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Women Fieldworkers and the Politics of Participation

F**ollowing on the heels** of the women in development (WID) and gender and development (GAD) approaches (see Moser 1993), gendered participatory approaches have grown popular as project planners seek ways to incorporate women's knowledge and labor into development projects. In development projects, groups of people in poor countries undertake some kind of major infrastructural work, like road building; or smaller-scale economic activities, like building and organizing schools; or income generation programs. These projects are usually funded by a donor institution like the World Bank. The development project that I studied is building a massive drinking water supply scheme. Like many development projects, some project activities are facilitated by an nongovernmental organization (NGO). While NGOs have been multiply defined, as I use it in this article, an NGO is a nonstate and not-for-profit group of people who do paid social work. Fieldworkers form the link between international development policies and target populations in villages.

Corresponding with the rise of gendered participatory approaches to development, women have been recruited into projects as facilitators of women's participation components. Once hired, these women fieldworkers often find themselves at the margins of their organizations (Vasquez Garcia 2001; O'Reilly 2004) or discover that they, too, are the targets of development efforts (Springer 2001; O'Reilly 2004). Thus, women's participation raises two problems in overlapping spheres: first, how to interest and include local women; and second, how women fieldworkers will (be

allowed to) participate inside their own organizations. In the case of the first, women fieldworkers are seen as the solution. Planners assume a natural communication between all women, despite socioeconomic differences between women fieldworkers and their clients. Women fieldworkers, simply because they are women, are expected to enable local women's participation (O'Reilly 2004). For example, according to the Project Social Side (PSS) Feasibility Report (1993), "it is essential that at least two persons of [each field] team are women.[1] Otherwise the work . . . with the rural women as [the] target group could be neglected" (sec. 6, 8). In the case of the second problem, women fieldworkers create it. Their presence within male-dominated development projects immediately requires social and spatial changes in order to accommodate women as full-fledged members (O'Reilly 2004). A woman fieldworker, in order to do her job, must make sense of this contradiction that surrounds her position within development projects (O'Reilly 2003).

In this article, I seek to fill a gap in current literatures of participation by exploring, first, the positionality of women fieldworkers within their institutions and second, how gendered relations of power influence meanings of participation produced in villages. I argue that women fieldworkers' practices in the field reflect the contradictory position they occupy within their NGOs. I find that their actions result in subversive meanings of participation that circulate alongside more hegemonic definitions. From previous research, we have learned that project outcomes do not often reflect project plans (Ferguson 1990). We know that meanings of participation are not directly put into action by field staff, which then lead to the success or failure of a project (Crewe and Harrison 1998; O'Reilly 2002). To date, however, attention to participatory policies, practices, and results has disregarded interconnections between gendered relations of power, the positionality of fieldworkers, and individual practices in the field. There has been little ethnographic research attempting to make theoretical claims about development field staff, their behaviors, and their choices (Nagar 2000; Springer 2001).

Development studies have come far in their explorations of the gendered dynamics of participatory approaches for women who are the targets of development (Agarwal 2001; Cleaver 2001; Cornwall 2003). However, far less attention has been given to fieldworkers as active agents during

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[1] Over the period I was conducting fieldwork, each field team was composed of two men and one woman. Two teams worked together out of one field office based in a village in the project area.

the implementation process.[2] Emma Crewe and Elizabeth Harrison (1998, 173) illustrate how a low-level male fieldworker is embedded within community relations and makes choices based on constraints and opportunities presented by both the organization that he works for and the community that provides him with social and professional support. Far from being whimsical, the choices he makes are shaped by the relationships and discourses in which he is immersed (see also Arce and Long 1992). Fieldworkers choose what to foreground or mute during interactions with villagers, which often results in contradictions within a single fieldworker's field-level practices (O'Reilly 2003). In her study of male agricultural extension workers in India, Jenny Springer (2001) shows that the degree to which workers identify with state-sponsored meanings of development has bearing on their practices with local farmers. Springer demonstrates the ways in which the state is constructed as separate from society by the efforts of local officials to align themselves with development or progress, efforts that are at the expense of local farmers. Such research moves beyond a view of fieldworkers as instruments of development, mechanically implementing plans, and explores the power relations in which they are embedded for the production of meanings. To these accounts, I add the critical aspect of gender because of its importance for fieldworkers' experiences of power. By turning toward those doing the implementing, I seek to further erode what has become a staple of development critique: the attempt to discover what formulas for participation are operative within projects and then offer suggestions for better implementation, training, and so on (see also Cooke and Kothari 2001). My research shows that participatory approaches are complex and negotiated during every interaction among staff and between staff and local people.[3] Simple suggestions of techniques for implementation cannot begin to cope with the range of power dynamics experienced (and created) by fieldworkers on a daily basis.

Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, in their edited volume *Participation: the New Tyranny?* (2001, 4), turn to Michel Foucault and address participatory approaches as a form of power. Foucault holds that the world of discourse is "a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies" (1990, 100). This conceptualization allows Cooke and Kothari to frame participation as discourses that contain "the potential

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[2] Notable exceptions include Arce and Long 1992; Villarreal 1992; Crewe and Harrison 1998; Springer 2001; O'Reilly 2002, 2003, 2004.

[3] Mutersbaugh 1998; Schroeder 1999; Mosse 2001; O'Reilly 2003.

for an unjustified exercise of power" (2001, 4); that is, participation can be tyrannical. Discourses of participation are suffused with power—what they contain and omit have important ramifications (see also Crush 1995; Escobar 1995; Kothari 2001). Different meanings of participation may serve similar purposes, while similar meanings may serve different purposes. Because identical discourses, like those of participation, may be deployed to both further and hinder power, Foucault argues that it is necessary to take seriously individual actors and the context in which discourses are created and operationalized.

Power, for Foucault, is exercised through a net or web; it is not something that is possessed by any single individual. On the contrary, individuals are "simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" (1980, 98). Instead of criticizing staff practices, I direct my attention to the micro level, where individual practices of participation depict the reproduction and subversion of existing gendered power relations. By tracing the circulation of power during the activities of NGO staff, this article provides a detailed illustration of how participation operates as a form of power. I ask the following questions: First, what do discourses of women's participation mean for women fieldworkers' positionality within their employing NGO? Second, how do women fieldworkers deploy meanings of participation as an exercise of power? Finally, what conditions enable this exercise? My findings indicate that women fieldworkers create fluid meanings and engage in shifting practices of participation that reflect the multilayered power dynamics in which they are embedded.

In the following sections, I discuss my methods and describe the project I studied. I then discuss the inherent tensions within participatory approaches, followed by a deconstruction of women fieldworkers' image in project texts. I suggest the implications of this representation for women fieldworkers and their particular gendered positionality. This is followed by ethnographic examples of women fieldworkers' strategies for participation in the field. Finally, I offer an analysis of relationships between women fieldworkers, NGOs' gendered internal practices, and participatory approaches.

Methods and case study

Between 1997 and 2002, I studied a drinking water supply project in northern Rajasthan, India. I made initial contact with the Project Social Side (PSS) through one of its staff, whom I met while visiting a different NGO. As I traveled with field staff (both men and women) while they implemented a participatory approach to water management, it became

clear that they were involved in highly nuanced negotiations among themselves over meanings of women's participation and the limits of associated practices. Women fieldworkers played a pivotal but controversial role as staff struggled with an increasing focus on women's significance to the project over the years. Some staff openly denigrated women's involvement; others publicly celebrated women fieldworkers' capabilities. But a majority of staff, both program officers and fieldworkers, both men and women, engaged in practices that signaled ambivalence about women fieldworkers' importance in the project (O'Reilly 2003). One thing was unequivocal, however; women fieldworkers' positionality within the NGO had direct bearing on the women's participation component in villages.

Over the course of intermittent visits, each lasting between two months and one year, I collected project literature and conducted participant observation with the seventy staff (management, consultants, and fieldworkers) of the project. I wrote daily field notes about fieldworkers' interactions and conversations in the main office and in villages. I interviewed in semistructured format twenty-two staff in Hindi, Marwari, and English. The interviews in Hindi and Marwari were tape recorded, transcribed, and translated by my research assistant, Tasneem Khan, and me; I recorded by hand if we spoke in English. In the interest of anonymity, I attribute all quotations and actions of PSS women fieldworkers to two composite women fieldworkers I call Vidya and Kavita. During the years I studied this project, I had informal conversations about women's participation with almost every member of the PSS staff whenever the opportunity arose, for example, while waiting for the bus, while preparing tea at field offices, or while walking to the next meeting. In villages I consistently identified myself as an independent researcher interested in the work of the PSS, women's participation, and local water problems.

The drinking water project I studied is funded by a large German development bank and the government of Rajasthan (GOR). Engineers and contractors affiliated with the GOR design and build the vast supply system infrastructure. Five Rajasthani NGOs compose the PSS, which focuses on community participation for the purpose of system sustainability. The PSS self-consciously acts as a single NGO, separate from the GOR (i.e., as a nonstate body). The PSS's participatory approach was written into early project plans, reflecting planners' beliefs that if villagers invest their time, effort, and money in the drinking water supply system, they will use it properly (i.e., not waste water) and maintain it. Villagers are expected to pay for water, which they previously got for free from the GOR. They also must agree to assist in the care and maintenance of the system inside village boundaries. The work of PSS field staff involves

organizing these two primary activities as well as providing health education, constructing latrines, and facilitating public tap site selection. Community participation in the case of the PSS has less to do with gaining local knowledge in order to tailor project plans to circumstances (Crewe and Harrison 1998) and more to do with setting up bureaucratic mechanisms for the payment of water tariffs and village-level governance of the system.

An unquestioned relationship between women and water underlies themes for women's participation in the project. Project plans indicate an assumption that women will see to it that public stand posts (i.e., taps) and the system are maintained because women need a reliable water supply in order to fulfill their roles as mothers and household managers (O'Reilly, unpublished). As stated in the PSS's *Women's Participation Handbook* (n.d.): "Women are the ones who will gain most from the project being accepted in the village and from the continued smooth functioning of the new facilities. Those who benefit most can also be expected to be most committed." Social change is hinted at in suggestions that women's groups might eventually proceed to solve other problems beside that of the drinking water supply: "Women's groups must first and foremost serve the purpose of making the water supply system sustainable in the long run, i.e., women must be mobilized to take responsibility for the water management of their village. The health and hygiene education objective and the empowerment and self-help objective are important but should be subordinate to this overriding goal" (PSS, *Women's Participation Handbook* n.d.). Women's participation, as stated in PSS documents, means drawing on women's labor as mothers and housewives to facilitate the long-term viability of the system (O'Reilly 2002). Health education and empowerment take place as secondary goals.

Of the approximately seventy staff who work for the PSS, fifteen of these are women, and all of them work solely on the issue of women's participation. A women's participation program officer directs their activities; she is the one woman in a group of seven program officers. While I was doing fieldwork with the PSS, considerable turnover occurred in the women fieldworkers' ranks.[4] Women fieldworkers with PSS are a remarkably diverse group, with the exception that they are all Hindu. They range in age from the early twenties to the midthirties, they come from all over India (e.g., Rajasthan, Karnataka, and Bihar), and they have a

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[4] The reasons for the high turnover are numerous. Most frequently, women left the project because of pregnancy or a stated need to be at home with family.

variety of education levels from tenth standard (i.e., tenth grade) to MSW degrees. Some speak the local language as native speakers; others learn it on the job; others never learn it. This variety of backgrounds means that field staff come to the organization with very different and occasionally contradictory ideas about what development is and how it should be implemented. Their work involves covering anywhere between fifteen to thirty villages a month. In villages they are expected to, first, involve women as representatives to village committees overseeing water use and decision making; second, form women's groups; third, establish micro-credit groups; and, finally, instruct women on hygiene at home and safe water-handling practices. Women fieldworkers are also responsible for re-cruiting caretakers for public taps and, if they have the time, for facilitating additional women's participation activities.

I am self-consciously drawing on both poststructuralist/postdevelop-ment and modernist approaches to development critique (see Blaikie 2000). I am simultaneously interested in deconstructing images of women fieldworkers created by project discourses and reconstructing, through ethnographic data, our notions of who women fieldworkers are and what it might be like to be one. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) calls for a deconstruction of the category *third world woman* for the purpose of recognizing the agency of all women, especially those in the global South. But Mohanty cautions us that if we are going to deconstruct, then we must ask ourselves what we are reconstructing in its place. Here I seek to contribute to a reconstruction of individual women fieldworkers' agency and the implications of their agency for participatory approaches. I want to highlight fieldworkers' political savvy as they decide for themselves the usefulness or uselessness of performing certain tasks. I seek to dislodge critiques of NGOs and participatory approaches that call for technical solutions transferable among NGOs (Vazquez Garcia 2001; Cornwall 2003) or personal transformation (Chambers 1997). In this article, I shift the scale of my investigation away from an ethnography of NGOs as units to individual fieldworkers and the relations of power in which they are embedded. A focus on organizations and groups obscures the ways that individual actors personally negotiate the social relations that embody participatory approaches on the ground. An extended ethnographic method allows for revelations about the micropolitics surrounding par-ticipatory approaches and suggests what specific constellations of power mean for individual actions, and therefore, for participation in general (see Buroway et al. 2000). I now turn to discussing the contradictions within approaches to women's participation.

Tensions within participatory approaches

Participation is popular both as a method of acquiring local knowledge and as a way to encourage project sustainability. Proponents laud participatory approaches for producing local actor investment in projects through increased sensitivity and attention to local peoples' desires for certain kinds of development interventions (Chambers 1983, 1997). Participation frequently appears as a framework for gathering local knowledge to facilitate sustainability and actor investment in a project (Mosse 2001). Supporters argue that previous top-down approaches to development failed because they did not concern themselves with local knowledge or interests (Chambers 1983, 1997; Cornwall 2003). Local civil society is celebrated as already having the answers to development problems (Watts 1995). The use of local knowledge purportedly facilitates empowerment of target populations and creates projects that serve the needs of villagers, thereby increasing success rates compared to those of top-down planned projects. Additionally, local involvement in project tasks hypothetically results in cost and time efficiency.

Whether participatory approaches are any more or less successful than top-down development approaches is subject to debate, and a substantial literature of critique has emerged following participation's rise in popularity. Participation, as read off project texts, takes a top-down approach toward existing human-environment relationships and corresponding roles with significant gendered implications (Schroeder 1999; O'Reilly 2003). Critics argue that participatory approaches cloak what is really development business as usual (Blaikie 2000, 1044): donor-driven, predetermined categories of people and activities that do not allow much flexibility for changing existing power imbalances (Crewe and Harrison 1998). As David Mosse states, participation "remains a way of talking about rather than doing things" (2001, 32). Others charge that participatory approaches have become a mechanism for efficiency of service delivery or for continuing maintenance (Kabeer 1996; Rahnema 1997) that reduces state responsibility (Paley 2001; O'Reilly 2002).

Nevertheless, participatory approaches currently enjoy not only the favor of mainstream development donors and practitioners (Chambers 1997; World Bank 1997) but also that of postdevelopment advocates (Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; Pieterse 1998; Saunders 2002). Civil society has been discovered by both prodevelopment and antidevelopment sides as the answer to the current modernist versus postmodernist crisis in development (Watts 1995; Blaikie 2000). Both sides appeal to local ordinary people with an obviously populist agenda: the rebirth of civil society; a development strategy in the form of local, rural initiatives poised against urban industrial

capitalism; and the creation of a national will (Watts 1995). Ernesto Laclau (1977) critiques populism for maintaining the status quo among the powerful and the people, noting that discursive constructions of "the people" are driven by dominant class interests. Michael Watts (1995) further argues that the appeal of the rhetoric of populism derives from the balance it provides between the pursuit of modernity and progress versus the morality and sensibility of everyday life. Development brings anxiety and tension about rapid social change and the future, to which participation provides a counterweight. Populist elements of participatory approaches may be understood as a way to ease the growing pains of social change that arise due to development projects. But they can also serve as instruments for the continuation of oppressive power relations (Laclau 1977; Watts 1995). Crewe and Harrison note that participatory approaches finesse power differences within communities (1998, 162).

Participation prevails as a term that is multiply deployed to validate any number of activities, for example, legitimizing expenditures, reducing operation costs, improving public image, and creating new markets (Mosse 2001). Development project planners may intend stable meanings of participation, but Mosse writes that "power in development is multi-centred, and practices indeterminate and adaptive. A theory of participation separate from analysis of the meaning of the concept in specific organizational practices would be impossible" (2001, 32). I find that meanings of participation are tied to field-level practices, and hence they are also fluid and adaptive. Any analysis of meanings of participation within an NGO becomes further complicated when that organization reflexively begins to take note of its own practices of inclusion and exclusion. For my Rajasthani case study, women's participation began as a gendered element of community participation, which was intended to ensure the project's long-term sustainability. But validating women's participation became a concern when staff began reflexively evaluating the marginal inclusion of women fieldworkers in project decision making. As one male fieldworker said to me, "So even here in the PSS there is no equal participation [for women]. How will she be able to create it in villages?" His words emphasize that women's participation is not only an effort to involve village women in project activities but also a process of negotiating how women fieldworkers will participate in their NGO. I explore below how these dual meanings of participation intersect and what they indicate about gendered social relations within NGOs.

Elsewhere (O'Reilly 2002, 2003) I have illustrated how PSS staff actively produce contradictory logics of participation in their everyday practices. For example, they both rely on and seek to dismantle existing gender

roles for women. On the one hand, male and female staff rely on and reproduce a construction of women as objects of development (O'Reilly 2003). So conceived, village women are a category with immutable, essential characteristics: traditional, powerless, and without agency (Mohanty 1991). Women are targeted as a category, which does not call existing gender roles into question, nor does it interrogate the variety of individual circumstances of individual women (i.e., class, caste, religion, ability, age, and family status). Plans are laid for women, all of whom (including women fieldworkers), it is assumed, need development such as the PSS is offering (see Pigg 1992).[5] On the other hand, the PSS's participatory approach depends on women's agency; the fulfillment of PSS plans for sustainability depends on village women as subjects (O'Reilly 2003). Fieldworkers need women to act as subjects; for example, women should report problems with public taps or misuse of the system. In other circumstances, staff need women as objects; for example, women should not be organizing to discuss their dissatisfaction with a delay in the onset of the clean water supply, but they should be available for meetings whenever PSS staff arrive to hold them. The contradictory concepts of village women as objects and village women as subjects reveal women's participation as an operation of power that serves different purposes (O'Reilly 2003).

Discursive constructions of village women as subjects and village women as objects envelop women fieldworkers as well. *Women* as a general development category influences constructions of women fieldworkers, who find themselves discursively placed in a tenuous position of being like village women but not like village women. This situation is made all the more precarious when we consider that some fieldworkers are in fact village women hired from the PSS project area. Below I discuss the creation of women fieldworkers as a development category, before exploring some illustrative incidents in the field.

Who is a woman fieldworker?

Rosemary Pringle, in her introduction to *Secretaries Talk*, asks the question, "What is a secretary?" (1989, 5). She answers that the word and image of secretary has not one but a variety of meanings. These meanings are not fixed but are continuously produced and reproduced. Neither are there infinite possibilities for constructed, changing meanings of *secretary*,

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[5] One gender consultant to the PSS advised that young mothers be organized into groups so that their specific concerns could be addressed. No action was ever taken.

but instead, its meanings are limited by wider structures of capitalist production, gender, class, and so forth. Following Pringle, I am interested in unpacking meanings contained within *woman fieldworker* in order to better understand contradictions contained within the construction and between the construction and the project's participatory approach.[6] In deconstructing the tasks, images, and demands of women fieldworkers, we can explore the relations of power influencing the implementation of women's participation. Women fieldworkers are hired into an organization that has stated participatory goals, but they also arrive with their own ideas about women's participation, and these are further negotiated in the field with villagers' and coworkers' ideas.

Trying to understand *woman fieldworker* as a static figure will not work, for her position both in villages and in the NGO is constantly shifting. Nor is she a singular category. In addition to differences in class, caste, religion, age, family status, and so on, women fieldworkers are surrounded by contradictions within participation and demands of staff and constituents. They also contribute to the fluidity of circulating meanings and an abundance of contradictory practices. Women fieldworkers labor at the center of gendered tensions that converge in her (as a person) and on her (as a figure). Nevertheless, the burden of resolving the multifaceted and multilayered contradictions of women's participation ultimately falls on them. Just as meanings of participation are multiple and contested, so also are meanings of *woman fieldworker* and her work as flexible, situational, and struggled over. Like participation, the category of *woman fieldworker* is produced and reproduced during daily practices of fieldwork in a variety of spaces (O'Reilly 2002). I suggest that a woman fieldworker is a new type of female figure—not quite *gaanv mahiilaa* (village woman) because she is more modern, not quite male fieldworker because she is not as mobile or powerful.[7] Her position on both the outside of the PSS (and yet occasionally the focus) and the outside of villages where she works (see Trinh 1997) compounds tensions a woman fieldworker faces in her job, and they add complexity to her decisions and practices.

Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests, in reference to difference, that negotiations occur not only between outsider and insider but "are also at work within

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[6] I note that *woman fieldworker* is a marked category; a male field staff member in the PSS is known simply as a fieldworker.

[7] Tensions due to prospective social change intensify around the issue of gender because of associations of men with modernity and women with tradition (Chatterjee 1993; McClintock 1997; O'Reilly 2003, unpublished). Gendered participatory approaches such as the PSS's that encourage village women's participation within traditional gender roles balance some of these tensions. By contrast, women fieldworkers are cast as modern.

the outsider herself, or the insider herself—a single entity" (1997, 418). Not only do those who are not women fieldworkers produce conflicting meanings for the construct of *woman fieldworker* but also conflicting meanings are at work within women fieldworkers and are constitutive of women fieldworkers engaging in ambiguous practices.[8] A woman fieldworker may at times identify with her village-level constituents at the expense of the PSS (e.g., agree that PSS demands on women's time are too great) and at other times distance herself from village women and side with project meanings of modern womanhood (e.g., wear a "modern" sari instead of traditional local dress). Trinh explains (for postcolonial women) a parallel situation: "Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both not quite an insider and not quite an outsider. She is, in other words, this inappropriate 'other' or 'same' who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at" (1997, 418). While some women fieldworkers come from urban, middle-class backgrounds and others come from rural, agricultural backgrounds, all negotiate a delicate position of working with village women with whom they supposedly share much in common because they are women.

But the women's participation program officer (and others in PSS management) expects women fieldworkers to distinguish themselves from village women through their behavior, for example, by attending mixed-gender nighttime puppet shows. Their position as not quite the same, not quite the other creates tensions for individual women fieldworkers. Vidya says, "We used to go to the field late at night, it is not that we did not go, but it would always come to my mind, 'what will villagers say?' since we are moving around with men late at night. Even in daytime it is in their minds." Vidya worries that villagers question her chastity because she travels in the company of men who are not her relatives. In an area where women's seclusion is practiced and women veil themselves in front of elders and in-laws, women fieldworkers feel the pressure of social mores held by those with whom they live and work.

Within the PSS, women fieldworkers also occupy an ambivalent position. During daylong meetings held in the main office, women fieldworkers often remained on the sidelines in the main meeting room while male fieldworkers

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[8] As a researcher, I have only a partial understanding of how women internally process the decisions that they make.

sat in small groups with the various program officers in their offices. These circumstances gave men opportunities to reinforce their dominance as project actors by planning their activities without considering women's input. Women fieldworkers may not have wanted it differently—they could sit and talk freely among themselves while men were out of the room. At other times, women made it plain they wanted responsibilities beyond their limited roles. For example, Kavita, a woman fieldworker, publicly demanded that project management provide equal opportunities for women in the PSS leadership ranks. Thus, the PSS's lack of reflexivity about its participatory approach was called into question by a woman fieldworker frustrated at her position outside the organization's power structures.

Women fieldworkers, trained by the PSS about the benefits of gendered participation at the village level, acted out both directly and indirectly a critique of their marginal participation in PSS decisions that affected their lives and work. It is from an awareness of their marginalization within their NGO that women fieldworkers make decisions about their practices in the field. In the next section, I use examples of women fieldworkers' practices in villages to illustrate participation's negotiated meanings. Each woman draws from her unique position within the organization to inform her decisions in the field.

Politics of participation

Field teams organized by the PSS work anywhere between two and five hours away from the main office, which means that most of their work is unsupervised by program officers or consultants. Field team leaders are responsible for the activities of teams, but they do very little supervising. This arrangement gives women fieldworkers a degree of freedom to decide for themselves on which activities they want to spend time and on which they do not. An activity known as social mapping illustrates beautifully a disjuncture between management's plans and women fieldworkers' ideas about women's participation activities. Program officers designed the social mapping activity to facilitate the process of public tap site selection. Based on standard participatory rural appraisal techniques, women fieldworkers gather village women's local knowledge of village paths and neighborhoods by having them draw a map. Ideally, village women are encouraged to express themselves creatively by designing a map of their village or neighborhood from locally available materials (e.g., colored powders, lentils, leaves, and sticks). They decide as a group what materials should represent what and, finally, determine the best locations for new public taps. This three-dimensional map is then transferred onto paper

with pens and pencils. The exercise is intended to raise awareness of village surroundings, create solidarity by involving women in a group effort, and boost women's self-esteem through pride in their created map.

When Vidya led this exercise, she and two village women used pencils and paper to draw a map, with Vidya occasionally grabbing the pencil and instructing the women to show a tree like this or a house like that. The rest of the group of about a dozen village women and many children looked on in amusement and gave occasional suggestions or pointed out locations. After about an hour and a half, Gopal (a male fieldworker) came and asked if we were done. Vidya, finishing, said, "*bas*" (enough), picked up the map in its unfinished state, and left without saying anything to the women about what would become of it. She said to me, "time waste *kartaa hai* ([it] wastes time)—other field teams do it with *ret* (sand), but here we shouldn't waste time (*time waste na ho*)."

It is possible to listen to this narrative and analyze the event as an example of a fieldworker with a bad attitude not doing her job. Or to assume that this fieldworker has adopted the behavior of lazy government workers whose behavior she knows well from other everyday contexts. She is a social worker employed by an NGO that has been contracted by the GOR, so her actions could be taken to reflect her interest in creating some distance between herself and the civilians she works with (Springer 2001). Her rudeness certainly indicates her disregard for her village clients, which may derive from PSS discourses of women as objects. It could be argued that Vidya needs training to bring about her acceptance of the PSS's dominant meanings of development. If she had proper training, she would understand what is required and why (Pigg 1992); she would perform her tasks correctly in full knowledge of the reasons for a step-by-step, time-consuming process. Such potential views of Vidya's practices assume that she does not justify her choices both within and without project discourses of participation. Vidya's choices of which women's participation activities are and are not worth an effort make sense, given her knowledge and experience with the PSS.

Vidya's fieldwork is embedded within discourses circulating among project staff as to whether women's participation is important to the project. Her actions indicate that she believes that women's participation in the form of social mapping is not especially important. She is willing to go through the motions of performing her duties to earn her pay. In the monthly reporting meeting, she can say that she did the mapmaking activity, and no coworker can say otherwise. Her choices about how to run the social mapping activity reflect a logical decision not to spend more time than is necessary on an activity that will not amount to anything

later. Like others in the project, including some program officers, she believes that women's participation does not matter in the project, at least not in terms of social mapping. She says that social mapping for women is a waste of time; after five years' experience, she has learned that decisions women make about the location of public taps rarely amount to anything—the men of the village or the GOR engineers make the final decisions anyway. Vidya may believe that far from being an empowering activity, social mapping is actually disempowering—as women would make maps and choose public tap locations only to have their decisions overridden by men. Therefore, Vidya does what is required of her as a fieldworker, but she does not expend any additional effort making it meaningful. If she is going to waste her time and other women's time, she is going to waste as little of it as possible. Within the constraints of the PSS's social mapping activity, she exercises her agency by minimizing what she might call the harmful effects of women's participation.

In an October 2000 interview, Kavita told me that on her first day in villages with her coworkers, she learned that they considered women's participation a mechanism for getting funds from the German donor bank (O'Reilly 2004). She said, "from conversations with [management] and team leaders (unofficially) I came to learn this goal." Kavita understood that both men and women senior fieldworkers did not take women's participation seriously, but she had a different concern. She told me, "For me the primary concern was the village women and not the [German bank] fund. So I only tried to concentrate on the village women. But at times, I had realized I was cheating with them." Village women wanted free health treatment, medicine, and some income-generation activities, she said, which she could not provide.[9] Her feelings of cheating derived from her inability to offer women the help they wanted. But Kavita also said, "From the very beginning most of the village women use[d] to trust me a lot because I never told them a lie or never tried to make false promises. I always told them the truth and that's why I always had a clash with my colleagues and [my field team leader]. I gave them [village women] a clear picture of the project's objectives and also told them what we expect out of them."

Kavita's early disillusionment led her to apply a no-nonsense approach to her work. She wanted women to know without sugarcoating that women's participation in the new water supply system meant new tasks for them: collecting payment for water usage and cleaning the public taps. Her decision to present women's participation in this way made her unpopular with her supervisor and coworkers. Kavita felt deeply the clashes

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[9] The PSS did eventually start income-generation activities in villages.

she had with her male coworkers, and she cited "noncooperation from [field team] staff (mainly senior staff)" as a reason she eventually quit her job. Her truth telling also made her job with village women difficult at times and more difficult still when she had to report in monthly meetings the trouble she was having in villages.

What Kavita learned about women's participation on her first day galvanized her will to take the component seriously, to find out what women wanted, and to tell them honestly that their concerns were only going to be partially and occasionally considered by project staff. For Kavita, women's participation needed to be put to women without empty promises—they were going to receive a twenty-four hour supply of clean water; in return, they needed to pay for it and keep the new public taps clean. When women asked to be paid for cleaning public taps, she told them frankly that it would not happen. She admitted to me that she was not altogether successful in getting these tasks accomplished, but she had very clear ideas about what women's participation was and was not. Like Vidya, she knew it was only a minor project element and made no promises. She gave straight answers, much to the dismay of her male colleagues.

As a woman fieldworker in the know about the truth of women's participation, Kavita was empowered to dispense with lies and postponements of solutions. Instead, she took the time to get to know women and listen to their problems, offering herself as at least one person willing to hear women's voices. She made it her business to know what women's concerns were and what village politics meant for their everyday lives. Kavita protected her own integrity. Having learned the truth, she chose to tell it to her women clients so they were equipped with the knowledge of what the project could not do for them and what the project required from them. In contrast to Vidya's distance, Kavita's outsider status within her field team led her to seek closeness with village women. In light of Springer's (2001) findings that extension workers use development discourses as a way to distance from their clients, Kavita's actions are notable, for not all fieldworkers side with the PSS's gendered participatory approach as a way to distinguish themselves from village constituents. Some fieldworkers side with villagers on certain issues in order to ensure their cooperation in other project activities or because of their own internal disagreement with women's participation as an approach.

Analysis

Instead of dismissing Vidya's actions as that of a bad fieldworker or celebrating (or condemning) Kavita for her honesty, we must explore the

behavior of these two woman fieldworkers for what it tells us about their own positionality within the organization, the status of women inside the PSS, the PSS's gendered structures of control, and conflicts within the NGO about implementing women's participation. The staff practices of the PSS reflect staff members' personal responses to the sociopolitical circumstances in which they find themselves. Fieldworkers change their practices, language, and behavior to accommodate the different demands made on them by coworkers, their field team supervisors, and local constituents (see also Springer 2001). Although they are not performing as some might think they should, given that they are paid to do a job, Vidya and Kavita's actions demonstrate their embeddedness within PSS power dynamics as marginalized women fieldworkers performing a low-status job. More broadly, their words and behavior indicate how power circulates through their practices.

Women fieldworkers simultaneously exercise, and are influenced by, participation as a form of power. They have the ability to disrupt dominant meanings of participation that PSS management and consultants would like to see implemented. Management in response tries to create schedules and procedures to constrain the variability of meanings that fieldworkers are putting in place, or refusing to put in place. Springer (2001) shows in a case of state extension workers that behaviors like Vidya's and Kavita's led to increased attempts to regulate them (e.g., Kavita's coworkers' non-cooperation may be seen as an attempt to discipline her), although the extension workers' practices made the most sense under the sociopolitical circumstances. Similarly, women fieldworkers do not need increased regulation. They do not escape the development discourses that surround them; they rarely engage women in some topic or activity completely unrelated to the project. They may not follow the topical script in discussions with village women (e.g., how to carry water pots), but their topics seldom stray radically (e.g., armed feminist struggle). Their behavior is controlled; they must implement social mapping or stand-post cleaning instead of some other activity that they think is better, so that they can report and prove that they did so. It could be argued that more control needs to be exercised over those actors who ignore women's choices for public tap locations or requests for medical assistance, but women fieldworkers themselves cannot influence those actors' choices.

The above examples of Vidya and Kavita (compositely representing many women fieldworkers' remarks and practices) demonstrate how participatory practices in villages grow out of gendered power dynamics within NGOs. Women fieldworkers' refusal to perform as expected by management reflects their understanding of the insignificance of women's

participation in the PSS. Vidya already knows that no one in the organization is going to pay attention to the map that these women have made; she knows these maps are only for show. To my knowledge, they were never shown to anyone after the day they were made. Vidya has sufficient experience in this organization to realize that maps village women make do not end up determining where project stand posts will be located. Vidya has no confidence that the exercise of mapmaking brings other benefits, such as solidarity, raised self-esteem, or empowerment. Kavita has less experience, but she has heard that women's participation does not matter except as a money maker, so she dispenses with false pretenses and angers her colleagues by not keeping up appearances about the importance of women's participation to project sustainability. Creating a participatory venue for women's knowledge and opinions (e.g., mapmaking) does not mean that when women speak they will be heard (Cleaver 2001). From their position as women fieldworkers, women employees of the PSS have learned that women's participation may be talked about in terms of its criticality to project success but remains something that many staff feel at the very least conflicted about. Those with experience have seen the fortunes of women's participation wax and wane based on members of the donor bank, the presence or absence of gender consultants, and money flows. They have known that they and their work are marginalized. They have seen women's contributions downplayed or ignored when male fieldworkers no longer pay attention in staff meetings when women's participation is discussed.

How can we be sure that Vidya does not shirk all her duties? She may, but even if she did, answers such as "she's lazy" or "she's just meeting quotas" are too simple. How do we know that Kavita was not burned out before she ever started working for the PSS? Maybe she was, but her behavior must be taken in context. Management blaming women fieldworkers does not move beyond a technical fix logic into the messy realm of social relations. Development planners and critics labeling fieldworkers as shiftless or obstructionist obscures women fieldworkers' immersion both in NGO power dynamics and project discourses of women's participation. A perception of Vidya or Kavita as a bad fieldworker must shift when either's practices are considered from the point of view of their insider/outsider status within the NGO and in villages. Crewe and Harrison (1998) suggest considering resistant responses as hybrid resolutions to conflicts or selective internalization of dominant notions of development. Importantly, these responses are gendered. A woman fieldworker's actions reflect her position as influenced, first, by an ambivalence within the PSS about the importance of women's participation and, therefore,

women fieldworkers; second, by contradictions between women as objects and women as subjects; and, finally, by her own power to create women's participation in a way that makes sense to her. The examples of Kavita and Vidya given here are ambiguous, which is exactly why they are worth exploring. They indicate that participatory practices are not pure—mixed messages in the field spring from power dynamics (e.g., hierarchy and gendered discrimination) within organizations. Participation begins with contradictory discourses of women's participation and opposing images of village women and women fieldworkers. It remains ambiguous through staff practices. From women's ambivalent positionality within their organizations and in their complicated relationships with villagers, multiple meanings of participation emerge and are created.

Participation as a form of power circulates through women fieldworkers. Whether they subvert meanings or reproduce project norms of participation, their activities always carry power with them (Foucault 1980). It is with this understanding of power that I argue for the importance of women fieldworkers' agency. Vidya minimizes participation's oppressive power by choosing not to give great weight to the mapping activity. Kavita decides for herself not to overstate the importance of women's participation or promise that it means something it does not. Given the material constraints, women fieldworkers find ways to neutralize activities that seem to have no benefit beyond display and that at worst serve to remind women that their wishes will not be given consideration if they do not match the wishes of more powerful players. The above examples of women fieldworkers' practices show the role that women fieldworkers play in recreating, subverting, and hybridizing meanings of women's participation.

Participatory approaches may make a difference if they challenge assumptions about gender and power (Cornwall 2003). I would argue that women fieldworkers challenge assumptions about gender and power when they subvert PSS plans while at work. They disrupt management's plans for women fieldworkers as objects by defining participation as it makes sense to them: merely going through the motions of an activity or telling women the limits and expectations of the project. Vidya sticks to PSS plans by treating her constituents as objects; she does not give the women creating the map much choice or information regarding its construction. However, in not wasting her own time, she also saves them time, and arguably frustration, and a potential demonstration of powerlessness. (Although perhaps this frustration would eventually lead to feminist revolution.) Kavita, however, listens to women's problems and concerns in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect; for her, the best she can do is subvert those who consider women's participation superfluous. A set of

rules will not solve these problems. Nor is it a matter of settling on a definition of participation, for, whether the PSS or individual actors themselves fix a definition, a variety of forces lead women fieldworkers to make on-the-spot decisions about what will and will not be participation at any given place or time. In one village, Vidya meets with many women's groups, but she refuses tea at every house except where the family is that of her caste; during the extra time we spend there, she expands on latrine usage and benefits in ways she did not at other households. Mosse (2001, 24) suggests that project activities tend to settle on a fixed set of interventions, which limit the creativity of potential solutions. I find, however, that fieldworkers act creatively when given the chance and that even fixed interventions can be modified on the spot. Approaches to participation remain fluid due to the dynamic sociopolitical context within which NGO staff work.

Conclusions

In the preceding pages I have steered my inquiry and analysis away from logistical and functional questions about problems with participatory approaches (e.g., those discussed in Chambers 1997; Agarwal 2001; Cornwall 2003). Instead I have tried to answer the question, How do gendered social relationships, constructed categories, and development discourses within an Indian NGO influence the meanings of participation that staff members produce? Drawing on Foucault's (1980, 1990) concepts of power and Cooke and Kothari's (2001) framing of participation as a form of power, I advance debates on participation by offering a detailed portrayal of how participation can be a form of power, by tracing women fieldworkers' individual words and practices. I have shown that women fieldworkers create meanings of participation that both reproduce and subvert existing gendered relations of power among staff and between staff and villagers. I argue that the actions of women fieldworkers make sense when viewed within the context of project discourses of participation and mixed messages about women fieldworkers' significance to the project.

Too often in development literatures, fieldworkers' agency and the power dynamics surrounding them within their organizations are overlooked. Critics mistakenly assume that fieldworkers simply implement plans instead of interrogating their unique position moving between their NGOs and their village constituents (exceptions include Villarreal 1992; Crewe and Harrison 1998; Springer 2001). This article fills a gap in participatory literatures by exploring women fieldworkers' contradictory positionality within their employing NGO and the importance of that

positioning for field-level practices. I have depicted women fieldworkers as agents, actively producing and challenging meanings of participation. Participation is shown as a form of power that interacts with other operations of power within NGOs, for example, the marginalization of women. Bearing this in mind, efforts at finding technical solutions or seeking greater control over field staff are certain to fail. Tensions within participation and the context of fieldwork itself (e.g., women working alone when in villages) enable women fieldworkers to facilitate meanings of participation that fit under the circumstances. They work knowing that limitations to women's participation constrain their field activities, and they use that knowledge to put in place their own ideas about what constitutes meaningful forms of participation.

Women fieldworkers are hired by the PSS to implement the women's participation component, making them insiders and different from women in villages who do not have the backing of a multimillion-dollar foreign-sponsored project behind them. But women fieldworkers do not fully participate within the PSS; that is, men and women do not play equal roles. Women fieldworkers are criticized for being inherently less capable than their male colleagues despite awareness at the level of management that women fieldworkers are given fewer opportunities (O'Reilly 2002). As women, they are expected to have a natural affinity with women in the field but to hold more "modern" beliefs about health, water, and sanitation. While undoubtedly aware of project definitions of participation, women fieldworkers negotiate the meanings of participation within a context of their own contested status in their NGO and limited room to maneuver. An examination of their practices in the field illustrates participation as a form of power whose shape reflects and interconnects with other gendered relations of power within NGOs. Participation as a form of power travels through agents, including fieldworkers. Their interactions in the field lead to the creation of subversive meanings and the recreation of dominant meanings of participation that defy technical solutions.

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