



Partnerships and appropriation: translating discourses of access and empowerment in girls' education in India



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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to illustrate how various actors involved in a state-NGO partnership to provide marginalized girls educational opportunities appropriate discourses related to schooling and empowerment in India. It traces the multiple discourses of empowerment underlying the implementation of the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) program in the Western state of Gujarat to gain a more nuanced understanding of the influences on educational programs' ability to support social transformation. I show how these multiple, and often competing, discourses might be appropriated to take into account the systems, structures, and practices that act as barriers to implement reform-oriented practices that perpetuate girls' marginalization. To do so, I also posit that programs and partnerships must specifically and systematically address the cultural and institutional forces that work to reinforce inequality and marginalization, but that these perspectives need large scale popular and political buy-in in order to realize their dual goals of service provision and long-term social transformation.

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1. Introduction

In an era of meeting Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals, education nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in India have proliferated, creating a fertile environment for a variety of partnerships in the arena of educational service delivery (Jowett and Dyer, 2012; Macpherson, 2009; Mundy, 2006; Unterhalter and Dutt, 2001). Since the 1980s and 1990s the involvement of NGOs in educational service delivery has increased exponentially, most recently supported by India's national flagship program on elementary education—Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). SSA's main focus is the universalization of elementary education through the reduction in the number of children out of school; decline in gender gaps; and reduction in dropout rates (Planning Commission, Department of Human Resource and Development, 2002: 2). To expand access and increase quality, SSA espouses partnerships to reach the 17.8 million, primarily rural, low caste, and female children still out of school (UNICEF, 2014).

Primarily conceived of as organizations focused on consciousness raising and social change, NGOs are considered to have developed close ties at local levels with communities and

marginalized populations. In this way, the development community generally espouses NGOs as de facto agents of democracy enabling nations to respond to the needs and demands of its marginalized and hard to reach populations (Kamat, 2003b; Jowett and Dyer, 2012). India has enjoyed a long history of civil society organization and volunteerism, going back to the days of the British Empire (Sooryamoorthy and Gangrade, 2001). The Western state of Gujarat in particular, with its Gandhian legacy and longstanding mercantile ethos, has some of the oldest and largest NGOs (e.g. the Self Employed Women's Association and Agha Khan Rural Support Network). Additionally, NGOs in Gujarat, and in particular in the education and social service sectors, have been at the forefront of engaging in creative partnerships with the State as well as with international donor organizations.

These partnerships uniquely position Gujarat with the potential to make significant progress in not only the provision of girls' education but also large-scale system-wide educational reform. However, in recent times, the complex and often conflicting political discourses in Gujarat have resulted in economic prosperity with extraordinarily high income inequality. Additionally, social and gender related progress has not followed economic progress, evidenced by the state's sex ratio of 919 females for each 1000 males, which is below the national average of 940 (Census of India, 2011). Educationally, in rural Gujarat, 6.6% of girls between the ages of 11–14 are out of school as opposed to 3.7% of boys; out

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of school rates that are higher than states with lower human development indices such as Bihar and Haryana (ASER, 2014). Gujarat's explicit neo-liberal approach to state development has clear implications for how social services are provided for the poor, and as a result, NGOs are often tasked with basic service delivery (Keefer and Khemani, 2005). These circumstances and orientations call into question the extent to which local NGOs are able to maintain a progressive and change-oriented agenda under pressures to effectively and efficiently implement educational projects.

In this paper, I analyze how one state-NGO partnership in Gujarat might re-appropriate an otherwise access-oriented program into one that seeks to promote empowerment (Sutton and Levinson, 2001; Levinson et al., 2009). By analyzing the KGBV program's appropriation and implementation from the national to the state to the local level, I seek to present a local and grounded picture of how a program might promote the interests of its targeted populations—marginalized out-of-school rural girls. This paper examines the implementation of the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyala (KGBV) Residential Primary School Program in Gujarat to provide a nuanced analysis of whether a mainstream developmentalist program can be re-appropriated in a way that pushes it beyond educational provision and toward supporting social transformation.

I illustrate that the uniqueness of the KGBV program implementation lies at the state level, which unlike most top-down national programs, developed its own framework for appropriation and implementation in partnership with the NGO CARE India. CARE India has been providing services and aiding state and national governments since the 1950s, with a focus on the well-being, social position, and rights of marginalized women and girls. I trace the various empowerment discourses embedded in this partnership through curricular and pedagogical engagements within the KGBV program in Gujarat to highlight how multiple and often competing discourses can be appropriated to take into account the systems, structures, and practices that both act as barriers to implement reform-oriented practices that perpetuate girls' marginalization. I also highlight the challenges and limitations that the program in Gujarat faces in promoting long term, sustainable change. I posit that programs and partnerships must specifically and systematically address the cultural and institutional forces that work to reinforce inequality and marginalization, but that these perspectives also need large scale popular and political buy-in, in order to realize their dual goals of service provision and long-term social transformation.

2. Intersecting discourses of empowerment

I use the framework of empowerment to illuminate how state-NGO partnerships can act as transformative forces in the development process. I begin with a discussion of the evolution of the concept of empowerment and the intersecting discourses underlying it. I then outline the discourses that influence NGO orientation, especially as they work with the State, connecting them back to discourses of empowerment.

Empowerment as a concept in development began to emerge in response to a general shift in development practice to focus on economic solutions to development problems and the subordination of women. Women In Development (WID), the dominant framework beginning in the 1970s, emphasized bringing women into development discourses and focuses on getting girls into school (i.e. access). WID explicitly links increased access to education for girls with efficiency and economic growth (Unterhalter, 2005; Vavrus and Richey, 2003). By including women and girls in the development process, WID has been successful in highlighting the marginalization of women and girls around the

world. However, WID does not explicitly challenge the multiple sources of women's subordination and exploitation (Unterhalter, 2005; Vavrus and Richey, 2003).

By the beginning of the 1990s, the empowerment approach began to play an integral role within development programs oriented toward poverty alleviation, welfare, and community participation. The empowerment approach bridges a WID perspective with a Gender and Development (GAD) perspective. It places less emphasis on increasing women's 'status' relative to men, and instead seeks to empower women through the redistribution of power within, as well as between, societies (Moser, 1989). This approach emphasizes the importance of gendered structures of inequality, and its theorists argue that inequality needs to be challenged outwardly and politically – the inclusion of girls/women into development processes is not enough to systematically challenge gender inequality in society (Unterhalter, 2005; Ankerbo and Hoyda, 2003). A GAD empowerment approach can be considered a bottom-up, or grassroots approach that grew out of women's organizations and Third World feminists in their critique of mainstream development theory, in opposition to the development agency driven, top-down approach of WID (Unterhalter, 2005; Kabeer, 2001; Heward and Bunwaree, 1999; Razavi and Miller, 1995). These critiques focused on the fact that development initiatives oriented toward poverty alleviation and welfare did not address the underlying structural factors that perpetuate the oppression and exploitation of poor women (Batiwala, 1994; Unterhalter, 2005).

A more critical analysis of gender, schooling, and society necessitates going beyond issues of access to investigate school quality and the impact/effects of education on social outcomes—i.e. the social construction of gender roles and economic and political participation of women (Stromquist, 2001; Assie-Lumumba and Sutton, 2004). GAD discourses of empowerment not only problematize mainstream notions of girls' education as found in the WID perspective, but also highlights the need to analytically link and analyze the interplay between micro and macro perspectives; the personal and the institutional; the family and community; the individual and society; and school and community/society/state (Heward and Bunwaree, 1999; Stromquist, 2001; Unterhalter, 2005). In short, this framework calls for exploration of "the context in which girls live and learn, and the experiences of girls within the schools" (Sutton, 1998, p. 395).

As GAD empowerment frames became more firmly rooted in neoliberal development approaches and came to replace poverty alleviation, welfare, and community participation, development agencies began to emphasize the reformative nature of empowerment (Stromquist, 2002; Kabeer, 1999; Parnpart et al., 2002). This turn has had implications for how empowerment programs are implemented—top-down and large scale versus grassroots, participatory and small scale. Some scholars assert that the discourse of empowerment used by development agencies links empowerment with economic globalization to such an extent that empowerment in and of itself is not the goal, but a concept to be understood primarily in the context of production and investment (Mohanty, 1995). Here, empowerment becomes a process of granting power from above rather than a process where people at the grassroots level seize it in the course of struggle. Consequently through its positioning into discourses of development, empowerment became restricted in meaning and "has been oriented to serve the present global drive of western capitalism" (Mohanty, 1995: 1435). Thus, the actualization of empowerment is influenced by a variety of intersecting and often competing discourses. Understanding the ways in which programs seek to support gender-oriented transformation requires attention to the various discourses underlying its implementation.

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