

## PREFACE



This book is about male domination in international gender development projects, based on research in Nepal. The book offers a feminist critique of the work of both international and local agencies, and shows how they reproduce gender stereotypes and preserve gender inequality. It is based on data I collected while working as a gender consultant for an irrigation company in rural Nepal. The book focuses on male-dominated agencies that manipulate projects intended for the benefit of women. It describes how high-ranking male officials in various agencies in Nepal cooperated in subverting resources allocated to women, while employing a well established rhetoric of gender equality to advance their own interests. Thus, women's marginalization is preserved and further manifested through a dialectic process.

The analysis also elaborates on the hierarchical relations and ethnocentric behavior that emerge from the bureaucratically structured polarization of power between developing and developed, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, urban and rural, employers and employees, men and women, local and expatriate, consulting and consulted, and patrons and clients in Nepal.

Apart from discussing a specific case study of gender relations in the context of the development project in which I was involved, the book seeks to stress the prominence of bureaucratic characteristics in the gamut of development projects. I argue that the processes and social relations that take place in this context should be explicated in terms of power relations that are unavoidably embedded in any bureaucratic setting. Examining the enforced introduction of a women's project into a male-dominated irrigation project reveals unrecognized and denied structured gender power differentials in particular, but it also reveals control mechanisms which are systematically built into organizations. Analyzing development projects in this vein provides a rationale for the persistence of development projects, although they are consistently described as "failures". It seems, therefore, that projects do not "fail" but rather succeed in serving, in complex, indirect, and manipulative ways, the varied interests of organizations and individuals. Analyzing the bureaucratic phenomenon also facilitates the understanding of the paradox that women's empowerment projects mainly serve the interests of male officials. In other words, a look at why a gender project scheduled to be part of a larger irrigation project did not materialize entails the exposure of the gendered structure of the wider society. Both

this structure and the women's project within the irrigation project are based on males' domination.

The "gender development program" discussed in this book<sup>1</sup> was scheduled because of pressure that the World Bank put on the Nepali government in the mid 1990s to take upon itself women-centered projects, offering a loan of some \$500,000 for their implementation. The Bank claimed that women's advancement would accelerate the pace of social and economic change in the rural areas of Nepal.

As the book progresses it becomes clearer how and why a project intended for women's advancement was used for the benefit of men, and failed to provide women with any of the resources promised. It describes in detail the implicit and explicit interests of all parties: Nepali government officials, heads of the World Bank, and directors of Tahal, the Israeli engineering company. It looks at the tactics they used to prevent the realization of the original aims of the scheme, and at their collaboration in making the funds allocated for women accessible to men. It illustrates the numerous manipulative strategies employed in day-to-day activities and their impact on social relationships, and particularly on gender relations. Moreover, the analysis illustrates how female employees collaborated, although reluctantly and sometimes unconsciously, with the organization's hidden agenda.

The ethnography demonstrates how organizations enhance recognition of the self-evident need for their services, by describing the village women, explicitly or implicitly, as needy and backward. However, the social and economic competence of these women, which is amply documented in the data, contradict this image. The rural women lack economic resources, yet are offered literacy programs that they believe to be only marginally needed for their daily routines. Nevertheless, in reality the developers provide neither literacy skills nor any vocational training or substantial economic assistance. Furthermore, although the village women are well aware of the deceitful game, they cooperate with the developers for their own reasons.

The book follows the growing critique concerning development and gender development in particular, while contributing to the criticism relating to women's development projects. It argues that gender development projects (and development projects at large), contrary to their manifest aims and budgets, do not and cannot contribute to social change in gender power relations (or any other social change). Rather, they serve to support the existing power structures.

However, the book does not offer an alternative discourse or policy recommendations for gender development. Doing so would entail the acceptance of this concept, whereas the book's basic argument is that such projects are all ultimately concerned with power manipulations rather than with social change. Thus, the theoretical analysis elaborates on structured power relations embedded in social organizations. It emphasizes gendered power relations in the bu-

reaucratic setting of the women's project under study. My analysis seeks to contribute to the limited literature in this field, by using reflexive tools of a profoundly involved anthropologist in a women's empowerment project.

The Introduction reviews the literature concerning the main issues that are discussed in the book, among which are: development and gender development projects in bureaucratic perspective; gender relations and feminist theories relevant to development projects; literacy campaigns and Nepali village women. The analysis incorporates insights from feminist, as well as economic and anthropological studies focusing on South Asia.

Chapter 1 analyses some of the dilemmas associated with the role of external consultant in "developing countries." Looking back at my fieldnotes, I reflect on the inescapable hierarchical relations into which I was thrust in my daily interactions with local people. This chapter exposes the constructed patronage and power differentials embedded in encounters between "outsiders" or "experts" and local people, between males and females, and between junior and senior officials in the organization's hierarchy.

Chapter 2 describes the continuous efforts of the representative of Tahal to establish a position of dominance in the project. It analyses the stereotypical expressions and ethnocentric attitudes he adopted toward local people in a drama of power which generated a good deal of antagonism.

Chapters 3 and 4 elaborate on the role that literacy campaigns play in development projects at large, and in the context of the women's project in particular. They describe the negotiations that took place with regard to the conceptualization, budgeting, and implementation of the women's literacy program. The analysis of written documents and field encounters tells the story of the intensive social engagements which ended up without concrete outcomes, for the project provided neither literacy classes nor vocational training.

The detailed description in Chapter 5 focuses on the seminar, a training course for village teachers involved in the literacy program, illustrates how the rhetoric of social change and women's empowerment served male officials in particular, but also the two gender consultants (myself and a local colleague), as a means for demonstrating control. The descriptions reveal the ongoing exposure of women to collective patronization in a male-dominated framework. However, they also illustrate the compliance of the few relatively highly positioned females (the two gender consultants) with the bureaucratic codes and expressions of power relations that prevailed in the project premises.

Chapter 6 exposes the budget as a mere phantom. It suggests that the women's project did not stand a real chance of benefiting the village women from its very inception. In reality, so it transpired, the project was used to "buy off" men in higher positions, at a local and national level. The gradual exposure of the hidden agenda behind the women's development program is connected to a discussion of feminine conduct in a male dominated organizations.

## Notes

1. This program, which was embedded in the irrigation project, is referred to by the following terms, interchangeably: gender development project, women's project, women's program, women's activities project, and women's empowerment project. This interchanging use of terms reflects the diverse terms use in daily encounters and in documents.