as expressed by women, as they are the producers, reproducers and maintain community roles" (Fenster 1996: 6). She also wrote, "The aim of the plan is to provide women (as well as men) in the Project area with skills and means to enable them to increase their standard of living" (ibid.: 17). Thus, at one point Fenster conceives of women as facilitators of economic improvement for the whole society, and in another place women's (and men's) needs are more explicitly expressed.

In my own report I stated, "The Project aims at increasing the income and economic power of these village women, who are at least equal contributors to the village families' economy and to national agricultural production" (Hertzog 1997: 8). Thus, Fenster defines her target as increasing the whole population's standard of living, and women are perceived as mediators in realizing this target. That is to say, from Fenster's point of view, women are treated by the plan mainly as a means for achieving wider social change. My own plan's rationale defines women as the main "target population" and the women's program sets out to provide them with the rights to which they are entitled, as equal partners and contributors to their families, communities, and country.

Both plans—Fenster's and my own—reflect the rhetoric used in many other similar programs, literacy programs in particular, which assume that access to education entails significant benefits. Among the anticipated outcomes are, for example, "community, self and socioeconomic worth, mobility, access to information and knowledge, rationality, morality, and orderliness" (Graff 1979: xv). Lawrence Summers, chief economist of the World Bank, stated that "the 'vicious cycle' of poverty could easily be transformed into a 'virtuous cycle' through the intervention of women's education" (Summers 1993: vii), and Robinson-Pant indicates that "Women's and girls' education has been taken up by many governments and development agencies as the key to improving the lives of poor families" (Robinson-Pant 2004: 1). Similarly, Mark Smith describes the anticipated benefits from informal and non-formal education programs in the South as the cultivation of: "a skilled work force to contribute to economic development, national unity and social cohesion, and in some countries, popular participation in politics. For the individual, it promised an escape from poverty, greater social prestige and mobility, and the prospect of a good job, preferably in town" (Smith 1998/2001²). Nevertheless, these assumptions and

expectations were already recognized as the “literacy myth” (Graff 1979: xv) by the end of the 1980s.

Interestingly, a project document, which was distributed to NGOs, invited them to propose the provision of “services for the promotion of women economic activities through the provision of women development programs” (Tahal 1997). However, the two reports and their budgets had little to do with “economic activities”. On the formal, declared level, the women’s project seemed to relate to and include both the economic needs of women and their “social and educational needs.” However, the written documents (mainly Fenster’s and my own reports) as well as the field data indicate that the latter were more readily acknowledged and favored by those in charge of the women’s project—the Israelis, the Nepali officials, and those at the World Bank. The importance attached to “social and educational needs” becomes apparent from Fenster’s report. Emphasizing the main concept of women’s development, she suggests: “Poverty eradication in the Project area can be carried out only if special attention is paid to social, educational and health needs together with economic and agricultural needs” (Fenster 1996: 17). She also states:

Initially, the basic assumption underlying this study was that efficient involvement of women in economic activities is one of the major means of alleviating poverty in the Project area. However, after a few weeks of fieldwork we realized that alleviating poverty in the project area could be achieved *only* if development includes social, educational and cultural components together with economic and agricultural aspects. We are now certain that putting emphasis on the efficient involvement of women in economic activities only is not sufficient to alleviate poverty in the area. (ibid.: 4, original emphasis)

It follows that the consultant’s original understanding that the essential practice needed for alleviating women’s poverty necessitates their “involvement in economic activities” had been dramatically changed. This shift in her analysis gained no support from her own study. The emphasis on “social, educational and cultural components” recommended by Fenster (interestingly writing in the first person plural) does not emerge from the “extensive work of the Project WGOs and AOs and the meeting held by Expatriate Expert [herself] with some twelve women groups from the three stages of the Project” (ibid.: 8). Rather, the evident conclusion that stemmed from numerous encounters with the women villagers was that “In all discussions held with the groups, economic needs were the first to be expressed” (ibid.: 8). Fenster also admits that: “An important factor in increasing the standard of living in the Project area is in increasing the yields of the crops and improving techniques of animal raising. This is also the request of many women in the groups. Since agricultural training is part of the Project activities it is recommended to carry out [*sic*] as many training programs as possible for women” (ibid.: 20). Yet,

“agricultural training” is very poorly budgeted (it is about 14% of the whole budget: \$60000 out of \$438475). This becomes even more striking in describing the economic needs, explicitly designated by the women as their main needs:

Agricultural activities and animal raising: all women expressed their needs and interests in having agricultural training. The areas of training that they wished to acquire were mainly: cropping and vegetable growing, animal husbandry, poultry keeping, and goat rearing. *Credit:* the need for credit was universal. All women expressed their interest in obtaining credit and complained about the very bureaucratic process of receiving credit from the banks. *Non-agricultural activities:* several women groups expressed their wish to have training in sewing and cutting. (ibid.: 9)

Moreover, the main part of the budget, as it appears in the estimation, allocates most of the funds to “development packages.” This vague category obscures the fact that literacy classes were the core of the program and budget: some \$300,000 out the \$440,000 total. When the additional sum of over \$40,000 is added to this amount—allocated, whether directly or indirectly, for hiring the expatriate gender consultant, who stayed in Nepal for some two months during the summer of 1996, a sum which does not appear in Fenster’s report—the figures suggest that a much smaller proportion of the budget and the program was allocated for economic projects. In fact, only \$60,000 was allocated for any economically oriented activity, namely animal keeping. Apart from development packages and animal keeping, other sections in the budget were: group formation, salaries for WGOs and Women Officers (WOs), bicycles for the WGOs, gender workshops, stationery and supplies, refreshments, and 10 per cent for miscellaneous expenses, which amounted to about \$40,000.

A deeper look into Fenster’s explanations of the “development packages” brings the centrality of literacy into clearer focus. She explains, “Literacy programs are the bases for any desired change in lifestyle and any attempt to increase the living standards of the population in the area should start with such a program” (ibid.: 19). Considering the centrality of the literacy classes to the women’s project, the meager and generalized information about the extent of female illiteracy provided in the “demographic characteristics” of the irrigation project area is unconvincing. Fenster claims that “there are no accurate figures as to the female/male proportions among literate and illiterate people” (ibid.: 7). However, she extrapolates from a socioeconomic survey of 1992, which states that over 50 per cent of people in the irrigation project area are illiterate, as well as from some obscure “national figures” that only 25% of the literate population are women. (ibid.). I suggest, therefore, that no evident need for literacy was established through conclusive data, nor had it been definitely requested by the women.

Focusing on literacy served to ignore the economic needs and public services that the women articulated as essential for their livelihood. In other words,

the village women's struggles with regard to poverty, scarcity, and the forces of hegemony were more significant, from their point of view, than those concerning the lack of reading and writing skills. The process of shifting from economic needs to literacy can be explained by Fenster's, and my own, unintentional compliance with our employer's (Tahal) and host's (the Nepali heads of the irrigation project) expectations.³

The prominence of "social and educational" needs is constructed in Fenster's report by referring mainly to the "social needs" of village women. The heading "literacy needs" appears at the top of the list. Other headings listed under "social needs" are topics which were hardly mentioned by the women (according to Fenster's study), among which were: marriage at a young age, women trafficking, polygamy, male drinking and violence in the family (ibid.: 9). The latter is described in great detail. This generalized emphasis on grave social malfunctioning is enhanced by enclosing it in a box. Fenster's conclusion is: "Women's needs and interests in the Project area are not only in Agriculture. Most of them face problems of male alcoholism and violence in the family, lack of basic health facilities and need advice in family planning" (ibid.: 8).

Thus, the "social rationale" behind the proposed program is found to be a generalizing, stigmatizing assessment, which implied the backwardness of local society. It follows therefore, that the gender development project aimed, from the point of view of Fenster's proposal, at a kind of social change that would advance a problematic, traditional, patriarchal society toward a literate, modern, egalitarian social order. This perspective implied the essential need for professional intervention, namely for experts trained in solving "special social problems".

The processes of attaining public acknowledgement of special social problems that call for the allocation of public funds and professional intervention have been discussed in several studies. To cite a few examples: Joseph Gusfield (1980) pointed to the connection between the construction of public problems—drinking and driving in this case—and the hidden interests of institutions. Lea Shamgar-Handelman (1986) described the process by which the status and categorization of Israeli war widows is constructed and public resources are allocated for dealing with the special problem, as well as the systems of "special care" and the interests of workers and organizations that develop in this context. Dina Siegel (1989) discussed the process by which the problem of battered women comes to be seen as a "severe social problem," thus constructing groups of allegedly violent men, to serve the social services' interests. In my own study of the absorption of Ethiopian immigrants into Israel (Hertzog 1999) I described how the "caring" stance and "professional" approach of the absorbing agencies serve as rationales for their patronage over Ethiopian immigrants and control of the resources allotted for their "treatment". Finally, David Mosse describes how development consultants develop "a professional overview of the domain" in which they have expertise, thus insisting that their project is

“dangerously ill-informed” and in need of “additional research or data collection for ‘proper planning’” (Mosse 2005: 135).

These studies suggest that “special care” does not necessarily help the needy group. Very often it creates the “problem.” James Ferguson’s (1990) study, for example, clearly points to this. He argues that the constructed “problematic” situation of Lesotho was employed to indicate the self-evident need for aid intervention. The World Bank’s funds and expertise were enlisted to develop and modernize Lesotho’s “traditional peasant society” which was “virtually untouched by modern economic development” (ibid.: 27). The outcomes of that “development” initiative did not, in fact, benefit Lesotho. Rather, it has enfeebled it.

This implied connection, between publicly acknowledged “social problems” on the one hand, and the consequent need for assistance and the self-evident necessity of expert intervention on the other, becomes evident in Fenster’s report. Recommending the nomination of “Women Organization Supervisor [WOS]”, and “Local consultant” (Fenster 1996: 21), she suggests that the “expatriate expert” (herself) “will visit the project every few months for assessment of the Program” (ibid). Although she recommends that a WOS should be hired by local heads of the irrigation project, and that a Nepali “woman professional” should be hired by Tahal as a “Local Consultant”, Fenster nevertheless recommends that an “expatriate expert” be employed as well. Also, the difference in terms should be noted: the relatively lower status (“a Women Organization Supervisor”) is associated with the woman to be employed by the local heads of the irrigation project, whereas a higher status is attributed to the Nepali woman who will be employed by the overseas heads of the irrigation project (a professional “local consultant”), and the highest status (“the expatriate expert”) is attributed to an overseas person who will be hired by heads of the irrigation project overseas. Thus, a hierarchy of prominence and prestige is constructed, in which professionalism and prestige are equated to varying degrees with locality versus foreignness.

Examination of the third heading of “women’s needs”, namely “health needs,” offers another example of Fenster’s manner of stigmatizing the population. Under the subtitle “health care” Fenster writes: “The population in the Project area suffers from many diseases and therefore complained about the lack of basic services. They need a doctor’s visit at least once a week and a nearby clinic. The nearby Hospitals for the Project people are Bhairahawa and Butwal. Maternity care is also absent at these villages” (ibid.: 10). Stating that the population suffers from many diseases as a taken-for-granted fact and tying this to women’s explicit request for improved health services exposes a latent bias. Thus, the lack of proper health services in rural parts of Nepal, which women complained about and which was probably the outcome of “bad governance, oppression, corruption and marginalization of people, especially women” (Sharma and Prasain 2004: 164), becomes secondary in Fenster’s discussion to the “many diseases” the village population is alleged to suffer from.⁴

Although Nepali women are discriminated against (see, e.g., Bennett 1983; Subedi 1993; Acharya 2001; Bhattachan 2001), the effect of portraying them as a helpless collective of victims, apart from homogenizing them (Tamang 2002),⁵ conceals the central role of state policies in failing to provide basic services and its responsibility for discriminatory practices. Fenster's description of poor hygienic conditions which the people endured, their negligence and wretchedness, fosters a stigmatized image of the population, their weakness, inferiority, and need for help. Moreover, emphasizing the diseases of the villagers establishes a social and hierarchal distance between them and those who study and treat them. In other words, when Fenster describes village populations as "suffering from many diseases" they are portrayed as collectively needy and her position is identified, consequently, as a professional, distinct and superior "other" who provides the crucial help.

Judith Justice's study of the cultural dimensions of primary health care in Nepal (Justice 1989) supports the argument that the problem of providing basic health services can be understood in terms of Nepali government's and international health agencies' policies and practices rather than the rural population's inherent and collective weakness. Justice argues that "many features" of health programs are not adjusted to "local conditions and cultures" (ibid.: xi–xii). She claims that "one central problem in providing the best possible health care to rural Nepal is the communication gaps between the cultures involved" (ibid.: 151). However, I suggest that the problem of providing poor services to rural Nepal is connected to organizational and personal preferences and interests (as Justice's book demonstrates) rather than to cultural gaps. Although Justice acknowledges this understanding, arguing that donor agencies often take "a course of action that has more to do with their own needs than with the needs of their beneficiaries" (ibid: 151), she perceives this conduct as the outcome of "the demands of the administrative structure and culture" (ibid). The "two major cultural boundaries" between international health policy and its outcomes are the ones that "separate the Western 'rational' bureaucratic culture of the donor agencies from the Westernized bureaucratic culture of the Nepal government, with its traditional roots; and the other separates the Nepal government from the traditional village cultures" (ibid.: 151–52). This "Westernized" versus "traditional" dichotomy, which reintroduces the concept of modernization, has been discussed in the Introduction and was rejected as ethnocentric and, more importantly, as legitimizing neocolonialist intervention in developing countries.

Illiteracy and the Invocation of Foreign Expertise: My Own Report

A similar analysis can be easily applied to my own gender activities report (Hertzog 1997). The first and central part of the two main sections of my estimation of the program costs refers to literacy classes, with the second section devoted to development projects. It appears that Fenster and myself were aware

in some way that the economic activities part of the women's project was of secondary importance at best, and that these activities were invoked in a token manner. The most striking example of this is the footnote attached to my work plan (*ibid*: annex 2.1). This detailed the proposed stages of program implementation month by month from September (when I left Nepal, and when none of the literacy classes yet had commenced) to December 1997, and from January until March 1998.

This footnote states that "Economic Development Activities [are] to be added at a later stage (January 1998 at the latest)" (*ibid*). It follows that by the time I completed my report I was well aware of the fact that implementation of the economic activities had been postponed until after the literacy classes were completed. Moreover, the fact that this part of the women's project was mentioned in the footnotes (of an annex) suggests that it became clear to me that the economic activities should not be taken seriously. Furthermore, in my introduction to the cost estimation for the women's development and economic activities program, I report that "in discussing the issue of content to be offered to the groups of women, with Mr Thapa and Mrs Khanal, it has been decided that literacy training will be ... the focus of the Project at the first stage" (*ibid*: page 1 in annex 1). Thus, I explicitly acknowledged and accepted the prominent role of literacy classes. However, the decision, which implied a significant shift from the main purpose of the gender activities project, clearly undermined my main position, as mentioned in the recommendations section of the report. I state there that, "the project aims at increasing the income and economic power of these village women, who are at least equal contributors to the village families' economy and to the national agriculture" (*ibid*: 8).

Another additional emphasis in my report relates to the firm justification of the need for the services of a foreign consultant. In the last part of my recommendations, I suggest:

It is recommended that [an] expatriate consultant should visit the Project for monitoring, assessment and supervision purposes. The consultant's first visit in December 1997 will serve to assess the implementation of the program during the first four months of its implementation by the local consultant, WGOs and AOs, as well as for discussing with them their experiences and problems in the field. This visit will also serve to supervise the preparation activities carried out prior to the widening of the Project targets, from 70 literacy classes by the end of 1997 to the opening of some 270 new literacy classes in 1998. Preliminary evaluation of literacy training outcomes and progress should also be done in this visit, thus to enable changes and adaptations of the concept and methods of training. Moreover, the December 1997 consultant's visit is recommended for the purpose of supervising the first stages of economic activities implementation, scheduled to start in the second quarter of 1998.

The second visit of the expatriate consultant is suggested to take place in March 1998. At this stage an advanced assessment of the program's implementation should be made and the economic activities should be reassessed and supervised, in regard to the extent, content and timing of preparations carried out towards the full implementation of the program. Both visits, in December 1997 and in March 1998, are considered as important in terms of offering encouragement, professional support and advice to local consultant and WGOs in particular, and also to others in charge of the program, officers and field workers alike. (ibid.: 10–11)

It is indeed interesting that I present myself as an expert not only for literacy classes, gender issues (in particular), and development (in general), but also for planning, assessing, and supervising economic activities of the women's project. Most importantly, I suggest that this text is perfectly adjusted to the "correct" rhetoric of development, and in particular it is adjusted to my employers' expectations. It clearly reflects both Fenster's and my own acknowledgement of, and compliance with, their intentions—that is, that none of the economic activities would in fact take place.

The vital need for visits by a foreign consultant to the women's project gains additional support in Leon's letter to Thapa, attached to the beginning of my report. The entire letter focuses on my recommendation of additional visits by the expatriate expert to the women's project. In the last and longest paragraph of his letter, Leon writes:

We would like to draw your attention again to Mrs E. Hertzog's recommendations on pages 8 to 11 of the report in general and to her last recommendation on pages 10 and 11 regarding two (2) visits of an expatriate consultant, in December 1997, and in March 1998, for the purpose of monitoring, assessment and supervision of the implementation of the work plan suggested by her for the empowerment of women in the BLGWP Area.

This letter hints at the hidden agenda behind the over-emphasized importance of the foreign expert's visits to Nepal. Leon's firm encouragement and insistence that I should include that recommendation in my report reveals the fact that something more than a matter of professional requirement was involved. I complied reluctantly, having my own reservations concerning the need for a foreign consultant and feeling that it was not appropriate for me to recommend myself, either directly or indirectly. My instinctive response exposes further the manipulative use of the foreign expert role in the project, "disguised as technical expertise" (Mosse 2005: 266).⁶

Moreover, by the time I wrote my report I was well aware of the fact that employing expatriate experts was crucial to Tahal's profits. This was explicitly revealed to me in one of my chats with Leon. When I asked him how Tahal would

benefit from the women's project, he replied that Tahal's sole profit is based on Anita's and my own employment, through per-diem costs. Thus, Tahal's and Leon's core interest in the women's project was connected to the profit made by hiring experts. As my salary was much higher than Anita's, employing me entailed greater income for the irrigation company. Therefore, my visits to Nepal were crucial from Tahal's financial point of view.

A final point of comparison between the two reports can be made regarding the budget. Two conspicuous differences emerge when comparing Fenster's cost estimation and my own: the difference in the proportional allocation of the budget for literacy classes (or "development packages" in Fenster's terms) and economic activities; and the difference between the total sum of each budget. In Fenster's budget, economic activities (more specifically, animal keeping) are allocated \$60,000 out of the \$440,000 total budget. In my own budget, the economic section is allocated \$130,000 out of a total of \$288,500. This substantial difference in the proportion of money allocated for economic and literacy activities can be explained in terms of our different assessments of the relative significance of the two spheres of activity. More important is the considerable difference between our estimated total costing of the project: Fenster's grand total is \$440,000, and mine is \$288,500. Nevertheless, even my own, smaller, budget was hardly spent on the women's program. Moreover, although the literacy program was, as suggested above, the core of the women's project, and although its budget was reduced considerably, only a small part of it was actually implemented.⁷

The differences of cost and emphasis between our budgets can be explained in relation to the point in time at which Tovi Fenster and I played our role in the gender activities project. When Fenster came to Bhairahawa, Tahal's involvement in the irrigation project was greater because the company had about two more years left before withdrawing from it and transferring the constructed irrigation system to the villagers. This enabled Tahal's representative a greater measure of negotiating power when facing the local managers of the irrigation project. By the time I arrived in Bhairahawa, Tahal's mission was nearly over. This situation explains the intense pressure that Tahal's representative exerted on their Nepali partners in order to extract some additional benefits for Tahal out of the women's project, before the irrigation project contract was terminated. It follows that the longer the Nepali party could defer the implementation of the women's project, the better their chances of canceling the women's project and using the money for their own preferred purposes.

This conclusion clearly emerges from letters I received from Leon and Anita a couple of months after I left Nepal. Having no idea about what happened with the literacy classes, I received a letter from Leon in November 1997, in which he wrote that eleven literacy classes had commenced and were running smoothly. He added that "the nine-day Seminar which was planned to train twenty village teachers and the consequent opening of twenty literacy classes has been delayed

because of lack of funding.”⁸ Anita’s letter, which arrived not long afterwards, informed me as follows:

Our ten literacy classes are running nicely. The ten teachers are taking their classes very seriously. There are thirty women in each class. All women appreciate the studies. We took their first exam on Dec. 11. We provided them agriculture training from November 9 to November 12 with the help of Mr Lama, Chief of Agriculture Division, and gave them free vegetable seeds. Veterinary training was held on November 23 to 28 for ten literacy classes.⁹

I still do not know which of the reported number of classes—ten or eleven—is the correct one. More important is the conclusion that in the end the women’s program involved a lot of commotion over almost nothing.

Successful Negotiations and Stalling for Time

It appears that the entire gender activities project was not meant to succeed. The existence of the women’s project was, therefore, mainly virtual—it existed in the reports and in budgets, but it was not really about to be implemented, whether geared toward economic development or toward educational and social change. However, arguing that none of the parties involved intended to carry out the women’s project from the start paints only a partial picture. Tahal’s motivation and efforts at realizing this project were explicitly articulated, although only with regard to employing experts, which benefited them (as suggested above). The World Bank may also have been genuinely interested in implementing the women’s project, which could serve to demonstrate its contribution to women’s empowerment. As the World Bank did not have to allocate any additional budget for it—the Nepalese were expected to siphon off a portion of the World Bank loan for the irrigation project to the women’s project—the women’s project must have appealed to it. The Nepalese were the only party that voiced implicit and explicit objections to the women’s project from the start.

The Nepali party, it would seem, succeeded in preventing the realization of the women’s project, while ostensibly negotiating its implementation with the other two partners. Nevertheless, while striving to achieve their goals, the heads of the irrigation project probably changed their views and adjusted them to the ongoing dynamic situation. I suggest that the precise goal of their interventions was not completely clear to any of them while negotiating over the women program’s budget. I assume that eventually both partners, the Israeli and especially the Nepali, gained more than they initially desired.

I would argue that the parties involved in the women’s project—the Nepalese, the Israelis, and the World Bank—were only concerned with providing village women with economic resources and/or literacy only insofar as doing so paid lip-service to international gender trends that had to be endured.

This understanding emerges, I have argued, from examining the various documents. It was also exposed verbally by the heads of the irrigation project on several occasions. One example concerns the encounter Anita and I had with Thapa, when we returned to the irrigation project center on the first day of our visits to the villages. Describing our impressions and ideas, I said that living conditions in the first village we visited (Ekala) were harsh and that the proposed options for literacy classes were inadequate. I then raised the idea of constructing huts. Thapa rejected this idea instantly, claiming that the World Bank would only approve budgets for instruction and definitely not for infrastructure. However, he suggested that people in the villages could construct study huts themselves. He seemed to fancy this idea and developed it further, proposing a competition be held and explaining that “a healthy competition between the two political groups in the village would motivate people to compete over the chance to construct the hut, if we promise that the winning group will earn the literacy class as a reward.” Hence, both Thapa, the Nepali director of the irrigation project, and the World Bank people would not consider investing in facilities for village women, as these cost much more money than paying local women instructors.

Despite Thapa’s objection, I went on trying to convince him that the irrigation project should construct study huts, arguing that they would also benefit the UNICEF children, who had unbearable study conditions. He ended the discussion by saying that the matter would be taken care of. However, to my surprise, Thapa willingly accepted Anita’s idea of offering the women students certain perks, such as refreshments, remarking that, “it is possible to buy some biscuits.” Thapa also seemed to support my suggestion of establishing a small fund, in which small amounts of money would be saved, for the women’s use after they completed the literacy classes. He proposed that I include that suggestion in the proposal to the World Bank. Thapa also accepted the idea of purchasing sewing machines, though not before I assured him that they would be for collective use in vocational training courses and not for personal use. All these meant minimal costs and delayed implementation.

My idea of marketing women’s handicrafts in Kathmandu was also rejected by Thapa. He said:

Let’s run the courses first and only afterwards will it be possible to talk about marketing. Marketing products in Kathmandu does not have the slightest chance to succeed, because of the high costs of delivery and their low market prices. Besides, I have tried a few times to market agricultural products, potatoes for example. It never worked. But in the future we might try the local market.

Thapa’s reservations with regard to encouraging private, small-scale ventures, finds support in John Whelpton’s analysis of Nepal’s development economy

between 1951 and 1991 (Whelpton 2005). Referring to a 1991 government report, he argues that, “The cottage-industry training programme had been of doubtful value because, even if equipped with adequate skills, the home producer was often not able to compete with mass production” (ibid.: 149). However, Thapa’s comment—“Let’s run the courses first and only afterwards will it be possible to talk about marketing”—is the significant part of his response to my proposal. That is, literacy courses were the main activity he was willing to consider, rather than any economic enterprise.

Unsurprisingly, Thapa was very pleased with Anita’s suggestion of incorporating lectures on health, family planning, and so forth into the literacy classes, and also with her ideas about enrichment activities for the WGOs. He added that we should include in our plans enrichment activities for village teachers, because they should be empowered. Thapa’s approval of Anita’s ideas can be readily understood as him conforming with then current views on gender issues, in line with the policies of UNESCO (1988) and the World Bank (1990), and with early 1990s literature, such as discussed by Elizabeth King and Anne Hill (1993). King and Hill suggest: “A better educated mother has fewer and better educated children. She is more productive at home and in the workplace. And she raises a healthier family since she can better apply improved hygiene and nutritional practices” (ibid.: 12). The dominant approach to women in development (WID) in the 1990s viewed women as mothers whose central occupation is child rearing and, consequently, this approach typically focused on family planning programs. Robinson-Pant claims that this approach remains unchanged and that “the reason for promoting women’s literacy (and girls’ education) is still to contribute to their roles as mothers and workers” (Robinson-Pant 2004: 16). Discourses and practices that ignored women’s autonomous agency were criticized by scholars like Stacey Leigh Pigg (1992), Geeta Chowdhury (1995), Fiona Leach (2000), and Priti Chopra (2004).

However, Thapa’s support for Anita’s ideas can also be seen as the outcome of his and other irrigation project heads’ desire to keep Anita and me busy with literacy and family health instruction, issues that were as remote as possible from the irrigation project and its economic activities. Thapa’s reactions in the meeting with Anita and me, and Pandit’s supportive attitude during our joint visits to the villages and during discussions over various difficulties involved in the implementation of the women’s program, may still suggest that both were genuinely interested in implementing the women’s project, and the literacy program in particular. Pandit promised to help open the literacy classes. He offered his help in guaranteeing that the needed books would be purchased on time. He also engaged enthusiastically in Anita’s and my deliberations concerning suitable classrooms in the villages. Thapa similarly conveyed the impression that he sincerely considered the literacy program as important and feasible. When we met, following our first visits to the villages, he responded pragmatically to each and every one of our suggestions, whether in the affirmative or in the negative. Thapa

seemed to treat the women's project as if he had to make technical decisions regarding a program that was to be implemented shortly.

Yet, in examining Thapa's attitude to the women's project on other occasions, the impression emerges that Thapa did not intend the project to be realized. Thapa avoided hiring foreign consultants for a very long time, and in fact he did everything in his power to prevent it. Moreover, Thapa rejected not only the overseas experts, he also ensured the long delay in hiring the local consultant. Eventually he capitulated after heavy pressure was put on him by the World Bank and Tahal, who demanded that he hire both the expatriate and local consultants. It is reasonable to assume that Thapa enjoyed the support of his superiors in the Ministry of Agriculture. This conclusion gains support from Leon's comment that the Nepali authorities were reluctant to "do things" unless they were forced to.

The reluctance of the Nepali officials, and their hostility toward expatriate experts, is also mentioned by Judith Justice (1989) and John Whelpton (2005). Justice reports that "the flood of foreign advisors and representatives" were considered by Nepali officials as "part of the aid package," "one of the 'penalties' of aid," "too abundant," and that it was impossible to cut back their numbers. Nepalese, she recounts, "questioned the high cost even for those whom they considered most helpful" (Justice 1989: 37–38). Whelpton describes the reluctance of the Nepali government toward American advisors in the 1950s and 1960s, who attempted to "urge reform within the administrative system" (Whelpton 2005: 129).¹⁰

The Nepalese did not object to the irrigation project. However, the women's program was perceived and treated differently, and the Nepalese objected to it. A comment made by Gupta, the local consultant on farmers' participation employed by Tahal, further supports this line of argument, and illustrates the reservations the Nepali directors of the irrigation project had with regard to the gender activities project. In conversations held between our visits (which he joined a few times), he said to me:

They [the village women] do not believe that anything will come out of this project. What can we do? The people in high places are not interested in the projects for women. We are dealing with irrigation, what do we have to do with women development? That is why I always tell people [the female WGOs and the male AOs] not to promise anything and explain that the project will be implemented only later within half a year. All we need is to start one group to break the ice.

The fact that Gupta was a local high-ranking official, and was at the same time employed by Tahal, makes his comment indicative with regard to both the Nepali authorities and the Israeli company. Thus, the "people in high places" were reluctant regarding the women's project and Tahal was clearly aware of this. Indeed Gupta's expression, "All we need is to start one group to break the

ice,” exposes the deceitful intentions of the Nepalese. As far as Tahal’s people were concerned, they were either indifferent or shared similar reservations, as is apparent from Leon’s comment following our visit to Ekala. He said to me that the women’s project did not stand a real chance, because:

as you have seen, these women, they cannot really read. In any case this is not serious, these women cannot learn to read and write within the planned course of time of the classes, especially since they are going to be very tired, when coming home after working all day in the fields. Think about children in Israel, how many years they study. And besides, this teacher, she can hardly read herself, how can she possibly teach other women?

Leon made similar comments often. As Tahal’s representative, his reservations seemed to echo his employer’s attitude towards the women’s project. If this view reflects the basic attitude of the decision-makers, whether Nepali or from Tahal, it follows that the women’s project was imposed on the Nepalese, while Tahal was scarcely inclined to struggle for the project’s implementation beyond hiring its consultants. Therefore, it was only a matter of time before the women’s program fell apart. In this context, Thapa’s encouraging remarks during his meeting with Anita and me can be explained as a manipulative tactic to gain time until the women’s project could be disposed of completely. His cooperative behavior could have also stemmed from a fear that the World Bank would succeed in imposing the program on the Nepali government and hence he was maneuvering over the minimum amount to be carried out.

While expressing their objections about the women’s program, Leon, Gupta and Thapa—together the Israeli and Nepali heads of the irrigation project—employed various arguments to persuade me, Anita, and probably themselves as well, that the project was not feasible. Their arguments pushed responsibility away from themselves and onto the village women, women “who cannot really read ... and are tired,” who “do not believe that anything will come out” of the women’s project, and who are not relevant to an irrigation project. They also blamed people “in high places” who “are not interested in the projects for women.” These arguments implicitly justified women’s exclusion from men’s spheres such as irrigation, their denial of resources, and their stigmatization as backward and ignorant.

The apparent pressure the World Bank exerted on local heads of the irrigation project to move ahead with implementation could be seen as reflecting the Bank’s sincere interest in women’s development. It is also clear that local officials seemed eager to satisfy the World Bank and to show progress. However, it appears that the World Bank would not or could not provide sufficient pressure to ensure the realization of the program. Moreover, Thapa’s gesture—hiring the one and only class teacher with his own money, a very unusual act in itself—reveals the covert indifference of the World Bank concerning the implementation of the literacy

program (and certainly of the economic activities part of it). Apparently, the Nepali officials knew that they did not need to demonstrate any real progress and that what became known as “Thapa’s class” was, in David Mosse’s words, just “a paradoxical ritual” (Mosse 2005: 166)¹¹ which was good enough to satisfy the World Bank’s representatives. This episode revealed the deceitful aspect of the whole women’s program, and symbolized the collusion of all three parties—the World Bank, the Nepali government, and the Israeli company—in pretending that the literacy program was on its way.

It is inconceivable that the World Bank’s staff were unaware of the fact that more than a year after the start of the women’s project only one class (out of some 300 originally planned) had been opened. This means that they colluded in the charade. I assume that if I was able to discern the true state of affairs on my first visit to the villages, the World Bank’s people could have assessed the situation just as well. For their own reasons, they seemed to consider the only class that was operating in Ekala as representative of the women project’s progress. Moreover, the conditions in which learning took place, which were noticeable to the World Bank delegation, did not seem to disturb them, as no comment was made in the Bank’s letter concerning the tiny, dark, and muddy hut in which the women were expected to acquire their literacy skills.

Project Reports, the Social Order, and Developers’ Compliance

Garfinkel’s argument, that documents are inseparable characteristics of the social order which they describe” (Garfinkel 1967: 201), finds much support in the analysis presented above with regard to the two women project’s reports and the irrigation project heads’ discourse. Analyzing these seemingly straightforward professional reports and some of the dialogues relating to the women project’s implementation exposes concealed organizational and personal interests of the people and organizations involved in the women’s project. It reflects the irrigation project’s hierarchical structure and reveals the adherence of the authors of the women project’s reports to wider discourses and practices concerning gender equality, development ideology, social change, and so forth. However, the reports were more than “inseparable characteristics” of the social order; they also demonstrate how and why people, idealistic and committed as they may be, succumb to organizational dictates, demonstrating “obedient compliance” (Weber 1948: 229) to the “moral discipline” of authorities which imply the “self-denial” (Weber 1948: 95) of their moral and professional self-declared positions.

Moreover, examining the figures, categories, priorities, and certainly the terminology contained and employed in these reports unveils the “secrets” of the women’s project: the papers served to impose agreement and acceptance on resisting participants at all levels. The written papers testify to Fenster’s and my own tacit agreement to substitute (higher budgeted and more concretely implemented) economic needs with a (flexibly changed) obscure budget for literacy classes; they signal an acceptance of the Nepali party’s *fait accompli* and the unquestioned need

of Tahal's expertise for the women project's maintenance and success. Hence, the reports played a significant role in overcoming resistance to the imposed cooperation: the gender consultants' potential reservations with regard to the changing of emphasis in their professional understanding of the women's project and the Nepali officials' resistance with regard to accepting Tahal's professional intervention. The reports and the daily encounters that took place with relation to them enhanced the belief that something was really happening and endorsed the women's project into the ongoing organizational bargaining.

In what follows I will use ethnographic data, collected during visits to villages in the area of the irrigation project, to describe this bargaining process concerning the women project's purposes and prospects in the field. Analyzing some of the encounters that took place in the villages, and the interactions that followed them in the irrigation project offices, reveals the women's project to have been a deceitful social drama.

Notes

1. Fenster's study focused on "identifying both existing constraints and assets in order to formulate a plan which will meet the needs of the people in the Project Area" (Fenster 1996: 6). Her study is based on discussions with twelve women's groups, and interviews with the irrigation project officials, state officials, and NGO activists.
2. Source: *infed* <http://www.infed.org/biblio/colonialism.htm> (Retrieved 29 September 2010).
3. A more detailed discussion of this point will be presented at a later stage.
4. Lack of proper health services in rural parts of Nepal are extensively discussed by Justice (1989). Sharma and Prasain argue that the conflict between the Maoists and the state "has behind it a long history of bad governance ... The government has been at best a remote entity for most rural women, and its programmes have not been responsive to their needs and aspirations" (Sharma and Prasain 2004: 164). They suggest that rural women's massive support for the Maoists is better understood against this background.
5. Tamang criticizes the homogenization of Nepali women in development discourse, the denial of the heterogeneity of women's lived experience, and the Panchayat elite's "unifying national narrative ... to legitimate their rule over a heterogeneous populace" (Tamang 2002: 170).
6. Mosse discusses the manipulative use of foreign consultants by development agencies. He argues that consultants are "contributing to a broader relationship of donor power and patronage" (Mosse 2005: 266 n.6).
7. According to a letter written by Anita ten classes were opened after I left Nepal, whereas Leon's letter mentions 11 classes.
8. Letter from Leon, 10 November 1997.
9. Letter from Anita, received by fax, 19 December 1997.
10. Latent and sometimes outright resentment toward foreign experts is discussed in various works (see esp. Yunus 1998). In the context of education programs funded by the World Bank, Mark Smith (1998/2001), for example, points to the indignation of the South toward the World Bank's policies and pervasive influence in education, which rest "heavily on the work of foreign, Northern scholars and agency staff." *infed* <http://www.infed.org/biblio/colonialism.htm> (Retrieved 29 September 2010).
11. According to Mosse, "paradoxical rituals" are events "in which the power of the donor over the project is publicly acknowledged but practically denied" (Mosse 2005: 166).



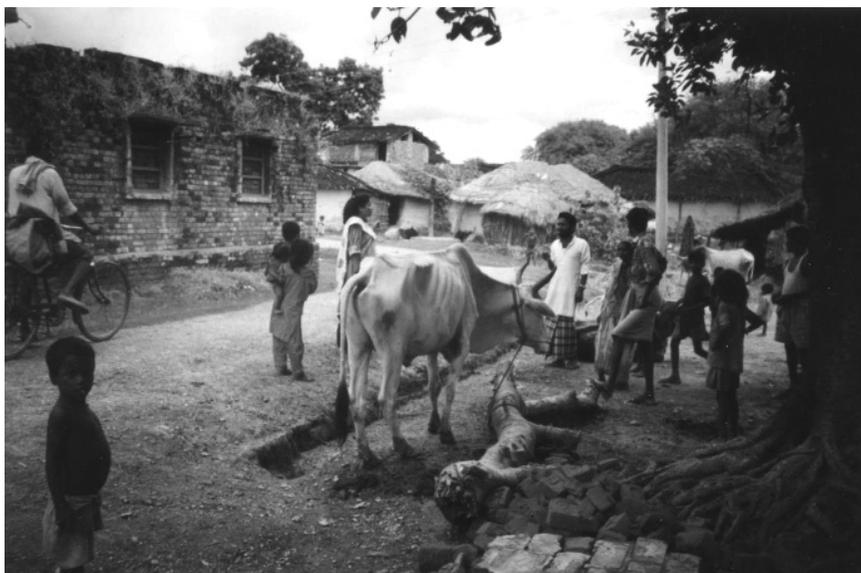
1. Main street in Bhairahawa



2. "Little Buddha" at the center of Bhairahawa



3. A village scene



4. A village scene



5. A tea-party of the expatriate functionaries' wives in the Shangri-la hotel



6. The project's jeep stuck in the mud



7. At a meeting with village women



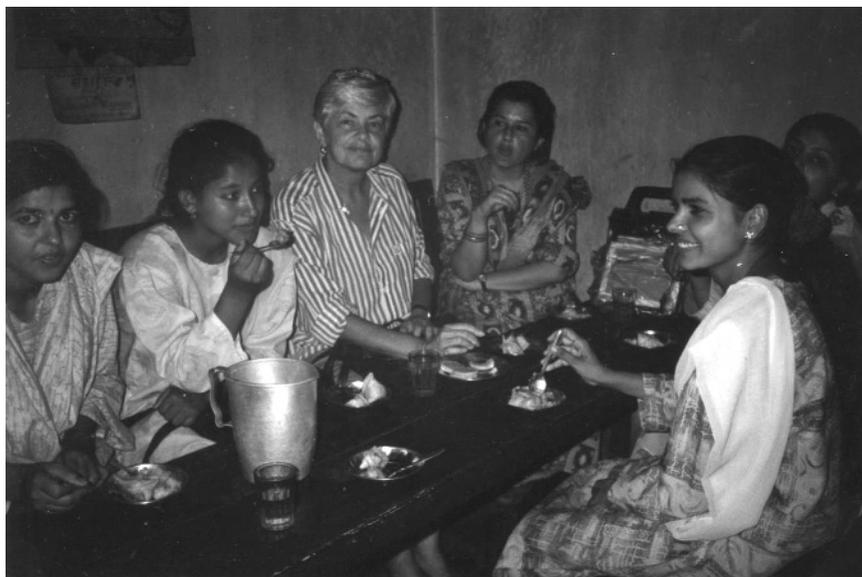
8. At a meeting with village women



9. Meeting women in the village



10. Thumb print – village women approving their acceptance to be included in a literacy course



11. Eating samosas with the WGOs



12. Cool drinks at a kiosk – Two of the WGOs



13. WGOs



14. Gathering in a project office