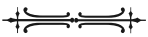
Chapter 5

The Seminar: The Successful Failure of the Women's Empowerment Project



Manufacturing a Fictitious Success: The Seminar and Thapa's Class

The village teachers' training course (hereafter, the seminar) was the main and probably sole achievement of my stay in Nepal. The fact that some ten village women received formal certification from the Ministry of Education to teach other women in their villages, acknowledging their entitlement to carry out literacy training, turned out to be the peak of my activity as the irrigation project's foreign consultant on gender issues. This achievement stands out against the background of the profound and insistent objection to the women's program and the ongoing attempts of the irrigation project's local heads to prevent its implementation. In the present chapter I will demonstrate how this achievement symbolized the failure of my efforts to ensure that the women's program was carried out.

I will also reflect on some further gender perspectives relevant to the convoluted progress of the women program. It will be described how all parties became involved, to varying extents and in various ways, in the seminar, despite their intensifying resistance and efforts to prevent the implementation of the women's project. The daily interventions of high-ranking officials in the seminar could be read as a reflection of their commitment to and interest in the seminar's purpose, content, and outcomes. This surprising engagement of the irrigation project heads—both the locals and Leon—might have indicated that their reluctant attitude towards the seminar and to the whole women's project had changed. I will argue, however, that these interventions did not signify any change in their basic attitudes toward the implementation of the women's project. Rather, it appears that the seminar became, for a certain time, part of the daily machinations of the irrigation project. Thus, people's behavior in relation to the seminar should be understood within the broader social context of the irrigation project. In other words, once the seminar became a reality, the irrigation project staff's attitude toward it stemmed from their ongoing social relationships and from the existing power structure. As the irrigation project

was controlled by men and oriented toward men's activities and interests, the seminar's affairs attracted their attention, and the seminar room became a female site which men exploited for the exercise of power.

The "exercise of power," as a discursive outcome of "instrument effects" in the context of development, has already been noted by James Ferguson (1990: 255). He argued that while development projects tend to end up as failures (in terms of their planners' intentions) political effects may be realized almost invisibly alongside this failure. Thus, "any intentional deployment only takes effect through a convoluted route involving unacknowledged structures and unpredictable outcomes" (ibid.: 276). The seminar provides an example of these political successful outcomes in the context of a failing women's development project.

My gender activities report (Hertzog 1997), presented to the local and Israeli heads of the irrigation project, indicates that the seminar was perceived by me as a success. In the report, I wrote:

> A 9–day preparatory seminar ended on 21.9.97. Ten village teachers, each of whom will facilitate literacy in her own village, were authorized by the district Ministry of Education to teach, and were provided with a formal certificate. All ten women were provided with transportation by the irrigation project's vehicles, with daily allowance and refreshments. The seminar was held in the conference hall of the irrigation project's headquarters lasting from 10.00 until 16.30 every day, including Saturday.
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> The rate of the village teachers' attendance was almost 100%. According to the seminar's trainers, eight of the participants did well, and the other two had considerable difficulties because of language problems. One of these women has overcome great difficulties, including having her baby with her every day, managing to attend all class days and to fulfill all the tasks exercised in class.
>
> Feedback from the seminar participants so far suggests that the small size of the group (only 10 instead of 20–30 women) and having female teachers played an important role in its success. The two female trainers were provided on our request. Following this experience it is recommended to have women trainers in the next seminars too and also in other kinds of training for village women and WGOs, whenever possible. (ibid.: 3)

According to this report, the seminar was a considerable achievement. All the women managed to finish the seminar, attending most of the training days offered, including Saturday. They overcame distance problems (some of them had to travel for about two hours) and fulfilled all the tasks required of them. The seminar teachers reported that most of the village teachers did well. The fact that the Ministry of Education provided the participants with a teaching certificate, signed by the head of the district office, endowed the seminar with a sense of real worth. The participants expressed their satisfaction with the

seminar, their teachers, and the venue (the conference hall, a small, relatively pleasant, and comfortable room). The irrigation project provided the participants with transportation, refreshments and allowances. In addition, the seminar offered some valuable constructive lessons in terms of assessment and recommendations for future implementation. One such recommendation was that women instructors were preferable to men instructors, for the purpose of training village teachers as well as for other activities intended for women. Apparently, this had not always been the case, and some groups of women farmers had received training from men. Another recommendation that emerged from the experience of the seminar was that small groups of women (ten per class) were preferable to bigger ones, as this enabled more personalized training.

Nevertheless, despite the seemingly positive outcome of the seminar, and notwithstanding its ambitious aims in terms of women's empowerment,[1] it cannot be regarded as having contributed to reducing village women's marginality or their experience of discrimination. Rather, it implicitly reflected, in Jo Rowlands's phrasing, "realities of power, inequality, and oppression" (Rowlands 1999: 149).

The seminar affair resembled, in many ways, Thapa's literacy class in Ekala. Both episodes served, in practice, as a deceitful means of conveying the impression of the irrigation project heads' sincere commitment to implementing the women's program. The women in the hut in Ekala were used as actors in a play staged to appease the worries of the World Bank about the seriousness of those in charge of implementing the women's project. It turned out to be very effective at proving to the Bank that the Nepali directors were reliable and could be trusted in financing their activities. Leon and the local heads of the irrigation project—Pandit, head of the farmer organization division; Gupta, a local consultant on farmer participation; and Acharya, head of the engineering division—repeatedly mentioned wanting the irrigation project to "look good" in Wolffenson's eyes. The women's project's success provided evidence of their personal achievements.

Analyzing NGO and INGO relationships in Nepal, Celayne Heaton Shrestha similarly demonstrates how a particular project's "'success story' was immediately earmarked as a 'showpiece'" (Shrestha 2004: 2) for a donor team's visit. She describes the local team's efforts to create "a good impression" on donors, including trying to ensure

> that the team had a pleasant visit. There was no sense that trying to portray a realistic field situation was the name of the game … nor was there ever a sense that we were "faking it." It all seemed as though the facts of the project, in spite of the stated visit aims, were not what the visit was about. The concerns on everyone's lips had to do with how best to receive the team and causing them as little hardship as possible … The [focus was on the] status of visitors/evaluators as guests, as persons-to-be-entertained. (ibid.: 12)

The seminar, too, had the appearance of a show. The classroom, the group of village women, the teachers, the opening and closing events, all served to convey the impression that the literacy program was about to take off. The subsequent opening of only ten classes, out of the 300 planned, following the conclusion of the "successful" seminar, exposed the deceitfulness of this show. This became apparent after I left Nepal, just as the Ekala literacy class was exposed as a sham once Wolffenson left Nepal. Nevertheless, in both cases all parties played their part in constructing the image of the forthcoming implementation of the women's program. The World Bank's people could not avoid noticing that the classes in Ekala were a bluff (as I suggested in Chapter 3). And I too must have realized, by the time the seminar started, that the women's program would not be carried out. Yet, I preferred to believe that my intensive efforts were not in vain. Concentrating on opening and running the one seminar enabled me to maintain my self-image of professional integrity and to conclude my visit to Nepal feeling that I had achieved something meaningful, however limited.

Manufacturing the image of a development projects' success is indeed not unique to the project under study. In his study of a farming project in India, David Mosse suggests that "the social production of development success" implies the cooperation of all developing parties in creating the deceitful image of a project's success (Mosse 2005: 157–83).[2] Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka similarly argues that "many failures are not evaluated as failures, but are instead interpreted as successes" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2004: 184). In her study of Nepal's Maoist rebellion, she elaborates on the deceitful character of development projects in Nepal and the wide cooperation of all parties in dissembling about their success. She argues: "Currently, even in the most remote areas of Nepal, villagers are well aware that the success of development cooperation has to rely upon representations of its success. What the villagers observe is that enthusiastic depictions of development interventions do not necessarily correspond with assessments at the grassroots" (ibid.: 185). Pfaff-Czarnecka tells the story of a village known "for being very successful in implementing development projects" and for its collective strategies of carrying them out. While, over the years, only a minor part of the project was implemented, and only the village leader benefited from it, the donors visited the village and produced a documentary film "to record its success." Nevertheless, although most of the villagers readily joined in the filming, in private discussions many of them said that they felt that "they have been made fools of" (ibid.: 187).

In considering the role of deceit in the context of the women's program, I follow Caroline Gerschlager and Monika Mokre's analysis (Gerschlager and Mokre 2002).[3] Drawing on Adam Smith's work on moral sentiments (Smith 1984), where he argues that a certain deception is inevitable in any social setting, Gerschlager (2002) argues that successful exchange is based on deceit. While standard "male stream" economic models ignore deception and imply that deception cannot succeed, Gerschlager considers deception as the key to understanding the functioning of exchange, and as an efficient aspect of ex-

change. Hence, I suggest that the role of deceit is not unique to the development context. Rather, it is embedded in this context, as in any other situation of hierarchical power relationships. Deceit, from this point of view, serves superiors as a way of calming resistance, removing the objections of subordinates (by promising unrealistic advantages, for instance), or for handling pressures exerted on superiors.

Both the Ekala literacy class and the seminar were the outcomes of pressure exerted on the local heads of the irrigation project. The World Bank applied considerable pressure on the Nepali heads of the irrigation project to demonstrate progress with gender development activities and, therefore, they were pleased to find that things "were working" as a result of their demands. Consequently, the local heads of the irrigation project could easily fool them: starting up one literacy class and hiring a new local consultant was enough to get the Bank off their backs. My own pressure on the local heads of the irrigation project, and on Thapa in particular, was daily and continuous. Evidently, the seminar opened as a direct outcome of my intensive urging.

Some of these pressures were described earlier (in Chapter 1) in relation to the demand that a male guardian provide a signature to approve his daughter's or wife's participation in the seminar. This demand was clearly a means of delaying the opening of the seminar, and consequently the implementation of the large-scale literacy program. When Pandit and Gupta were taken by surprise, realizing that the seminar was going to start the next day, they then mentioned, for the first time, that a woman's participation in the seminar would require male consent. This stalling tactic worked, and the seminar did not start the next day. Indeed, I found the negotiations very troublesome. It felt as though I was nagging Pandit, Gupta, and Thapa to accept something they opposed. When Pandit and Gupta eventually suggested starting the seminar on Thursday of the same week, it was clearly a gesture to calm me down. I realized, as my fieldnotes record, that "that was the farthest I could go with my pressures." Thapa and Pandit had done their best to prevent the opening of the seminar but ended up giving in to my continuous pressure, albeit only until the moment of my departure from Nepal.

Another point of comparison between the literacy classes in Ekala and the women's seminar concerns the urge to demonstrate personal achievement and competence to those in power. Thapa had to prove his competence to James Wolffenson and other representatives of the World Bank. Apparently, Thapa thought that the failure of the women's program would be seen as his own personal failure, which he clearly needed to avoid. Assuming that one class would be sufficient to create an image of his own success, as well as that of the women's program, he bankrolled the literacy class with his own money. Likewise, a single group of seminar graduates provided me with the illusion of achievement, and of contributing to the advancement of village women. It enabled me to prove myself worthy to the local heads of the irrigation project, to my Israeli em-

ployers, who paid for my time and work, and to myself as well. Anita's situation was even more complicated because she needed to ensure future employment, and therefore had to prove her vital contribution to the women's program. Feeling that both of us had to prove our worth to our superiors in the irrigation project, Anita said to me on the day before the seminar opened, "this is our first test."

However, there is a significant difference between Thapa's endeavors to demonstrate competence and reliability, and Anita's and mine. Anita and I both aspired to accomplish a great deal and to implement the full-scale women's program. In practice, however, we were expected to implement nothing. In my case it became evident that the less progress I made, in terms of opening classes, the more satisfied those in charge were (although they would not admit this openly). Thapa, on the other hand, did not want to implement the women's development project. Nevertheless, he was formally praised and respected for something on which he did not deliver.

Both Thapa and I manipulated and took advantage of the women's groups' visual and sentimental impact. The sight of the women, young girls and older women, sitting in a dark, tiny, muddy, clay hut, concentrating on their books, appearing eager to become literate, was a very persuasive and touching picture. No less persuasive and touching was the sight of the ten women, aged fifteen to over fifty, sitting around tables, watching the trainers carefully, writing diligently, and complying with the vigilant supervision of "important" males, who used to visit the seminar from time to time. The two delicate, petite teachers added also to the fragile atmosphere in the seminar. The diminutive female student, who brought her baby and her elder son, to look after the baby while she was studying, created a particularly moving sight. She came from a distant village and spoke a different Nepali dialect from that of her classmates and teachers. This additional obstacle must have made it nearly impossible for her to persevere in her studies. Nevertheless, she missed class only once, when the baby was sick, probably as a result of having been carried all the way to town on a rainy day. For my part, I often invoked this woman's eagerness to complete the seminar training as a powerful symbol of women's ambition to study and achieve economic and social mobility. The woman's devotion and fragility was used by me to convey my own feminist commitment and social sensitivity as well as the seminar's success, which was presented as my personal professional achievement. Indirectly and invisibly, then, I realized personal advantages, just as the men on the irrigation project staff did. Hence the "actual process proceeded" masked "by its contrast with the intentional plans, which appear bathed in the shining light of day" (Ferguson 1990: 276).

The Collaboration of the Project's Partners in Faking Progress

Clearly, neither the heads of the World Bank nor the Nepali and Israeli heads of the irrigation project were genuinely interested in any substantial progress in

implementing the women's project. Therefore, one literacy class and one seminar group represented the minimum attainment needed for demonstrating progress and the maximum of what the women's project was allowed to achieve. It follows that the irrigation project directors' real purpose was "to look good," and to make believe that a great deal more was going to materialize. Similarly, Pfaff-Czarnecka argues that the common explanation offered by entrepreneurs and implementers for not fully and successfully implementing the projects they are in charge of is: "'what is not completed will be finalized in due course', whatever 'in due course' may imply" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2004: 184).

This point is also compatible with Fenster's single workshop on gender awareness, carried out in October 1996, which she organized and attended. Her plan to provide some 27,000 women aged between 10 and 65 with literacy skills—a number that would have amounted to some 900 women's groups—followed by economic activities, ended up as unimplemented recommendations in her papers. The one gender awareness workshop which was held was highly praised and frequently mentioned as Fenster's achievement during her visit to Nepal.

The World Bank's cooperation with the pretense of the women project's success, by presenting the meager (and practically evanescent) accomplishments as "good work," was repeated with regard to the ten literacy classes that were opened after I left Nepal. In a letter some two months after I returned to Israel, Leon informed me about a visit by the Bank's supervising delegation. Its members' excited reaction was very similar to that of the previous Bank delegation to Ekala. He wrote:

> On the 5–6–7/11/97 a visit of a supervising delegation of the World Bank (IDA) took place in a literacy class in the village Bhawarabari, next to tube well EW/S. The visit lasted for half an hour. It was 19.00 and despite the very poor light, provided by a few lanterns, and the difficulty to read from the board, the head of the delegation, Mr Mint, was deeply impressed. He spoke with two students, one of whom was 16 and the other was at least 40, and praised the teacher who was doing, according to him, a "holy work."[4]

Thus, gaining the Bank's trust appeared to be a very easy task, and faking the implementation of the women's project was, in fact, welcomed by the Bank's representatives. It is apparent, therefore, that both parties were eager to present the only literacy class in Ekala and the one class in Bhawarabari as a success, even describing it in terms of "holy work," while in practice eliminating the women's project. Moreover, the delegation's head, Mr Mint, openly admitted to the Bank's disinterest in the women's project. According to Leon's letter, "Mint repeatedly stated that the project is mainly an agricultural irrigation project and that he is committed to complete it on time, as was scheduled in the contract, including from the financial perspective, and therefore his main efforts will focus on the civil assignments, the electric and mechanical."[5]

Mosse suggests that gender projects fail to be implemented and to become "part of the projects' self-representations," because they attain "neither internal support [within organizations] nor external demand for anything but the simplest notion of gender equity…" (Mosse 2005: 152). However, Mr Mint's statement, which suggests that there was no intention of implementing the women's program, demonstrates that no realistic chance existed for the women's project from the outset. The World Bank, the Israeli irrigation company, and the Nepali government never intended to carry out the women's project, despite their expressed enthusiasm regarding the women they met in the field. Therefore, Mosse's explanation for the failure of gender projects—that project consultants fail to gain support—is not supported by my ethnography. That is, gender consultants fail, according to my experience because they are not expected to succeed, but rather to provide the façade of empowering women.

The Seminar: The Exercise of Men's Power and the Use of Cultural Discourse

Despite the reluctance of the heads of the irrigation project to fully implement the women's program, as soon as the seminar became a reality they treated it as an inseparable part of the irrigation project's social life. Hence, some of them used it as a platform for displays of power. Important people from the irrigation project and outside it visited the class, and opening and closing ceremonies were organized. Several of the higher-ranked employees, whether directly or indirectly connected to the women's program, expected to be invited to talk, and some insisted on their "right" place in the line of speakers.

The negotiations over who would speak at the opening of the seminar started as soon as the date was fixed. After Mr Gurung, the district head of the Ministry of Education, accepted a request from Anita and myself to assume professional responsibility over the teachers and for the teaching certificates, I suggested that he present greetings at the opening of the seminar. Anita approved, explaining that, "after all, he is the director of the Ministry of Education in our region." When the two of us arrived later at the irrigation project offices, I informed Pandit that Mr Gurung had been asked to talk at the opening of the seminar and that he was pleased to accept the offer. Pandit was pleased and also agreed to my suggestion that he himself address the audience at the opening, immediately adding that Acharya should also be invited to join the greeting panel. Apparently, Anita had already spoken with Acharya about this. Pandit then suggested that I should also speak at the opening. I replied that Anita was the one who should be given this role. Pandit then insisted that I must speak as "an outside guest." I reacted jokingly: "Well, you are the boss, whatever you say." He did not like my remark, and replied: "No, I am not the boss. We are working in cooperation." Later on, I found out that my name appeared second on the list of speakers, right after Mr Gurung's.

On our way home, I asked Leon if he would come to the opening of the seminar. He replied instantly: "Of course, I have to replace Thapa, who will not

be able to attend the opening." Uneasy at the growing number of people who were supposed to talk at the seminar opening, I went to Pandit to inform him that Leon would replace Thapa, and also suggested that I did not need to talk at the event. Indeed, I assumed that if Thapa were to attend the event he would certainly speak and therefore Pandit would not. Pandit responded instantly and determinedly that both of us should talk.

Ranju, one of the WGOs, convened the opening event. She asked Pandit to speak first. Pandit talked about the importance of literacy and the need to empower the village women. Then Ranju turned to me and asked me to talk. I used statistics published that same day in the *Rising Nepal*, a Nepali English-language paper, about rates of illiteracy in the world. The data suggested that some fifty years ago the rate of illiteracy in nineteen countries from around the world was over 45 per cent, whereas the current average rate had dropped to 23 per cent, while in Arab countries in Asia and Africa it was still 70 per cent.[6] I then concluded that, "our challenge should be to reduce the rate of illiteracy and provide women with a key to knowledge, information, and perhaps to economic wealth as well." When I finished, Ranju turned to Leon and asked him to talk. He turned to Acharya and suggested that Acharya speak before him, thus making him the last speaker, but Pandit told him that Ranju was the one who decided the order of speakers. As he was left with no choice, Leon started his talk saying: "The teachers will be inspected by us. We shall determine if they are doing a good job." Acharya spoke last, and he reflected on the importance of education for women.

Thus, the ten women had to listen to the four of us talking for almost an hour about the importance of literacy and education and about the vital challenge of disseminating knowledge and literacy. The women were also explicitly reminded (by Leon) of their dependence on "us," their superiors, who would be monitoring their progress.

At the closing event, the number of speakers grew to six. The list of speakers included Pandit, Anita, one of the graduating women, Leon, Gurung, and Thapa. When the important people had left the room, I gave a short speech, raising the number of speakers to seven. The closing ceremony further demonstrated the power differential between the female trainees and teachers, and the males who were addressing them. As the speakers finished talking to the women, and after the certificates were handed out, Gurung looked at the board and noticed a table indicating the students' grades in the tests. He then took the stage again to address the women for a second time, expressing dissatisfaction at the poor level of achievement of two students and reservations about their capacity to teach others. The women were obviously humiliated in front of their classmates and the speakers, all of whom, apart from myself, were males. Embarrassed by Gurung's comments, I tried to suggest quietly to him that perhaps it was not the proper time to talk about these women's grades. Gurung ignored my remark and continued to reprimand the women.

Later on when I discussed this episode with Thapa, he told me that having noticed the women's timidity at the opening of the seminar he had invited them to his office after it had ended. Then he asked them if they thought they could teach other women and they confidently replied that they could. Thapa concluded: "So I told them, you see that you can teach?!" Thapa might have wanted to ensure that the women's shyness would not undermine them in their teaching. It is also possible that he felt uncomfortable about Gurung's comments, and therefore he tried to make up for them. However, at my farewell party he used the incident to prove my lack of understanding of the local mentality, claiming that "Nepali people are not easily offended."

Signing the teaching certificates manifested another form of symbolic power. When this was done Leon insisted on signing them. Thus, his signature appeared side by side with that of Gurung (the ministry official) and my own, as representative of the women's development program.

Male domination pervaded the seminar from the outset. I have already mentioned the demand that men sign their spouses' or daughters' form to signal their approval of participation in the seminar (see Chapter 1). I argued there that this demand was a manipulative tactic aimed at stalling the implementation of the women's project. It also derived from a patriarchal discourse and culture. However, I would argue that traditional, cultural, patriarchal structures and norms were instrumentally used in this case to serve the male officials' needs. They probably assumed, consciously or unconsciously, that "cultural" explanations work well at convincing foreigners like myself that local culture and tradition impose unavoidable constraints. Moreover, employing "traditional" rhetoric turned me into an "outsider," one who was unable to express reservations concerning local norms. Doing so would imply my rudeness and arrogance.

Thus, cultural or traditional narratives served the male officials in justifying their rejection of an activity intended for women's advantage, and were conveniently manipulated to suit their needs. Moreover, cultural constraints are dynamic and can be dramatically changed by social, economic, and political conditions and crises, such as wars, immigration, and so on. Evidence of this can be found in studies of rural women's participation in Nepal's Maoist insurgency. For example, Mandira Sharma and Dinesh Prasain show that, despite "dominant cultural narratives in Nepal which portray women as weak and submissive," women comprised "between thirty to forty per cent of the Maoist cadres" (Sharma and Prasain 2004: 152). Other studies also suggest that women were conspicuously involved in the war and argue that their mass participation reflects the dynamic transformation of cultural identities in Nepal and the emancipatory potential of women's participation in a militarized movement (see, e.g., Gautam, Banskota, and Manchanda 2001; Manchanda 2004).

I would argue, therefore, that whereas the women's program was presented as a means to create a gender transformation, in practice it was sabotaged by male officials (in the irrigation project and outside it) who used "cultural" rhetoric to prevent its realization.

Bossing Women in the Hierarchical Setting of the Irrigation Project

The process of hiring the two seminar teachers provides another example of the gendered power relations embedded in the encounters that took place. Anita and I first met the two candidates who were to train the village teachers in the seminar at the district office of the Ministry of Education. The two women were in their fifties, and looked passive and gloomy. They were standing quietly in the corner of the room, waiting to be addressed, while Anita and I were talking with Gurung's assistant. He explained that the teachers were very experienced and that they used to teach in a high school. One of them had been an English teacher and the other had taught social sciences. We asked Gurung's assistant to approve our inviting the two women to our office, as we wished to speak with them in more detail about the seminar, and he agreed. However, none of us asked the women themselves if they could or wanted to join us. The teachers' inferior position was established by all parties, by Gurung's assistant as well as Anita and myself. While the official treated us as his equals, he seemed to perceive the two teachers as obedient employees. Nevertheless, Anita and I unintentionally collaborated with him. Thus, the bureaucratic encounter that took place at the district offices of the Ministry of Education fostered the teachers' invisibility and social vulnerability.

When the four of us arrived at Leon's office he was sat at his table. Leon attended the whole meeting, following our conversation quietly. I asked the teachers about their teaching technique, whether it was didactic or interactive. They explained patiently. As the teachers' English was very poor, they responded to some of my questions in broken English and to others in Nepali, which Anita translated. We found out that the two teachers had had only ten years of schooling. When I asked about their teaching materials, they opened up a worn-out envelope, from which they took out and displayed various items: cut-out letters, books, and booklets. Then they specified the items needed for the seminar. Anita and I were perplexed, as we had no idea how to organize all that was needed on time. We suggested various ideas for obtaining the books, but none seemed to be realistic.

I emphasized the need for focusing on training in practical literacy skills, such as filling out forms and reading newspapers. When I suggested that reading newspapers should be taught only in the last part of the literacy course, Leon intervened, after sarcastically requesting permission to interrupt. He turned to me and said in Hebrew, with an authoritative tone, that I was talking too fast and that the two women understood nothing of it. He added: "Although you ask them whether they understand you, they don't feel free to tell you that they don't understand." I reacted apologetically, saying (also in Hebrew) that "this is exactly what I am doing, I am speaking very slowly and I use Anita's help to clarify things." We went on to discuss other problems concerning the women program, such as the lack of books and instructional devices.

Leon intervened repeatedly, commenting on various subjects that came up in the conversation. He made skeptical observations, which he directed at me in Hebrew. He asked when and how the village women would learn, raising doubts concerning their ability to study at night after a full day's domestic work, as well as about the teachers' ability to teach at night after dark. Regarding the teachers' comments about their previous experience of working with women in the villages, he claimed triumphantly: "Even the teachers say that there is a significant drop-out rate of participants from classes that take place at night."

Leon's apparent interest in the seminar (and the literacy training) and his many interventions could be regarded as a genuine expression of concern for the seminar's (and the literacy program's) success. As Tahal's representative, he might have felt responsible for my professional performance and for the appropriate implementation of the program of which I was in charge. I suggest, however, that Leon was eager to convey to us (and, I suppose, to me in particular) that he was in control of things and that he knew much more than us, even in a field in which he was not an expert. He pretended to know everything, including how the teachers felt (their unease about admitting to their inability to follow me), the village women's difficulties (studying late at night), how I should talk (slowly), and how the teachers should teach. He behaved as if it was not only his right and duty, but also within his competency to instruct us—Anita, as well as the teachers and me—and to clarify to us the literacy program's constraints and limitations. Leon's repeated interference dictated the encounter's atmosphere and the social positioning of its participants. His skeptical comments not only revealed his doubts about the value of the women's program and his lack of belief about whether or not it would ever be realized, they also underscored the inferior position of the teachers, Anita, and myself. I assume that conveying an impression of his own superior bureaucratic and professional stance was particularly crucial to his attempt at putting me down.

It follows, then, that the encounters in Gurung's and Leon's offices established power differentials that were the outcome of bureaucratic structured domination. Although in Gurung's office Anita and I cooperated in the process of excluding the two teachers, it was that fact that we were on Gurung's territory and his assistant's formal authority which fostered the social distance between the two women and the rest of us. Whereas in the first encounter gender was relatively muted in relation to socioeconomic status, in Leon's office the gender dimension was clearly revealed. While the four of us interacted in a friendly, informal manner, Leon's aggressive and patronizing interventions, and his attempts to control our conversation, demonstrated a substantial difference between the four women and the single man in the room. Moreover, while the women involved in this encounter had some relevant professional credentials, Leon had no such background, and instead pretended to have expertise and authority in matters that we discussed.

Men's Supervision of the Seminar

The seminar attracted visitors, mainly senior irrigation project employees, who used to watch the women, and discuss among themselves what was going on and how things should work. Thus the group of teachers and students, who were never asked if they minded being observed or how they felt about the continuous intrusion, became an object of social exchange. These visits became part of the seminar from the first day. Leon's attendance at the seminar was particularly conspicuous. When the opening ceremony was over, Acharya was about to leave the room when he suggested that Leon escort him out. Leon replied that he wanted to stay to see how the seminar worked. Anita and I remained in the room, sitting among the students, and participated in the first assignment presented by the teachers. Later on that day, Anita and I discussed our impressions, following our participation in the introductory part of the seminar. Anita said that the teachers informed her that my partner during the exercise where we introduced ourselves in pairs was the weakest student in the group, and had language difficulties.

When I went to Leon's office after leaving the seminar room, Leon asked me why I had left. I told him that I did not want to burden the women with my presence. Leon was displeased and said, "It is important to see what the teachers' worth is and what the women are doing." I told him that I would visit the class again in a few days when the group assumed its working routines. Indeed, I did not voice any objection to Leon's demand that I attend the seminar class regularly and interrupt its routine. Instructing me to attend the class, to observe its activities, to evaluate the teachers' and students' performance, and probably to report to him about all of it, implied his control over the seminar through me. Indeed, it also implied his ambition to impose his control over me. Leon's pervasive engagement in the seminar, as revealed in his verbal and physical participation in the opening and closing events, was just one instance of male domination with regard to the seminar. Similarly, Gurung's reprimand of the women in front of all the other participants and Thapa's paternalistic attitude toward the two offended women also exposed the gendered power component of the irrigation project's setting. The assumed right to supervise, watch, evaluate, and gossip about the women's activities in the seminar was taken for granted, particularly by Leon but also by others, including Anita and myself. It seems that I considered Anita and myself to be directly responsible for the seminar and, therefore, I perceived our attendance at the classes to be more legitimate and justified.

Yet, I was evidently ambivalent about my attendance of the seminar. This emerges from my reaction to Leon's demand that I should attend the class regularly, and from the way in which Anita and I integrated into the class's activity. Both of us stayed in the class after the ceremonial part was over, not as observers but rather as full participants, taking part in the games of mutual introduction. The teachers handed everyone one half of a piece of paper, on which

part of a proverb was written. Then every woman had to look for the missing part of the proverb. When the missing half of the proverb had been located, each member of the resulting pairs was then expected to find out details about their partner, following which they were asked to present themselves to the whole group. My partner and I had a proverb that said something like: "Between health and wealth—the first is preferred." She was a short woman, who seemed to lack self-confidence, repeatedly pulling her headscarf back.

I did my best to fit in with the group as one of the students. Nevertheless, the teachers' evident need to convey the message to me, through Anita, that my partner was "the weakest student in the group" suggests that my attendance was intrusive and threatening. Thus, despite my efforts at becoming a "regular" participant in the ongoing activities, the teachers perceived me as an outsider representing the authorities, with the power to influence their professional reputation and future prospects in the women's program and beyond it. The teachers may have thought that if I perceived the student I interacted with as representative of the others' learning capacities and potential, I would draw negative conclusions about the class, themselves, and of their chances at success.

I perceived Anita's daily visits to the seminar as an appropriate, even important, activity because she was local and spoke Nepali. Evidently, this enabled her to follow what was going on and to evaluate the teachers' performance and the progress made by the students. This implied, of course, that both students and teachers were being regularly observed and supervised, directly by Anita and indirectly by me (and consequently by Leon and other irrigation project staff).

Urged by Leon to attend the class, I joined Anita one day and found Gupta already sitting in the class. He seemed very satisfied. He told Anita and me afterwards that one of the students was an acquaintance of his, and said "she is a very talented woman." In response, I said that the woman who sat next to his friend was "very intelligent, she can sew and in fact is sewing clothes for her neighbors." Leon, who overheard the conversation, said, "I told them [the teachers] that they should not become anxious because of my presence, as I don't understand one word of Nepali. I said that because I felt that the teachers' voice lowered dramatically when I entered the class." Gupta and Leon laughed, enjoying the story. Leon's description of the influence he had on the teachers indicates clearly that he was aware of the impact of his intrusion into the class. However, he did not seem to care, as it was self-evident to him that he was entitled to enter the seminar room whenever he felt like it without asking for permission. Leon regarded the teachers as either naive or foolish because, according to him, they failed to realize that he did not speak one word of Nepali and needed an explicit mention of this fact.

It appears that the women were used, mainly by males (like Leon and Gupta) but also by Anita and me, as a resource in social interactions. Observing and discussing the women in the seminar enabled us to position ourselves as superior—professionally, socially, and personally. The interaction between the irri-

gation project staff, who controlled desired resources, and those who lacked them, and therefore depended on their benefactors, resembled, in some ways, a parent–child relationship. The teachers and their students were perceived and treated as protégées who needed watching, instruction, and compliments, and could be ridiculed when they were not present.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in this context of patronizing interactions the students bargained over refreshments. When offered one kind of refreshment, the women continuously demanded another kind until they achieved what they wanted. The students complained daily to Anita and me about the two biscuits they each received and demanded samosas instead. Anita and I were well aware of the need to please the women, as we were also depending on them to complete the seminar classes. Consequently, we did not give up until we managed to obtain samosas for the women.

No Books for the Seminar: Men's Stalling and Women's Anxiety

The lack of seminar textbooks led to a mini-drama in which Anita and I were the naive party at first, believing that Leon and Thapa were doing their utmost to provide the needed books on time. Early on in my involvement in the women's program I found out that there was a book shortage, and that the procedures involved in purchasing them were complicated. It was impossible to purchase the books on the free market and they had to be obtained from the Nepali government. In the district education office, Anita and I found a meager number of the books we needed for the literacy classes and seminar. The books were clearly not available in sufficient numbers for our large scale literacy program, and some of books needed for the advanced stages of the literacy studies were simply unavailable. Moreover, obtaining the books entailed long bureaucratic procedures, including having applications approved by officials in the district Ministry of Education, followed by the approval of the head of the informal education department in the main office of the ministry in Kathmandu. Only then, and after paying for the books, could they be supplied.

Anita and I were anxious to ensure that the books arrived before the seminar started. When we realized that the procedures involved were much more complicated than we had anticipated, we tried every possible way to overcome this unexpected delay. Thus, Anita suggested that during our joint visit to Kathmandu she would hand in the vital letters of application personally, and, if nothing else, return with the books needed for the seminar. With no check in hand from the irrigation project to pay for the 900 books needed (which we planned to start immediately after the first seminar ended), Anita could not purchase the books.[7]

Eager to ensure the opening of the literacy classes, and deeply upset about these delays and difficulties, I suggested that I would pay for the books out of my own pocket and get a refund from the irrigation project later. Thapa agreed to the idea and said that the money would be repaid by the irrigation project. However,

Leon's wife Hanna, with whom I spent some of my time while visiting Kathmandu, was startled by my suggestion, and warned me about the risk of losing my money. The effort of obtaining the books involved pursuing Thapa daily to sign a check for the books, but he was never available. Anita and I were repeatedly promised that we would get the check to us "in no time" and that Thapa would sign it as soon as he returned to his office. As Thapa was either absent or unavailable, we tried to get help from Pandit, hoping that he might find a way to obtain the books for the literacy classes before the seminar ended. Pandit exhausted all possible excuses for the continuous delay, always concluding our encounters by saying that everything depended on Thapa.

The problem of the books for the literacy classes was never resolved, since they were never purchased, and—except for the ten that opened after I left Nepal—the classes never started. The smaller problem of obtaining books for the seminar teachers and students was solved by Leon. The token contribution he offered us emphasized his general cynical attitude in relation to the literacy program. Feeling desperate about the chances of acquiring the books on the day before the seminar started, Anita said to me mischievously that Leon would buy the books. I expressed my doubts regarding this. Leon would not, I thought, pay for the 900 books for the literacy classes, but I suggested that he might, nonetheless, purchase the smaller number of books needed for the seminar. To my surprise, when I brought this idea up Leon agreed to buy the few books and materials needed for the seminar on his next visit to Kathmandu.

Nevertheless, he stated that he would need Thapa's approval in writing to ensure that he got his expenses reimbursed. Anita told him that Thapa's approval had been given over the telephone. This precondition was then followed by Leon recounting Thapa's problematic record in repaying debts. He told us that some time ago the local heads of the irrigation project had come to owe Tahal $12,000. "I had all the proofs for their debt," he said, "and I wrote Thapa a letter, titled: 'An Unpaid Debt.' Thapa was very angry and said that they did not owe that money to Tahal and that he never signed any document to that effect." After sharing with us his lesson, he said that he would get the books for the seminar. However, when he returned from his weekend in Kathmandu he did not bring the books. Eventually, Leon's contribution to solving the problem of the books was to acquire a single Stage II textbook for the teachers, which he brought from Kathmandu on the closing day of the seminar. Anita photocopied it for the two teachers.

Realizing that Leon's commitment to acquiring the books before the seminar opened was no guarantee of actually getting them, and as the seminar was about to start the next day, we went again to the district education offices to look for texts and materials that would be useful. Our search through the clutter produced only a few crumpled and detached pages from an old teacher-training textbook.

When the seminar started we still had no books or materials for the teachers. However, the teachers themselves had all they needed to start with. The

ten Stage I textbooks for the seminar students were donated by PACT, an international literacy NGO, whose representative Anita and I had met in Kathmandu and whose services we intended to hire for training the WGOs. The Ministry of Education's district official provided ten Stage II books, but only after the seminar ended.

This mini-drama, in which Anita and I were determined to overcome whatever obstacle was put in our way, went on for weeks. Our persistent and stubborn efforts in confronting reluctant male officials revealed the literacy program to be a phantom and unveiled the gendered nature of power within the project. The male officials could pretend to the two of us that they supported the women's program and our efforts, while at the same time they avoided our requests for the books that we had been promised, and they lied to us, pledging their cooperation while simultaneously withholding it. Thus, it appears that our role in this affair placed the two of us in a vulnerable, absurd position, and fostered our grave dependence on the heads of the irrigation project, Thapa and Leon in particular. While they controlled the women's program budget, they encouraged us to believe that they intended to finance our (approved) plans and our negotiated agreements with potential partners.

The Seminar: Degrading and Disempowering Women

Leon's obsessive interest in the seminar was diametrically opposed to his explicit reservations regarding the entire literacy program, which he expressed these just a few hours before the opening of the seminar. Leon was expecting a letter from Israel regarding my estimated costing of the women's development project. Although I will discuss this episode in detail in the next chapter, at this point it may be relevant to mention that Leon's interest in the seminar had nothing to do with the actual implementation of the women's project. Apparently he considered his role in supervising it as self-evident. As Tahal's representative, he perceived himself as legitimately responsible for any activity that was carried out by its employees— in this case, Anita and me. It follows, therefore, that Leon's attitude to the seminar (and the whole women's program) was two-faced: objecting to any substantial resource-intensive activity on the one hand, and supervising ongoing activities on the other. Other high ranking officials, like Thapa, Gupta and Pandit, also revealed this self-contradictory attitude, yet Leon's overt statements made the deceitful component contained in these encounters more conspicuous.

The fax Leon received from Tel Aviv on the morning of the seminar opening was Tahal's approval of my estimated costing. Leon let me read the fax, which said that it is the client's business to decide on the extent and objectives of budget expenditure. "Now I am covered," he said, and then asked me to come and sit next to him. Looking very irritated he said to me:

> I explained to them [his superiors in Tel Aviv] that your proposed budget does not leave any room for Tahal to make a profit. I would never approve such a proposal. The only profit Tahal can gain here is perhaps from hiring the teachers or organizations that will carry out the women's project. However, in your proposal, there is no profit for Tahal, and they know that they should include in the budget the experts [i.e., those who work for the irrigation project] that would cost some $250,000 … [A]fter all, with all due respect to women, other things are higher priority. You heard Sonderman [from the Ministry of Agriculture] who said that the position of women here is not bad at all. I heard them [the local heads of the irrigation project] saying that they have invested too much money here and that they don't have any more money to invest here.

But it was not only Leon who was being duplicitous. Thapa, who had done his utmost to undermine the realization of the women development project, also behaved as if he supported the seminar. He addressed the women in the seminar very warmly and spoke positively about the importance of literacy for women. Moreover, Thapa made a sentimental gesture to the seminar teachers. When he came back from a holiday in India, he brought three small styrofoam folders. Showing us the folders, he explained to Anita and me that each of them had cost him $1. He suggested that these could efficiently replace the conventional classroom blackboard, and serve the village teachers when teaching in the villages, as most villages would not have any boards.

Anita and I expressed our enthusiasm, and I suggested to Thapa that he patent his idea. Thapa was very pleased at our childish excitement over his gesture. Thus, the styrofoam board encounter exposed further the fragile position and profound dependence of Anita and I. We needed to show appreciation and gratitude regarding Thapa's ridiculous gestures, while at the same time he denied us the most basic financial support, such as money for purchasing textbooks for the seminar and literacy classes.

Thapa's attitude revealed that he understood that we, the women, could be bought cheaply and that our submissive cooperation was ensured. His gestures symbolized paternalistic disrespect for all women, the seminar students, the teachers, Anita, and myself. This and other trivial, cheap gestures accentuated to the extreme the men's cynical attitude toward women. Just as Leon was only prepared to buy a single book for the seminar teachers to please Anita and me, Thapa found he could buy us off with a toy-like article for the seminar. The lion's share of the project budget was earmarked for "important" projects and people, as Leon's comment about "other things" being of a "higher priority" revealed. The local and national male executives of the irrigation project were the ones who benefited from the budget intended for the women's project, as will become clear in the next chapter.

In conclusion, the events described above demonstrate how the women's development project, formally aimed at women's empowerment, in practice

disempowered women. The seminar affair is an example for how an activity that set out to advance women's interests was overtaken by male officials and exploited for exercising their power and for advancing their interests. In the end only ten women were trained as village teachers and only ten literacy classes were started; thus, the village teachers were given almost no chance to teach literacy, which was offered to some 300 village women instead of about 9,000 (or 27,000, according to one of the initial documents). It appears, then, that the women's development project was a project aimed at women's empowerment that failed because of the successful efforts of all parties: the World Bank, the Nepali government, and the Israeli irrigation company.

Gender policies, Sara Hlupekile Longwe suggests, have a "strange tendency … to 'evaporate' within international development agencies" (Longwe 1999: 63). The evaporation of the women's empowerment project in rural Nepal provides an example of this phenomenon, which seems to reflect deep-rooted gendered power differentials in society, both at international and at local levels. Thus, a more general understanding that emerges from the seminar affair is that projects aimed at advancing women's empowerment, like other development projects designed to advance social equity, cannot bring about social change. Because these projects are embedded in the larger socioeconomic, cultural, and political power structures, which are eminently patriarchal and capitalist, they are taken over and absorbed by those in power to serve and preserve the prevailing power structures. This line of argument is in accord with Frank Youngman's study of a national literacy programme in Botswana, which "in fact served to reproduce the class, gender and ethnic inequalities within society" (Youngman 2000: 135). Moreover, Youngman too was aware of the fact that the literacy program served political interests, constituting "a strategy of state legitimation by demonstrating a welfare concern for providing the rural areas with social services. The overall consequence was to legitimate Botswana's capitalist development and social inequality" (ibid.: 135–36).

The kind of political interpretation of development that I offer echoes with other studies of educational policy. Such an analysis is offered by Malcolm Adiseshiah, who argues:

> Education is not politically neutral. It is an active supporter and faithful reflector of the status quo in society. If the status quo is predominantly unequal and unjust, and it is increasingly so, education will be increasingly unequal and unjust and there will be no place for non-formal education to improve the conditions of the poor … If, however, society is moving in an equalitarian direction, then non-formal education can and will flourish. (Adiseshiah in Fordham1980: 21)

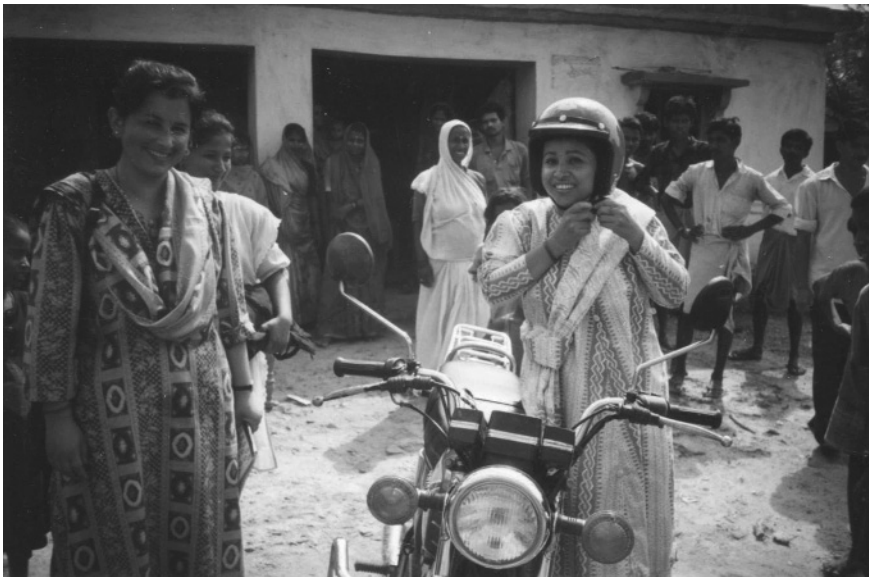
This optimistic understanding appears to be irrelevant to the context of the women's project and of development projects at large. This is so because non-

formal education projects that take place in developing, colonized, or poor countries, by definition do not correspond to the preconditions suggested by Adiseshiah.[8]

For social change to produce greater equity—whether it be addressed at inequalities of gender, ethnicity, class, or whatever—power centers must be comprised of proportional representation of all (or most) relevant sectors in society. Education—whether formal, adult, informal, or non-formal—can generate social change when it is inseparable from comprehensive policies and practices of economic equality and social justice (Mulenga 2001). Thus, Wickens and Sandlin suggest, in the context of literacy: "For progressive shifts over literacy from colonialist Western control to local governance to significantly continue worldwide, financial structures must be reorganized. Local governments need the economic freedom to make wise decisions on the behalf of their own populace, rather than bending to Western mandates over free labor markets" (Wickens and Sandlin 2007: 290).

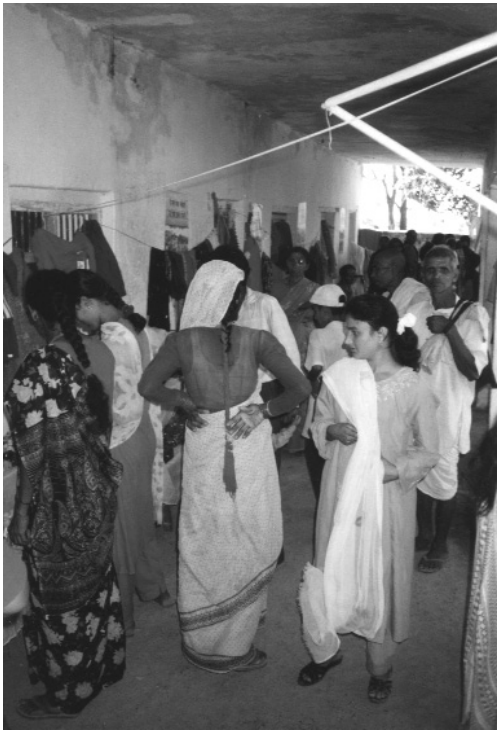
Notes

1. Jo Rowlands suggests that appealing terms such as "empowerment," "participation," "capacity-building," "sustainability," and "institutional development" are instrumental in ignoring or hiding "realities of power, inequality, and oppression" (Rowlands 1999: 149).
2. The development project studied by Mosse, described at one point as a "jewel in the crown," was two years later judged to be "very disappointing" or "negligible" (Mosse 2005: 183).
3. The volume edited by Gerschlager and Mokre (2002) contributes to an alternative feminist conceptualization of the embedded connection between exchange and deceit. Thus, for instance, Mokre's essay in the volume examines Adam Smith's considerations on exchange and deception as a concept of identity-building (see Smith 1984).
4. Letter from Leon, 10 November 1997.
5. Letter from Leon, 10 November 1997.
6. The data comes from an article titled "World Illiteracy Rate Falls," *Rising Nepal*, 9 September 1997, p. xx.
7. Each book cost 27 rupees (approximately $0.46). The total cost of the books was about $414.
8. The role of education in preserving power structures in society is also discussed in Chapter 3.



15. One of the WGOs with her motor-cycle

16. A bazaar in the village (organized by a women's organization)



17. Village women at the bazaar

18. A village woman making fun of me

19. A "field bank"

20. Baby-sitting his little brother while his mother studies at the seminar

21. At the seminar room

22. Addressing the seminar graduates at the closing ceremony of the seminar

23. Addressing the women at the closing ceremony of the seminar

24. Representing the seminar graduates in the closing ceremony

25. At the farewell party

26. At the farewell party