Navigating Empowerment

An exploration of rural women's experiences from South India

A Research Paper presented by:

Vrinda Poojari

India

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Major:

Human Rights, Gender and Conflict Studies: Social Justice Perspectives

(SJP)

Members of the Examining Committee:

Prof. Dr. Wendy Harcourt

Dr. Sreerekha Mullassery Sathiamma

The Hague, The Netherlands

November 2023

Inquiries:

International Institute of Social Studies
P.O. Box 29776
2502 LT The Hague
The Netherlands

t: +31 70 426 0460
e: info@iss.nl
w: www.iss.nl
fb: http://www.facebook.com/iss.nl
twitter: @issnl

Location:

Kortenaerkade 12
2518 AX The Hague
The Netherlands

Table of Contents

List of Annexes

Abstract

This research looks into the experiences of rural women in a sub-district of Karnataka in South India to explore the place and function of empowerment in their lives, while paying attention to how they express resistance and agency in their oppressive context. The aim is to provide a critical and caring space for the complex experiences and voices of global south rural women, and the many ways they navigate the power dynamics and restrictions in key aspects of their lives. The women whose lives inform this research are part of an empowerment project run by a local NGO, and its role in the women's experiences is explored by critically looking at its visualisation and implementation of empowerment, guided by feminist theorisations of NGO-isation and critiques of empowerment in gender and development practice. Feminist methodologies guided the research through ethical dilemmas and was instrumental in understanding and addressing power relations with the women during research.

Relevance to Development Studies

This research contributes to feminisms understandings of empowerment, as experienced and navigated by rural women from Karnataka. It also provides a critical perspective on the role of a local NGO in their lives by applying feminist theorisations and critiques of NGO-isation and empowerment. It provides a look at the influences of neoliberal gender and development and failure of gender mainstreaming in the visualisation and understanding of empowerment in an NGO in the South Indian context. My own ethical explorations of research as a global south woman, guided by feminist methodologies, are documented here.

Keywords

Rural women, empowerment, NGO-isation, feminist methodologies, feminist critique, south India.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Women's empowerment

Gender was mainstreamed into the development agenda after three decades of feminist activism in the field of development (Mukhopadhyay, 2004). The objective of mainstreaming gender was to bring feminists demand for gender into the practice of development, and not remain at the margins (Razavi, 1997). Gender equality concerns would become important in the formulation of policy, programmes and projects but, while the gender agenda was historically adopted at the Beijing 1995 conference where governments across the world signed a commitment to achieve 'gender equality and the empowerment of women' (Moser and Moser, 2005), this mainstreaming has led to its normalisation in development as an "ahistorical, apolitical, de-contextualised and technical project" (Mukhopadhyay, 2004).

It is important to note here that, empowerment was a concept that arose as an attempt to '"deconstruct a monolithic version of western feminism" and was about empowering the "other women in western feminist theory, bringing together the voices and perspective of the disempowered, aiming towards alternative development" (Sreerekha, 2015). But the adoption of gender into development and empowerment as a tool to achieve this led to a depoliticisation because, as Mukhopadhyay (2004) put it, feminists work straddles two worlds: the political and the technical, "but the development business only tolerates the technical role" (Mukhopadhyay, 2004). My research will look at the experiences of rural women in India and its relation to the implementation of an empowerment project by a local NGO using feminists' conceptualization of empowerment and critiques of its 'technical implementation' through projects. The depoliticization of empowerment and the adoption of neoliberal gender agendas are important in understanding the women's experiences when development programmes claim to 'empower women' (Alvarez, 2009).

In India, the widescale adoption during the 1980s first lead to women in different parts of the country being mobilised and developing a political and personal agenda for change, collective strength and creative power to work towards them (Batliwala, 2007). Initial support from the state and development sector donors led to a constriction of the way empowerment was understood, which reflects today's implementation of empowerment in terms of micro-credit Self Help Groups

and individual achievement and status, and an absence of political and personal awareness (Batliwala, 2007).

Significance and Objective

As someone who is interested and invested in gender and development, in this research I bring feminist theory to explore and reflect on my previous experience working in the development space. Using what I have learnt during my time at ISS, I revisit the NGO where I worked in order to take a closer and critical look at the lived experiences of rural women in India. I pay attention to the place and function of empowerment as understood by the women, looking at the many different paths women take as they navigate an oppressive context; while also exploring how this depoliticisation in NGOs has, in this context, affected the rural women it 'empowers'. The women whose experiences inform this research are part of an empowerment project run by a local NGO in their region (elaborated later).

This research has three main objectives. **First**, I apply a critical and caring lens on the experiences and lives of rural women, adding their experiences and voices to understand what empowerment in their context is. Rural women or women from the global south tend to be treated in a one-dimensional way in gender and development discourse and academic studies. My research aims to give a more nuanced and rounded understanding of their experiences and lives by looking at the different forms of marginalisations they face while paying attention to their forms of resistance and agency, and how these are based on ideals of solidarity and care. In listening to their experiences, I aim to capture how they navigate empowerment. **Second**, I use feminist methodology to address ethical dilemmas of research in relation to power dynamics, aware of the extractivist nature of research. I pay attention to silences and use reflexivity to go deeper into how power plays out between the women, the NGO and myself as a researcher. I was constantly thinking about my positionality, which I elaborate below, and how I interacted with the women. I tried to be aware of the power dynamics between us, addressing it when I could. Reflexivity also guided me in my research choices I made and the motivations behind it, which I elaborate below. Paying attention to silences allowed me to become aware of intersectional identities and experiences of women. **Third**, I take a critical look at economic empowerment as a strategy implemented by a local NGO with whom I worked, and with whom the women continue to engage. I explore the intentions and the gaps in the NGO's approach, guided by what I found out

from the women. Feminist theorisations of NGO-isation shaped my critique of the NGO's structure and functions and their interventions in terms of economic empowerment.

Focus and Scope

The scope of this research is to highlight the marginalisations the women face in various spheres of their lives while looking at how they navigate these to exercise their agency and mobility. As part of this exploration, I look at the role of the NGO in providing possibilities for women to express their agency. I compare the women's experiences and reflections on how they see empowerment, with the NGO's definition and strategies of empowerment.

Background

I grew up in Bangalore, a metropolitan city and capital of Karnataka, a southern state of India. Known for its diverse culture, pleasant weather, and career opportunities, Bangalore is often called the Silicon Valley of India because it is a hub for information technology in the country. This status has led to migrations from all over the country, contributing to its diverse population. Women in Bangalore are involved in a wide variety of work, from the IT sector, which has seen women's participation double in the past decade (Phadnis, 2023). Also knows as the education hub, there are many educational institutes in the city for every sector, and women outnumber men (Times of India, 2011, The Hindu 2018, Kumar 2019). Many women also work as domestic help, street vendors and in other informal jobs (Kaliyanda, 2016, Kambara and Bairagya, 2021). Bangalore is a mix of traditional families who follow gender norms that dictate arranged marriages for women, restrictions around menstruation, obligation and responsibilities towards family and household, and modern families where women's freedom and careers come first, women are allowed to date and marriage is not the first step of adulthood for women as well as a mix of both where modernity and tradition overlap (Menon, R. and Sharma, 2020, Fleming, 2006). Safety of women in public spaces has been an increasing concern in Bangalore with the number of women harassed increasing, recorded at 15 women harassed per day in 2022 (Kumar, 2023, Vivan, 2022).

While the importance of caste, religion, socio- economic status, dowry are decreasing in importance for arranged marriages, they are still very prominent in both urban and rural spaces in India (Kashyap, 2020). A woman's role within a marriage, traditionally, is to serve her husband and in-laws, give birth to and care for children, while being sub-servient to her husband (Sharma, 2023). While such expectations are changing in urban spaces, it is a slow change in rural areas of India (Kashyap, 2020). There are very strong patriarchal influences in the family hierarchy, with men of

the house having the power of decision making (Singh, 2005). Hierarchy is also dictated by age and generation, and respect is shown by obeying elders in the family (Singh, 2005). These are true for structure and hierarchy in families in urban spaces like Bangalore and rural spaces in almost equal measure.

I grew up in this city, influenced by the restrictive context. My mother's emphasis on my sister and my education shaped our growth out of these restrictions, creating ways for us to shape our own independence. Yet, gendered expectations in the household, especially as the youngest one in a traditionally hierarchical family setup, has meant that I've always rebelled against these expectations. Finding a balance between my own freedom and independence while also owning up to my responsibility towards my family has been a struggle for me, especially in a confusing context where traditional family structures continue to be important but education and cultural diversity have influenced my sense of individuality, separate from the family. Empowerment for me has meant finding a path to economic independence, access to opportunities outside of gendered expectations, and discovering things that life has to offer through relationships and experiences discovered along this path.

After my undergraduate degree, I worked for an NGO that empowered rural women through education and livelihood projects in a taluk (sub-district) in Karnataka. The taluk was starkly different to the life I was accustomed to in Bangalore. While Bangalore is known as the garden city, the beauty of this taluk was scenic. It has hills, rivers, forests and is home to over a hundred villages, historical sites and wildlife sanctuaries (Karnataka Forest Department, n.d.). Despite its beauty and natural splendor, it is a hard place to live in. Harsh weather in the summer makes agricultural work difficult, and heavy rains during the monsoons washes homes and crops away yearly (Karnataka Revenue Department, 2023, Deccan Chronicle, 2023). Most of the population is involved in agriculture. The diverse tribal and caste populations are involved in occupations like basket weaving, cattle rearing, and products made from bamboo, cane, and grass twine (Obeng, 2014). Like other parts of rural India, poverty and low incomes are common, as agriculture becomes financially nonviable for small and marginal farmers, who make up most of the rural population (Bhende, 2013). This taluk is also similar and has a large portion of landless families that survive by working as labourers on other's lands. There is a prevalence of strict gender roles and small village communities that play a big role in intrusion and control over many aspects of women's lives, an observation from all my visits to the region. Most women in this taluk work as labourers or are restricted from working and must stay at home and look after their households and families (Dhanaraj & Mahambare, 2019).

My interest in working with the NGO stemmed from the organisation's bottom-up approach, the inclusivity and depth to which it worked in this community. The organization has worked in this taluk for 10 years and has an education project working in 50 villages, with the goal to empower women and girls by improving the quality and accessibility of education. They have a livelihood approach aimed at women who don't have an education background, to upskill and train them so they become entrepreneurs, and earn while supporting the local economy. In the education projects, women with a basic education (10th grade) are selected and provided teacher training so they can teach and gain an income through it. The NGO helps the women open an after-school learning centre in their village (sometimes in their houses or at the local government school) where a safe and encouraging learning environment is created, especially for girls. Strict gender roles prevent girls from participating and being outspoken in many environments, including classrooms, so teaching styles aims to encourage them through fun-learning activities and teacher from their village to look up to. The women who become teachers, are given continuous trainings throughout the academic year, to ensure quality of teaching and education. Trainings are conducted at the NGOs office in the town centre of the taluk, a space where women from 50 villages of different backgrounds come together for a few days every month. The NGO has a field team consisting of employees who are local and live in the same taluk, the CEO and Board of Trustees based in Bangalore. The focus of this paper will be on the women who are part of the education project of the NGO.

I worked there for three years, as the programme manager. Working in a small grassroots organisation, my role was varied- designing and changing projects, handling implementation, and monitoring along with the field team, handling donor and communications, etc. Mostly, I spent a lot of time in the taluk with the women with whom we worked. We developed close relationships as we only spent time together in trainings, visits, informal settings, and local festivals, and respected and cared for each other. I was younger than most of the women I worked with, and they were married with kids. I was an outsider in many ways. I had an urban upbringing and was independent in ways the women with whom I worked couldn't be. My interest and work at the NGO brought me to ISS to do my MA, here I have developed an awareness of the strong power dynamics and ethical considerations present in development work, explored power dynamics between identities of the researcher and researched in writing like 'If the shoe fits' by Henry (2007) and 'New feminist approaches to social science methodologies'(Harding and Norberg, 2015). While I was aware of these power dynamics, I never realised the role they played in our interactions. My learnings have led me to develop a deeper and critical lens towards empowerment and development interventions

Chapter 2: NGO-isation and the Indian Context

My research looks at how empowerment is experienced by the women who are part of an empowerment project by a local NGO in the taluk. Feminist writings on NGO-isation is an important tool in understanding the NGO's conception of empowerment and in the influence of larger discourses on gender and development on this conceptualisation. Looking at NGOisation allows me to understand the functional and structural roles that the NGO plays and how this influences the women's experiences of empowerment.

Feminists have critiqued NGOs in the late 1990s onwards for the depoliticisation of feminist agendas and its replacement by neoliberal ones (Alvarez 2009). NGOs dependence on donor funds means that they can be "co-opted by the powers they once criticised" (Castro 2001, pg 17). This influenced NGOs professionalization, shaping the practices and functioning of the NGO structure, leading to more corporate leanings (Murdock, 2008). Parallelly, NGOs became more important with the withdrawal of state in many welfare spaces with the emergence of neoliberal governments in the 1990s (Alvarez, 2009). As a result of this, what Murdock (2008) calls the movement work of NGOs got moved to the back burner and donor impacts and projects became more important (Murdock, 2009). NGOs "ability to critically monitor and advocate for more thoroughgoing feminist reform was jeopardised in this change (Alvarez ,1999). Understanding the influences on the objectives, structure and functioning of NGOs in the 1990s NGO boom will guide me in understanding the influences of neoliberal agendas on gender and development on a grassroots NGO in the global south that was established around 2010, adding to our understanding of how this depoliticisation and professionalisation has grown.

The feminist critiques of NGO-isation talks about the depoliticisation of movements and feminist organisations with reference to development NGOs that emerged in the 1990s. But in the Indian context, philanthropy and volunteerism has played a big role in the establishment and functioning of NGOs and has a history that can be traced back to the British colonial period (Sheth and Sethi, 1991, Sidel, 2001). Welfare activities as part of the state during the colonial period were done through Christian churches with state support, in resistance to this there were numerous indigenous organisations working in social and religious reform in the 19th and early 20th century (Sheth and Sethi, 1991). Philanthropy and voluntary organisations emerged during this time, social and religious reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj sought to advance women's education and widow remarriage, challenge the caste system and rituals, and rationalize

Hinduism, while in the early 20th century, Gandhian organizations worked to uplift the doubly disadvantaged castes and impoverished individuals under the guise of 'social uplift' (Chandhoke, 2012). Women were also part of these social movements and reforms through petitions to the state against the restriction of their economic independence, limited ownership of property and control over their sexuality and mobility (Anagol-McGinn, 1994). Social action, underlined by volunteerism, was very political in nature and in opposition to the colonial state. These social movements were absorbed into the congress party through the independence struggle and gave rise to organisations that worked for issues ignored by the dominant social reform movement (Seth and Sethi, 1991). The dominant side of social reform lost its steam as important figures shifted to politics post-Independence, and organisations became dependent on government funds and more a part of state welfare. This changed with instability and failure of state and governance on many fronts, including the Emergency (1975-77) and earlier concerns of poverty, inequality, environment with politics central to social activism began again (Seth and Sethi, 1991). The vocabulary shifted from social service and reform to empowerment, development, rights, governance and accountability in the civil society space, which led to a dominance of the sector by professionalised NGOs that were western funded and partnered with state in their work (Chandhoke, 2012). At the same time, there was a rise in business philanthropy that was "characterised by a re-configuration of religious and cultural traditions of giving" merged with western ideas of giving that were imposed during the colonial period (Godfrey, Branigan, Khan 2017).

Understanding the dynamics of philanthropy and tracing the intricate relationship with the state within the civil society sector in India is of paramount importance for a critical perspective on NGOs, as it sheds light on the historical evolution, power structures, and influences that have shaped their structure and operations. Today, the sector is restricted in terms of funds and the many bureaucratic laws and hoops that NGOs have to jump, with accusations of too many organisations in the sector, many that misuse funds and even there being an availability of sufficient funding in the country making the need for foreign funding redundant, but these are inflated facts and misrepresent the reality of the sector (Seth and Shetty, 2023). Laws like the Foreign Contributions Regulations Act (FCRA) and Companies (Corporate Social Responsibility) Rules, 2014 and other amendments push a lot of regulations and restrictions on civil society organisations, but looking into the impact of these on the NGO for this research are out of the scope of this paper.

Chapter 3: Empowerment through a feminist lens

Gender equality and its mainstreaming is important to understand as I try to critically approach the empowerment project of a local NGO in South India. The goal of mainstreaming gender into development throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s was to incorporate women into the development process (Mukhopadhyay, 2016). Mukhopadhyay (2016) argues that the constrained progress of gender mainstreaming within international institutions can be attributed to the dual factors of a deficiency in both professional and political responsibility and the absence of structured mechanisms for upholding accountability (Mukhopadhyay, 2016). Feminist academic research has extensively focused on revealing the built-in male-centered tendencies within development processes (Elson, 1991). Furthermore, recent scholarship has explored male biases in the formulation of rights, legal structures, and the interpretation and application of laws (Mukhopadhyay, 1998, Goetz, 2003). The combined effect of these criticisms and resistance has been the suppression of the pursuit of equality, leading to its portrayal as a context-free, apolitical, ahistorical, and purely technical endeavor in both discussions and practical implementation (Mukhopadhyay, 2016).

This selective adoption of feminist ideas into the "mainstream development agenda" through which technical aspects have become mainstreamed but the political aspects have not, inform my perspective towards the empowerment approach in development work (Daly, 2005, Mukhopadhyay, 2016). This is important as the selective adoption and depoliticisation of gender mainstreaming is implemented in development organisations like gender and development NGOs through the empowerment approach. As I touched on in chapter 1, empowerment was an approach born out of global south feminist activists looking for an alternative to development and was a reinterpretation of power in the third world context (Sreerekha, 2015). In the 1980s, 'women's empowerment' spread as a political and transformative idea that challenged patriarchy, structures of class, race, ethnicity, and caste and religion in India (Batliwala, 2007). The influence of feminist movements in Latin America and South Asia led to the widespread adoption of the empowerment concept in education, health care, rural development and workers' rights. During this time, the term was borrowed from feminist educators in other parts of the world and empowerment replaced "women's welfare", "women's upliftment" and "women's development" in governance and donor agencies and also entered the women's movement vernacular in India (Batliwala, 2007). Despite this widespread adoption of the term empowerment, any conceptualisation and understanding of it was missing in the country. Batliwala (1993), in her text

'Women's Empowerment in South Asia: Concepts and Practices', developed this through her interactions with activists, grassroots women and development organisations in South Asia and in this paper, defines empowerment as "a process, and the results of a process, of transforming the relations of power between individuals and social groups" (ASPBAE/FAO, 1993). Specifically, it meant the transformation of power relations between men and women, challenging ideologies that justify social inequality and existing patterns of access and control over resources and changing institutions and their structures to shift social power (ASPBAE/FAO, 1993). In terms of 'power within' empowerment also refers to processes that lead people to "perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions" (Rowlands, 1997).

The empowerment approach in India started off as a departure from past interventions and created spaces to collectively engage in their experiences of poverty, exclusion and discriminations; and critically analyse the structures and ideologies that sustained and reinforced their oppressions (Batliwala, 2007). Batliwala (2007) outlines how this empowerment approach became watered down in India (Batliwala, 2007). During this early phase, the women's movements saw state as a critical enabler, as parts of the state took the lead in supporting and launching programmes that were built on transformative notions of empowerment, and donors also played a role in adoption of empowerment in development organisations (Batliwala, 2007). This wide scale adoption across governing levels and bodies led to a constriction of empowerment into Self Help Groups or micro credit models, reservations for women in governance and led to a replacement of the empowerment approach with a management influenced rights-based approach in development programmes, supported by donors (Batliwala, 2007). This led to the empowerment approach taken out of its realm of societal and systemic change and into the individual domain, from signifying shift in social power to signalling individual power, achievement, and status (Batliwala ,2007). This dilution of empowerment in development interventions has taken place everywhere, as Wieringa (1994) states, because development planners are searching for projects with a few years' duration with easy schedules, quantifiable targets to address enormous and complex situations that have grown over the ages and so the empowerment approach as feminists have defined it is seen as too difficult (Wieringa, 1994).

Chapter 4: Methodology and Methods

Methodology

In order to look at empowerment I explored women's experiences of marginalisation and agency in the different spaces such as the households, village community, within the NGO and their interaction with other women, in their own and husband's families. I paid attention to the intersection of class, race, caste, gender, mobility in these spaces and how power operates. I examined the NGOs' definition and strategy of empowerment as part of a process of NGO-isation and the depoliticization of empowerment. I looked critically at the NGO's power relations with the women, power dynamics within its structures and influences of international discourse on professionalisation of NGOs. I was not able to examine all the NGO's projects, but I did look closely at how the NGO visualizes empowerment in its vision and strategies. My focus, however, was the women's experiences and how they perceived empowerment.

Finding out what their meaning and experience of empowerment was difficult to do, somewhat ironically, because of the power dynamics between the women and me, as a former NGO worker, and now as someone doing research with them. I therefore took a very fluid and open approach to how I engaged with them, and my methodology was to be guided by them in our conversations. When I worked at the NGO, I was aware of the power relations between the women and me, and how they coloured our interactions. At the NGO, we addressed the power differentials by making our interactions informal- conversations in settings that are comfortable to the women, sitting on the floor and talking with them. But we did not go beyond this. I now see it was an awkward intermingling of a surface addressal of power relations and a 'scientific' means of collecting data.

Learning about feminist methodologies inspired by Henry (2007) and Harding and Norberg's (2005) reflections on the topic, helped me make sense of these experiences and led me to experiment with ways to address them. The transparency and openness with which feminist methodology approached the complexity of doing research, while aware of the inherently extractivist nature of research, was a starting point for me to explore this for myself in this research. Doing the RP was a reflexive and personal process for me (Harding and Norberg, 2005). I had to break away from what has become a standard means of research: personal distance, structured and professionalised interactions. My reorientation with research by applying feminist methodology

focused on the transparency to address power relations, unstructured and free conversations, comfort and connection for both me and the women I spoke to, while staying aware of our complex identities and how they interact (Henry, 2007). Initially, it was a challenge for me to even have a phone conversation with the women when I first arrived as it could've been intimidating that I directly contacted them, my outsider identity was made that much more obvious now that I had moved abroad for my studies.

From my initial interactions with the women, I was open about my research and the reasons I wanted to talk to them. I made it clear that the choice to talk to me was up to them. I explained that the nature of our conversations would be personal and would focus on their life and experiences as a woman. I met with the women at their convenience at a place chosen by them where they would feel free to talk, away from any influence of the NGO, the village community and their family. Before we started our conversations, I assured them of the confidential nature of our conversations, permission to voice record was taken after I assured them that these would be heard only by me and be deleted after. Since the nature of our conversations would be very personal, I made sure they knew that they could choose not to talk about anything they were not comfortable with, and I would not use anything in my research that they were not comfortable with. This helped in addressing our power relations as 'researcher' and 'participant' and gave them some control over the conversations while trying to take away some of the extractivist nature of research. Since the conversations were very personal, I openly shared my experiences and struggles, and was open to any questions about myself as well. A Participatory Action Research activity, inspired by Kindon, Pain and Kesby (2007) was used at the beginning of our conversations (Kindon et al., 2007). They were asked to bring an object from their house that reflects something about them as women, which were insightful and helped start our conversations. I, too, brought an object and shared it with them.

Feminist methodology, specifically, Henry's (2007) own reflections guided me in paying attention to experiences of intersectional identities. Since I wanted to see how women experienced 'empowerment', I found it important to speak with women who had been with the NGO's education project for different periods, as I also was curious to explore the role the NGO played in their experiences. Along with this, I also tried to pay attention to silences, voices and identities that can help me bring experiences that otherwise might not be given importance. Keeping these in mind, I selected women with varying experiences and backgrounds. I looked at women from upper and lower caste Hindu families, comparatively rich and poor economic backgrounds and

from Christian and other religious background. I even looked at women who lived in villages that were marginalised in some way, for example, a village that had a high incidence of physical and mental disability due to its proximity to a paper mill that released its toxic waste into a river near the village. I reached out to 10 women and 5 of them chose not to have a conversation with me, while 5 did.

Before I met the women, I had concerns about how to separate my identity from the NGO. I made sure my interactions with the women were direct and the NGO played no role in it, even my travel to their villages were done individually, as before I would travel with a member of the field team using the NGO's transport vehicle. I was apprehensive if the women and I would be able to have such personal and private conversations as I was there only for 2 weeks due to the risk of flooding from heavy monsoon rains and economic limitations. I tried to address the obvious power dynamics between us, resulting from our stark background and experiences, and of course my standing as a privileged urban woman with access to opportunities not available to them and the ways it created shifts in our power relations (Henry, 2007). I was relieved when it seemed we were able to easily talk as we respected each other and were able to build on our existing relationship. This allowed us to have meaningful conversations. We even cried when talking about the burdens and difficulties they currently face in their lives. But some aspects of the power dynamics between us was still very present. I was treated as an esteemed guest, and I showed my respect towards them as best I could. I made sure I respected their time and space and stood by the boundaries we had established. The women also expressed their gratefulness and the honor of having me visit them and listen to their stories. They cooked food and put effort towards welcoming me to their homes/ spaces. I brought them gifts of fruits when I visited them, which is a local custom, as a sign of respect and gratitude. We navigated the power dynamics together by caring and being thoughtful towards each other.

Methods

Once I arrived in the taluk, I reached out to a handful of women. We initially had a phone call after which I visited their village to meet them. I spoke with 5 women who had been part of the NGO's education project for at least 3 years, maybe because we had known each other well already and they were comfortable having such private conversations with me. A few other women I reached out to, chose not to have conversations with me. I met with the women who agreed at least twice in the two weeks and spent around 2 hours with them each time.

I also spoke with two women from the taluk who are part of the NGO's field team. We had spent a lot more together previously as we worked together and had closer bonds. As they work 6 days a week and must balance their personal lives with their long hours at work (due to village visits across the taluk), I was only able to speak with them once, in order to not impose my needs on them or get in the way of their work at NGO. I visited their homes, and we also spent 2 hours having this conversation related to my research, after which I also spent time with them and their families.

The table in [Annex A](#) outlines the background of the women I spoke with and the object they chose in the PAR activity, representing their reflection of themselves as women. The information presented in the background was collected through observations and conversations with the women and their family on my visits. I had an online conversation with the CEO of the NGO in order to understand their visualisation of empowerment and how they implemented the same through their project. We also talked about the pressures and limitations the NGO faces while doing its work.

Chapter 5: The NGO

Introduction

This chapter will focus on CT NGO[1]. I provide a closer look at CT NGO by looking at its importance for the region in which it works and an examination of its structure and functioning. This will allow me to look more in depth at how CT NGO understands and employs the notion of empowerment, specifically through its education project. I will also outline how the women experience this 'empowerment' and what role it plays in their lives.

I have already described the taluk in the previous chapters. What is important to note here is that there are many development interventions for women coming from the government and important political figures in the region (RSETI, n.d., SKDRDP, n.d.). The diocese of the region works with the Christian population and another organisation that focuses on children and women through education and is present in 5 villages ("Karwar Diocese", n.d., Navsahyog, n.d.). CT NGO works directly with women in the communities, across different demographics of women living in

1- I wish to keep the NGO anonymous, to avoid causing any harm to its work.

50 villages in the taluk (CT NGO, n.d.). CT NGO outlines its objective to "nurture the holistic development of rural girl children and women into economic self-sufficiency through knowledge, skills and tools" (CT NGO, n.d.).

Background and structure

CT NGO was established by an affluent family to provide support to the region as the family traces its roots to rural Karnataka (Seema, Personal Conversation, July 16 2023). Initially, in 2011 it worked as a parent organisation to implementing ogranisations in the regions of Karnataka and Goa. Four years later, it started to implement its projects with a focus on the taluk where it is now based. Its inception was rooted in ideas of philanthropy, but it shifted to development work as the employees of the NGO had a development sector education and experience and the objectives were upliftment of rural women through education and livelihood interventions (Seema, Personal Conversation, July 16 2023, CT NGO, n.d.). The structure of CT NGO consists of a board made up of successful individuals based in Bangalore with an interest in the work of CT NGO. The board gives leadership and direction to the organisation along with its network and connectivity to individuals, organisations and a donor base (CT NGO, n.d.). The programme and implementation team of CT NGO are based in the taluk, with a CEO, who acts as a bridge between the board based in Bangalore and the taluk (CT NGO, n.d.).

CT NGO has been moving towards a more corporate management business style of working and is hierarchically organised. This follows the pattern of NGOisation that Alvarez (2009) notes where donor-led NGOs are pushed towards professionalisation. The current CEO has a corporate background and has been instrumental in professionalizing the NGO, as can be seen in the way the projects are implemented and is elaborated below (Alvarez, 2009, CT, n.d.). The CEO in our conversation underlines that multinational corporate donors who have CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) departments come with international mandates, strict deadlines and measurement of impact, while domestic organisations are more flexible about the time frame (CT CEO, Personal Conversation, August 18, 2023). Their main funding is from philanthropic givers but now they are seeking out larger institutional donors for funding to reach the larger objectives CT NGO has to reach women across 100+ villages in the taluk (CT CEO, Personal Conversation, August 18 2023, Seema, Personal Conversation, July 16 2023).

The field team, or the programme team, based in the taluk enable the CT NGO to engage with the community. It has worked in the region for 10 years and the field team has been instrumental in building its grassroots identity by working with and as part of the community. All the members belong to the region or surrounding regions and live in the taluk. The NGO's first employee in the field, Seema, was instrumental in starting the projects and mobilising the local community. She has been the face of the NGO in the villages as well as with government departments and other stakeholders in the region (Seema, Personal Conversation, July 16, 2023). Meera, the other field team member I interviewed during my research, used to be a teacher in the education project of CT NGO before she joined the field team. They have both led the organisation in rooting itself in the community it works with and building its identity as a grassroots organization. This has been a way to lessen the power difference between the organisation and the community it works for. Nevertheless, there are still clear divisions between the Bangalore section and the taluk section.

Professionalisation and hierarchy

The Bangalore section consists of the board (unpaid volunteers but the decision makers) and the CEO (highly paid) who are at the top of the hierarchy and the field team which makes up the taluk section at the bottom. This hierarchy is reflected further in the differentiated salary scale of the employees who have less education qualification and work experience than the CEO who is at the top of the pay scale. The field team members who have an education qualification from government institutions and work experience only with the NGO are placed at a lower pay scale[2]. The CEO and programme coordinator (refer note[2]) handle donors, partnerships and programme ideation and the field team as employees along with their programme related work, while the field team's focus is on the implementation of the programmes. This different dimension of power relations within the NGO are not addressed openly but inform how NGO functions. The absence of an analysis of the power dynamics that exist within the NGO reflect the depoliticisation of groups working for social justice or social reform, a direction that began in India post-independence. The way CT NGO functions today as a semiprofessional organization rather than as part of a movement is like many other NGOs in Karnataka.

2- The head of the field team (programme coordinator) has a degree from a development studies university in Bangalore, work experience in the corporate sector and receives a higher salary than the field team.

Going further into the impact of professionalization I look in detail at the education project of CT NGO. The education project aims to empower women and girl children by providing quality education and showing them the possibilities and opportunities available to them alongside marriage (CT NGO CEO, Personal Conversation, August 18 2023). For the women, empowerment is envisioned through the upskilling and training that is provided to them which allows them to work and earn, giving them a voice in decision making at the household and community level (CT NGO CEO, Personal Conversation, August 18, 2023). CT NGO visualises empowerment for the women in the education projects, reflecting a neoliberal idea of empowerment where "the goal becomes to fill gender gaps in education... and to help poor women generate income" which have replaced the initial transformatory ideas of empowerment (Mukhopadhyay, 2016).

Women and the NGO

Within these restrictions, the women have experienced CT NGO as a path for their empowerment. As I outline in the next chapter, each of the women I spoke to has had to overcome the negative opinions and questioning of their village community to be able to work as teachers in CT NGO. All of them also talk about how they wanted to do something more and approached their families or husbands to do more than household work but were restricted. The CT NGO provided the women a goal for which they navigated their oppressive context and exercised their agency to work as teachers. They see CT NGO, as a space that enabled them to work within their own village. By working in CT NGO, they found a safe space where they are valued, able to form close female friendships, and is a source of knowledge and training where they can explore and experience themselves. They explored their abilities in a way that were was not possible previously and developed confidence. To refer to the women participants Varsha, for example, says that it was the NGO that got her out of the house. Mala and Gauri, both told me that they felt more settled and like they belonged more after they joined CT NGO and started working as teachers. As part of the project, the teachers also become the point of contact for CT NGO for the rest of the village. They hold parents' meetings, community discussion and other activities that integrate them with their own village community, increasing their mobility and going directly against the earlier restrictions. The NGO also involved the woman's family via regular field team visits to their homes, to assure the trust and safety of the NGO for the family. The women talked about these social and cultural changes they experienced in themselves and their lives which has little to do with economic abilities.

Economic empowerment

Women varied over how important the income from their work at CT NGO was for them. Even if it was important for poorer women, economic change alone did not determine their involvement in decision-making in their household. Smitha, who lives with her kids and her husband works in another state, runs the household from her income[3]. Gauri saves most of the money she makes so she can provide a college education for her kids. Varsha says that the income doesn't factor into their family expenses, and she uses it for her own needs as they are from a rich family.

For Bhavana, this income, even though she said was little given the time she put into it, was important for them as it was a stable source of income and something that helped her with the education expenses for her son, and other small needs they have throughout the month. She was removed from the project recently, and this has affected her and her family. Losing this job, that she was able to do while caring for her sick son, was an important part of her life. The NGO has made their projects more standardised, with the donors asking for proof of impact for each rupee that is donated. CT NGO is trying to achieve this by setting threshold of impact and reach in each village they work in. There is a set number of children that need to attend the classes and, as a step towards sustainability and independence from the NGO, a small fee is collected for these classes (which were previously free) and classes are only conducted in government schools. Bhavana was part of the digital education project, which was integrated into the government school. An exception was made for Bhavana to continue participating as she was unable to leave her home and her younger son, travel to a high school every day to take classes. The computer classes and the equipment that came with it were set up in her house. She had also made the case that, moving the computer classes to a high school that is away from their village would deprive the children from her village of opportunities provided by the digital education model[4]. But in the end the very reasons that led to an exception and change in the model of the project was reversed and Bhavana was removed from the project. The devastation and grief she feels was multiplied by the fact that she was left with no source of learning and work without CT NGO. There were a few others like

3- Her income is higher because she is part of the digital education project, the other teachers are either not in the digital education project or have just started as part of it this academic year (starting in June) but haven't earned from it due challenges in implementation.

4- This specific project works only with kids above 5th grade and most primary school in this region are till 5th grade. This focus is because the digital education project focuses son teaching students coding and physical computing using Raspberry Pis.

her, who had been with the NGO for a few years and were removed because it didn't meet CT NGO's need for impact and reach.

While the NGO visualizes and works towards economic empowerment, the women's experiences show how little this has impacted their lives. Other factors like mobility, a space for them to learn and explore themselves has had a greater impact on the women's ability to exercise their agency. And the standarsidation of projects has taken away all of this for women who don't fit into this standard, neither empowering them but leaving them to their circumstances. It can be seen here that professionalization and economic understanding of empowerment, both promoted by global neoliberalism strays CT NGO from its objective of supporting and empowering women (Alvarez, 2009).

This brings us to the question of to whom is the NGO is accountable? Is it the women in the community with whom the NGO has worked with and been rooted in for the 10 years? Or is accountability to the donors who give the funds? The CEO said that there are pressures the donors place on CT NGO in terms of impact created with limited amount of funding and time. Donors who are multinational corporates are very strict, and domestic institutions less so, as stated above. These local donors are more flexible and open to conversations and discussion on these, but limitations that led to women like Bhavana being removed are not explored. CT NGO makes it clear that the accountability of the NGO is with the donors, where funding, numbers and impact and economic empowerment are important that the women they are seeking to help. The professionalization in CT NGO is reflected in the way the women are treated as employees, which has become stricter in the recent years. Bhavana used to be allowed to be late to trainings as her village is very far where only one bus is available and travels with her son. She says that the last year in the trainings, they are not allowed to arrive late for any reason, Mala also says that the kindness and understanding that is usually extended to them is not present anymore when it comes to the trainings[5]. CT NGO is unable to empower the women through its visualisations and implementation of economic empowerment. But CT NGO is a space that the women choose, a space that allows them freedom and access to knowledge to discover their abilities and empower themselves.

Chapter 6: Navigating Empowerment

In this chapter, I share what I found about the women's lives in the taluk. I will share their experiences under a set of major themes: gender norms, household responsibilities, mobility, power in relation to different actors and spaces of support. I highlight the different experiences of the women, including the marginalisation they face as well as they ways in which they find wiggle room to exercise their agency.

Experience of gender norms

One of the important aspects of the marginalisation the women I spoke with faced are gender norms, imposed on them in many aspects and spaces of their lives. I share them in an effort to understand the various layers present in the women's experiences, using an intersectional lens. Gender norms are constructed social beliefs and practices that assign certain behaviour and expectations to people based on their genders, and problematically associated men with authority and control over resources while constricting women's voice, participation in society and mobility leading to serious gender inequalities (Sequino, 2007, Petesch and Badstue, 2020). The experiences of women with gender norms highlight the strong presence of these norms in rural India, as in the taluk. Education through government schools in India is free and compulsory for all under the age of fourteen and this right is provided by local governments through schools run by them in most villages (Department of School Education and Literacy, 2021). As a result of this, most women have had access to primary and secondary education.

Each of the women I spoke with told me that they aspired to study after high school. For most of them, marriage was the expected next step, but they had little to no say in it. For example, Varsha, who belongs to a rich upper caste Hindu family, had a hard time continuing her education despite her family's resources. Her grandmother was of the belief that "girls should not want things", whether it was more clothes, pencils for school or further education (Varsha, Personal Conversation, July 12, 2023). Gender norms doubled with the prestige and status of a rich and upper caste family, led to a lot of strict gender expectations from Varsha. When she started going to school, she was told to "keep her head down, look at no one, go to school and head right back" and if she didn't, she would get questioned at home about where she went and why (Varsha, Personal Conversation, July 12, 2023). When she went to high school, which was in another village,

she had to walk there alone as she was not allowed to travel by bus. Her behaviour was linked to the image and status of an upper caste family as this is a burden usually thrust upon women. She was not allowed to travel by bus where men and boys are also present, for fear that it could tarnish her family's reputation.

Varsha recalls the hardships she faced to continue going to school. She would walk to school even in the rain with a heavy bag full of books everyday for about 4 km, sometimes get splashed by mud by passing vehicles, return home to change and walk back to school. Varsha said family was afraid to let her, and her sisters do things because of the fear of society's judgement, and the fear that freedom given to the girls would mean that they would run away and marry for love and ruin the family's reputation. Varsha remembers her mother telling her that the world is a dangerous place for a girl, and a teacher at her school once told her to be careful because she is very beautiful and since she likes to study, she should only wear black, so she doesn't attract any trouble. Social status of her family and beauty that aligns with society's standards charted the path of her life. But Varsha always knew she wanted something different. She was not allowed to have her own money, so she would ask her grandmother for a little money to eat something but would instead save up that money for a year, to buy a pen and once, a dictionary. When she had finished 10th grade, her grandmother said that it was time for her to get married, but she cried and said she wanted to study more first. She negotiated with her father that she only wanted to study and would not go anywhere except her university[6] and her parents supported her so they got her admission at a university. Since her parents let her, her friends from her village were also allowed to go to college, and they went there everyday together making sure to never speak with anyone else.

After that, she wanted to study computers and go to college, but her grandmother was against it, and her parents couldn't go against the wishes of the elders in the family, so she was married. Varsha wishes that she had married later not at the age of 18 years, so she could have studied and been qualified for a job. Varsha exercised her agency by accepting the hardships placed on her so she could study. She worked within the restrictions placed on her, and found room for what she wanted, like buying a pen and pushing for further studies. Her upper-class identity enforced stricter rules on her, and after a point she was not able to negotiate further and had to give into what gender norms dictated, enforced by her grandmother, and was married.

6- 11th 12th grade is considered pre-university in Karnataka and provided in a university

Smitha had a different experience with education and marriage. She was from a not-so-rich family, and her parents were originally very supportive. She has always been social and enjoys spending time with people in her village. Her sociability was brought under scrutiny even if she did not talk to boys in school, but there was a boy from their village who liked her and started to chase her. She was the one blamed for his behaviour. Her family doubted her and decided she was under *jaadu tona* or black magic's influence and was taken to a healer who performed rituals on her. It was a painful period for Smitha, and she was angry at her family for the way she was treated. She ran away and got married to the boy and didn't finish her 12th grade exams. Her father, who she thinks of fondly, was angry and moved their entire family out of that village a few years earlier than planned, where they were to move after she completed high school so she could study further. After she got married, she moved to another state as her husband had a job there. She and her husband then moved back to their village and lived with her in-laws, who mistreated and talked badly about her, probably because of the way they got married. She alone faced the blame from her parents and her in-laws. It illustrates how gender norms are stricter for women.

Smitha says her father still refuses to step foot into the village. Her sister-in-law completed her undergrad but Smitha's request to continue with education was not heard. Her husband felt there was no need for it so she couldn't study further. And in their village, not everyone likes her, and they reprove her for running away. She tries to do what she thinks is right for her life now, and welcomes the opportunities provided by NGO, as elaborated in the previous chapter. Her family provided her support which changed when they thought she broke gender norms and was involved with a boy. Instead of trusting her they doubted her because of her social nature, unacceptable under the gender norms imposed on women in rural India. She exercised her agency by rejecting this and running away in the only way she could and giving up her education. She acknowledges she made a mistake and faced punishment from her family and in-law's and continues to face it, while her husband does not.

Mala grew up in a joint family, with 9 girls and 4 boys in the family and recalls her childhood fondly. The women and girls would handle the chores and household work, while the men and the women would work on their agricultural land, all working happily together in the house. All the girls in her family studied till 12th grade. Immediately after her final exams she was married. Mala wanted to become a teacher and study further. She protested her marriage by giving up food for 8 days, but her grandfather didn't agree and said that educating her further meant that they would have to educate everyone in the family, which they couldn't afford to do. She was married

to her mother's brother which is a custom in some parts of South India (Caldwell, Reddy, Caldwell, 1984). She didn't want to marry, let alone someone she was related to, but went ahead with it because she scared of her father. In pre-university, she also wanted to learn how to sew, and went after class everyday to sewing classes. She started earning from it, which paid for her studies. After marriage she became financially dependent on her husband and had to ask him for money for every little thing. So, when she had a child, as is custom, relatives and neighbours visit the newborn and give money, all of which she saved to buy a sewing machine. Since her family had the means, she learned to tailor so it could make her financially independent and have control over her own education. Despite this, her family gave finance as a reason to not educated her further. In her marriage, she found a way to buy the sewing machine, and become financially independent again. She exercised her agency where she found space. When joined the NGO and her aspiration to become a teacher was reached.

Gauri grew up in a tourist town of the taluk, and this made some difference in the way she grew up. She and her three sisters went to school and their parents were loving. They all went to pre-university, but were not allowed to continue, even though Gauri wanted to study further. They have a brother, who was always put on a pedestal. Gauri recalls that this favouritism for their brother reflected in every part of their family life. Anything that was cooked at home, or anything that happened at home, he had first rights over. Among their extended family, he was pampered a lot, while the three girls were treated as a burden on the family. Their brother was also very strict with them - they were not allowed to run around and play like other kids. But she remembers having a lot of fun in school with her friends. This changed when she went to pre-university. She was told not to talk to boys and just go to classes and come straight back which left no space for her to enjoy it. She was the eldest daughter and so was always expected to be obedient and set an example for her younger sisters. She even did a computer course after pre-university. She wanted to study more and get a nice job after that. But all these decisions were not for her to make. Her brother decided that she would get married. She expressed to her father that she wanted to study more but was told that there's a limit to how much a girl should study. She had seen what marriage can be like, with husbands beat their wives and so had no intention of getting married but, was told that if she didn't get married as the elder daughter, she would also be ruining her sisters' lives. And so, she was married to a man chosen by her brother, who lived in a village deep in the forest, very different from everything she knew. She didn't want to move to this village, but she didn't dare anything and never asked anything about it and just got married.

Gender norms in her house were discriminatory against the daughters. Choice and decisions about her life were not in her hands, and her opinion and preferences were ignored. This led to her being scared of voicing her concerns. The dominance of her brother and father, resulted in her fears and an internalisation of the restrictions placed on her, which are elaborated later. She was unable to find room to exercise her agency and had to accept the choices made for her. Moving to the village was hard for her. She didn't feel like she belonged there, only when she joined CT NGO and started working that she felt like she had found a place for herself. Again, we see that coming from a more affluent background led to stricter restrictions, like with Varsha.

Bhavana has lived in poverty all her life and this aspect has made many things much harder and difficult for her. She grew up very poor, but with a lot of love. She has three other sisters, and getting them an education till 10th grade, even though schooling was free, was hard for her family. She loved studying and wanted to study more. She felt that because her parents only had daughters, the possibility to marry was all that the family thought they could provide. The money they would have had to put into her education would get her married, as paying for both was not affordable. She had her mind set on doing pre-university and a course to become a teacher. She left her parents and moved in with her grandparents who supported her and paid for her education. But unfortunately, both her grandparents fell sick and became bedridden and she was left with no one to support her aspirations. She gave up her education and took care of her grandparents. Soon after she was married, she and her sister had their wedding ceremony together to save money and married into the same family. Since they came from a poor family, their chosen husbands were from the same economic background. She moved to a village where her husband lived, where his family had moved because of job opportunities at a paper mill located there.

The proximity to the mill also meant they live in a polluted region. When she had her first child after marriage, he went into a coma from a brain fever. The doctors at the government hospital didn't take his condition seriously and they took him to private hospitals for health care but had to bring him back when it became too expensive. After that, Bhavana became his primary care giver. She overcame some of these restrictions due to her son's ill health by joining the NGO where she could continue her learning and become a teacher. She brought her son to all the trainings so she could continue to care for him. I saw that there were no restrictions on her mobility like with the other women, possibly since status was not a concern for their family. She was able to exercise her agency by leaving her parents for her grandparents. But health problems have created hardships for her throughout her life. First, she lost her grandparents, and her chance for

education with it. Then her sister who got married with her, died in childbirth and she looked after her baby, who passed away soon after. And then the brain fever of her son made him bedridden. Her poverty has led to vulnerabilities and hardships that she has faced, without support from her extended family who want nothing to do with her family because of their poverty. CT NGO was a means for her to realise her dream of teaching, while taking her circumstances and limitations into account, but this also was taken away from her along with the meager income she made from it.

Seema belongs to the Siddi community, who are descendants of Africans brought to South Asia through the slave trade by early Muslim Omani Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch, English and French (Obeng 2014). She grew up with her family in a house that was deep in the forest with no other houses around, near the village they still live in. Her parents went through hardships to provide an education for their children. While her brother didn't want to study much, she always wanted to study more. Since she is also Christian, for schooling, she and other Siddi kids were enrolled in a Christian boarding school in the taluk. In the school, all the Siddi kids were pushed towards sports as they are naturally good at it, but she had no interest in it. She started missing all the sports hours even if she was pushed in that direction. At the boarding school they were kept under very tight schedules and strict rules, with virtually no free time. She said that it felt like they were still viewed as slaves like their ancestors. There was no freedom and there was no time to study, which is what she was there to do. As a result of this, she failed her mid-terms and realised that she would not be able to study well if she stayed there.

She started heading home everyday immediately after class, the fathers in the school tried to get her to stay at the hostel but let it go. At home, she had a loving relationship with her parents, and they supported her aspirations, so she and her mother would do the chores together quickly so she could study. In the final exams for 10th grade, all the other Siddi students at the boarding school failed, and she was the only who passed. Tribal groups like Siddis, who have Scheduled Tribe status in India, have access to political and social opportunities through governmental and non-governmental programs, free tuitions, unforms etc. (Obeng, 2014). But as Seema's experiences show, her Siddi identity became a barrier, which she overcame with support from her family. Seeing her success in high school, her aunt supported her further education. She did her pre-university and Masters in Social Work in a public university. She was able to study the way she wanted to without being "suffocated by the fathers" (Seema, Personal Conversation, July 16, 2023). Seema became the first woman from her community to hold a Masters in Social Work, and joined

the NGO as their first employee. She played a crucial role in NGO's grassroot identity through her community mobilisation. Her ambition and the continued support of her family played an important role in her achievements, including delayed marriage until she was ready and willing. She has been able to exercise her agency in many ways throughout her life and shape her life according to her wants and aspirations because of the support of her family, even against a lot of gender norms. I also expect that the environment of the NGO, which led to close relationships with urban women played a role in this.

In contrast to the other women I interviewed, Meera had a lot of freedom within her family. She used to skip school sometimes with her friends to just have fun together. She and her sister could do what they want, as their mother never placed any restrictions on them for being girls. While they had this freedom at home, they faced a lot of ridicule from the village community for this. Even the fact that their family has two daughters and not a son was a source of judgement and commentary. Meera's life changed when her father passed away from a heart attack when she was still in school. Suddenly there was a lot of responsibility on her. Her mother had a hard time dealing with her father's death and so Meera would get up early and cook for everyone. Their mother struggled with grief but still put both the girls into college. With only one source of income, it was tough for them to manage their needs. Meera joined CT NGO as a teacher and used the income to put herself through college. And after college she joined CT NGO as a field team member. She fielded a lot of gossip about herself in the village. But decided to live her life the way she needs to, given her responsibility as the breadwinner of her household, also due to the deteriorating health of her mother. Getting married is an expectation that she has pushed off for a while. The support from her family, has been important in her ability to break away from gender norms and overcoming the opinions of her village.

As seen in the women's stories, the family plays an important role in the imposition of gender roles on the women and can also play a role in their ability to negotiate these norms. The women had someone in their family who supported them but for Gowri, Mala and, after her grandparents passed away, Bhavana without some support in their family, the wiggle room to exercise their agency was much more limited. In looking at the women, I considered how the differences in their experience were a result of their intersecting identities. The strict and long-term restrictions faced by Varsha were not present in anyone else's experience, except Gowri who was also from a family with good economic standing. Status was important to both families, resulting in strict gender norms in their education, mobility and marriage. While poverty meant lesser restrictions for

Bhavana, through her marriage and the isolation from wealthy parts of her extended family, she was restricted to stay within her economic circle, and surprisingly didn't face any consequences to leaving home by using her agency and mobility like Smitha faced. Comparing the women's experiences and understanding the differences helped me highlight how intersectionality played a role in their experience and negotiations with gender norms.

Household responsibilities

I now turn to household responsibilities and gender norms in the women's roles as wives and mothers. When it comes to household chores and responsibilities, the women have been performing them since childhood. Varsha remembers that she was taught to do everything around the house in preparation for her to handle all household responsibility after marriage. And in her married life, as they live in a joint family, the household responsibilities are divided among with women only. For Gauri, taking up all this responsibility by herself was difficult. She recalls that it used to take her all day do the work around the house, but she started doing them quickly once she joined CT NGO. She thinks she used to be lazy when she actually did all of the work at home by herself. It is probably because of expectations that household responsibility is the wife's duty. At the beginning of their marriage, her mother-in-law also used to live with them, and her husband never thought about all the work that is required in the house. Now that she does it alone and expressed the burden of doing it all by herself while also working, he handles it occasionally.

Mala was used to sharing the household work as grew up in a joint family, but after marriage she handles it alone. She raised 4 kids while doing the household work herself and working two jobs, one with the NGO and another teaching at a nursery school. And before she started working two jobs, she was sewing 4-5 clothing items to earn and support her needs. Similarly, Smitha was doing work around the house as a kid to help her unwell mother, but her brothers were never expected to do help. Now that she lives separately, with her two kids, she does all the household work by herself while also working as a teacher with CT NGO. For Seema and Meera, household work is a part of their daily lives even with a job where they travel across villages work women's meetings or monitoring visits till late night. Seema relies on her mother a lot for support, as she is exhausted by the time she gets home. She does chores in the mornings before work to make sure it doesn't burden her mother. Meera on the other hand, takes on a lot of the household work so her mother won't have to push herself too much on this because of the state of her health. She, her sister and mother help each other out with the work at home. In all their experiences, the

husbands and fathers are automatically excluded from any work around the house. They are only expected to do work at their job or on the fields but even with jobs, the household responsibilities fall completely on the women.

Childbirth and motherhood are also important aspects. Most women who are married had kids within a year of marriage as expected. While the husbands are involved and loving towards their children, the mothers are the primary caregivers and do most of the labour involved in raising their children. Smitha's relationship with her parents after she eloped and got married started to improve once she was pregnant. And now that her kids are in school and she goes to work as a teacher, when she leaves home, people talk that she leaves home despite having children. They have two children, both girls, and they love them and feel no pressure or desire to have a son. Varsha had twin girls soon after marriage. She and her husband were happy with them and didn't want more kids, but her in-laws insisted on them having more kids so they could have a grandson. She had twin daughters again and so had another baby who was a son. Mala also has two daughters and a son. When she first gave birth to a baby girl, her mother-in-law wanted them to have more kids so she could have a grandson. She didn't want to have more children because childbirth was a very painful process for her, but she had more kids because it was expected of her. Gauri and Bhavana have two sons, and from the way Gauri talks about her kids, it reflects that she and her husband are both very involved in the upbringing of their children, but the grunt of it is done by Gauri. Bhavana's younger son required full-time care and so she was the one giving him this care. Seema had a son not immediately after marriage, but took a few years, as her career was still a priority. She had a son and as a single mother, her own mother plays a big role in raising her son, especially as he is still very young. Without this support, Seema would not be able to go to work like she does now.

For all the women, household responsibility, childbearing and childcare are seen as their primary role, and any negotiations on this are only with other female members of the household. Gowri's case in unique as she can express her anger and burden and has negotiated this responsibility with her husband (elaborated later). The only way they can negotiate in this aspect of their role is by becoming very adept at handling it so they can make time for work at CT NGO in their daily lives. And it is interesting to note that feminists see power redistribution within the household as an important aspect of empowerment, but in CT NGO visualisation of empowerment, it is not a consideration and the gendered division of responsibility is accepted (Baltiwala, 2013).

Mobility

Restrictions on mobility were emerged through our conversations. The three women from a poor economic background had fewer restrictions in terms of mobility. Bhavana has never really faced mobility restrictions, but she is home bound to care for her younger son. She would travel with him when needed even it this is very difficult. Meera had no restrictions or issues with her mobility as she went to college, went to trainings to the town centre when she worked as a teacher with CT NGO, and when she joined the field team, travelled to different villages till late evening. But had to overcome opposition from people in her village as elaborated later. When Seema first joined CT NGO, the work involved travelling across a lot of villages around the taluk and it felt like something she couldn't do. Travelling alone and by herself everywhere- with the lack of public transport connecting villages an added challenge, she wanted to give up, but her brothers supported her through this (elaborated later) and now she knows the taluk very well and learned to ride a two-wheeler to travel by herself. Gowri started to face restrictions on mobility when she started pre-university, but after marriage she has no restrictions and attributes it to her husband being open minded.

Mala, too, didn't have a lot of restrictions when it came to mobility before marriage, except that she could only go with family or a group of friends. And now she doesn't have any restrictions, also attributed to her husband. I've outlined above how Varsha faced a lot of restrictions on her mobility, despite it being for school, she was never allowed to use the bus even if the school was far. When she wanted to study further after high school, she negotiated with her father by being clear that her interests were in only studying and she would come straight back home after classes. There were rules to be followed when she went out: no talking to boys, not go to anyone's house and she admits to never visiting anyone in all those years. After marriage, she was restricted to the house. She never went outside, was always at home taking care of the house or her children. She pushed to be able to go outside because she needed to something other than the same routine she followed everyday and realised she didn't know anyone in the village because her live was within the walls of their house. She recalls the first time she travelled by herself on a bus, it was to go to a training at the taluk's town centre, and it terrified her because she had no idea how to do it. But today, she is able to go where she wants by herself when she needs it, while keeping her husband informed. Smitha faced a lot of restrictions to her mobility after marriage. She was not allowed to go outside when they lived with their in-laws but now that they live separately, she has no one to restrict her, except the words and opinions of people in the village.

The same intersectionality of the women's identities that played a role in their experiences of gender, played a role in their mobility. Status meant restrictive mobility, but this changed for Varsha because she went against the wishes of her husband. As status was still important, and her husband's opposition to her working is not known in the village, she must keep him informed about her whereabout (elaborated in later). For Gauri and Mala, their husbands don't place any restrictions in their mobility. Meera's responsibilities pushed her to overcome the opinions of the villagers about her mobility, and she still deals with these comments but has learned to ignore them. Household responsibility and mobility are important ways that gender norms restrict women. CT NGO was a trigger for the women to negotiate this part of their gender and find their agency along the way.

Power dynamics within the home

Feminists have highlighted the importance of the transformation of existing power relations between men and women, including through systems and institutions that enforce inequalities between the genders as a central aspect of empowerment (ASPBAE/FAO ,1993, Sreerekha, 2015). This section will look at how the power relations between the women and their husbands and village community have manifested, and how the women navigate and negotiate their power in these relations and spaces. I will also look at the role the NGO has played in this.

The cultural and social constructions around marriage produce power dynamics that are played out differently by individuals in private space of the marriage relationship. The husbands of the women I spoke to are good men who care for their wives and children. The husbands have existing ideas about the role of a wife, which manifest in the restrictions and constrictions they place on their wives. For Smitha, her husband lives away from the family for work, so she freely moves around, does her job as a teacher and lives her social life around the village. But she says that when her husband comes home for a few days to visit them on breaks from work, he doesn't let her talk to other people, even women, and she can't go to anyone's house to visit them. And recently, whenever she goes somewhere, like the NGO or her mother's house, he calls her. Before this he didn't used to call her during the day as he had work. She is ezpected to talk to him on call for however long he wants and when she asks him why he called, all he says is that he has some free time and so he wanted to talk with her. While she couldn't understand why he has started to

behave this way, it could be that the opinions of the villagers (elaborated later) have led to him imposing control over her everytime she goes outside the house.

For Varsha, the maintenance of an image and status that she has dealt with her entire life has also been imposed on her as a wife. Her husband believes that since they have 5 kid her responsibility is only towards the children and household. He has the responsibility of working and earning for them, and what he earns should be enough for them and they can adjust their needs to what he earns. He believes there is no need for her to work, and that it will be too heavy for her to manage. He thinks that she should relax and not work, but that's not what Varsha wants. She is in her youth and wants to learn and do new things. She even tried to work on their fields, but her husband stopped that. She started learning to sew from a woman who lives next door and her husband disapproved but she continued. She joined the NGO and didn't tell her husband it at first and when she did, it made him angry. But she continued to work with the NGO for 8 years now, her husband still refuses to know anything about the work she does. She wishes to have his support and there have been times when his lack of support and anger has frustrated her, but she instead she looks at it as an opportunity to become independent.

Once, one of their children had a fever and was very sick. Usually, her husband takes them to the government hospital at the town centre and handles everything, but he was angry about her working and refused to help as she does everything else herself. She had no idea how to do this but her anger, frustration, and confidence she gained from working with the NGO, pushed her to figure it out herself and she did. So now, she never asks him for help for such things, and it has become easy for her do such tasks this on her own. There was a point where she questioned herself for going against the wishes of her husband, she questioned whether it was wrong of her to want to work but realised that what she's doing isn't wrong. Her husband taking a step back from certain parts of her life as way to try to enforce his power over her didn't deter her from exercising her agency. She chose to overcome the challenges herself, guided by her newfound confidence in her abilities.

For Mala, in contrast to Varsha and Smitha, her husband is very supportive and doesn't stop her from doing anything she wants to. But during the first year of their marriage, her husband had denied buying her a sewing machine believing that she wouldn't be able to sew while caring for a newborn. Instead, she bought it herself and soon was financially independent. It is also interesting

that that was the only instance of her talking about any restrictions placed on her within the marriage. Her act of working smart with limited resources to express her agency and independence may have altered the power dynamics within their marriage, as he realised he couldn't place restrictions on her. They both overcame gendered expectations within their own marriage through this.

Power of social pressure

When looking at the experiences of the women and trying to understand the sources that impose marginalisations on the women, the community and village opinion seemed to be a key source of that enforces gender norms on the women. When women go outside their house, they are questioned on it. Smitha recalls that before she started working at the NGO, every time she stepped out of the house, she had to answer inquiries about where she is going and why and even now when she goes to trainings, people talk about it. For Varsha, when she goes out, people ask her husband about it. He gets angry when someone else tells him she's gone somewhere, and he has no idea about it, so she always has to keep him informed about her whereabouts. Smitha says that she is also judged a lot for making herself look presentable when going out, as a teacher in the school and when she goes to the NGO's taluk office for trainings. She likes to look presentable, but people only talk about how she always dresses up to go outside. More conversations on this topic, led to them telling me that it is usually the women who talk the most about other women in the villages. Mala says that the elderly women talk this way and have negative opinions on other women because they think everything needs to be the way it was for them, as dictated by tradition and fail to see the changes that come with the younger generation. Smitha, too, says that it's their grandmothers who say these things, and she and her sister-in-law always berate them for it. Mala on the other hand, feels like she can't say anything to these women as it would be taken as a sign of disrespect towards them.

For Gauri, it is a different experience. She lives in a Gouli village and even lives on the outskirts of the village where the other maratha families live, but they have good relations among them and the villagers are supportive of her. The only problem she has in the village is with the Headmaster (HM) of the government school in the village. The HM doesn't like her because many years ago, before she got married, her husband's family had complained about the lack of electricity at the school because of an oversight by the HM and has made things very hard for Gauri. It got so bad that she couldn't continue taking her classes for the students on school premises despite

having permission from the education board for this. She now teaches at a temple in the village, and while the teacher never leaves the children on time, Gauri tires to do her job the best she can while avoiding the HM, and has the support of the village in any skirmishes with the HM.

Power relations among the women working in the NGO

While the NGO has been a supportive place for the women, for a critical perspective, its also important to look at how the women experience the power relations between them and the NGO. In the previous chapter, I have outlined how CT NGO has been a space of growth, connection, and pathway for their empowerment. Smitha, Gauri and Varsha have been part of the digital education model, that has had some road bumps in its implementation due to changing ground realities. But these challenges have affected the women quite a lot. While all of them have expressed their trust in CT NGO, they still talked about how they've felt through it. Smitha feels like their group of teachers are being left behind, while the other groups have made a lot of progress. Varsha feels like her learnings have come to a stop and she's having to teach the kids by making her own lesson plans, after she has gone through struggles to be able to work with CT NGO. Mala had dropped her other teaching job at the nursery to do be part of the digital education project, and now with it being stalled, she is at a loss without work to do. She was tired of working two jobs and decided to choose the CT NGO to lessen some of the burden on herself. She has started her tailoring work again because she has no other option, but this work doesn't inspire her like teaching does. While the implementation of the project is on hold, Smitha and Varsha have continued to take classes at the local government schools because the parents of students have continuously asked for it. And because of changes in the way the project is being implemented, the women have been asked to hold parents' meetings about collecting small fees from the students for these classes. While this is a step towards making the model sustainable and independence, the women feel uncomfortable doing this. There have been no trainings for them the last year, no new material to teach the students and hence no quality of teaching for them to feel comfortable about this. While CT NGO may have its own plans and is working on resolving these issues, the women feel like their concerns and opinions do not get heard at CT NGO.

Bhavana was someone who worked at the NGO as a teacher for 6 years. She enjoyed taking the classes, while learning and growing from the trainings. CT NGO is the only organisation that worked in their village, there was no other source of welfare for the village people. When she was removed from the project, she asked CT NGO for some help to start her own classes but received

no help and felt like the work and time she put in for 6 years was not valued. Rules and impact objectives for the NGO have changed in the last few years, and she feels that CT NGO only care about working in villages where there's a high number of children, where there is a high school and not about the villages where the children and the women need it the most. She also reflected on the fact that CT NGO never gave her the tools or trainings to make her capable of running her own tuition centre, so without them she has no means of doing it herself and she has no document or certificate to show for the many trainings she attended and the years she spent as a teacher. Despite this, she has started taking classes for around 15 students, and collects a very small amount as a fee[7], which would make her current yearly earnings equivalent to what she earned in a month.

This shows us that while CT NGO's objective through this project is to empower women, they are also hierarchically placed at the bottom of the organsiation. While every small decision, change or roadblock greatly impact the women, their opinions and concern seem to be overlooked by CT NGO. This reflects that the women who are the main executors of their projects on the ground are completely excluded from decisions and discussions about the very project, creating large power dynamics between CT NGO and the women.

What provides support for women to express their agency?

In my conversations, about the ways the women negotiate and navigate their agency, I realised that some form of support was necessary for the women to negotiate and navigate their agency. These pockets of support that they found was from different sources in their lives. While CT NGO was one such important space of support, there were also other sources which I describe here.

Friendships with other women were important for most of the women. They shared with me that their friendships with women spaces where they could share their problems, talk about anything and be received and understood. Smitha recalls that she used to be nervous going anywhere and meeting other people, but from observing other women and the way they conduct themselves in various spaces, she has been able to learn to do this herself. She told me about a group of women from her village who formed a labourers group and work on different farms together, and she lights up when she talks about them. She says that they work on farms and have a really good time together. She says that when they are together, it is a very free space, there is no

7- as the parents of her students are just as poor.

good and no bad and that these women live differently when they're together and away from the village. This also resonated how the women who are part of the NGO feel about the friendships they form among themselves. During monthly trainings, women from 50 villages come together and spend a few days together at the NGO's taluk office.

All of them describe their friendships as a space where they find support in each other through all the things they face, as teachers and as women. Even the new teachers[1] are supported by the experienced teachers and the latter feel like it is their responsibility to help the former adapt to the job in the ways CT NGO supported them when they started, with care and kindness. The women said that the female friendships they formed among the teachers was of a different nature and closeness. CT NGO has provided them with a space where their differences in caste, class, religion do not matter. They all freely speak and mingle with each other, and their shared experience in CT NGO and the space it provides to them binds them in a different way. Mala says that the closeness she feels with the other women at CT NGO is something she doesn't find in other female friendships. These friendships with the teachers remind her of her childhood friendships, where they could be free and have fun. She can be silly and childish and not have gossip spread about her everywhere for behaving in a way that would be considered a crazy manner, giving them a space free of judgments.

For Smitha, her neighbours form an important part of her support system. Women who are her friends and recognise her for the joyful and ambitious person she is, and with whom she has created a space where they talk and share things about their lives. For Varsha, her in-laws have been a source of support and they never object but instead provide encouragement. It is because of their support that she can go against the wishes of her husband and work. And her parents, who have always supported her aspirations but couldn't provide the opportunities she wished for by going against the wishes of her grandparents, continue to support her and are proud of her work as a teacher. Mala's closest friend who was also her neighbour, is a friendship where they share all aspects of their lives with each other and understand each other like sisters.

Gauri has a space of support with her husband. They have a very good relationship with each other, a space where she can even express her anger, frustration, and burdens. When she was considering joining the NGO, it was her husband who encouraged and supported her on it. When the project in the village was being monetised as a step towards sustainability and independence,

she thought it would be impossible to mobilise the community to understand the importance of this and had decided that her path as a teacher was ending. Her husband stood with her through this and helped her talk to the members of the village and, along with support from the NGO, it turned out to have a good outcome in the village. Gauri also works with the local panchayat in mobilsing women's groups, so handling all the work at home gets very heavy for her. She has openly expressed her frustration about this with her husband and when she is away from home working, he even cleans the house, and her sons help her with chores around the house everyday. But Gauri says that she doesn't have close friendships with the other women from the NGO because of the strict pressures that she had as the elder daughter while growing up. She is unable to mingle and have fun like the other women, something she has never done because of her strict upbringing, and this has stuck with her and prevents her from forming friendships with women at CT NGO.

Bhavana's grandparents were a source of support as I had outlined earlier. She says that she also has close friendships with the other teachers from CT NGO, but her daily schedule is so busy that she rarely ever gets time to talk to them over the phone. She wakes up around 5 am everyday so she can make breakfast and send everyone to work, then she does all the chores and hourly care for her younger son. By then, it's time for her to take classes in the evening. And when she used to be at CT NGO for trainings, she had her younger son to look after and not much time for socialising. She and the women in her village are close, and a lot of them dropped by throughout the day as I observed during my visits to her. But she said that they are also very busy with household work and so rarely have time to spend with each other, except a few minutes through the day. When Meera talks about her friendships with other women, she recalls the time when she was in college and her father had passed away. Her mother was in a bad place and was unable to work or provide food to her when she went to class, so her friends used to bring her breakfast and lunch everyday. It was also a time when she was facing a lot of opposing opinions from her village because she chose to go to college and her friends supported her through it. Meera recalls these friendships with a lot of emotions and had counted on their support to get through that tough period.

Seema's family has been a source of support for her throughout her life. Her parents, especially her father encouraged her ambitions, and her mother has always been someone she goes to for advice. When she was thinking of joining the NGO, it was her family who encouraged her and made her believe it was a job she could take on. And when she had to travel across the taluk, and

she was thinking of giving up as travelling was a big challenge, it was her brothers who supported her. They took her to all the villages she needed to go on their two-wheeler. In time, they taught her how to ride a two-wheeler and bought her one so she could do what her job required by herself. Seema says that her family raised and supported her in a way that would ensure she isn't dependent on anyone else. The friends she made in graduate school are still some of her closest friends. She visits them when she needs a break from the taluk and shares all her troubles and struggles, and they provide her with a perspective that is different from her own and she is able to grow and learn through the hardships of life because of these friendships.

Why are these sources of support important?

When I started this research, in addition to CT NGO, I wanted to look at what other sources of support women have in their lives. Friendships with other women are an important one, especially those from CT NGO, as they break away from gendered expectations of behaviour, allowing them to forge friendships they've not experienced outside of this space. The teachers also look upto Meera and Seema in these aspects because they have been able to break away from gendered expectations, work full time jobs and even travel outside of the taluk for work. Having such friendships where you are not judged or held to society's standards create a space where you are accepted and loved for who you are. The support from husbands, in-laws and members of the village community was unexpected as gender norms and the marginalisation of women is viewed as strict and unchangeable in rural spaces, but this shows us the diversity in how different people in rural communities think in relation to gender norms and the changes that can be affected. These pockets of support also enable the women to overtly express their agency and internal empowerment into their external lives, and as my illustration of their lives have shown, without these forms of support the women are left with no means to navigate their oppressive context.

CT NGO recognizes the solidarity the women feel in the connections they form with each other and encourages it. But women's empowerment from a collective perspective, that would also include affecting changes in existing systems like family and society, cannot be done through a professionalised NGO with neoliberal empowerment goals. Beyond assuring the families of the women of their safety and the moral basis of the women's work (furthering the education of the village's children and thus its future), CT NGO is not involved with structures like family that enforce inequalities in the women's lives or even aware of the complex navigation the women undertake in their lives. By expanding this visualisation of empowerment, guided by the

experiences and needs of the women and looking at them as more than teachers, an NGO like CT could even support the women navigate for their agency and create real change within the family and village realm, empowering women and redistributing power.

Chapter 7: Conclusion: Economic Empowerment or Economic Participation?

The depoliticisation and neoliberal influences are clear in the structure and functioning of CT NGO and its visualisation of empowerment. It visualises economic empowerment as upskilling that results in the women able to earn. This economic ability then would translate to a voice in the decision making at the household level, changing power dynamics in the household, an important aspect of the process of empowerment as outlined by feminists (Baltiwala 1994). But while this is expected, the NGO's evaluations of the projects do not include this insight into the women's lives on the exercise of their voice at the household level (CT NGO, n.d.)

I have given space to the complex and rich lives of rural women to look at the many ways they navigate and negotiate their agency and marginalisations they face, as outlined in chapter 6. I have also documented the aspirations of the women beyond the limited role of being mothers and wives. Empowerment means to be able to go outside the house, to work or to meet friends without the questioning and doubting gazes, to be trusted, to be able to participate in education and the opportunities it affords. The women had to give up aspirations when family and society felt it was time for them to get married. Smitha has always been interested in fashion and wants to learn how to design clothes, Bhavana always wanted to teach mathematics and computer science. They found ways to meet some aspirations. CT NGO was an important form of support and encouragement for the women. CT NGO did focus on economic empowerment and upskilling, supported the women's mobility, gave them a safe space to form important friendships. CT NGO was a catalyst for the women to believe in their own abilities, giving them confidence and awareness of their rights to make decisions. Rowlands says that this perception of women to see themselves as able and entitled to make decisions is an important process of empowerment (Rowlands, 1997) even if the social and political context continued to limit them.

I conclude that CT NGO did not provide economic empowerment but economic participation. They are provided skills training and a source of income to cover small monthly needs but isn't significant to make them financially self-sufficient. CT NGO is following donor demands but is able to provide the women with skills. It provides a path for the women to move out from their homes and villages and its restrictions, which no other government intervention or development initiative in this region has been able to provide. I would argue that the women showed agency as they navigated and negotiated the chance to work with NGO and overcame hurdles to move outside the walls of their house. Despite these small successes it is still important to see how that empowerment cannot stop there, they may feel internally empowered, but they continue to live in an economic, social, and political context which still hems them in.

Word count:17,298

Annexes

Annex A: Table 1.1: Women, their background, and the outcome of PAR activity

SL no	Name and Background	PAR Activity object and explanation
1	o Smitha, married with two kids, aged 34 and is Christian. o Lives in a predominantly Hindu village with 50+ households, in a rented house. o Her husband works in another state and so is away most of the time. o She manages the household and kids by herself. o Landless, no other assets	Object: Rose with thorns "A rose is very beautiful to look at and it brightens up the place, but it has a lot of thorns. Smitha feels that she, too is like this. She is liked by everyone and enjoyed socializing but has a lot of problems in her life" (Smitha, Personal Conversation, July 10, 2023).
2	o Varsha, married with 5 kids, aged 35+ and is Hindu upper caste and from a relatively rich family. o Lives in a joint family in a large village with 200+ households o Family has farmland and two houses	Object: branch of Tulsi plant (holy basil) "Like women, when the Tulsi is young, it is watered regularly so it can grow, and it even has healing properties. But if it gets too big, people cut and trim it because they use it as a show piece. People cut it till is it according to what they need. They want the plant, but they don't want it to grow. And women's lives are the same. As a child, parents will nurture you and help you

			grow. They will get you married and then they want kids from you. They want all these things from you, but they don't want you to grow. They want you to support the growth of the society from us, but they don't want us to grow. All they want from us is to raise kids, do the work at home, so that society is supported but we are not allowed to go outside" (Varsha, Personal Conversation, July 12, 2023).
3	o	Mala, married with 3 kids, aged 32+, Hindu	Object: Bulb
	o	Lives in a Hindu village with 75+ households	"The bulb gives light to everyone around it, the same way that she tries to help those around her. If she doesn't help someone then she is also useless like a bulb that can't give light", (Mala, Personal Conversation, July 12, 2023).
	o	Family has farmland and a house	
4	o	Gauri, married with two kids, aged 34+, Hindu.	Object: Book
	o	Lives in village deep in the forest that is predominantly Gouli, a tribal caste that lives with their cattle (Obeng 2014).	"A book feels like it is never ending, the more pages you turn and it feels like there are more pages. Life has been like that for her, in terms of the difficulties she's been through. The more she overcome, the more there is to overcome" (Gauri, Personal Conversation, July 13, 2023).
	o	Live outside the village where other Hindu families also live.	
	o	They have cattle, some farmland and a house in a flood prone region	
5	o	Bhavana, married with 2 kids, aged 35+ Christian, very poor family	Object: Sewing Machine
	o	Lives in a small village near a paper mill that releases insufficiently treated waste in quantities beyond regulations into a river that flows through the village (Dandeli-Ashi Tiger Reserve 2013).	"The sewing machine is a lot like me. It needs basic maintenance and with it, it can work well and stand on its own" (Bhavana, Personal Conversation, July 18, 2023).
	o	Lives in a tin roofed house in a flood prone region	

	o	They live in the house and pay taxes for it, but is owned by the forest department	
	o	She was recently removed from the NGO's education project	
6	o	Seema, lives with her mother and two brothers and baby son, Siddi Christian	Object: Steel Rod
	o	Lives in a village with 300+ households, with a significant presence of the Siddi community	"No matter where you take the steel rod, it will fit in. It can be used for a lot of things. When the door doesn't stay open, we wedge it in the door; when we want to
	o	Since there is no space in the village, they live in a house on their farmland, away from the village with no proper road connecting them to other roads	make chutney we can use it, when we want to dig something in the ground outside, we use it as well. It is useful everywhere" (Seema, Personal Conversation, July 16, 2023).
7	o	Meera, lives with her mother and sister, Hindu	- N/A
	o	Lives in a village with 400+ households	- Due to limited time with Meera, I was unable to have a conversation the way I did with the other
	o	Live in her father's brother's house as they don't have a house of their own	women. Our conversation was more condensed and so I couldn't do the PAR activity with her
	o	They own farmland, which was used to take a loan that Mala is paying off	
	o	She is doing her B. Ed with scholarship support from the NGO's contact while working full-time	

References:

Alvarez, S. (1999) 'Advocating Feminism: The Latin American feminist NGO "boom"'. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*,1 (2): 181-209.

Alvarez, S. (2009) 'Beyond NGO-ization? Reflections from Latin America'. *Society for International Development,* 52(2): 175-184.

ASPBAE/FAO. (1993) 'Women's Empowerment in South Asia: Concepts and Practices, New Delhi', *ASPBAE (Asia South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education).*

Badstue, L. Petesch, P. (2002) 'Gender Norms and Poverty Dynamics in 32 Villages of South Asia'. *Int. Journal of Com.* WB 3, 289–310.

Baltiwala, S. (2013) 'Engaging with Empowerment: An Intellectual and Experiential Journey'. *Women Unlimited*, New Delhi.

Baltiwala, S. (2016) 'Engaging with Empowerment: An Intellectual and Experiential Journey'. In Harcourt, W. (Ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development* (pp. 77-91). Palgrave Macmillan.

Batliwala, S. (2007) 'Taking the Power out of Empowerment: An Experiential Account'. *Development in Practice*, vol. 17, no. 4/5, pp. 557–65.

Bhende, M.J. (2013) 'Agricultural Profile of Karnataka State'. *Agricultural Development and Rural Transformation Centre*, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore.

Caldwell, J. C., Reddy, P. H., & Caldwell, P. (1984) 'The Determinants of Family Structure in Rural South India'. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 46(1), 215-229. National Council on Family Relations. [Online] Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/351879 (Accessed on 11th November 2023).

Caroline Moser & Annalise Moser (2005) 'Gender mainstreaming since Beijing: A review of success and limitations in international institutions'. *Gender & Development*, 13:2, 11-22, DOI: 10.1080/13552070512331332283

Castro, M.G. (2001) 'Engendering Powers in Neoliberal Times: Reflections from the left on feminisms and feminisms'. *Latin American Perspectives*, 28 (6):17-37.

Chandhoke, N. (2012) 'Civil Society in India'. in Michael Edwards (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society*, Oxford Handbooks.

CT NGO (n.d.) 'About Us: Mission and Vision'. (Website Accessed 9th November 2023).

CT NGO (n.d.) 'About Us: Leadership'. (Website accessed 9th November 2023).

CT NGO (n.d.) 'About Us: Team'. (Website accessed 9th November 2023).

CT NGO (n.d.)' Our Projects: Learning'. (Website accessed 9th November 2023).

Daly, M. (2005) 'Gender Mainstreaming in Theory and Practice'. *Social Politics*, 12(3), 433–445.

Dandeli-Aashi Tiger Reserve. (2013) 'Background History'. *Dandeli-Aashi Tiger Reserve* [Online] Available at: http://dandeli-anshi.blogspot.com/2013/?m=0 (Accessed on 11th November 2023).

Deccan Chronicle. (2023) 'Heavy Rains in Coastal and North Karnataka'. *Deccan Herald*. [Online] Available at: https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/in-other-news/240723/heavy-rains-in-coastal-and-north-karnataka.html (Accessed on 11th November 2023).

Department of School Education and Literacy (2021). Right to Education. *Department of School Education and Literacy.* [Online] Available at: https://dsel.education.gov.in/rte (Accessed on 11th November 2023).

Dhanaraj, O., & Mahambare, V. (2019) 'Family structure, education and women's employment in rural India'. *World Development*, 115, 17-29. ISSN 0305-750X. DOI: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.11.004.

Elson, D. (1991) 'Male Bias in the Development Process: An Overview', in D. Elson (ed.), *Male Bias in the Development Process*, Manchester. Manchester University Press: 1–28.

Fleming, R.C. (2016) 'Working for a Happy Life in Bangalore: Gender, Generation, and Temporal Liminality in India's Tech City'. Doctoral dissertation, University of Colorado.

Gender mainstreaming since Beijing: A review of success and limitations in international institutions', *Gender & Development*, 13:2, 11-22, DOI: 10.1080/13552070512331332283

Goetz, A. M. (2003) 'Conceptual article on applied research for gender justice' (draft), prepared for *Gender Unit of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC),* Ottawa.

Godfrey, J., Branigan, E., Khan, S. (2017) 'Old and New Forms of Giving: Understanding Corporate Philanthropy in India'. *International Society for the Third-Sector Research and the Johns Hopkins University* 28:672-696 DOI 10.1007/s11266-016-9693-4

Harding, S. & Norberg, K. (2005) 'New Feminist Approaches to Social Science Methodologies: An Introduction'. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Signs: 30(4): 2009-2015.

Henry, M.(2007) 'If the shoe fits: Authenticity, authority and agency in feminist diasporic research'. *Women's Studies International Forum* 30: 70–80.

Kambara, C., & Bairagya, I. (2021) 'Earnings and Investment Differentials Between Migrants and Natives: A Study of Female Street Vendors in Bengaluru City'. *Environment and Urbanization ASIA*, 12(1), 56-72.

Karnataka Forest Department (n.d.) 'Haliyal Division'. *Karnataka Forest Department.* [Online] Available at:

https://aranya.gov.in/aranyacms/(S(abkzxe2x4qyfspafymw5i2eg))/English/FieldDivision.aspx?u15HOwzBSytZASWnHMXKxw== (Accessed on 11th November 2023).

Karnataka Revenue Department. (2023) 'Karnataka State Heat Wave Action Plan - 2023-24'. *Government of Karnataka*. [Online] Available at: https://ksdma.karnataka.gov.in/storage/pdf-files/Heatwaveactionplan2023(r).pdf (Accessed on 11th November 2023).

Karnataka Revenue Department (n.d.) 'Agricultural Profile of Karnataka State'. *Karnataka Revenue Department.* [Online] Available at http://www.isec.ac.in/Agri%20Profile-Karnataka.pdf

Kashyap, L. (2020) 'Changing Couple Relationships in India'. In Abela, A., Vella, S., Piscopo, S. (Eds.), *Couple Relationships in a Global Context*. European Family Therapy Association Series. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37712-0_5

Kindon, S., Pain, R., Kesby, M. (2007) 'Participatory Action Research: making a difference to theory, practice and action'. In *Participatory Action Research Methods* (pp. 26-32).

Kumar, P. (2019) 'Women outnumber men in higher education in Karnataka, UP'. *The Deccan Herald*. [Online] Available at: https://www.deccanherald.com/india/women-outnumber-men-in-higher-education-in-ktaka-up-763736.html (Accessed 11th November 2023).

Kumar, Santosh. (2023) 'In Karnataka, 15 women molested per day.' *The Times of India*. [Online] Available at: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/in-karnataka-15-women-molested-per-day-in-2022/articleshow/97014953.cms (accessed on 11th November 2023).

Menon, S., M, R. & Sharma, S.(2020) 'A Study on the Status of Women's Empowerment in urban Bangalore, India'. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 21: Iss. 5, Article 6.

Moser, C., & Moser, A. (2005) 'Gender Mainstreaming since Beijing: A Review of Success and Limitations in International Institutions'. *Gender & Development*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 11–22.

Mukhopadhyay, M. (1998) 'Legally Dispossessed: Gender Identity and the Process of Law'. *Stree*. Calcutta.

Mukhopadhyay, M. (2004) 'Mainstreaming Gender or Streaming Gender away: Feminists Marooned in the Development Business'. *Specials issue of repositioning feminisms in Gender and Development* 35(4), 95-103.

Mukhopadhyay, M. (2016) 'Mainstreaming Gender or "Streaming" Gender Away: Revisited'. In Harcourt, W. (Ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development* (pp. 132-144). Palgrave Macmillan.

Murdock, D. (2008) 'When Women Have Wings: Feminism and Development in Medellín, Colombia'. *University of Michigan Press*. Ann Arbor, MI.

Navsahyog (n.d.) 'Presence'. *Navsahyog.org*. [Online] Available at: https://www.navsahyog.org/presence/ (Accessed Nov 13, 2023).

Obeng, P. (2014) 'History and Identity.' In Harcourt, W., & Pande, R. (Eds.), Rural Women's Power in South Asia in Gender, *Development and Social Change*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India (2011) 'Tatwanagi Population- Uttara Kannada, Karnataka'. *Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India*.

[Online] Available at: https://villageinfo.in/karnataka/uttara-kannada/haliyal/tatwanagi.html (Accessed on 11th November 2023).

Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2011) 'Khamdolli Population- Uttara Kannada, Karnataka'. *Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.* [Online] Available at: https://www.census2011.co.in/data/village/602857-khamdolli-karnataka.html (Accessed on 11th November 2023).

Phadnis, S. (2023) 'Women in IT more than double to 20 lakh in a decade'. *The Times of India.* [Online] Available at: https://www.deccanherald.com/india/women-outnumber-men-in-higher-education-in-ktaka-up-763736.html (Accessed on 11th November 2023).

Razavi, S. (1997) 'Fitting gender into development institutions'. *World Development*, Vol 25 No 7: 1111–1125.

Rowlands, J. (1997) 'Questioning Empowerment: working with women in Honduras, UK'. *Oxfam.*

RSETI (n.d.). 'About Institute: Rural Self Employment Training Institute'. *RSETI Haliyal.* [Online]Available at: https://www.rsetihaliyal.org/overview.php (Accessed 9th November 2023).

Seguino, S. (2007). 'Plus Ça change? Evidence on global trends in gender norms and stereotypes'. *Feminist Economics*, 18 (2), 1–28.

Seth, R., Shetty, S. (2023) 'Who loses when FCRA licences get cancelled?'. *Indian Development Review.* [Online] Available at: https://idronline.org/article/fundraising-and-communications/who-loses-when-fcra-licences-get-cancelled/ (Accessed on 31 Nov 2023)

Sethi, H., Sheth, D.L. (1991) 'The NGO sector in India: historical context and current discourse'. *Voluntas* 2, 49–68. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01398670

Sharma, B. (2023) 'Changing Ideologies of Marriage in Contemporary Indian Women's Novels'. *Journal of International Women' s Studies*: Vol. 25: Iss. 3, Article 9. Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss3/9

Sheth, D.L., Sethi, H. (1991) 'The NGO sector in India: historical context and current discourse'. *Voluntas* 2, 49–68 . https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01398670

Sidel, M. (2001) 'Recent Research on Philanthropy and the Nonprofit Sector in India and South Asia'. *Voluntas*: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations. Vol 12, No. 2.

SKDRDP (n.d.) 'Women Empowerment'. *SKDRDP India.* [Online] Available at: https://skdrdpindia.org/women-empowerment/ (Accessed 9th November 2023).

Sreerekha, M.S. (2015) 'Mapping Empowerment in Gender and Development'. *Journal of Political Economy and Fiscal Federalism*, Volume 1, Issue Number 2395-6976, 65-86. K.N. Raj Centre for Planning and Centre-State Financial Relations.

Wieringa, S. (1994) 'Women's Interests and Empowerment: Gender Planning Reconsidered'. *Development and Change*, 25: 829-848.