

**Empowering Women:  
Understanding Government Failure and  
Social Movement Success in Brazil and India**

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November 15, 2006

During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a dynamic shift in the state policy towards rural areas in both India and Brazil. Instead of a secondary concern, the rural periphery became a much greater priority of the state. In Brazil, the end of military rule in 1984 brought about a renewed commitment to democratization and decentralization. Similarly, in India, a crisis of the state in the 1970's-1980's revealed a need to revitalize local and domestic politics to address local problems. Yet decentralizing and devolving politics to the local level did little to benefit individuals living on the rural periphery. Women especially continued to be marginalized, despite the attempts of state-directed gender development initiatives. Considering the new commitment towards the cause of marginalized peoples, why did state-directed gender development programs fail to bring about real benefits?

State-directed gender development programs, seeking to improve conditions for women, were pursued with the pressure of the international community on the backs of central governments. Precisely at the same time as decentralization and devolution of central authority occurred in Brazil and India, the paradigm of gender development emerged. It was enabled by the increasing awareness of the particular needs of women and their vital role in influencing the path of development. Improving conditions for women became a global concern, putting pressure on states to “engender” their development programs (Rai, 2003). These state-led programs, while nominally acknowledging the need for women’s empowerment, did not accrue actual improvements because they only prioritized the immediate, economic welfare aspects of women’s empowerment. Over time, this incomplete approach was broadened to include elements of political empowerment and more long-term economic development strategies.

Social movements and grassroots initiatives were most instrumental in diversifying the definition of gender development to include both political empowerment and sustainable economic development and therefore the most successful in empowering women. While states and state institutions fell short in realizing the goals of their gender development programs, informal actors brought about the ideological change needed to truly realize women's empowerment. This paper will argue that the comprehensive definition of empowerment held by non-state actors enabled their greater success in improving conditions for women. State-led programs failed because they were founded on one-dimensional understandings of empowerment that did not take into account the deep roots of women's marginalization and oppression.

Defining the particular vision of empowerment needed to bring actual benefits for women is a difficult task because empowerment is an on-going process. Empowerment is not dictated by a specific goal or end state but rather it seeks to eliminate conditions of disempowerment such as poverty, lack of land ownership, and lack of political voice.<sup>1</sup> Although this vision of empowerment is fluid and context specific, there are certain common characteristics. Naila Kabeer most concretely defines the multi-dimensionality of empowerment, using three indicators – resources, agency, and achievements (1999). Access to resources involves the ability of women to have both control and access to material and non-material resources. Second, Kabeer describes agency as the decision-making power of women. Lastly, achievements are operationalized as actual changes in the roles played by women. Together, these three indicators are comprehensive in describing the economic and political aspects of women's empowerment. Therefore, I

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed description of various levels of women's disempowerment, see chart in Appendix A.

will be utilizing these indicators to measure empowerment as attempted by government programs and social movements.

Juxtaposing social movements and local initiatives to particular government gender development programs will reveal different visions of empowerment. The variation in the outcomes of movements and programs will be examined to determine the cause of their particular success or failure. While, this paper argues that social movements and local initiatives are more successful than state programs in empowering women, flaws in social movements and successful government programs, for example programs that only pursue economic empowerment, will also be examined to avoid selection on the dependent variable. Including these anomalies will show not only that the few government successes that have occurred have been enabled by more advanced understanding of social movements and that flawed social movements have not ebbed away but rather have learned from their lessons and have matured. This analysis will reveal the undeniable importance of a comprehensive notion of empowerment.

*Existing Theories of State Failure:*

Some theorists undermine the significance of a multidimensional vision of women's empowerment, attributing greater causality to state weakness. The inefficacy of government institutions compromised all development programs. During the 1980s, the governments of India and Brazil attempted to overcome these very problems by pursuing decentralization and devolution. Unfortunately, however, bridging the gap between the center and the periphery only exacerbated the inability of the state to address local needs. In Brazil, decentralization shifted power from an elitist national government

to already powerful local governors. In India, political elitism continued with the persistence of personalistic and centralized politics at the subnational level. Both countries, even with different trajectories of decentralization, continued to manifest great weaknesses in their institutions. The inability of decentralization to reduce government inefficacy revealed the chasm between national and subnational politics. These weaknesses also continued to make the states vulnerable to capture by local elites, undermining development policy in general.

The lack of effective gender development reform from the state can also be attributed to the traditional view of the embeddedness of elites in subnational politics. The overwhelming political dominance of subnational elites and their propensity towards corrupt, self-serving politics undermines state programs. In Brazil, subnational governors continued to dominate the sphere of local politics, compromising the efficacy of development programs by channeling resources into their own pockets (Schonwalder, 1997: 755). Government bureaucrats in India were equally self-serving. Not surprisingly, the capture of state programs by these elites diminished the efficacy of government programs greatly. However, these flaws are not specific to gender development programs. Rather, they generally undermine the overall efficacy and authority of the state. The failings of state-directed gender development programs are more particular in nature and arise from shortcomings in policy rather than in traditional political structures.

Other theories find that gender development is inhibited by the persistence of these traditional politics and political economic structures in rural areas. In Brazil, early agrarian reform programs failed to benefit women because only men owned land

traditionally (Deere, 2003). Also, women's needs were not represented in unions, which typically consisted only of men. In India, agrarian reform also excluded women because it was founded on a similar male-ownership model (Agarwal, 1994). Because land ownership is an important resource for women, the failure of state-directed agrarian reform to reach women due to the persistence of traditional socio-political structures continued the disempowerment of women.

Society and culture also inhibit the efficacy of state-directed gender development programs, but neither is fixed or permanent. Patriarchy in Brazil as well as in all of Latin America represses women and their needs. In the state of Rajasthan in India, male-dominated structures still limit women to the roles of wives and mothers (Unnithan-Kumar, 2003: 244-245). The effect of culture, specifically the persistence of patriarchal structures, in perpetuating the marginalization of women cannot be understated. Yet, the success of many social movements and initiatives in empowering women demonstrates that although culture is an inhibitor to change, it is not entirely immutable. Tradition and societal norms can indeed be transformed.

The alternate theories detailed above describe many valid reasons for the failure of government development programs. However, none of them address the specific shortcomings of gender development programs as policy failures. These theories do not emphasize the importance of a multi-dimensional vision of women's empowerment in improving conditions for women. According to this paper, the lack of this comprehensive notion is the cause of failed state-directed development programs. Conversely, the success of social movements and grassroots initiatives is a product of the multi-dimensional vision.

International organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations help social movements greatly though they do not enact change themselves. Rather, these organizations support movements by providing financial support, advocacy, research capacity and organizational experience. They also pressure governments to pursue gender development.<sup>2</sup> According to Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, these attributes constitute the greatest strength of international and transnational organizations (1998). However, despite their external support, international actors have little influence in actually sustaining the movement; rather, true agency arises from the local constituents. While international organizations have aided social movements and local initiatives to conceptualize their notion of empowerment and helped them articulate their demands, the movements have achieved long-term success because of their own internal strength and their commitment to women's empowerment.

### *Reasons for Comparison*

To show that social movements and local initiatives have succeeded where state programs have failed, this paper will take a comparative approach by examining initiatives from the 1980s onward in both India and Brazil. The 1980s brought the end of the military authoritarianism in Brazil, signaling the beginning of the democratic transition and greater openings for non-state actors. An increase in the activity of social movements also occurred in India during this time because of a perception of state crisis (Calman, 1992). The social movements that emerged during this time were called "New

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<sup>2</sup> The International Year for Women in 1975 in Brazil brought women's interests very much to the foreground. Interestingly, the commemoration of women's interests occurred at the start of the democratic transition.

Social Movements” because they embodied an anti-statist approach to fulfilling their demands (Veltmeyer and Petras, 2000).

Besides the parallel emergence of social movements, Brazil and India also experienced other significant political developments. This period included important political developments such as a revision to the Brazilian Constitution in 1988 with provisions for agrarian reform as well as the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Indian Constitution in 1992. The increasing attention to marginalized peoples specifically to those in the rural periphery makes this time period very appropriate for an analysis of development.

Social movements and state programs can be compared and contrasted in India and Brazil because of their similar political, economic and social structures. Most basically, Brazil and India are two of the biggest democracies among developing countries. They also share common political dynamics such as the disconnect between rural and urban areas and the embeddedness of political elites. Similar socio-political elements of patriarchy, great cultural and ethnic diversity, and stratification in society unify both countries. Inegalitarianism is also a common economic reality in both Brazil and India.

Differences between Brazil and India are equally instrumental, particularly in revealing the distinct approaches of social movements within each context. Inequality and social stratification are much more severe and entrenched in Brazil than in India. Different degrees of decentralization and prioritization of rural needs forged very different institutional environments in Brazil and India. For example, in Brazil, land redistribution and agrarian reform were the main concerns of rural development

programs. However, in India, these programs were oriented towards creating non-agrarian forms of employment. Culturally, there are significant differences also with the dominance of Roman Catholicism in Brazil and Hinduism as well as other equally prevalent ideologies in India. These differences determined the distinct bargaining strategy and development of social movements in each case.

The response of social movements and their relationship with the state and state actors varied greatly in India and Brazil. Despite these differences, a similar vision of empowerment characterized all movements. In Brazil, social movements focused on lobbying the state for recognition and acknowledgement of their needs. In India, the dominant strategy in rural areas involved creating enclaves in which women could realize empowerment separately. While these organizations emerged in parallel during the political openings created by the democratic transition in Brazil and the state crisis in India, they pursued different tactics to realize their common goal of empowerment. These distinctions will be explored in greater detail through the course of the paper.

The implications of the rise of social movements in rural Brazil and rural India are significant. That movements could emerge to bring about change in these peripheral areas shows not only the desperation of rural women but also their powerful agency. In Brazil, social movements pushed the government to reform land redistribution policies to benefit women, doubling the number of female beneficiaries during the second wave of reforms. They also created a legitimate space for female laborers, beginning to level disparities between men and women in the labor force. In India, movements created cooperatives or separate local assemblies in which women realized their economic, social, and political potential. In pursuing their goals, social movements also shaped

women who were leaders in their own right. Ela Bhatt, the founder of the SEWA movement, became an international figure, traveling abroad to represent Indian women in global conferences. A great sense of solidarity among these women also emerged. Solidarity, communion, and a new vision of empowerment shaped a new group of rural women who could stand independently.

The success of social movements and local initiatives in empowering women in Brazil and India reveals the importance of grounding policy action in local arenas. Action and policy-legislation as informed by local needs seems to be most effective in realizing change. While, the qualitative nature of this study in looking at only two countries prevents it from prescribing particular pathways for successful social reform, it does offer some significant insights into how deeply entrenched societal structures can be transformed. Culture, including political culture, is not immutable. The agency of actors, strengthened by their purpose, can bring about change from the bottom. How women's initiatives achieved their goal of empowerment against the odds of embedded patriarchy, corrupt political culture, a legacy of failed state programs holds great promise for other social movements.

### **Conservatism, Misogyny, and Empty Promises in Brazil**

In Brazil, government initiatives to improve conditions for rural women and rural peoples in general began with the end of the military dictatorship and the reinstatement of democratic rule in 1984. These programs were a response to the emergence of new social movements and their increasing demands for reform. Although the programs had the intention of revitalizing the neglected rural periphery, they failed in accruing any benefits

to rural women. Not only did these programs lack an understanding of women's disempowerment, they were also inconsistently implemented, depending if they could be used to advance other political priorities. The programs also failed in acknowledging the particular needs of women, embodying the government's attitude that women's issues could be adequately addressed within existing fora. Together all of these shortcomings led to the absence of a comprehensive conception of women's empowerment, resulting in the failure of state directed gender development programs

*No land for women:*

Land redistribution, the focus of government reform policies during the democratic transition in the late 1980s, benefited only half of the rural population (Deere, 2003). Women continued to be excluded from owning property rights, thereby lacking both resources and agency. In rural Brazil, ownership of land defines the entire social, political, and economic matrix, a reality to which the government was attuned. Yet, its initiation of the most radical set of agrarian reforms in Brazilian history did not include women. Women were in fact the biggest losers of the agrarian reform during this period because their continuing plight was obscured by the purported success of government programs in solving rural inequality and poverty. Exclusion of women from the major thrust of government development programs during the democratic transition reveals the government's ignorance and neglect of women's issues.

Agrarian reform failed to benefit women because of the government's lack of commitment to implementing reform. Although the constitutional reform of 1988 included women's needs for land redistribution, actual implementation of constitutional

clauses never occurred (Deere, 2003: 258). The change in presidential administrations in 1989 derailed the process of putting thought into actual action. Empowering women became a secondary concern compared to political priorities. Even when implementation finally occurred, it was undertaken by an agency that believed that by themselves women cannot own land fruitfully.

Responsibility for land reform was delegated to the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), a government agency that pursued a male-centered approach towards redistributing land, marginalizing women even further. INCRA enacted land reform under the existing paradigm of the 1964 Land Statute which meted out land to only the male heads of household. This type of discriminatory redistribution was justified by the conviction that women without a husband or a grown son could not utilize land productively. In the minds of INCRA and other government officials, women continued to be viewed as second class citizens in Brazil: “The relatively low share of female beneficiaries reflects the discrimination against women that prevailed before the 1988 constitutional reform and the fact that it was not eliminated by measures to establish women’s formal equality with men” (Deere, 2003: 269). Thus, even though INCRA was entrusted with this critical task of solving inequities in land ownership, because of its misogynistic philosophy, it failed in realizing any benefits for half the rural population. Data on land reform gathered in 1996 reveals that women only constituted a minute 12.6% of the beneficiaries.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly, the state-directed land reform program initiated in 1988 was unable to benefit rural women. Its failure is directly caused by INCRA’s philosophy of land reform.

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<sup>3</sup> See appendix A for a breakdown of the male and female beneficiaries by state.

### *Continuing Conservatism*

The limited responsiveness of the government to women's demands for profound change reveals its inability to understand the multidimensionality of empowerment. In 1985, the National Women's Council (CNDM) and several feminist organizations created a Women's Charter or *Carta* voicing the needs of women (Alvarez, 1990). While the *Carta* did influence the Constitutional reform to some degree, none of the provisions for necessary political, social, and economic transformation were included:

Constitutional provisions that promoted gender role change...or threatened to alter gender power relations or disrupt capital accumulation were excluded from the final Draft Charter, due largely to concerted, well-financed opposition from powerful capitalist, church, and traditionalist lobbies (Alvarez, 1990: 252).

Entrenched elites and interest groups dominated the Brazilian government, preventing from initiating reforms that would bring about empowerment. Because it focused on nominal reforms, which placated the interests of dominant elites and which had little transformative power, the government was ineffective in implementing change that truly empowered women.

Even during the period of decentralization and greater prioritization of the needs of the poor, women and their needs continued to be placed at the bottom of the political agenda in Brazil. The dominant political stance was that the needs of women could be addressed by existing institutions and within existing organizations (Stephen, 1997: 217-218). Many politicians and government bureaucrats believed that there was no need for separate women's organizations. The women's organizations and initiatives that did emerge under state direction during the 1980's were vulnerable to the state's inconstant prioritization of women's issues (Stephen, 1997: 216). Dependent on the state for

funding and other resources, these initiatives oscillated in degrees of commitment. Also, by overly representing elite demands, the state distanced itself from the rural periphery and precluded the implementation of programs that would accrue actual benefits to women. The state's continuing disconnect from rural peoples resulted in its inability to fully understand women's needs in order to conceptualize a comprehensive notion of empowerment. In sum, during the democratic transition, the government proved that although it was nominally willing to acknowledge the marginalization of women as a problem, it would not commit itself entirely to empowering women. Effective change therefore had to come from the bottom.

### **A United Front: The Rural Women Workers' Movement (MMTR)**

The disempowerment of women in rural Brazil was a deep-rooted and hidden reality that was best addressed by emerging non-state actors during the democratic transition of the 1980s. Operating outside of the institutional fora, social movements and grassroots initiatives were able to avoid the co-optive tendencies of Brazilian politics (Alvarez, 1990). In doing so, they were able to depart from the characteristic conservatism which so far had inhibited any profound change for women. Social movements were able to advocate for a vision of empowerment that eliminated all forms of women's disempowerment. By lobbying independently for women's empowerment, they were able to work towards political, social and economic inclusion of women. Most of these grassroots organizations began with demands for land reform, however their strategy was quickly expanded to demand more far-reaching changes in the lives of women (Deere, 2003). Over time, these movements evolved internally to strengthen their

positions within Brazil's socio-political framework. The upshot of their demands was increasing government responsiveness in the form of more land reallocation to women as well as the creation of particular government institutions for women.

Initially, in order to create the space necessary to mobilize, social movements had to free themselves from other non-state actors that had relegated women's issues to the periphery historically. These movements had to become independent from the conservatism of the Catholic Church, its Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), and Christian base communities (CEBs) (Stephen, 1997; Deere, 2003). Unions also limited women's demands for empowerment by excluding them from membership (Deere, 2003: 263). Peasant movements such as the Rural Workers Movement (MST) failed to benefit women because they subsumed the particular needs of women within the overall objective of the movement (Stephen, 1997: 212-224). The inability of these organizations to fully integrate women and their demands forced them to break off and form their own groups. Over time, as they experienced threats of co-optation from both state and non-state actors, these movements became increasingly independent.

Rural women's movements sought empowerment with two primary demands - representation in the unions, which would facilitate land redistribution, and greater social security benefits. Union representation would enable women to have a political voice and gain access to an arena in which they could exercise their bargaining power. Possession of social security benefits indicates an acknowledgement of female laborers as equal with men in the workplace. They sought to realize these demands through the MST and also by lobbying the national and subnational institutions. The nature of these demands reveals the profound awareness of rural women of the requirements of

empowerment, paralleling Kabeer's notion of empowerment in increasing the resources, agency and achievements of women.

Over time, the resources and agency demanded by rural women changed as women's organizations articulated their particular vision of empowerment. Initially, to increase their political agency, women pursued greater representation in existing unions (Deere, 2003: 263-268). However, the inability of these unions to truly integrate their needs inspired the rise of all-female unions. The Movement of Rural Women Workers (MMTR), the dominant women's organization in Brazil, originally focused on increasing women's participation in Confederation of Agricultural Workers (CONTAG) and its affiliated unions, however it quickly realized that its success was dependent on CONTAG's political priorities at the time.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the MMTR changed its strategy to focus on amassing strength internally. Its evolution demonstrates the realization of women's groups that successful empowerment is dependent on autonomy. Independence enabled the national MMTR and newly formed state-level MMTRs to avoid co-option and to advocate for their own particular vision of empowerment. Their interests and demands were not subsumed by the political priorities of other actors; instead, they could be fully articulated. Autonomy was critical in revealing the complexities of women's disempowerment and in envisioning true empowerment.

### *Beyond Land: The MMTR Increases Demands*

Women's movements in Brazil became stronger and more effective as they broadened their strategy from demanding union representation and land reform to

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<sup>4</sup> CONTAG was responsive to the MMTR's demands only because it sought to increase its constituent base in order to out-compete other unions (Deere, 2003: 264-265)

eliminating all forms of women's marginalization. The platform of the MMTR in 1992 embodied its goals of radical change for rural women. The MMTR sought to realize: "a new ideology, equal socialization for men and women: enfin, new relationships between men and women" (Stephen, 1997: 221). These particular goals manifested the MMTR's desire to transform the political, economic, and social dynamics of rural areas. Unlike CONTAG and its unions or the government and its agencies, the MMTR revealed through its goals and strategies that it was concerned with disempowerment of women as a multifaceted phenomenon.

One of the significant achievements of these vibrant social movements was in increasing the participation of women in the political sphere. The rise of state-level MMTRs in the 1980's included many more women in politics (Deere, 2003: 266). In 1995, The MMTR also held a council to form a national network of rural women – ANMTR – which would unite women from all over Brazil to materialize the reforms included in the 1988 Constitutional reform (Deere, 2003: 276). An important priority of this group was recognizing the citizenship status of women, increasing the agency of women as equal not only in workplace but also in society. The rise of these organizations reflected widespread recognition of the co-optive tendencies of existing institutions and the need for separate fora which would more readily reflect women's needs.

*New Capacities for Women, New Recognition:*

The successes of women's social movements in rural Brazil were evident in the new resources, agency, and achievements they brought to women as well as in the increasing responsiveness of the Brazilian government to women's issues. The doubling

of female beneficiaries of land reform between 1996 and 2000 demonstrated that the government began to acknowledge women as legitimate property owners (Deere, 2003: 277-278). Women garnered many more resources as well as greater agency. As a result of the MMTR's efforts, they also gained social security benefits such as retirement benefits, disability leave and pay, and paid maternity leave for women. Their economic contributions as laborers were increasingly recognized by the Brazilian state. The MST also created a separate branch for women's issues in 1999 called the National Women's Collective (Deere, 2003: 278). These improvements reflect the new agency of women in the political sphere and an increase in bargaining power of women's organizations.

Recognition of the particular needs of women is also apparent in the government's new Affirmative Action Program and the extension of the Ministry of Agrarian Development to implement the program. This reform provided for the needs of female workers, specifically access to land and titles, credit, training, technical assistance and social security benefits (Deere, 2003: 282). The new program compensated for the former failures of INCRA land redistribution initiatives by formally considering female spouses as household heads. Women were also accorded greater political agency with a 30% quota for including women within the Ministry. Thus, through the emergence of women's organizations brought about great changes in the lives of women.

Both state institutions and social movements came to reflect the needs of women largely because of the agency of female leaders and women's groups. The state's transformation did not reflect change from within but was more of a response to the external pressure of women's groups. By pressuring the national government, international factors such as the World March of Women in 2000 created an enabling

environment for these organizations. The movements were further enabled by informal actors such as unions, other social movements, as well as the Catholic Church. Though these actors created an enabling environment for the emergence of women's movements, it was their own agency and particular vision of empowerment which allowed women's groups to succeed. Women's groups achieved not only land redistribution, they were also very successful in increasing political participation, realizing greater social security benefits, and in general including women in both the subnational and national political fora. Although many of the initiatives to empower women were founded on demands for land, their goals extended beyond simply economic development to the overall empowerment of women. In her analysis of women's social movements in Latin America, Stephan asserts, "The reason why formal attention to women's rights in Brazil resulted in some concrete changes is clearly linked to the presence of a strong women's movement" (Stephen, 1997: 215).

### **Decades of Failed Reform in India**

Government attempts to address gender disempowerment in India had many of the same shortcomings as the ones in Brazil. The failure of government programs in India also resulted from the state's superficial and incomplete understanding of the marginalization of rural women. Like the Brazilian government, the government of India also failed to understand the deep, structural roots of women's disempowerment. Its lack of understanding was revealed by its means of empowering women. Not only did government programs include women's empowerment as part of overall rural development, it provided only superficial and temporary solutions. Instead of solving

deeper conditions of disempowerment such as inequities in land ownership and political exclusion, state programs provided temporary solutions of cash handouts, subsidies, and other welfare schemes. These superficial and unsustainable programs did little to undermine the deep roots of women's disempowerment. In India, the inability of the government to empower women resulted from the poor conception and superficiality of government programs as well as the lack of genuine and consistent commitment to reducing the marginalization of women.

Gender development programs were first initiated during the 1980's under the auspices of broader rural development. Rural development, formerly only popularity building tool for politicians in India, became much more of a genuine concern during the 1980's, and reducing the marginalization of women was part of the overall scheme of eliminating conditions of dire poverty. International pressure and concern about the poor conditions of rural women also put women's issues higher on the government's agenda.<sup>5</sup> In response, government development programs included particular clauses directed only towards women (Narasimhan, 2002: 21-52). These programs included the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) in 1976, which provided subsidies and credit to women, and other welfare programs such as the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and the Integrated Area Development Programme (IADP). In addition to these broader rural development initiatives, the Government of India also created female-only programs and organizations such the National Plan for Women 1988-2000A.D (Narasimhan, 2002: 21). Unfortunately these new programs were ineffective in empowering women, because they embodied a very narrow perspective of empowerment.

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<sup>5</sup> The Food and Agriculture Organization's Report of the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in 1979 exposed great gender inequalities in land ownership in India, placing pressure on the government to reverse these inequalities (Agarwal, 2003: 186).

These programs only focused on the immediate, economic conditions of disempowerment, ignoring the deeper, structural social and political realities of marginalization.

To truly increase the economic resources and capacity of women, government policies ought to have focused not just on creating employment or providing a wage, but rather on more profoundly eliminating the source of women's marginalization. In rural India as in rural Brazil, inequities in land ownership cause societal stratification and exclusion of certain groups and also place them at much greater risk of poverty (Agarwal, 1994, 2003: 187). Women particularly are disenfranchised because of their lack of ownership because it is much more of a source of livelihood for them than for men (Agarwal, 2003: 187).<sup>6</sup> Government gender development programs which truly empower women ought to have addressed their exclusion from land ownership and provided them with this vital socio-political resource. Another more viable solution would also have been to create non-agrarian ways in which women can sustain a living. Government programs would have been much more successful if they had been able to accrue women with actual resources and agency instead of a temporary source of wages.

Another way in which state-directed programs failed to address the deeper roots of women's disempowerment was in their inability to understand the social and political dimensions of class and caste that cause women's disempowerment. This shortcoming is evident in the latest government plan, initiated in 1992 by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment. It aims to increase the political participation of rural women by creating a

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<sup>6</sup> Since 1973, the number of rural workers in India declined greatly however this transition only consisted of men shifting to non-agricultural occupations. Women have remained dependent on agriculture for subsistence because they are limited by their duties at home, by their lack of education, mobility, and assets (Agarwal, 2003: 192).

quota of 30% for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).<sup>7</sup> However, over the last 12 years, the imposition of this quota failed to involve women more critically in local democracy. Instead, class and caste divisions prevented women as a whole from being more involved in local assemblies. Only the wives of local elites were represented, and even then only as nominal and silent female figures rather than actual representatives (Bryld, 2001). The continuing political exclusion of women proves that this initiative had little efficacy in increasing the resources, agency, or achievements of women. Clearly, class and caste issues ought to have been taken into account in order to politically empower all women.

Feminists also level great criticism towards the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment as “tokenism” on the part of the government (Bryld, 2001: 152). These critics voice great opposition to the government’s presumption that by imposing quotas for women in PRIs it can create roles for women within the local political sphere. They emphasize the government’s ignorance of traditional politics and its inability to understand that such drastic change cannot simply be imposed from above.

Despite these doubts, there is hope that over time benefits will eventually materialize from the reservation of PRI seats. Despite the temporary shortcomings of this particular program, it may bring about long term benefits: “having female Panchayat members has had some influence on the participation of other women in local decision-making. It is gradually making men more accustomed to women in the public sphere and gradually leading to a greater acceptance of female participation (Bryld, 2001: 164). By emphasizing the importance of female participation in the political arena, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment may inspire a greater respect for women’s issues.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information on the specific provisions of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, see Appendix D.

While the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment and other programs reveal the flaws in government gender development policies, one program demonstrates that the state has made some improvements in conceptualizing gender empowerment. In 1979, the Government of India initiated a new program which critically involved local leaders in envisioning and implementing the program. The Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) program was created as a partnership of a grassroots organization, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), and was headed by the founder of SEWA Ela Bhatt (Crowell, 2003: 4). Although this program had uneven success, it shows the government's increasing awareness of the necessity of local input in creating the most effective programs. Amid many inconsistent implemented and unevenly effective gender development programs, DWRCRA demonstrates progress in the government's gender development paradigm. Also, the greater success of DWRCRA, because it was implemented by SEWA members and not by government officials, supports the theoretical claim that more effective change is achieved when it is informed and enacted from below. The entire SEWA movement reveals the effectiveness of bottom-up reform.

### **Enclaves of Empowerment**

Social movements and grassroots programs in India pursued empowerment in parallel with government programs. However, they did so with a dramatically different vision of empowerment. Local initiatives such as SEWA were guided by their understanding of the deep structural roots of rural women's marginalization. In order to overcome the multiple layers of gender disempowerment, social movements, unlike the bulk of state programs, combined several strategies to endow women with resources,

agency, and achievements. Less-successful social movements in India started with a much narrower perspective of empowerment, but they learned quickly that they had to broaden their approach to make an impact. Unlike government programs, social movements, because of their proximity to the local level, have the capacity to evolve in response to new dynamics. Greater flexibility and responsiveness due to deep connections to the local level are important attributes of social movements. As a whole, vibrant social movements in India have been highly successful in improving the lives of women in rural villages.

To empower women with resources and agency, social movements in India did not focus as much on redistribution of land as ones in rural Brazil. In comparison to the strategy of Brazilian social movements, which centered mainly on land reform in the beginning, Indian initiatives pursued different resources. Land ownership defines the socio-political matrix in rural India as critically as in rural Brazil, however, movements in India focused on creating non-agrarian forms of subsistence for women, reducing their dependence on land (Agarwal, 2003: 186). According to Agarwal, the strategy of social movements is flawed and needs to focus on providing land to women.<sup>8</sup> However, reducing dependency on agricultural production does have its benefits. Women who were employed in agriculture in India were often vulnerable to sporadic employment opportunities and wages depending on the growing season (Datta, 2003: 356). Thus, many social movements focused on creating women's cooperatives and cottage industries as alternate forms of creating employment. These cooperatives were founded not just

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<sup>8</sup> The dominant approach of women's movements in India is flawed because it does not understand the dependency of women on agriculture. Its strategy of creating on-agrarian means of employment is also not sufficient to provide for all the women in India (Agarwal, 2003: 218-219).

with the intention of enabling women with economic resources but also with many other long-term capacities.

Education, literacy, healthcare, and an attitude of self-sufficiency were all aims of women's cooperatives in India. Along with economic development, these cooperatives also involved improving women's education, increasing literacy levels, disseminating health information, and increasing the overall welfare of women. The SEWA epitomizes this holistic attitude towards women's empowerment.

### *The SEWA Movement*

Like the MMTR in Brazil, SEWA was also founded in 1972 as a labor union particularly voicing the needs of women (Datta, 2003: 354-355). Initially, it operated as part of the Textile Labor Association (TLA), a union working for the needs of mill workers, however, like the MMTR, it broke off on an independent path to more effectively fulfill women's demands. Operating first in urban areas, SEWA soon spread to rural areas. After more than three decades of struggle, SEWA has gained a significant local presence as well as a prominent international image.

SEWA's success results from its understanding of the multiple dimensions of rural women's marginalization which critically inform its approach towards empowerment: "Focusing on the idea of self-help, SEWA also strengthens women's bargaining power, offers new alternatives, and succeeds in organizing women to enter the mainstream of the economy" (Datta, 2003). SEWA provides local jobs, also diversifying these forms of employment to reduce reliance on unpredictable, conventional forms of employment. Self-confidence is a natural result of the self-sufficiency of these women,

inspiring them to take on leadership positions. Female leaders, trained within the SEWA movement, begin to take on decision-making roles within their households and the larger community. Increasing literacy levels and educating women is also an important part of SEWA. A few years after its creation, SEWA also formed its own independent bank, the Shri Mahila Sewa Sahakari Bank, which not only provides credit to women but also teaches them to manage their money.<sup>9</sup> These diverse elements of SEWA attempt to address the multiple levels of disenfranchisement faced by women.

By increasing the resources and agency of women, SEWA's diverse elements truly empower women. Women are able to make a living through cottage industries of textile and handicraft production. Since these industries are based on traditional knowledge and do not require any additional training, there is no adjustment gap in assimilating women into this workforce. Their access to capital also enables them with new resources. Increased resources bring about greater self-sufficiency and self-confidence, empowering women with new forms of agency. With greater bargaining power and decision-making abilities, they can voice their needs and demands both within their household and in their communities.

Fulfilling the third criteria of empowerment, an increase in the achievements of women from participation in SEWA is represented in both local and international success. Locally, SEWA has continued to have great impacts in reversing women's marginalization. SEWA cooperatives have been highly successful in providing a wage and sustaining the livelihood of many women. Within India, the SEWA movement is greatly esteemed by the government of India, which partners with SEWA on many development projects. Also, internationally, SEWA represents a successful social

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<sup>9</sup> The success of the SEWA Bank is evident in its rapid growth. See table in Appendix E.

movement and a novel paradigm that has gained much respect. The international attention garnered by SEWA has enabled it with increased bargaining power with the Indian government. Finally, its membership of more than 140,000 women represents strength in numbers (Crowell, 2003: 186).

### *The AWARE Strategy*

Although SEWA is one of the prominent images of women's movements in India, there are many more movements attempting to empower rural women. The Action for Welfare and Awakening in Rural Environment (AWARE) is a program that was initiated in Andhra Pradesh in 1975, originally attempting to improve the status of all rural peoples (Narasimhan, 1999). However, in 1977, responding to a woman's complaint that it completely failed to address the needs of women, the program incorporated specific approach to create sustainable lifestyles for women. Its responsiveness to the demands of women contributed to its success in developing and implementing an effective program. Over time, it has evolved into three different programs involving 2.57 million people. Two million of these individuals have risen above the poverty line. Specifically for women, it has also brought about great improvements in health, attendance in school, a greater perception of equality among men and women in the household, lower indebtedness, etc. A study conducted in Andhra Pradesh finds that in villages where AWARE had been implemented for 18 or more years, 87 percent of women surveyed thought that they were equal with men, whereas only 5 percent of women in villages without AWARE perceived this equality (Narasimhan, 1999: 95).<sup>10</sup> The AWARE strategy has demonstrated as much success as SEWA and certainly much more than

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<sup>10</sup> A table describing specific improvements found by the study is presented in Appendix F.

government programs. Along with SEWA, it supports the strengths of non-governmental initiatives in empowering women.

### *Separate Female Councils in Maharashtra*

The rise of all-women councils in Maharashtra also represents an alternative to government programs (Gala, 1997). The female panchayats arose as a response to the failure of PRI revitalization campaign of the 1980s. In rural areas in Maharashtra, reforms to the PRI system were compromised by the overall insufficiencies of the PRI institutions as well as the co-option of these programs by rural elites. Power continued to be concentrated because only the wives of the elite represented the needs of women in local assemblies. As a whole however, women continued to be disenfranchised. The intention behind forming the all-female panchayats was to provide an alternative arena of political representation that could not be co-opted by elite or male interests.

Thus far, these panchayats have been tremendously successful in improving the lives of women. Some benefits include reducing the drudgery of women by bringing resources such as water closer to hand, increasing women's access to transportation, and increasing their shares of property and other assets. In addition to these resources, women also have greater agency within political arenas and within their own households. An increase in household power is manifest in the reversal of consumption patterns during meal times. No longer do girls and women eat what is left over from their male family members, rather both genders eat at the same quality and quantity of food at the same time. In surveys, women also express that they consider the needs of the girls and boys equally now. Thus, by forming these female panchayats, women have achieved

tangible as well as more attitudinal changes in gender roles in rural Maharashtra. This study reveals however that although some improvements in the status of women has occurred, rural women still remain bound to their traditional roles as women and mothers and to their daily work. Achieving complete equality in a society with a highly patriarchal structure requires more than a few decades.

### *Learning From Experience: The Evolution of Social Movements Over Time*

While movements such as SEWA and initiatives to create all-female panchayats empower women with greater resources, agency, and achievements, there are many movements which have little success. One approach to improving conditions for women has been the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) which seeks to empower women by “[developing] a set of practices, tools and methodologies which facilitate critical reflection, analysis and action by marginalised groups” (Akekar, 2000: 2). While it seems theoretically sound, this approach failed in a case study of the 1992 Kribhco Indo British Rainfed Farming Project in West Bengal (Akekar, 2000). Because it did not consider that women were occupied with weeding responsibilities and did not have the time to participate in the project, they continued to be excluded. PRA’s gender-neutral approach made it unable to take the specific needs of women into account. It failed because it did not consider empowering women involves considering their equal but different needs. According to Nancy Fraser, this would be the greatest flaw of the PRA approach (Fraser 1995). Fortunately, following initiatives including the Joint Forest Management Program and the Eastern India Rainfed Farming Project took the needs of women more into account. The main problems of the PRA approach arise from its

community-based approach towards empowering women. Without disaggregating the particular marginalization of women from the overall destitution of rural communities, it is difficult to truly empower women. Part of the problem is been the low participation of women in the political arena, which has made them unable to express their needs. Overcoming these hurdles is a matter of time and dialogue between effective and non-effective techniques as well as between the rural peoples and policy-makers. With enough understanding, perhaps, even government programs will be more effective.

## **Conclusion**

Change in countries as stratified as Brazil and India promises great hope for women around the world. The success of women's movements in rural India and rural Brazil, in spite of deeply rooted patriarchy, questions the immutability of culture. Societal norms and traditions can be changed to enable women to possess the same resources and agency as men. In India, the ability of women in the very traditional state of Kerala to empower themselves proves that cultural norms can be undermined (Sooryamoorthy and Renjini, 2000: 46). Once a patriarchal society, Kerala now has the highest percentage of women voters in India and a growing number of women councilors in local assemblies. The transformation of these highly stratified societies promises great hope for women around the world.

Eliminating structures of oppression requires understanding the culture, traditions, and institutions of disempowerment. In India and Brazil, social movements have succeeded because they have been able to perceive the reality of rural women's disempowerment. Their realization of the source and nature of women's marginalization

has defined their particular approach towards empowerment. In Brazil, unequal land distribution and lack of other resources and agency for women in the labor force inspired the MMTR to lobby the state. It succeeded in realizing social security benefits and new roles for women as legitimate land owners and economically valuable laborers. In India, by contrast, the same vision of empowerment had a much different outcome. Instead of interacting as much with state actors and institutions, social movements in India focused on creating separate enclaves in which women could practice a trade and earn a living, obtain education, and empower themselves in isolation from men. Cooperatives in India were as successful as social movements in Brazil, both enabling women with resources, agency and achievements. The unifying characteristic of these distinct approaches towards empowerment was in their definition of disempowerment as deep-rooted and structural and empowerment as a broad, comprehensive reversal of these institutions.

While the varying strategies of social movements in India and Brazil did not reflect a divergence in ultimate goal of women's empowerment among these movements, the differences reveal how political dynamics and particular contexts shape the approaches of non-formal actors. In rural Brazil, the prevalence of unions as the main socio-political unit caused women's movements to organize as separate female labor unions in which women could express their demands without the danger of co-option. Their demands focused on land, because land ownership along with union membership defines the socio-political matrix in rural Brazil.

In India, women's movements emerged in a different socio-political context. In rural villages, particularly before the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, women in India remained secluded within the home without any awareness or demand for political participation

(Bryld, 2001: 157-158). In addition to patriarchy, other socio-political factors of class and caste that created stratifications within villages, also atomized women within their households. Within this context, women's movements emerged to form separate cooperatives that sequestered women away from men. Separate enclaves fostered a sense of solidarity among women that transcended class and caste divisions, enabling women to gain resources, agency, and achievements without the interference of men.

The explanations detailed above are only some of the reasons why social movements emerged with distinct approaches in India and in Brazil. The ability of these social movements to employ different tactics to most effectively achieve their vision of empowerment explains much of their success. Because they based their strategies on their understanding of the local context of gender disempowerment, social movements were able to eliminate the problems more successfully than governments.

State initiatives have failed because of their inability to perceive the reality of disempowerment and enact policies and programs reflecting a comprehensive vision of empowerment. While they continue to be mired in the ineradicable problems of state weaknesses, corrupt officials at various levels, and co-option, these failings are not the prime determinants of the ineffective gender development programs. Many government programs were not co-opted and were successfully implemented, however, they still accrued only limited benefits to women. Their shortcomings resulted from their inability to fully understand women's empowerment.

In cases where the state is more responsive to the demands of rural women, its initiatives actually empower women. The greater success of the DWRCA program in India and the expansion of the Ministry of Agriculture in Brazil represent the state's

acknowledgement of the particular needs of women. Furthermore, if the state were to increase and strengthen connections with the local level, its policies would actually reflect people's. Channeling knowledge from those on the ground to government officials would lead to more effective policy. Another way to link the top with the bottom is to devolve implementation to a local level. While it seems unlikely that the state will ever be able to replace social movements and other non-state actors, at least its formerly futile attempts to empower women will be more fruitful. A much brighter future for women's empowerment lies ahead if the states in India and Brazil continue to integrate non-formal actors and create more openings for demands from below.

## **Appendix**

Appendix A.....	Sources of Women's Disempowerment
Appendix B.....	Beneficiaries of Agrarian Reform in Brazil in 1996 (by sex)
Appendix C.....	Beneficiaries of Agrarian Reform in Brazil (by marital status)
Appendix D.....	73 <sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment
Appendix E.....	Growth of SEWA Bank
Appendix F.....	Impacts of AWARE Strategy

## Appendix A

**Table 1** Sources of Women's Disempowerment

	<i>Women – intensive</i>	<i>Women – exclusive</i>
Social	Dependence on élite Dowry Poor housing Poor infrastructure Class violence Social isolation	Dependence on male kin Divorce or desertion Patrilocal residence Gender division of labour Gender violence Norms of seclusion Limited bargaining power/ mobility
Political	Lack of consciousness Lack of representation Lack of organization Lack of voting rights Limited bargaining power Anti-poor policies	Male-biased policies
Economic	Limited asset base Limited access to resources Limited employment High interest loans Indebtedness Limited bargaining power Imperfect markets Unfair or high prices Environmental degradation Exploitation	Patrilineal inheritance Male-biased recruitment Limited access to loans Gender-stratified markets Gender exploitation

Source: (Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala. Speaking Out: Women's Empowerment in South Asia. 1996)

## Appendix B – Beneficiaries of Agrarian Reform in Brazil in 1996 (by sex)

Table 2. Beneficiaries of the agrarian reform by sex and region, 1996 (per centages)

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>No info.</i>	<i>Total</i>
North	85.0	12.7	0.3	100
Northeast	85.3	13.4	1.3	100
Southeast	83.2	13.8	2.9	100
Centre-west	86.8	11.5	1.7	100
South	91.1	7.9	1.0	100
Total	85.6 (n = 135,011)	12.6 (n = 19,905)	1.8 (n = 2841)	100 (n = 157,757)

Source: INCRA/CRUB/UnB (1998, 26).

Source: (Deere, Carmen Diana. 2003. "Women's Land Rights and Rural Social Movements in the Brazilian Agrarian Reform." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 3 (1, 2):257-88. 269.)

**Appendix C- Beneficiaries of Agrarian Reform in Brazil in 1996 (by marital status)**

*Table 3. Marital status of the agrarian reform beneficiaries by sex, 1996*

	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Total</i>
Married	33.9	63.7	59.9
Consensual union	25.1	22.3	22.6
Sub-total	58.9	86.0	82.5
Single	13.3	9.6	10.1
Separated	9.3	2.2	3.1
Divorced	1.4	0.5	0.6
Widowed	16.7	1.5	3.5
Other	0.4	0.2	0.2
Sub-total	41.1	14.0	17.5
Total	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 18,048)	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 124,134)	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 142,182)

*Source:* Author's calculations based on the *1 Censo da Reforma Agrária-1996*.

*Source:* (Deere, Carmen Diana. 2003. "Women's Land Rights and Rural Social Movements in the Brazilian Agrarian Reform." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 3 (1, 2):257-88. 271.)

## Appendix D - 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment

**Table 1**  
**Features of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment**

1. The centrality of the village assembly (*gram sabha*), as a deliberative and deciding body, for decentralized governance.
2. A uniform three-tier structure across the country, with the village, block, and district as the appropriate levels. States with populations of less than two million have the option of not introducing the intermediate level.
3. Direct election to all seats for all members at all levels. In addition, the chairpersons of the village councils (*panchayats*) may be made members of the councils (*panchayats*) at the intermediate level, and chairpersons of block councils (*panchayats*) at the intermediate level may be members at the district level. Members of Parliament, members of legislative assemblies, and members of legislative councils may also be members of *panchayats* at the intermediate and the district levels.
4. In all the *panchayats*, seats are reserved for Scheduled Castes (henceforth SCs or Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (henceforth STs or Adivasis) in proportion to their population. One third of the total seats are reserved for women. One third of the seats reserved for SCs and STs will also be reserved for women.
5. Offices of the chairpersons of the *panchayats* at all levels will be reserved in favor of SCs and STs in proportion to their population in the state. One third of the offices of chairpersons of *panchayats* at all levels will also be reserved for women.
6. The legislature of a state is at liberty to provide the reservation of seats and offices of chairpersons in *panchayats* in favor of members of the backward classes.
7. The average *panchayat* has a uniform five-year term. Elections are to be completed before the expiry of the term. In the event of dissolution, elections will be compulsorily held within six months. The reconstituted *panchayat* will serve for the remaining period of the five-year term.
8. It will not be possible to dissolve the existing *panchayats* by the amendment of any act before its term is ended.
9. A person who is disqualified under any law of the state will not be entitled to become a member of a *panchayat*.
10. An independent State Election Commission to be established for superintendence, direction, and control of the electoral process and preparation of electoral rolls.
11. Devolution of powers and responsibilities by the state in the preparation and implementation of development plans.
12. Setting up of a State Finance Commission once in five years to revise the financial position of these *panchayati raj* institutions (PRIs) and to make suitable recommendations to the state on the distribution of funds among *panchayats*.

Source: (deSouza, Peter Ronald. 2003. "The Struggle for Local Government: Indian Democracy's New Phase." *Publius* 33(4): 99-118. 107.)

## Appendix E – Growth of SEWA Bank

Table 1: The Growth of SEWA Bank

Year	Number of Share-holders	Share Capital (Rs.)	Number of Depositors	Deposits (Rs.)	Working Capital (Rs.)	Profit (Rs.)
1974-75	6287	71320	6188	243010	332231	-11802
1975-76	6634	74990	10459	936388	1060431	33016
1976-77	6945	78970	11038	1053480	1198872	21623
1977-78	7044	81100	11656	1448586	1267452	13729
1978-79	7131	81800	12366	2523722	2743564	35244
1979-80	7321	84080	13060	3024230	3324844	36953
1980-81	7507	88690	14022	2728876	3194930	54152
1981-82	7943	131350	16164	3503986	4119379	77632
1982-83	8398	195830	19057	5060240	5815669	116284
1983-84	8938	302610	20122	6830768	7981869	200085
1984-85	9457	427970	21656	6093587	7897007	161752
1985-86	9825	538130	22208	11278880	13537252	222767
1986-87	10339	707000	23834	10790000	13928000	334000
1987-88	10972	883730	23156	11232537	14930963	370054
1988-89	11742	1074000	23582	13890000	18301000	480000
*1989-	12089	1150000	25311	15600000	20000000	375000

Source: SEWA Bank.

\* Provisional data for July through December 1989.

Source: (Rose, Kalima. 1992. *Where Women Are Leaders: The SEWA Movement in India*. Atlantic Highlands: Zed Books Ltd. 280.)

## Appendix F – Impacts of AWARE

Table 5.1  
Qualitative Study Findings  
(in percentage)

Total number of respondents			
	females	150	
	males	117	
		33	
	Group 1	Control Group	Group 3
Incremental income without economic intervention	84	—	64
Health improvements	92	—	70
Daughters going to school	87	38	72
Not afraid (of police, officials, male authority)	100	0	93
Existing <i>mabila mandals</i>	100	0	93
Men and women are equal	84	5	74
No drinking	100	0	86
We will continue to be poor	0	100	22
Indebtedness	12	88	64
Who decides:			
men	12	78	30
women	8	10	24
both together	80	12	46

Source: Field Study.

Source: (Narasimhan, Sakuntala. 1999. *Empowering Women: An Alternative Strategy from Rural India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 95).

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