RE(ART)ICULATING EMPOWERMENT:  
COOPERATIVE EXPLORATIONS WITH COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORKERS IN PAKISTAN

by

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Abstract

Situated in the postcolonial modernizing discourse of development, many empowerment narratives tend to pre-identify, pre-construct and categorize community development workers/mobilizers as empowered bodies, catalysts, and change agents. These bodies are expected to and are assumed will facilitate a transformation in oppressed peoples’ self image and belief’s about their rights and capabilities. Although feminist academics/activists have been critical of imperialist, neo-liberal and politico-religious co-optations of understandings of empowerment, limited attention seems to have been paid to the material effects of empowerment narratives on the lives of these community development workers. Nor does there appear to be sufficient analysis into how local community development workers/mobilizers who find themselves in precarious positions of employment, engage with these narratives.

Provided with guidelines based on project objectives and lists of targets, many development workers/mobilizers in Pakistan tend to live with expectations of how best to ‘translate/transform’ empowerment from the abstract into the concrete while restricted in their space to critically reflect on theoretical notions that drive their practice. This thesis provides insight into the economy of empowerment narratives and the potential they have to mediate ‘encounters’ shaping ‘subject’ and ‘other’ by critically exploring how bodies of community development workers are put to work and are made to work. Drawing on feminists poststructuralist and postcolonial theory my work explores
how these community workers/mobilizers located in the urban metropolis of Karachi, embedded in a web of multiple intersecting structures of oppression and power relations ‘encounter’, theorize, strategize and act upon understanding of empowerment and community development through an arts informed cooperative inquiry.

Through the use of prose, creative writing, short stories, photo narratives, artwork and interactive discussions my participants and I begin to complicate these narratives. As a result empowerment narratives begin to appear as colliding discourses, multi-layered complex constructs, which may form unpredictable, messy and contradictory assemblages; as opposed to linear, universal, inevitable and easily understood outcomes and processes.

I conclude that the insistence to complicate and situate such messy understandings in specific contexts is important for women’s movements if empowerment is to retain its strategic meaning and value in feminist theorizing.
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Dedication

For my parents.
Glossary

aam       mango
abella    Arab long loose overcoat worn over regular clothing
abba      father
Alif Bey  first two characters of the Urdu alphabet
Allah Hafiz Good bye (literally God is the Protector)
angrezi   English Language
ambh      mango in Sindhi
amma      mother
apa       older sister
Asalam-a-lekum Muslim greeting (Peace be upon you)
baji      sister
bakri     goat
Baluchi   ethnic group from the south western province of Balouchistan
Basant   traditional spring festival in South Asia
beta      child
Bihari    migrant from the state Bihar in India (Bihar is a Muslim majority state)
burqa     traditional veil and coat usually black in color worn by women
chai      tea
chapatti  wheat flatbread
cholas    boiled chickpeas and tamarind sauce sold as street food
deeni-madrissah religious school for children
desh drohi traitor in Hindi
dikki     car boot
doodh pati chai milk tea
durri      woven rug
gajras    bracelets made out of fresh flowers
gunda     hooligan
haram     against religion, not permitted in Islam
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<td>randiyan</td>
<td>prostitute (plural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>razai</td>
<td>cotton stuffed heavy winter blanket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salam</td>
<td>hello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>samosa</td>
<td>fried snack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shalwar kameez</td>
<td>traditional tunic and baggy pants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shamiana</td>
<td>tent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shaturmurg</td>
<td>ostrich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sindhi</td>
<td>ethnic group from southern province of Sindh</td>
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<td>susral</td>
<td>in-laws</td>
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<tr>
<td>tamasha</td>
<td>spectacle</td>
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<tr>
<td>thela</td>
<td>cloth bag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zaarband</td>
<td>string to tie shalwar</td>
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<td>zamanat</td>
<td>surety</td>
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Prologue

It is May 2008, the hottest month of the year in Karachi and six months since I started my fieldwork. I sit on a dust coated red and blue striped durri which has been laid out on the dirt floor for an anti-Talibainization protest rally organized by the Women’s Action Forum (WAF) in Karachi. A woman in a pistachio green starched cotton sari who looks like she is in her late fifties is trying to get the media organized as they set up their equipment. She scolds them like school children every time they inch over the designated parameters roped off for the press. The reason for this media hype is the impending presence of Arundati Roy, writer and South Asian activist who is visiting in solidarity from India. Designated a desh drohi (traitor) in India for her anti-nuclear activism; her opposition to the so called War on Terror; and her support for Maoist groups; she has been granted a Pakistani visa with great difficulty.

Arundati steps up to the podium barely visible behind the confusion of microphones and wires to share her impressions of being amidst us activists here in the city of Karachi. She begins to speak, her voice is calm, clear and forceful, her expressions empathetic.

Even in the few hours that I have spent here (in Karachi) I have realized how very complicated this situation is...So my only way to be able to handle this complication is to say that theoretically we must never surrender that space to say that we are neither with you (the imperial powers) or with the Terrorists...That is not a passive position it is an active resistance...(by this) you are saying that we will define what women’s rights are, what our world is and who we are and we are not. To insist to the right to be complicated so that we do not have to make a choice between US imperialism and the Talibain; to not let the colors seep out into black and white. We have to not let that happen somehow. Never to surrender our complications, never to pick and choose our injustices and never to make that choice (Roy, 2008)

Over the last two and a half years I have engaged in an arts-informed inquiry with a group of community development workers/mobilizers located in the urban metropolis of Karachi in order to complicate narratives of empowerment embedded in the colonizing discourse of ‘development’. The
work through a process of collaboration explores how these community workers/mobilizers, embedded in a web of multiple intersecting structures of oppression and power relations theorize, strategize, and act upon understanding of empowerment and community development.

As I sit listening to Arundati speak I realize that insisting on the right to be complicated for me is an ethical and political imperative and this position is also at the core of my vision of praxis. To insist on the right to complicate requires being ‘thoughtful’ about “constructions of truth, power, knowledge, the self and language” (Gore, 1992, p. 54), and being aware of the complex, interconnected modes of being, thinking, collaborating and acting. It also means acknowledging power differentials in the process of collaboration and being cautious of cooptation and complicity. It means knowing that relations of power are inherent in all forms of collaboration yet hoping to that political alliances can be created in spaces where people can come together despite their differences to think, listen, contemplate and act. Such an analysis requires introspection, turning the gaze inward and reflecting on the discursive and material outcomes of empowerment work and power relations unpacked in context. Sara Ahmed terms this “ethical encounters”, “ethical representations and readings” of narratives through a self-reflexive reworking of the ‘terms’ under which they take place (Ahmed, 2000).

I believe that this perspective sets the tone for my thesis. I embark on a scholarartists’ rendering; writing individually and collectively to make sense of my data; writing to provoke change in the way I think as well as the way those who engage with this work think. Writing to evoke an interactive engagement both locally and transnationally in order to open up potential space to change the way one knows, makes meaning, and acts. I write in different voices and different forms to complicate the narrative of empowerment and the construction of community development workers within it. My hope is that through this text and its Urdu translation I will be able to engage multiple
audiences including grassroots workers-researchers-students-activists-scholars-practitioners-policy makers-donors and others in an interactive dialogue. A multifaceted dialogue that will inspire critical thinking in feminist activism, program planning, policy development and research in terms of the structural hierarchy of empowerment work and the importance of context. One that will acknowledge the need to meaningfully engage with community development workers and address the ironic condition of their precarious employment.

Figure 1. Image of a placard at an anti-Talibain protest rally in Karachi 2008 by author. It reads “Awam ki Awaz Talibain key Khilaf” (Peoples voice against the Talibain).
Section I
Chapter 1 Introduction

Empowerment narratives seem to promote a sense of purposeful optimism, moral authority and legitimacy to the project of ‘development’ and ‘poverty reduction’. By empowerment narratives, I refer to multiple stories or texts currently in circulation which propose and reaffirm theories of empowerment. These are stories policymakers, development practitioners, and activists-academics like myself are complicit in constructing and reaffirming. They tell us about what empowerment is; the process of how empowerment takes place; who needs to be empowered; and how people can individually and collectively be mobilized in order to become empowered. Such narratives suggest pragmatic strategies, stories which simplify issues of global injustice where all can participate in these global democratic transformative processes (Cornwall & Brock, 2005). I argue that these empowerment narratives tend to pre-identify and pre-construct development workers as empowered bodies; catalysts; and change agents who are expected to and are assumed will facilitate a transformation in oppressed peoples’ self image and beliefs about their rights and capabilities.

Although feminist academics have been critical of imperialist, neoliberal and politico-religious co-optations of feminist empowerment frameworks (Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Kabeer, 2001; Parpart, Connelly, & Barrteau, 2000; Rowlands, 1998; Zia, 2009a, 2009b) limited analysis seems to have been presented on potentially regulative and disciplining technology (Foucault, 1977), or how community development workers/mobilizers\(^1\) engage with these narratives.

Centred on notions of autonomy, decision making, participation, agency and rights (Wee & Shaheed, 2008), many theorists/practitioners/activists tend to categorize empowerment both as a process and an outcome. As a process, empowerment is associated with enabling individuals and

\(^{1}\) I use the term community development workers and community mobilizers to describe local grassroots community development workers as synonyms throughout the thesis as both terms are used interchangeably in the context of my fieldwork and the literature on local development workers in South Asia.
communities to participate in identifying their own needs through doing their own analysis; as well as taking control of and making decisions that affect their lives (Chambers, 2006). As an outcome empowerment is generally seen as manifest in the redistribution of power (in relation to nations, classes, castes, races, genders or individuals).

Emerging from feminist critique of mainstream development policy, empowerment has taken centre stage. According to Kabeer (2001) feminist campaigns combining the intrinsic value of empowerment, that of social justice with its instrumental benefits of poverty reduction and efficiency “have given rise to some unlikely advocates... including the World Bank” (p. 17). As a result, the term ‘empowerment’ has entered the vocabulary of International Financial Institutions (IFIs), national governments and corporations.

As of 2006, almost eighteen hundred projects funded by the World Bank alone have the word empowerment included in either their project strategies, goals, methodology or outcomes (Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006). Empowerment of the poor is now considered as one of the primary pillars in reducing poverty and fulfilling the Millennium Development Goals. Its inclusion is also part of the suggested blueprint for designing Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) which are mandatory for countries such as Pakistan that are categorized by International Financial Institutions as Highly Indebted Developing Countries (HIDCs) (World Bank, 2000). Most national donors including the Canadian and Swedish Development Agencies have gender empowerment strategies, and the government of Pakistan’s Ministry of Women Development has been funded by the UNDP to plan, implement and monitor Gender Empowerment Strategies (Barri, 2009).

Interestingly enough, feminist notions of empowerment have also been drawn upon by faith based politico-religious groups. For example in Pakistan, faith-based activists who consider
themselves ‘moderate’ promote the concept of empowerment bringing secular strategies into an
‘Islamic modernizing framework’ (Zia, 2009a).

Empowerment simultaneously has also entered the speech of transnational diplomacy and
‘war talk’. In 2006 the former President of Pakistan, General Parvez Musharraf informed former US
President Bush on a visit to the White House that “The first ingredient of democracy ... is the
empowerment of the people. We have empowered the people of Pakistan now they were never
empowered before” (Musharraf, 2006). Early this year at an event for International Women’s Day
echoing the words of Nancy Bush (Bush, 2001) former First Lady of the United States, Secretary of
State Hillary Clinton, made a passionate plea to give equal rights to women around the world
claiming that the subjugation of women is a direct threat to US security and a “threat to the common
security of our world” (Haider, 2010).

Essentially empowerment continues to be in vogue both internationally and in local contexts
and has moved from the realm of feminist and grassroots movements to a more global arena.
However, these assertions of addressing issues of inequity through empowerment ironically stand in
contrast to increasing poverty, violence, and insecurity that I witness everyday in Karachi implying
that something has gone terribly wrong in the global development industry or perhaps terrifyingly
right (Sachs, 1992).

Over the last two decades community development workers in Pakistan have been caught
between (but generally excluded from) these global and local debates guiding visions of
empowerment and the notion of ‘participation’ as the debates have emerged. Provided with
guidelines based on project objectives and lists of deliverables and targets, development
workers/mobilizers live with expectations of how best to translate and transform empowerment from
the abstract into the concrete; while restricted in their space to critically reflect on theoretical notions that drive their practice.

Despite extensive policy formulation, programs, research and funding funneled into the country in the name of development; it appears that researchers and policy makers in South Asia rarely pay attention to the unique context specific perspectives of development workers/mobilizers who experience the everyday complexities of applying theory and policy in practice at the field level. This is indicated by the scarcity of research which sees experiences of development workers as “worthy of investigation” (Goetz, 2001).

According to Goetz this neglect and exclusion of what she terms ‘lower-level workers’ is primarily due to

preferences amongst development analysts, practitioners, activists and critics for the heady world of policy design and the politics of promoting policy changes, rather than the muddy world of implementation in the field. (p. 30)

She also suggests that lack of research in this area may be related to

a common assumption that the field workers’ room to manoeuvre, the ways they exercise their discretion in interpreting policy goals and distributing development resources, is something to be controlled and limited, not expanded. (p. 20)

Goetz (2001) links these assumptions to the organizational culture of mistrust in competence and honesty of one’s juniors. However I believe that this marginalization has deeper roots and is intrinsic to empowerment theory itself which I will discuss in the next section.

A study by Ahmed (2007) in the context with Bangladesh is noteworthy as it is one of the few that considers perceptions development workers’ in relation to their profession and career choice in the context of Bangladesh. Ahmed claims that development workers in Bangladesh tend to be undervalued and marginalized. Today although preferable to farming, most see themselves as underpaid, undervalued, overworked, underappreciated and perceived as low status; employed in a
difficult and low paying occupation. Most participants in Ahmed’s study also claim that their organizations see them as frontline staff involved in direct service delivery but not in the management of programs or the organization. They occupy the least desired position in the organization from a career point of view with limited upward mobility.

In another study in India Sharma (2008), highlights how empowerment programs such as the MS program are concerned with “the community” but tend to negate the “the survival needs of women who worked for the program” (p. 67). She claims based on her study that,

Women staffing different program levels belong to different social strata and thus have unequal access to educational and cultural capital. For instance field level employees tend to come from rural, lower/middle class and caste backgrounds. In contrast most of the managerial staff is drawn from urban and relatively privileged backgrounds in terms of caste, class and education. (p. 89)

As a consequence empowerment labour is seen as “deserving of lower remuneration” (p. 67). Nagar and Raju (2003) document how field workers in India have observed a shift in the way they are valued by their employers. At one time these workers felt critical to the organization’s existence, even though they did not represent the organization to the English speaking government officials and donors. Now they feel marginalized in a context where computer generated sophisticated reports to donors have become the most revered activity. Salaries, privileges and importance have shifted to those who can sell the NGO to donors rather than to those who really connect with people in terms of their language, struggles and issues (Nagar & Raju, 2003).

In cases where community development workers have been critical of program philosophy, methodology or management the repercussions have been severe leading to loss of jobs and public disgrace (Nagar, 2006; Sharma, 2008). In Playing with Fire a text co-written by a group of field workers in India, Nagar and the Sangtin Collective (2006) share how grassroots workers who were involved in the Sangtin Yatra were threatened with disciplinary action by State employers for honest
analysis of their experiences. Another example of resistance and sanctioning is that of the MS program in India where workers who tried to unionize were fired. The core demands of these workers were job regulation, salary increment and benefits (Sharma, 2008).

The development industry comprised of the state, international NGOs (INGOs), Government NGOs (GONGOs) and local NGOs are the primary employers of social mobilizers/development workers in Pakistan. It is within the discourse of development generated from the industry that empowerment narratives tend to be found. Within the state apparatus community development officers are employed by the local government and report to the Executive Development Officer (Community Development) and the Provincial Social Welfare Department in each province. Based on my experience employees in these departments generally have a degree in the social sciences and have cleared the government service exam. They are provided with government benefits and their promotions are connected to a grade system. There are also national vertical programs like the Lady Health Worker (LHW) program that draw on community mobilization for health promotion.

In the case of the INGOs, GNGOs and local NGOs many development workers (both women and men) begin as community volunteers, also termed as ‘community activists’ (M. H. Khan, 2009). They usually do not have formal academic qualifications. These local community volunteers may go on to form their own community based organization (CBO) or seek employment in development projects and continue to work within their communities. Some development workers are recruited for projects from fieldsites (non-volunteers) and trained by development projects. Many go on to seek further employment in NGOs or government projects/programs. A third carder of development workers are recruited by NGOs from outside marginalized communities. These women and men are usually university graduates from lower middle class backgrounds, generally with a degree in the
social sciences. Most are hired on contract and do not have employee benefits however this varies from organization to organization (particularly the size of the organization).

Development is now increasingly being categorized by politico-religious groups within Pakistan as a “Western” agenda, a backlash for the state’s foreign policy attachment to the United States. Protests against what politico-religious groups term government supported secular brand of development are an ongoing feature in the press and public spaces (Syed, 2007). Reported threats of attacks, kidnappings, physical attacks on field workers as well as the burning of project vehicles have become the norm. These incidents are particularly common in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkwa where the Taliban have their stronghold and almost a dozen incidents have been reported during just the last few months. Despite the attacks being highlighted in the press, development agencies claim that government has turned a blind eye to these incidents (Syed, 2007). Many field workers are seen by their attackers as embodied representatives of their employers and subscribing to ideals which their attackers oppose. Last year one of the fieldworkers from an organization I was collaborating with was kidnapped. The kidnaper’s conditions for his release were the shutdown on the girl’s school run by the organization in the area. The organization was forced to shut down its operations after which he was released. As a result security has become a major concern for development workers in that area.

In the context of Pakistan there have been no studies to my knowledge which have engaged in a critical discourse with grassroots community mobilizers about their own field experiences. There are however some studies available on gendered challenges of female health workers hired by the state\(^2\) (A. Khan, 2008; Mumtaz & Salway, 2005). Employing a postcolonial and poststructural feminists framework I draw particularly on the work of Sarah Ahmed (2000) to provide insight into

\(^2\) Lady health workers provide basic medical care and health information at the community level. They are provided a stipend by the state and are not considered state employees and are therefore not provided with employee benefits (Khan, 2008).
the economy of empowerment narratives/texts and the potential they have to mediate ‘encounters’ (Ahmed, 2000) shaping ‘subject’ and ‘other’. In order to illustrate this process in context this thesis explores how community workers/mobilizers located in the urban metropolis of Karachi, embedded in a web of multiple intersecting structures of oppression and power relations theorize, strategize and act upon understanding of empowerment and community development through an arts-informed co-operative inquiry. By arts-informed, I refer to a mode/form of qualitative research where the arts broadly conceived, serve as a framework for research inspiration conceptualization, process and representation (Cole & Knowles, 2008). Through the use of prose, creative writing, short stories, theatre, artwork and interactive discussions my participants and I begin to complicate these narratives. As a result empowerment narratives begin to appear as colliding discourses, multi-layered complex constructs, which may form unpredictable, messy and contradictory assemblages; as opposed to linear, universal, inevitable and easily understood outcomes and processes.

The structure of this thesis is grounded in a mixed genre scholar artist rendering of data made during my fieldwork in Karachi, Pakistan, framed by notes to the reader on the construction of each piece. In this introductory chapter I set out to outline my theoretical framework followed by a chapter outlining my methodology and then provide a map to enter this thesis in order to engage with the text that collectively supports my argument.

Developing a Theoretical Framework

I draw on a postcolonial and poststructural feminist analysis to inform my work. By “postcolonial” I refer to exposing the lens exposing structures of power and intuitional legacies of colonising bodies and their ongoing attempts to “subjugate entire populations on the basis of race and geography” (Prasad, 2005, p. 212). I do not refer to postcolonialism as a temporal state which assumes colonialism to be in the past. Instead I see postcolonialism as a frame to rethink how
colonialism operates “in ways that permeate all aspects of social life in the colonized and colonizing nations” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 11). I use postcolonial feminism not as a counter to Western Feminism but in part as “a challenge to the systems of knowledge that continue to inform feminist understandings” (Kapur, 2005, p. 4). This mode of scholarship for me also challenges feminists located in the postcolonial world who continue to reinforce the divides between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and seek to secure an ‘authentic’ native informant identity to distinguish their positions from western feminism. By taking this critical stance I am in no way implying that the work of women’s movements is unimportant only that an internal critique is useful to build solidarity in these times. I am therefore conscious of these critiques of representation and positionality as I situate my work in the postcolonial context of Pakistan while addressing the broader global politics and relationships of domination, challenging imperial and essentialist assumptions that universalize experiences and perpetuate exclusions.

My work highlights the contemporary relationships of domination and subordination which draw on previous colonial encounters and the modernizing civilizing discourse of development. The liberal project of development seems to operate partly because it has been able to justify the denial of subjectivity and material benefits to large sections of populations based on modernist assumptions. According to Kapur (2005) “There remains a deep ambivalence in the liberal project, which seeks to include ‘the Wretched of the Earth’ in the exorable march of progress” (p. 17). Consequently liberalism has been unable to transcend the need for an ‘other’ where exclusion through ‘othering’ is premised on a threat to the liberal project (Kapur, 2005). Ahmed (2000) suggests that such crafting of ‘subject’ and ‘other’ takes place through what she terms encounters, the meeting of human subject with that which is identified and pre-defined by the subject as “not so
human”, as “strange”, as “other”. I use Ahmed’s notion of encounter in this thesis to explore the relationship between empowerment narratives and subjectivity.

According to Ahmed (2000), formation of the subject as a conceptual category is based on establishing and maintaining his or her superiority and hegemony through the principle of exclusion by ‘othering’. This means that all those who do not fit or cannot be assimilated into this category of subject are excluded from it or are in need of being moulded (if they are deemed ‘fit’) into this particular form through a process of civilizing. Exclusion therefore implies an exclusion from privilege and benefits of being constituted as human subject. The other is then that which is not subject, and hence an object of comparison. According to Yegenoglu (1998) maintaining the existence of the ‘other’ provides an extremely productive function in development discourse, that of maintaining a specific hegemonic identity and all that this implies in material terms for the human subject.

For Ahmed (2000) encounters are mediated and draw on past meetings, present experiences as well as particular epistemologies or accepted “truths”. Encounters in different times and spaces reach for each other and build on each other partly predefined as they are “lived and written…already recalled and relived in the metonymic slide between different encounters” leading bodies to be “read and recognizable through histories of determination” (p. 51). Thus according to Ahmed the body comes to be lived and marked by differences, constructing and reinforcing boundaries and borders between self and other. All that which is identified as “not human” becomes a fetish, abstracted from relations of power.

Although encounters of subject and other can take place through physical proximity; according to Yegenoglu (1998), “Othering can take different forms in different contexts” (p. 41). Hence encounters can also take place over distances and through the reading of text or what Ahmed
(2000) terms ‘textual encounters’ such as an encounter between subject and that of empowerment narratives. Textual encounters are meetings between two elements, the reader and the text which build on scaffoldings of previous encounters. What is unique about textual encounters is that they are ‘safe encounters’ for the subject where she or he is allowed or can indulge in the vicarious pleasure of touch and feel of the ‘other’ but from a safe distance. Such texts or stories provide an interactive element in narratives which draw on the emotions of the audience through an aesthetic medium. Hence encounters through text are also embodied experiences with material consequences where in the case of text, “there is an intrinsic link between writing and acting, between forms of construction and ways of doing” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 15). I take this to mean that there is a specific intentionality in the production of a story, and the experience of consumption is designed to have an effect on the being or the subjectivity of the consumer bestowing meaning on the constructed body within a pre-existing framework. Textual narratives which also include empowerment narratives therefore cannot be considered simple neutral written; visual or audio documents. They are subjective interpretations which contribute to setting the terms of the meeting through the mode of representation and the subject’s previous encounters, one sliding into the other, morphing. Therefore there is a need, if one is to critically examine empowerment narratives, to question the intentionality and the economies which support them (Ahmed, 2000, p. 64). Ahmed (2000) suggests that there is a need to consider how such textual encounters build upon and contribute to the construction of First World subject and Third World other. This requires a critical awareness that informants/authors, the text, and the reading of the text are mediated by particular interconnected histories, economies and unequal power relations (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Jamal, 2005; S. Khan, 2006; Mohanty, 1988; Yegenoglu, 1998). My purpose is to explore how certain themes and notions are at the centre of the text and how they are “employed to systematically exclude or inhibit other themes or categories” (Prasad, 2005, p. 241)
to decentre and rupture them. In order to do so Sara Ahmed (2000) suggests asking what knowledge and structures are already in place which allow for and facilitate this translation of being into text and text into being to take place. This requires an investigation on and an awareness of the ‘terms’ under which encounters occur. I use these questions as a starting point to complicate empowerment narratives and their material effects.

Keeping the postcolonial as my locus I also draw on poststructural feminist theory to inform my work and my mode of representation. By poststructural, I refer to modes of thinking and analysis that explore linkages to language, subjectivity, social organization, power and the modern state as these intersect in the function of systems of thought (Richardson, 2004). This tradition is highly sceptical of universal transcendental truth claims and meta-narratives (Prasad, 2005). The work of Michele Foucault (1977, 1990, 2000) is heavily drawn upon by poststructuralists especially the notion of discourse which is particularly relevant to my work as I explore the discursive elements of knowledge construction and subjectivity in empowerment narratives. Foucault (1990) defines discourse as

Tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy. (p. 102)

Keeping this in mind, I consider empowerment narratives as complex interconnected webs that construct and regulate modes of being, thinking and acting. They are located on temporal and spacial axes and are therefore historically and culturally specific. They are active processes working in the “realm of materiality and the body” (Prasad, 2005, p. 251) ordering actions, processes and subjectivities. Since discourses articulate what we think, say and do it is through them that social organizations and power are defined and contested. It is also the place where our sense of self and our subjectivity are constructed (Foucault, 1990). I therefore argue that empowerment narratives
produce meaning and create social reality. Consequently I look at empowerment narratives as competing discourses, competing ways of giving meaning and of organizing the world that construct community development worker subjectivity in ways that are historically and locally specific. The individual in such an analysis is both site and subject of discursive struggles for identity as the individual is subject to multiple competing discourses in many realms. Hence one’s subjectivity is shifting and contradictory, not stable fixed and rigid. According to poststructuralist feminists Gannon and Davies (2007), one is always already constituted in discourse. As a result discourses operate on and in us simultaneously at the levels of both desire and reason and,

One can never stand outside discourse, agency is always radically conditioned by the positions made available to the acting, agentic subject, and subjectivity is always also subjection to the available ways of being. (Gannon & Davies, 2007, p. 78)

Poststructural feminist thought has influenced my methodological framework and mode of representation. Although poststructuralists do not have a predefined methodology, textual analysis is a central strategy in this mode of thinking. Attention is given to seeking out particularities and specificities accompanied by alternative forms of narrative and representation (Gannon & Davies, 2007). Of importance are questions such as: How are such categories constructed and maintained? What inclusions and exclusions mark such sites? How is subjectivity constructed? How are the unstable borders of these sites policed by individuals and institutions through oppositional and moralistic discourses and regimes of truth? Hence a poststructural analysis of empowerment is not about the origin of the idea but the use to which it is put. Such an analysis helps to denaturalize what seems natural and disrupt essentialist thought through complicating it. Therefore I search for ways to disrupt the grip of binaries and linearity from thought and identity through mixed genre representation.
**Demarcating the ‘Terms’ of the Encounter**

The *terms* of these textual encounters with empowerment narratives revolve around the discourse of ‘development’. Development has also been termed a form of neo-colonialism with polices such as “tied aid” and “structural adjustment” resulting in governments being forced to cut down public spending budgets. National governments too have been identified as colluding with these international organizations and benefiting from the increased poverty of their own people. Escobar (1997) believes that development discourse shapes

Who can speak, from what points of view with what authority, and according to what criteria of expertise; it sets the rules that must be followed for this or that problem, theory or object to emerge and be named, analysed, and eventually transformed into a policy or plan. (p. 87)

Thereby shaping expressions of dissent and potentially limiting critical, challenging and emancipatory approaches (Escobar, 1995, 1997, 2004). Add more text for a proper paragraph, which has more than one sentence.

Within the context of Pakistan (the site for my field research) of particular concern is the rise of what Tariq Ali (2003) terms ‘US-based imperial neo-liberal globality’. Ali (2003) maps the intervention of the US government in Pakistan noting its role in the creation of the Talibain through CIA funding and Pakistani military collusion, and continuing with the contemporary so called ‘War on Terror’ which has killed hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. Escobar (2004) specifically terms this colonialism; economic–military–ideological orders that subordinates regions, peoples and economies world-wide. This feature has become central to the neoliberal approach of the American empire (even more so after the US-led invasion of Iraq). For theorists like Tariq Ai (2003) what is at stake is a type of regulation that operates through the creation of a new horizon of global violence. Feminist critiques of the so called “War on Terror” reveal how the rationale of intervention and invasion builds on, is fuelled by and embedded in the gendered politics of colonialism, nationalism,
and liberalism (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Maira, 2009). Transnational feminists also argue that much liberal feminist discourse now universalizes a notion of global sisterhood under attack by Islamic fundamentalism, female genital mutilation, and "honour" killings without nuanced context specific understandings (Maira, 2009). I argue that community development becomes a vehicle through which this discourse can be actualized and subjects moulded to meet the desires of imperialist powers drawing on foundational tropes of Orientalism and colonialism. This empire regulates disorder through financial and military means, benefiting through structures of oppression and exploitation (Ali, 2003; Escobar, 2004).

Foundational myths continue to underwrite discourses of civilization and modernity legitimizing occupation, regulation, surveillance, and torture of Muslim men. Gayatri Spivak (2004) observes that "Something called terror is needed in order to declare a war on it – a war that extends from the curtailment of civil liberties to indefinite augmentation of military self-permission" (p. 91). According to Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) with the initiation the War on Terror public obsession with “the veiled oppressed Muslim woman” and her need to be “saved, liberated and empowered” is gaining momentum and has acquired an interesting instrumentalist twist. Feminist discourse has now been brought into the service of Western governments where the “the fight against terrorism” has slid into the “fight for the rights and dignity of women” ‘horrifying’ ‘civilized people’ (Bush, 2001).\(^3\) As a result the War on Terror is packaged as rational, moral and legitimate where “certain lives are valued over others” supported by narratives of empowerment. This discourse of ‘Colonial Feminism’\(^4\) presents the War on Terror as a matter of survival and therefore a rationale for legitimating other acts of violence in the name of safety, self defence and women’s empowerment.

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\(^4\) ‘Colonial Feminism’ according to Abu-Lughod (2002) is the instrumental use of feminism which presents the ‘War on Terror’ as a matter of survival and therefore a rationale for legitimating other acts of violence in the name of safety and self defence.
(Abu-Lughod, 2002). In an article written as a response to the post-911 discourse on the ‘War on Terror’ and ‘saving’ Muslim women, she writes,

I do not think that it would be easy to mobilize so many of these American and European women if it were not a case of Muslim men oppressing Muslim women – women of cover for whom they can feel sorry for and in relation to whom they can feel smugly superior. (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 787)

As I write, the war talk and development nexus has now been extended to justify demand and allocation of funds for flood relief and reconstruction to Pakistan where the US government has rationalized the provision of funds to Pakistan to counter any gains ‘terrorists’ will make in supporting the relief effort.

Decreasing the role of the state has resulted in the increasing role of civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to compensate for socioeconomic inequalities and social problems. The role of NGOs has both been lauded and criticized in international and local community development. They are seen as the solution to the development dilemma and embraced by donors, international governments and financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank (Alvarez, 2009). NGOs are perceived as dynamic and privatized alternatives for development, democracy and empowerment. According to Alvarez (2009) the expansion of NGOs over the last two decades as value driven facilitators of change has mainly been based on the need for reducing the social costs of economic liberalization, such as growing social problems and also to fill in the vacuum left by the state. As major employers of community development workers in addition to the state, their relationship with the state as well as transnational actors is central to the context of my work and to the broader context of community development and will be explored in subsequent chapters. As employers of development workers and contributors to empowerment narratives state and non state actors such as NGOs can also be seen as complicit in the constructive endeavour of producing development workers. NGOs are presented as honest, committed, technically capable,
flexible entities who can be trusted to fulfill project objectives and hold credibility with the people. They are dichotomized against corrupt, incompetent and patriarchal governments (Grewal, 2005). It is assumed that these organizations are more aware and able to articulate and cater to the needs of vulnerable groups and will therefore provide more opportunities for women to gain a voice at the community level – through community-based organisations (CBOs) and women’s groups (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010). NGOs are therefore presented as “saviours” and above or beyond the neocolonial differences in power (Grewal, 2005, p. 138). As a consequence of the globalization of ‘development’ NGOs play a significant role in the production of professionalized empowerment narratives as well as the development worker/activist subject construction. It is therefore assumed that those community workers/ mobilizers who work for NGOs work in more ethical and equitable environments and that their interests will be safeguarded. Development workers are seen as embodied representatives of this ideal. The term activist is also used to describe many of these development workers giving them a radical edge differentiating them from government employed actors.

However according to Kamat (2002, 2003a, 2003b), it is a fallacy to assume that NGOs are autonomous from the dominant political economy, any more than is capital, state or civil society as this assumption obscures the interests of powerful states, national elites and private capital within development discourse. Many NGOs have been categorized by feminist critics as “veritable traitors to feminist ethical principles who depoliticize feminist agendas and collaborate with neo-liberal ones” (Alverez, 2009, p. 175). They have also been termed “watchdogs of the state” working for donors rather than for changing inequitable social relations within society. They have been seen as responsible for co-opting activist agendas and complicit in supporting the cause of neoliberal patriarchy. Grewal (2005) goes as far as to term the formation of international donor supported
NGOs as a “neoliberal strategy for the marketization and privatization of welfare” (Grewal, 2005). According the Grewal (2005) NGOs and activism have become inescapably transnational even while their presence made less of a difference to subalterns in a welfare state than to those in a state without a strong welfare apparatus. Drawing on Foucault, she sees the process of professionalization as an example of governmetalization of welfare within human rights ethics.\textsuperscript{5}

According to Grewal (2005) the pressures to professionalize and institutionalize activist work in numerous areas has created work conditions that further regulate and increase the differential power between funders and those in the field and their helpers (i.e., community development workers). Production of five year plans, hiring the “right kind” of staff, record keeping of “clients”, speaking and writing the right kind of English and defining goals for efficiency and productivity have become a necessity. Those who wish to participate in this global industry must strive to make their work visible to donors and funders, establish credibility, measuring and evaluating effectiveness. As a result voluntary organizations are forced to behave like private enterprises and learn to manage employment, take managerial approaches and generate schemes on a “for profit” basis. Nagar and Raju (2003) in their discussion on empowerment and NGOs suggest that the corporatization of NGOs has led to an increase in internal organizational hierarchies as well (Nagar & Raju, 2003). They feel that “the increased emphasis on professionalization means that many NGOs cannot find the time to discuss the questions of hierarchy and structure even in their own organization” (Nagar & Raju, 2003, p. 5). Sharma (2008) views professionalization a tactic of technologies of governance.

Crewe and Harrison (1998) highlight the switch from critical pedagogy to \textit{training} which is now very popular in NGO circles. They claim what “technical knowledge” is now of more value

\textsuperscript{5}“Foucault (used the term governmentality) to refer to those discursive activities that are involved in ordering actions, processes, and subjectivities” (Prasad, 2005, p. 255).
than structural analysis of oppression. They also suggest that within this system “value of knowledge is based more on the (racial, gendered, national) characteristics of people rather than about what they know” (1998, p. 96). Consequently the professionalized hierarchy is linked to language, computer skills, class, sophistication, regulative apparatuses to produce a particular type of subject (Grewal, 2005). Project implementation calls for training in specific technical skills rather than the analysis of social and economic policies. Technical staff seems to see themself as separate from larger social and economic processes and structural adjustment programs (Kamat, 2003). The emergence of “experts” is also linked to this training phenomenon, as trainings require expert trainers. A case in point is the flood of gender experts in the market. According to Crewe and Harrison (1998) gender analytical frameworks initiated by ‘‘professionals’’ tend to prioritise increasing women’s participation in economic processes rather than uncovering and addressing broader unequal power relations between men and women. The more political term feminist has largely been replaced in development speak by the more acceptable terminology of gender. The gender and development discourse prevalent in the NGOs has also led to the focus on women and increased marginalization of men in the same community. Cornwall (2000) highlights the phenomenon of gender =women. She sees men to be missing form the gender equation and only making occasional appearances as ‘‘Oppressor’’, as figures women struggle with, fear, resist or resent withdrawing the option of multiple masculinities which are supportive of women (Cornwall, 2000). In addition many NGOs seem to be blindsided with their myopic focus on women and targets that need to be achieved and forget that they need to move beyond the empowerment of women to look at how systems of oppression within communities function (Nagar & Raju, 2003).

The Sangtin Writers and Nagar (2006) also reflect on the manner in which elitism and hierarchies reproduce the hierarchies they are trying to dismantle in which community mobilizers
too are implicated. In an effort to produce evidence of empowerment they claim that many of the grassroots strategies are homogenized and standardized. Empowerment in such cases gets “visualized as a concrete thing that can be measured, quantified, and replicated and that each piece of “empowerment” can be reduced to its component parts” (Nagar, 2006, p. 144) in a way depoliticizing the activist agenda.

A critique of NGOization also comes from the platform of the World Social Forum, where many activists see donor-driven NGOs as entities that have been instrumental in de-radicalizing people’s movements against the state. Hulme and Edwards (1997) suggest that donor-driven NGOs may have been socialized into the development industry to the extent that they may now be incapable of challenging the system. They fear that this will lead to ignoring issues of class, caste, gender and environmental justice in their own work, but even more dangerously, they will effectively marginalize and de-legitimize those people’s movements for whom these issues form the core of their struggles. David Ntseng reflecting on his experience at the World Social Forum claims that “every time the organized poor start speaking for themselves it creates a serious crisis. NGOs overtly and or covertly try by all means to undermine movements of the poor” (Ntseng, 2007). Kamat (2002) suggests that donor-driven NGOs reproduce the ‘development ideology’ and are complicit in accepting and drawing on homogenization and universalizing discourses through the politics of funding.

Within the South Asian context, Sharma’s (2008) work in India is an interesting case in point. She looks at the creation a hybrid ‘the GONGO’ an entity that part government art NGO. Her research explores “what happens when the state in collaboration with the NGOs, implements empowerment as a technology of government” (Sharma, 2008, p. xvi). For example, the state is interested in ensuring effective delivery of health services within the existing framework and
conditions. NGOs take on the role of “operators” putting aside their political agenda of discussing the structural issues that ill-health and disease (poverty being a primary cause of ill-health) and become the arm of the neoliberal government. She suggests that in such circumstances the political edge to change or challenge inequitable systems is lost and instead the focus becomes to cope with the shortage of resources better and survival within the system. Nagar and Raju (2003) question such models raising the issue of dependency; where one form of dependency on the state is replaced with another form of dependency on the NGO (removing the element of empowerment). They highlight the need to reflect on co-optation of the feminist empowerment discourse(s) by mainstream forces. They question the actual role of NGOs, and whether the work they are taking on is beyond their capacity (as in the case of service providers). They also consider this mainstreaming of NGOs has led to attempts to up-scale localized context specific ideas and raise concern that the process can crowd out alternative locally derived strategies.

**Conclusion**

One of the first formal empowerment narratives I encountered was in the late nineteen nineties. I had just completed my undergraduate degree in Canada and was full of feminist zeal as I returned to Pakistan to work for a women’s rights organization in Karachi. One of my mentors a self declared feminist who had spent a lifetime in the field handed me a much paged through photocopied text by Sahey (1998) and asked me to use it as a reference to develop a project proposal. The text read as follows:

1. Empowered women are autonomous because they claim their freedom from existing male hierarchies.
2. Empowered women maintain equal mindedness – they do not claim to be superior to men but respond as equals and cooperate to work towards a common good.
3. Empowered women use their talents to live fulfilling lives. They survive and transcend their subjugation, moving from survival to fulfillment.

4. Empowered women maintain their strength in the presence of pressures from family, religion, work etc. and contribute towards the empowerment of all women.

5. Empowered women may continue to meet their family responsibilities and participate in religion. They choose to do so in ways that strengthen rather than debilitate and do not retreat from traditional responsibilities.

6. Empowered women define their values and formulate their belief in themselves and strengthen themselves through other women’s support and sustain their own moral vision.

(p. 13)

This story of empowerment in my naivety and zeal to change the world sounded plausible and solid, one I could hold on to, one I could propagate with a holier than thou attitude; one I could stand tall on, test my weight on and feel reassured that the surface would hold. It evoked a vision of a revolutionary grassroots participatory process which is inclusive and provides a voice to marginalized people (particularly women) strengthened by collective organizing and solidarity. Tongues and textbooks enunciated what appear to be concrete words such as autonomy, freedom, self esteem, social transformation, poverty alleviation, local indigenous bottom up strategies and participation. However after a few years in the field I began to feel a twinge of discomfort. My observations and interactions with grassroots workers contradicted many of the key assumptions I had held so close. Words began to lose their power and I began to lose my confidence in what I was doing as a community development practitioner. The particular story of empowerment I had been weaned on when probed with the finger of reflexivity uncoiled itself to reveal an amalgam of constructs encompassing a multiplicity of truths, knowledge constructs and power relations;
diverging violently and unpredictably I might add when it came to lived experiences and their material outcomes.

Feminist theory suggests that transformation will come through a process of empowerment both individual and collective. There is a belief in solidarity, through modes of collaboration across borders. Yet I no longer think this strategy is as straightforward as it sounds. Through context specific explorations with community development workers I tease out how imperial, neoliberal, feminist and politico-Islamic discourse is entangled in the production process of ‘empowerment’ and subject construction. I believe that these raced, classed and gendered entanglements have significant discursive and material implications for the politics and ethics of knowledge production and consumption, as well as the bodies they touch and put to work. Reworking the terms opens up the radical possibility of open subjects and open texts such as those presented in this thesis (Cole, 2004; Cole & McIntyre, 2004). By open, I am referring to meetings that are premised on the possibility of surprise a dynamic interaction (Cole, 2004) or what Ahmed (2000) terms “generous encounters”. Such dynamic interactions require ‘provoking’ (Cole, 2004) subjects to questions how investigations of events are connected to their representations and readings (S. Khan, 2006). They necessitate an acceptance by subject of the “limits, partiality and fragility of such texts” (Ahmed, 2002, p. 40). They demand an awareness by the subject to complicate his or her “textual encounter” through recognizing the text and its reading are mediated products of particular interconnected histories and unequal power relations between local and global. Collaboration therefore entails recognition that situations are always subject to historical transformation, and that there is a need to consider “our own larger responsibility to address the forms of global injustice that are powerful shapers of the worlds” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 783) in which we find ourselves.
Through the use of the arts and interactive discussions my participants and I begin to complicate these narratives creating open texts. Located within the context of everyday life in Karachi the stories, artwork, performative writing and prose, emerge in relation to critical discussions on complicating empowerment. Placing the spotlight on narratives makes it possible for the content of stories to be brought into focus as well as the context of story-telling (social, cultural and fantasy narratives); the agency of narrators as well the intended audience. The objective of such complication is to disrupt and denaturalize what is seen as natural and interrupt essentialist thought. Analysis is focused on how certain modes of thought become possible at junctures and how a empowerment narrative feeds into and feeds from dominant discourse or a regime of truth that can itself be subject to retracting and retelling (Kim, 2007, p. 83).

However this mode of analysis also requires sensitivity to the political complexities of engaging in critiques of empowerment talk and work where the NGO sector and private philanthropists provide the last resort to service delivery and support. Nor is it my intention through this thesis to alienate the women’s movement or negate their contribution and importance to social justice struggles. Engaging demands an acknowledgement and interrogation of complicity in processes of governmentality (Foucault, 1977) based on an imperative to change the terms of the development encounter to one that is more equitable.

My thesis through this interrogation highlights how community workers/mobilizers, during the course of the multiple subject positions they occupy at any given moment, strategize and negotiate the power relations they are enmeshed in within the context of their work, at times by appropriating discursive space, contesting and also reaffirming dominant narratives they encounter. We collectively and individually explore how empowerment narratives connect to the political

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6 Governmentality here implies processes where exercise of power results in the disciplining of bodies, actions, thoughts/discourses and repressive practices (Pease, 2002).
economy of development, research, violence, gender and sexuality in order to provide glimpses into
the complexity of facilitating processes of social transformation. In a rapidly changing precarious
scenario my participants and I voice our doubts and reconsider assumptions trying to comprehend
what we observe, sense and experience around us. As a result empowerment begins to appear to me
as combination of colliding discourses, multi-layered complex constructs, which may form
unpredictable, messy and contradictory assemblages; as opposed to linear, universal, inevitable and
easily understood outcomes and processes.

I conclude that empowerment cannot be simplified for quick and easy solutions and
accommodated within the inequitable existing order. It requires greater engagement with changing
structures and power relations. Images of empowered autonomous subjects, able to choose, make
and shape their own paths need to be reconsidered. There is a need to trouble the assumed homogeny
of effects, material and discursive outcomes, unintended results of empowerment talk and work and
understand how multiple discourses come together in very specific contexts.

So here is an open challenge if you feel your encounter with this produced text has moved
you, engaged you or ‘provoked you’ (Cole, 2004). Can we together collaboratively create more
dynamic texts that too provoke such questioning and invoke more complex layered understandings
of empowerment assemblages which “challenge the role of neutral knowledge and help generate
some accountability in the process of reading and writing” (Khan, 2006, p. 17). Can we make visible
and challenge the power relations that sustain inequitable encounters and the framing of such textual
productions. Can we produce aesthetic, self-reflexive open texts, which put the subject to work
instead of the subaltern. Open texts created by such subjects who challenge our own forms of
representation. Story tellers who take risks so that their stories do not re-enforce stereotypes and co-opt transformative agendas to serve transnational politico-economic agendas and possibly
sensationalize violence, tradition and customs at the expense of sharing experiences of indigenous context specific empowerment (Khan, 2006). Texts where representations of violence are presented in non-violent ways. Texts that are transparent in their construction and challenge subjects to consider their own complicity in encountering them. Can we facilitate textual encounters that maintain the dignity (McIntyre, 2004) and accept the particularity of change agents’ unique experiences? Encounters that acknowledge multiple manifestations of women’s agency (whether they are ‘transformative’ or not) and respect their being. Ethical encounters that give community mobilizers the opportunity to be ‘knowers’ in collaborative acts of meaning making. Such encounters would argue for more contested versions of context, agency and empowerment moving away from textual fetishism to making connections between how empire, patriarchy, neoliberalism and militarism move across nations marking bodies and borders in specific contexts.
Chapter 2
Methodology: Artful and Cooperative

Coming Towards Scholartistry

Sameshima (2008) writes “art dynamically informs in its creation and again informs in its completion” (p. 155). As scholarartist I research and write in order to understand, to provoke and to promote action. I tend to think in colours, my ideas spread out, visual, animated, multidimensional, tangible, emotions linked with sound, smell, taste, touch and sight. Stimulated, senses aroused, I describe what I see and feel as I write and engage metaphorically with the core subject of my inquiry.

Coming towards scholartistry and arts-informed research has been a long but serendipitous process of personal reflection and risk taking. As scholar and artist I now draw on a mode/form of qualitative research known as arts-informed research where the arts serve as a framework for research inspiration, conceptualization, process and representation in the social sciences (Cole & Knowles, 2008). This mode of inquiry connects with my poststructuralist sensibilities, my connection to the arts, and the way I understand the world. Yet it conflicts with the context specific colonial discourses of research and relations of power I encounter within academia in South Asia which tend to disregard such ways of knowing and representation as “legitimate research”.

My experience of graduate teaching and research in Pakistan both with universities, NGOs, and international donors over the last eight years has been challenging. The political economy of research in Pakistan is suffocating for scholarartists like myself engaged in critical pedagogical work. Colonizing and civilizing discourses are still a central part of knowledge construction and research work in the worlds in which I inhabit.
In Pakistan the social sciences are generally relegated to the bottom rung of the academic ladder (Pervaiz, 2003). Neglect in the development of the social sciences and higher education by the state has primarily been attributed to continuing political instability, national debt, and military expenditure (Saigol, 2005a). In addition it is interesting to note that during the nineteen nineties 1990s one of the SAP (Structural Adjustment Policies) caveats for loans given to the ruling elite through the IMF was that the state would not invest in higher education (Barri, 2009).

Graduate degrees in social work, economics, sociology, anthropology and women’s studies are not considered of significant value. Academic standing and credibility of social science graduates is considered suspect by other professions. The general sentiment is that social sciences are the last option for students who do not have the grades to secure admission in a pre-medical degree, business, law or engineering degree program. This sentiment is reflected amongst the majority of academia and policy makers. According to Pervaiz (2003) the conventional modernist positivist pedagogical model is present in its most convoluted form within most institutions providing social science education in Pakistan today. The state which has primary control of national educational institutions. It has collaborated in developing distorted educational goals and practices that reflect the values of successive corrupt, authoritarian, and bureaucratic leadership (Pervaiz, 2003). Course content is primarily in English and is dominated by western scholars who are not familiar with South Asian contexts. These institutions promote controlled environments which stifle the concept of merit, critical thinking, freedom of inquiry, creativity and dissent. In addition they foster isolation of local scholars and organizations who are engaged in evolving critiques of the system.

The text *Social Science in Pakistan: A Profile* (Inayatullah, 2005) provides an interesting example of this thinking around social science research. Published by the Council for Social Sciences funded by UNESCO, the *Introduction* states that it is only through “rigorous evaluation”,


“testing” and “verification” that knowledge can gain accuracy and scientific status (Inayatullah, 2005). Reflecting on the choice of words, the texts appear to highlight the inherent positivist bias and anxiety present in Social Science teaching and research in the country. With these guidelines students of social science disciplines including Women’s Studies in most public universities are neither taught nor exposed to critical postcolonial and postmodern critiques of traditional research (Saigol, 2005c). As a result the majority of students and academics are still schooled in the tradition that says good research means distance, objectivity, neutrality, and of course, empiricism with no space for the arts, subjectivity or reflexivity. During the past few years I have observed and experienced how many academics and students construct knowledge about ‘others’ through such lenses and facilitate a mode of governmentality disciplining and regulating bodies and boundaries.

Funding also plays a significant role in the politics of knowledge production. Writing in the context of South Asia, Partha Catterjee (2002) claims that it is now becoming impossible to do social science research through local funding (given its scarcity). There is virtually no research carried out by university faculty or by those outside academic institutions, which is not sponsored in some way by international agencies. Priorities of these international think tanks, award granting agencies and fellowships tend to pre-determine academic agendas and fundamentally influence the production of knowledge and ontological orientations. Space for indigenous scholarly debate is also to a large extent dominated by donor agendas and interests. According to Saigol (2005b), attention to distinctive Pakistani contexts, issues, needs, priorities, theoretical understandings and methodological concerns are also rarely debated or discussed. In addition, fundamental theoretical research seems to be confined to universities in the global north (Chatterjee, 2002). Most donors seem to have a deep aversion to theory building, work presenting political thought, theoretical depth, or academic discourse. As a result most social science research conducted particularly in the context
of Pakistan tends to be focused on cookie cutter surveys and descriptive studies. Consequently the focus tends to be on collecting more baseline data while work on interpretation and analysis remains limited (Saigol, 2005b).

International and local NGOs, in addition to their community development work are now also key service providers in this economy of research, filling the vacuum left by academic institutions and the state. Although there are examples of practitioner-activist-academic collaborations to subvert such forms of knowledge production (Batliwala, 2003), most NGOs produce information that is based on simple surveys, and rapid appraisals or PRA (Participatory Rural Rapid Appraisals) for evaluation and donor reporting purposes which tend to yield superficial information generally lacking depth (Saigol, 2005b). According to Saigol (2005a) this quick and speedy ideology discourages thorough painstaking analysis and deconstructive thought which frustrates the few critical academics and activists struggling to change the system.

I do not want to keep building on and be complicit in a colonizing scaffolding to promote my career. I have been caught in a game and its language needs to be troubled. My body moves back and forth between the global north and south with my Canadian and Pakistani passports opening and shutting doors. I am aware of my privileged position with secured funding from University of Toronto and the Government of Ontario for my doctoral research. I want to be strategic in its use and envision expanding the discourse on research beyond these positivist, extractive and liberal universalising ontological and epistemological frames in my worlds; this is part of my activism. I am looking for ways to break this structural hold through critical pedagogy and modes of inquiry that challenge these hegemonic modes of knowledge construction. I do not want to maintain the status quo or further perpetuate and be complicit in reinforcing such power relations. An approach which challenges these structures requires risk taking, innovation, facing the fear of perfection and ‘not
being creative enough’, of trying something new. However taking an unconventional approach and working outside the accepted methodological box also runs the risk of being challenged as ‘authentic researcher’. Based on my previous eight years of experience as researcher and performing artist, I know this fear well, the fear of not conforming to the rules, the fear of being called a fraud, of being called a pseudo artist or pseudo intellectual (depending on who is launching the attack). Yet I am convinced that it is a risk worth taking. I ground my choice of methodology in my own experience and will in this section demonstrate my conviction and rationale for it being an appropriate journey to embark upon.

In the next section I will outline my approach and methodological process of facilitating an arts-informed co-operative research.

*Arts-Informed Research*

Arts-informed research for Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles (2008)

Is a way of redefining research form and representation and creating new understandings of process, spirit, purpose, subjectivities, emotion, responsiveness, and ethical dimensions of inquiry. (p. 59)

It requires a commitment to a particular art form which must be reflected in the research process and text, and must serve as a framework to define all aspects of research and text. The focus is on the relationship between form and substance (developing a rationale for using a particular form); responsiveness to the natural flow of events; serendipity; subjective and reflexive presence of the researcher (both researcher as instrument and researcher as artist) (Cole & Knowles, 2008). Audience engagement and relevance is central to this approach. The methods and form of research used must complement the inquiry just as the representation must honour the research and provoke
the audience. The researcher through her work needs to strive towards evoking and promoting emotion, thought and action (Sameshima, 2008).

Arts-informed inquiry appears as a response to critique of traditional notions of research, where representations are seen as being

Wrung dry of life – of emotion, of sensuality, of physicality. Individuals and their lives were flattened into a form mostly unrecognizable to those directly and indirectly involved or represented. (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 57)

According to Cole (2002), the nature of academic systems form barriers to representation and communication with the public at large, and there is a need for alternative approaches that capture the complexities of the human experience. Hence a central feature of this form of research is its emphasis on “epistemological equity”. This approach implies an inherent agenda to break down knowledge hierarchies making research accessible. What is unique about arts-informed research is the principle that the intellectual should not be privileged over emotional and sensory forms of knowing. As Maura McIntyre (2004) puts it “research is needed to show that it makes sense to make sense with the senses (p. 260). The academy needs to make research more relevant, accessible and community centred, “honouring the many diverse ways of knowing – many of which stand outside sanctioned intellectual frameworks imagining new possibilities” (McIntyre, 2004, p. 260). Arts informed theorists suggest that there is a need to embody these principles in research and not just intellectualize them.

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, I believe that there is a pressing need to engage development workers in a critical dialogue on the theory-practice of empowerment given the unique and rapidly changing global and local contexts within which they work. I also believe that given the marginal position development workers occupy, the process of this inquiry needs to be one that has the potential for shifting the boundaries of subject constitution and challenging the terms of the
encounter in order to re-encounter the intrinsic spirit of empowerment. This requires an approach which acknowledges participants’ knowledge as legitimate and authentic; as well as their right to imagine and construct it themselves, fashioning and reclaiming their being as opposed to others determining it.

Co-Operative Inquiry

Given the nature of research question and my approach to inquiry, I see elements of co-operative inquiry as useful to incorporate into the design. Although there are various perspectives in terms of how it should be categorised, co-operative inquiry is generally seen as part of the family of action research methods. It draws its roots from a series of critiques of orthodox scientific research methodologies, and a desire to produce “knowledge and action of use” (Reason, 1998a). It is a way of working with other people who have similar concerns and interests, in order to understand, make sense of, and develop new and creative ways of looking at things. According to Heron and Reason (Heron & Reason, 2001) co-operative inquiry is aimed to facilitate a learning process in order to “act to change things you may want to change and find out how to do things better” (p. 179). It therefore relates to my understanding of research as having a pragmatic purpose which can be used to critically examine colonizing discourse and its material implications.

Co-operative inquiries have been categorised as informational, transformational, and or a combination of both. Outcomes of informational inquiries generally describe and explain the domain of the inquiry proportionally and/or presentationally; while transformational inquiries focus on the transformation of practical skills as the outcome (Goetzman, n.d.). My focus in this research is to adapt and modify the transformational form of co-operative inquiry nested within arts-informed research.
According to Heron (1996), the process of co-operative inquiry involves two or more people researching an area of inquiry through their own experience of it. Using a series of cycles, participants move between experience and reflecting together on a chosen topic. Its key distinctive quality is in breaking the research subject/object barrier common to conventional research methods. In the case of co-operative inquiry all participants/researchers are co-researchers as well as co-subjects. Heron and Reason (2001) further elaborate on the term co-operative research in saying that it is not research "on people" (as is the case with most traditional forms of research) rather research "with people" (p. 179). This addresses a major objective of my research study. Based on an ethical imperative for disrupting established hegemonic encounters, the research approach is designed to be more collaborative in nature in an attempt to address the unequal relations of power within research previously outlined. It is designed to create an environment which has the potential to facilitate study participants and myself to act as collaborators in shaping sections of the research process. Collaborators in the sense that we engage in a process of critical dialogue on understandings of empowerment based on our experiences through individual and collective artful reflection and representation. I therefore see a collaborative arts-informed research as an appropriate methodological option for disruption, provocation, and equitable encounters.

Combining Approaches: The Research Design

According to Heron and Reason (2001) an inquiry usually requires an actor/person to facilitate the bringing together of an inquiry group. An inquiry can be externally or internally initiated. This person/facilitator is known as an initiator (in the case of this inquiry I am the initiator). According to Reason (1998b) co-operative inquiry can be seen as cycling through four phases of reflection and action. The process begins with the formation of a group by an initiator. Having previously facilitated a co-operative inquiry, and having worked with community development
workers in Pakistan, I was familiar with the process and comfortable with the proposed group. It is important to note that an ideal egalitarian environment cannot always prevail in such inquiries. Inquiry groups like any human group have to “struggle with the problems of inclusion, influence and intimacy”, so one must assume that people will take different roles, and there will be differences in both quality and quantity of member contributions” (Reason, 1998, p. 264). In addition, Goetzman (n.d.) cautions that it is important to note that there tends to be no set method in co-operative inquiries and it is more about “congruence with the epistemological, ontological and authentically co-operative principles than specific steps” (no page number).

Participants and Process

Study participants (many of whom later became my collaborators in the second phase of the research) categorise themselves as facilitators/community development workers/catalysts/outreach workers/extension workers/volunteers/field workers/peer educators/activists/social mobilizers/organizers or change agents. The terms are used in many cases interchangeably by development theorists and practitioners in development discourse. Some are government workers; others are employed by the NGO sector; while some had worked for both and had also in some cases been employed by the corporate sector. Some see themselves as ‘activists’ while others categorize themselves as ‘just salaried workers’. Most see their work to include grassroots community mobilization and group formation; data collection; monitoring and evaluation; documentation; training of informal community groups and formalized community based organizations (CBOs) as well as smaller NGOs.

Some are professionally trained performance and visual artists with many years of experience. Others see themselves as amateurs and dabbling in the arts is more of a hobby. There are
also those who are interested in the arts as members of an audience and for entertainment purposes, but have no direct experience in formal creative artistic endeavours.

Many have formal high school level education while others have graduate degrees. Some are in their early twenties while others’ have over thirty years experience in the field. They come from a mix of middle and lower middle class backgrounds. Like most Karachites they are multilingual. Some are recent migrants to the city (moving due to perceived better prospects) while others had grown up in the metropolis. They identify with a variation of religious backgrounds (Muslim, Christian and Hindu) and ethnic groups (Mohajir, Bihari, Pathan, Punjabi, Sindhi, Baluchi, Anglo-Indian, just to name a few) from across Pakistan.

Since development programs are integrated, the sectors they identify as working in include: primary and adult education; public health in general; primary health care; reproductive health; women’s health; HIV/AIDS; poverty reduction and economic development (particularly microcredit and enterprise development); labour rights; relief and disaster management; women’s rights; peace building; and social movement organizing. None are limited to just one sector. The projects they work on cross different sectors and they also move from sector to sector depending on job availability. So for example it would not be uncommon for someone who works on labour rights to have a previously worked in reproductive health or primary education.

Phase I Recruitment, Selection and In-Depth Interviews

Indirect recruitment.

I began indirect recruitment, advertising the study through email listserves; personal contacts and paper flyers in both Urdu and English which described the purpose of the study and how to contact me. I also made presentations at organizations that were willing to have me speak to their staff. Once people contacted me I arranged information sharing meetings where potential
participants had the opportunity to ask questions before agreeing to participate. In these meetings I outlined in detail my purpose and methodology. I explained that I was interested in collaboratively exploring local community development worker understandings of empowerment in context. I shared my professional and volunteer experiences and background of being associated with the field of community development in South Asia, particularly Pakistan as a community facilitator, trainer, planner, teacher and researcher. I talked about why the concept of empowerment interests me and about how it seems to be a word that those in this field come in to contact with everyday in the practice of community development. I shared my curiosity and desire to learn from their experiences, and to critically dialogue with them on how meaning and understanding of the term are shaped through their own experiences in context. I acknowledged their expertise and their potential contribution to inform, to move, and to provoke multiple stakeholders (theorists, practitioners, other field workers, community representatives, policy makers, NGOs and development aid agencies) by adding further insight into the debate on empowerment theory and practice within the larger field of development where it is presently missing.

I explained the methodology of using in-depth interviews and collaborative workshops drawing on the arts. I described the proposed process of the workshops adding that it would not require participants to have any prior expertise in art forms and preliminary guidance on the use of the art forms would be provided. In addition the discussions in each workshop would determine the structure of the next workshop and the inquiry process. I also shared that I anticipated each workshop to take place over a two day period (maximum of eight hours each day including lunch) in order to allow enough time be allocated to discussion, reflection and representation of their ideas. The structure of the group process would be based on the interviews which would provide insight into group dynamics; comfort levels; aspects participants were willing to openly discuss; art forms
they thought were appropriate in relation to the focus of inquiry and audience; and would highlight common areas they would like to further investigate. I discussed confidentiality and use of data as well. I explained why four workshops were proposed as I felt the process would allow enough time for each participants to bond and reflect on the concept of empowerment and represent their understandings individually and collectively through the art forms introduced. I also talked about the nature of the inquiry as a group process requested them to respect the trust of the group by maintaining the confidentiality of discussions. Proposed dates and location for the workshops were shared. I reiterated that input would be solicited at all levels of the process and that all materials for the workshops would be provided and participants would not have to make any out of pocket expenditures except for transportation to the location and that dates for the workshops would be confirmed based on their convenience.

The process of recruitment was both challenging and time consuming. Sharing a cell phone number and my name in advertising the study in Karachi created its on problems as a woman. I received many obscene calls and text messages in the middle of the night and I finally had to shut the number. Another issue was my association with a foreign university. As the letters outlining the study and the consent forms were on University of Toronto letterheads this added both credibility and also built expectations. Many potential participants thought that I had extensive funding for my project and was reaping extensive monetary benefits. I explained that I was on scholarship from the university and that I was actually supplementing the research costs by teaching research part-time in Karachi. Given their experience with donors and international consultants their suspicions were not out of place and it took a while for me to establish a relationship of trust. My credibility and reputation in the field helped I think in this regard as I later heard many participants had made their own inquiries about me before committing to be part of the study.
A major challenge in terms of recruitment was being able to find participants willing to commit time to the inquiry process which included participating in in-depth interviews and co-operative inquiry cycles which required a year long commitment. I needed to find participants interested in the research process that were willing to share their time over this period. Many potential participants were interested but felt that it was too extensive a commitment to make as their own situations were unpredictable. I had two participants who committed to being part of the study but later lost their jobs. They decided not to participate given their precarious livelihood situation.

I struggled with the idea of providing monetary compensation but in the end decided to offer a voucher for participants to register in an introductory research course in community development which I was organising for students and practitioners of community development. This decision was based on discussions with a number of community development workers. They felt that monetary compensation would be belittling to the spirit of the work and it would not attract participants who were really interested in the process. When I suggested the idea of an introductory research course they agreed that it would be something tangible and of use to those in the field. Participants could still use the voucher even if they withdrew from the study.

Another challenge to setting up the initial meetings; subsequent interviews and then workshops was the deteriorating law and order situation in the country. I had arrived back in Karachi in December 2007 to start my fieldwork just a day before the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. As soon as word of her assassination spread rioting and looting in the city commenced. I watched cars set on fire and people robbed while waiting in traffic jams created by the panic. What followed over the next two years was more political and ethnic violence; targeted killings; bomb blasts and strikes. Personal safety and risk of potential violence breaking out in the city disrupted public transport and caused ongoing uncertainty so that I was always left with making
contingency plans and rescheduling with participants. Yet life continued to function. As one 
participant put it “These are the risks everyone takes when leaving for work each morning in the 
city...you don’t know if you will see your husband and children at the end of the day”.

**In-depth interviews.**

Initial informed consent was taken through an Urdu translated consent form which outlined 
the objectives and process of the study as well as issues of confidentiality and the ability to leave the 
study at any point. As there was more than one interview, verbal verification of consent was an 
ongoing process included within the approach. Once the consent form was signed a time was set up 
for an in-depth interview. Once I was able to recruit twenty participants, interviews began in May 
2008 and continued till late October 2008. Data from interviews was tape recorded and transcribed 
by myself.

Interviews usually lasted between an hour and a half and two hours. Sometimes I would meet 
participants at their places of work (after work hours), sometimes at their homes or sometimes at the 
university I was working at. It depended on their preference, their travel schedule, the situation in the 
city, and making a judgement call regarding safety. The interviews were mostly conversational in 
nature. By that time we had met on a number of occasions and had become familiar with each other. 
I asked questions about their experience, they asked questions about mine. Some wanted to know 
what type of work was required for a doctoral degree and how I had applied and gotten accepted. In 
almost each interview participants would mention that they were glad someone wanted to hear about 
their experiences for a change.

I would begin with questions such as

*Ager main aap ko kahoon key aap thora say peecheh sochein yaad karein apney field 
key tajrube pey to koi aisey waqya aap ko yaad hai jo aap key zehen mein ata ho jo 
bohot ahem ho – mera ishara zindgi ya soch badlney wali ahmyet sey hai*
(If I were to ask you to think back and reflect on your field experience can you recollect any one incident, which stands out in your mind as being life changing?)

I would then move on to questions such as approaches to community development and how they perceived their role as community development workers. I followed these with questions and focused empowerment, asking them to explain through examples from life or art, reflect on its essence and meaning. We also talked about research and art, discussing experiences and preferences. Conversations were intense and the sharing of experience was to a large extent reciprocal. I was aware of my position of privilege throughout these conversations. Each discussion was unique. I was surprised at many of the stories I heard and never expected myself or my participants, particularly male participants to be moved to tears but that happened too. In one case we had to stop and reschedule because the emotions the conversation brought up were so raw.

During discussions I encountered much curiosity about the research process and its extensive timeline. After learning about their time schedules I realised that asking participants to give their entire weekend for a workshop was not appropriate. None had heard of the process of indirect recruitment or collaborative research. They were used to directly approaching participants from communities they worked in for research purposes and having the research process predetermined. When I explained the issue of ethics and power relations they appreciated the process. To quote from a transcript interview between myself and Maria one of my participants

Maria: Mujhey lagta hai key is mey bohot waqt lagta hai is tarha logon ko batana aur phir intezar karna. Zyadatar log to wapas call nahi kartey honge na.?

It seems too time consuming to share information and then wait for people to contact you if you are conducting the research. Most people probably would not call back right?

Shama: Lekin aap ney to mujhey call kiya. Hamarey baatcheet mey kuch to tha jus ki wajha sey app ney call kiya
But you did call me back. There must have been something that made you call back.

Maria: Han aik tajasus si thi. Aap merey tajrubey key barey mey jaana chah rahi thi. Aap ney kaha main kuch is research mey maddad kar sakti hoon.

Yes I was curious. You wanted to know about my experience. You said I could contribute in some way to this research.

Shama: Han! Aap key paas bohot kuch hai!

Yes! You do have a lot to contribute.

Maria: Agar main thora sa gaur karoon kuch aur bhi tha...mujhey aik khushi si thi key faisla merey hath mey hai...agar mey is mey hissa lena chahoon ya na lena chahoon. Hum jab community mey jatey hain to hum unko aisey faisla karney ka moqa nahi detey aur yeh nainsafi hai...lekin jitney research karney waley log hain unhon ney to kabhi aisey tarekeykar nahi istemal kiye...

On the other hand as I reflect back it was something else... I appreciate having the choice to decide if I want to be part of this study. We don’t give the community that choice which I now realize is unfair...but none of the researchers we work with have ever talked about this or used this technique.

Discussions around consent and the effort I was going through to explain the details of the study also raised questions. For the purposes of this study I had designed two consent forms. At the initial meeting I shared the consent form translated in Urdu and asked potential participants to read it and keep it for a few days to think about it before agreeing to sign it.

Ahmed a participant who had worked in a field research project commented during a workshop

Hum zyada tar to field mey jatey hain aur CBO sey baat kar letey hain key hamey itney log chahye. Jub log akhta ho jatey hain to hum in ko bata tye hain key hum kyun aye hain aur kya un ko is guftgu main hisa lena manzoor hai key nahi. Sab shamil hi hojatey hain. Hum to research isi tarhan kartey hain...aap ko to pata hi hai...kum sey kum waqt main kam karkey nikal jain...log bhi beysabar hotey hain

We usually go into the field and approach the CBO (on the day) and tell them we need people for a group discussion. When the group gets together we verbally tell them about the study and tell them they can participate or can choose to leave.
Nobody usually leaves as such. I guess that is the way we do research ... you know how it is ...spend the least amount of time we can and get the job done and leave.

After completing the interview I would follow up with a phone call reminder inviting participants to join in the second phase of the study, a group process of critical reflection and dialogue and to negotiate dates and timings. I was hopeful that phase one of the study would smoothly move into phase two ‘the collaborative group inquiry process’. I was optimistic that almost all participants would individually and collectively participate in reflecting in the discussions contributing suggestions and shaping the inquiry process. The interactions during the interviews allowed for participants to begin a process of reflecting on the proposed topic of interest and to decide whether they would like to participate in the group process or not. However not all participants were interested in the group inquiry and chose to limit their participation to the first phase of the study. I found it interesting to note that it was mostly the government employed participants who did not attend the workshops even though they had signed the consent form and assured me that they would be able to participate. Given this attrition the in-depth interviews were extremely important as they allowed me to capture stories and opinions of people who did not continue on to the next phase which have contributed to the richness of the text and emergent theoretical understandings.

In addition as co-operative inquiry is an emergent process, the individual interviews assisted in designing the group inquiry process providing insight into group dynamics; comfort levels; which aspects participants were willing to openly discuss; which art forms they thought were appropriate and highlighted common areas that participants would like to further investigate.

The space created during interviews also gave participants an opportunity to confidentially express their ideas and share experiences which the group process may not have allowed. It also provided an opportunity for rapport and trust building between myself and participants which was
important in their decision to continue their participation into the next phase. As I interviewed participants I began to get a feel for artistic modes and preferences. Discussions on the arts during the in-depth interviews formed the backbone of the second collaborative phase of the study.

Participants had a variation of interest, experience and skill levels in the arts. Interests in specific art forms varied from participant to participant however common themes were theatre; poetry; film; television dramas; painting; photography; South Asian classical dance and music. Some also talked about embroidery and puppet. Many discussed the emotive element inherent in the arts both in the creation of works of art and as audience members enjoying works of art. Those who saw themselves as artists talked about the passion they felt for their work and the sacrifices they had made within the prevailing politico-religious opposition to their work.

When I asked about the utility of the arts in research they found it difficult to make the direct link. Most made the connection through their experience of the use of arts in community development. They discussed art therapy where they saw art as a means of self expression and healing. Many saw theatre as means of message delivery (as in health education or violence prevention). Theatre was also described as a form of community mobilization.

All this information was extremely important as I needed to balance the needs and aspirations of group members and their experience in the arts. I saw the variation of experience as an advantage so that we could each learn from the other. As an initiator of the co-operative inquiry I needed to keep in mind a combination of elements. The workshops needed to be designed to provoke critical thinking, thoughtfulness, as well as capture interest and included elements of fun. This also required the skill of combining participant suggestions; their time constraints; artistic sensibilities; religious sensitivities and my own limited local resources. I identified a number of mediums to stimulate discussion and artistic expression based on data from the interviews. These included theatre; the use
of symbolism in art through the development of a mixed genre creativity treasure chest (*Khazana-e-Takhleeq*); the use of photography and photo-journals; free style art-making and film. Although classical dance was of interest, I did not feel it was an appropriate medium given some participants religious sensibilities and the time commitment required.

Weightage to artistic process; aesthetics and creativity was a central concern; as was dignity to the craft. Hearing stories of humiliation, sacrifice and degradation from artists made me sensitive to their struggles making it even more important to create an environment of respect for the arts during the workshops. Privacy and confidentiality has been maintained by using pseudonyms for participants and fictionalizing accounts. The interview voice recordings and the transcripts were stored in digital form on my computer with a secure password and were only be accessible to me. Voluntary Consent was sought from participants prior to initiating the group process and verbally at each meeting to document the process and any artwork produced, be it literary, visual or performative. The video recordings and art work were kept in a locked cabinet and were accessible only to me and study participants for viewing.

**Phase II Group Inquiry Process**

The group inquiry process began at the end of October 2008 and continued till May 2009. The most prominent mode that emerged was theatre. Theatre was something that many participants had been involved in during the course of their work. Many had also expressed a desire to be able to watch live performances. Something they usually did not have time for or found too expensive. As a consequence I thought this particular genre would be an interesting place to start discussions.

**Step 1 Theatre of the Absurd.**

I was familiar with a women’s rights group *Tehreek-e-Niswan* who frequently perform street theatre but also stage formal plays. I learned that this group was performing their interpretation of
Beckett’s *Waiting for Godo* titled in Urdu *Insha Ka Intezar (Waiting for Insha)* at the Arts Council. The play in the genre of theatre of the absurd is a tragicomedy in two acts adapted by Anwer Jafri. What is different about this genre of theatre is that it lends itself to ambiguity and opens up space to a variety of readings and audience interpretation. I thought this performance might provide an interesting bridging between theatre for development and street theatre (something participants were familiar with) and theatre as an open text (a starting point for our discussions on empowerment).

I spoke to the director and lead performer of the play Sheema Kermani and she was gracious enough to provide tickets at a discounted rate which I purchased for participants. I also provided an extra ticket for those who wanted to bring a friend or spouse to accompany them.

‘Waiting for Godot’ centres around two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, as they wait for Godot or as in the case of the ‘Tehreek-e-Niswan rendition wait for ‘Insha’. In Beckett’s version of the play the four main characters are all men (something Beckett was adamant about all productions adhering to). However, this being a women’s rights group, the audience was informed that in this adaptation two of the characters are women. Zulekha (Sheema Kermani), Karmo (Salim Meraj), Mansha ullah (Hafeez Ali) and Naseeban (Shama Askari) are the main members of the cast.

The play opens with two vagabonds on a desolate landscape (Karmo and Zulekha) are in conversation. Their sole companion is a barren tree, as they wait for Insha to arrive. Zulekha is convinced that Insha will solve all their problems, regardless of the fact that she is really vague about whether he did confirm to show up or not, and is not even sure that they are waiting for him at the right place and on the right day. Their seemingly endless ordeal is interrupted by the sudden presence on the scene of Mansha, who they initially mistake for Insha; and his servant Naseeban, the woman who is made to carry all his burdens and serve him. Despite these interludes Zulekha and Karmo continue to wait but Insha never arrives.
A few weeks after viewing the performance we were able to meet as a group for our first workshop. Twelve participants had been able to attend the performance. The discussions around the play were interesting. We talked about form and content interpretation. None of the participants or myself had seen this performance before. Nor had we read the play. Some participants talked about being bewildered by the play and not being able to understand what it was about (while they were watching it) which was frustrating to view. It was only after a few days that the themes began to emerge.

The waiting; frustration; irrelevant conversations; poverty; helplessness; the persecutor/oppressor and the oppressed tied together through a relationship of perpetual misery. The discussion revolved around the abstract representation of these themes. We discussed how we felt about the art form. How it was unsettling not to understand. How it was not a performance that we had expected. Would we use such an art form? And what did the play say about empowerment? Many of the participants including myself identified with the feelings of frustration and helplessness given the socio-political context of our work.

For example for Hamid (one of the group participants)

it is a social commentary on power imposition on use of (negative)force (jabar) and violence in our society and its outcomes which are both resistance through empowerment and injustice. How everything has been usurped (kabza) and controlled by those who dictate (rich people, the state, corporations, foreign governments, donors). The general(Mansha) is the one in power so he is empowered.

To quote Maria

But look at the character of (the servant, Naseeban) she is the public…look what happens when the public is allowed to speak how did she use that opportunity? What happens when she was able to speak…she did not make sense..she ended up maintaining her status quo. She was so used to being oppressed she did not know what to do with her freedom. Even in the second act she was still oppressed even when she was leading the general. Are we the architects of our own oppression do we choose to maintain the hierarchy? When you are oppressed for so many years is your spirit dead?
For Ahmed

It is also about gender…so about how patriarchy functions. When the woman was given the right to speak she had so much to say but her voice was silenced. The public also plays this role of silencing women. If the public were to change its perspective then no one can stop us. We would become a force to reckon with.

For Rabia

when I watched the play I did not know its background, but I felt like this is exactly like our country’s situation. The way when they sleep and wake up the next morning and cannot remember what has happened the day before. Even though they try to remember or Zulaiqa tries to remind Karmo it is like they are in a fog and they get confused. The way our history is manufactured and the truth about what really happened is blurred and becomes vague. Karmo is us the public who keeps forgetting what has been done to us - the atrocities of the state as well as those we may have committed. We can never tell who has done what, who is responsible …every act of violence is covered in a fog. But perhaps this is how we survive by forgetting…it is easier to forget than to live with the constant pain of what we have endured and been witness to.

Now it seems that we are just waiting for the end. The way Pakistan has always been seen – that it will not survive, first with partition, then with the wars, then with Bangladesh, now with the Talibain and the US drone attacks…we live in a self-fulfilling prophesy of doom.

Figure 2. (Starting from left to right) Invitation letter to attend the play; play bill © Tehreek-e-Niswan; play tickets; performers on stage ©Tehreek-e-Niswan.
**Step 2 Developing the ‘Khazana-e-Takhleeq’ (Creativity Treasure Chest).**

The first workshop had provided an entry point into discussions on abstraction and ambiguity and I wanted to push this further to present the arts as playful medium to provoke thought and not just entertain or indoctrinate or compel. I wanted participants to get a feel for using the arts in the process of inquiry and contemplate on how the viewing of the performance was connected to the inquiry. So I developed what I termed a ‘Creativity Treasure Chest’ which translated in Urdu was titled ‘Khazana-e-Takhleeq’. The box itself was a symbolic representation of scholartistry as understood by myself. Since Karachi was the context of this inquiry, I selected the contents of the box around this theme demonstrating how to focus an inquiry around a specific theme while drawing on the value of the sensory, the sensual, different forms of knowing and knowledge construction. The box included pictures symbolic of Karachi such as modes of transport (the motor rickshaw) and public spaces (the mausoleum of Quaid –e –Azam). Poetry by Parveen Shakir and Zeeshan Sahil, Karachi poets who take the city as their central theme. Sand and shells symbolizing the sea so central to the port city and to myself and a narrative explaining the use of the art forms to reflect on the meaning Karachi holds for me and for those who view and interact with it. Enclosed within was also a reflective diary with suggested guidelines participants could refer to in order to describe their reflections throughout the inquiry process. The idea was to get participants to critically reflect on the use of symbolism and artistic modes of expression for their own exploration of personal experiences of empowerment.

I delivered the boxes to participants. The reactions to the box were interesting. Some chose to open them immediately, other’s much later. Some admitted that they did not open it at all.

Abida related her experience with the box and how she used it as a prop which I found interesting.
We had a sense of anticipation, that is for sure, but when we went outside with the box other people were also curious to know what was in it and what it has to do with a research study. I pretended carry it as if it were really heavy and then as if it weighed nothing...people kept asking ‘Will it explode?’ I had fun with the box.

*Figure 3. From left to right. Contents of the ‘Khazana-e-Takhleeq.’*

**Step 3: Photography workshop.**

Following the viewing of the play and discussion on the interpretation of ‘*Insha ka Intezar*’, we discussed our next steps. I shared a list of suggestions I had compiled from the in-depth interviews. A number of suggestions were offered and photography was voted most popular. I was asked to see if I could find a facilitator for a workshop given my connections. I approached a faculty member at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Nariman Ansari who was willing to volunteer her time once I explained the purpose of the inquiry. The workshop was designed based on suggestions from participants to explore photography as a means of representation (this was more journalistic style photography) and the ethics of photographic representation. Many participants had mentioned in interviews that they used photography as a form of documentation and as mode of data collection. They had also voiced ethical concerns regarding the use of these photographs. I provided disposable cameras to experiment with however most participants found them difficult to use and preferred the digital variety which they had access to from their organizations. A few also brought their own cameras. Our facilitator made a presentation on photography as an art form and the
invention and mechanics of the camera. She took us through the aesthetic aspects of photography including lighting, aperture, composition and shadows, illustrating them with various photographs through an overhead projector. She then put up a series of journalistic photographs to provoke discussions on representation. One photograph in particular of a starving child and a vulture proved extremely disturbing and a few participants walked out of the room. Other images included depictions of poverty and sex workers. We then discussed the ethics of taking these photographs and how consent could ethically be taken. We then went outside to experiment with cameras in the pre-evening light which we were told was good for photography. One participant as a result decided to take on the role of documenting the process of the inquiry through photography and two others developed photo diaries as means of representing their reflections (see Chapter 10).

Figure 4. Examples of photographic skill (composition, lighting, portraiture, story telling) © Study Participants.

**Step 4: Free style art making.**

After the photography workshop, there was a break in the process. Many participants were travelling and we had to keep rescheduling. I would call to follow-up and we would discuss possible options. During a number of phone conversations there was a suggestion that all group members have a chance to work with different art and craft forms creating their own art during the workshop time. This suggestion emerged when many participants voiced frustration with wanting to create
artwork but found that their work and home lives did not allow for space and time for themselves. They wanted to use the workshop time as protected time to contemplate on the topic on inquiry through art. I called the rest of the group members and asked if this would be something they would be interested in. Most agreed with the idea so I coordinated the space and timing and sent text message reminders. Twelve participants attended this next workshop.

We spent a day as a group using different art forms to express ourselves. It was a beautiful spring day. We were out in a garden, with music playing and the breeze blowing. Participants arrived and left at their leisure. Some brought family members to observe and collaborate with. Some used collage, others drew and painted. Later we collected to exhibit our work and talked about our artwork and meaning making.

Some of the reflections from participants on the day

I enjoyed the art making it was different from my routine and it was also a challenge. It was different in the sense that we spent the entire day on our own research. When we attend workshops the time is always short and you are given five minutes to develop a role play. However in this case I had time to think and reflect on my experiences and to share. (Ameena)

It was different ...we have been in this sector for so many years but we were never given an opportunity to really think about what empowerment is and what we think of it. We just give this rote message...this is what we give to communities.(Ahmed)

One of the challenges I feel with doing anything creative is that I am overburdened at work and so the time needed to be able to do something for myself to take my thinking forward is never there and then when I come home I have my husband and children to look after I don’t know where the day goes. With the travelling I feel guilty not spending enough time with my children so I try and do that. Today we could do what we wanted...it was a special time...if only we had the time to do that for ourselves at work too. It is also not just the time but the peace of mind required to do this type of work...it is an emotional state to be creative and to change gears from automaton to self-reflection it does not come easy. (Maria)

I didn’t understand the process you were proposing when I first agreed to be part of the study. I mean interviews yes but the group process no. Even after the interview and signing the second consent form I really was not sure. I was not sure how that process would unfold and what my role was. In my head I was thinking ‘she is not
clear herself if does not know what will happen in the workshops...is this really research? I always thought research had to be planned in advance and here you were saying we will design the study together and it will take its own direction. I really only came to understand this whole idea today when I went through the process of art making for myself ...it makes sense now. (Hamid)

**Figure 5. Photos of free style art making workshop © Participant.**

**Step 5: Viewing Slum Dog Millionaire.**

As part of our workshop series using the arts, film was a medium which we had decided to work with. As stated earlier, film and documentaries were mentioned frequently in the preliminary in-depth interviews with participants as a suggestion for the group discussions to be developed around. Both my participants and I frequently use film in our community development work for community discussions and mobilization purposes; and also as a personal means of entertainment (particularly Bollywood Hindi films). During the course of our workshop discussions one of the group members Naheed, mentioned an interest in viewing the film *Slumdog Millionaire* which had recently been released in Karachi (dubbed in Urdu). She felt that the theme looked interesting and appeared to be related to what we were discussing in our workshops based on the previews she had seen on television. She also declared that despite her interest it would be impossible for her to go to the theatre to view the film as a woman since she felt uncomfortable with the predominantly male crowds and she usually never had time for these things. Ahsen another participant joined the
discussion and suggested that it would be great if we could have our own screening with the group as a workshop. We took a decision by popular vote.

I was able to get a copy of the DVD and so the last workshop revolved around the viewing of the film followed by an afternoon of discussion. We set up our own mini theatre at our usual workshop venue so we could watch the film, review, and reflect on it as a group. I put together some questions which would help us review the film exploring the form itself and the content. The viewing and discussion was attended by seven participants and discussions were recorded on a digital recorder by myself with consent form participants which I later transcribed.

![Photographs](image)

*Figure 6. Photographs documenting the film viewing, discussions and lunch ©Participant.*

**Step 6 Readers’ Theatre.**

We (as in the larger group of fourteen participants who attended most of the workshops in the second phase of this research) had initially planned to develop a play through a theatre workshop raising concerns about issues of inequity in the development profession and present our analysis through the group process of existing notions of empowerment in development discourse. Discussions around developing a play began in the second workshop when one participant passionately claimed that we needed a union and the group members needed to unite and take some sort of action. Almost all participants voiced enthusiasm in putting a production together to express their frustrations and perhaps present it at a public NGO meeting or conference. However towards
the end of the workshop series many participants began to feel uncomfortable in putting up a public performance. Some voiced concern about the backlash of such a production on their employment conditions and possible repercussions post performance. In addition, when the process of putting the production together was outlined by Ahsen, one of the participants, others also realized that this would require also require an extensive time commitment. Eventually even though Ahsen (who had worked on theatre productions) offered to volunteer his time to facilitate the process, the group was unable to meet and put the production together.

In order to address the desire of some group members as well as my own desire to go ahead, I suggested that we could still put something together. I offered a suggestion that we could still use a performative genre which gave the option for a production to be read or performed using ‘readers’ theatre’. I felt confident having read and seen a few readers’ theatre performed that data from the discussions could still be used through this genre to express understandings developed through collaborative dialogue. This form would not necessarily require a public presentation by those of the group concerned about publically sharing their points of view and would maintain confidentiality which suited our needs. Four participants expressed an interest and agreed to meet for an afternoon to summarize the themes emerging from our discussions and to put them together in the form of this readers’ theatre. I then worked on producing the piece in English (with a note to reader) for this thesis. The sub-group of four participants and I chose the discussions from our last workshop as the setting for this performative piece as we felt they provided a dramatic moment. We also agreed that it was at this juncture that our analysis and conversations as a group had ended and it was here that we were able to collectively dialogue. We wanted to show the conflicting points of view and give the audience a feel of our process of analysis.
One of the challenges of putting the readers’ theatre together was explaining how this particular genre of theatre is produced and performed. As opposed to most scripted productions, performers in readers’ theatre do not have to memorize scripts. In fact performers usually hold their scripts in their hands throughout the performance reading from them. According to Donmoyer and Donmoyer (2008) the purpose of having scripts in hand is not primarily for pragmatic reasons but is more to “stylize” what happens on stage. Stylizing in this case refers to a distancing device where distancing is seen as a strategy to challenge realistic modes of performance which aim to smooth over contradictions; creating harmony and a unitary production of reality. From what I have read, readers’ theatre is a stylized form of performance is constructed to challenge simplistic interpretations and provoke thought, emotion, and critical analysis. The audience is encouraged to think and analyze and co-construct meaning and interact with the narrators and the narratives produced. In addition according to Donmoyer and Donmoyer (2008) the distancing device also attempts to ensure that audience emotional engagement does not overpower the thinking required when viewing the production.

My collaborators and I had a number of discussions on the dramatic effect and the language. I had to keep stressing that this form was a little different as it was read out from the script and so we needed to focus on first bringing the themes together and writing it up. Listening to the discussions again gave us (myself and my four collaborators) a feel for emerging themes and helped to organize the flow of the dialogue. I was then left to consolidate the material. After consolidating it I translated the material into English for the purpose of this thesis and gave it back to the four members who said they would be willing to review this English version. A few months later I followed up with these group members for their feedback. For the most part they were comfortable with its content but found this English version rather dry. They suggested that if the script were to be performed in Urdu
it would need much more “spicing up” and humour (especially if it were to be presented to NGO settings, policy makers, donors and fellow colleagues). They suggested that an Urdu version should be produced but that it should be written by a professional script writer or someone who had a flair for words and knowledge of the Pakistani public. This process is still pending due to lack of funds.

Figure 7. Participant artwork (chalk, water colour, collage) from left to right “Meri zindagi ki kahani” (My life story); “Jinsiyat key rang” (Colours of sexuality); “Aurat pareshan” (Woman Troubled); “Hamri zindagi pey jootey kisi aur key” (Someone else’s shoes on our lives) © participants.

**Reviewing the Group Process**

One of the major challenges and limitations of the group process was time constraints. It became a balancing act to accommodate each participants travel and training schedule in order for all participants to be present at the workshops. Frequently despite keeping all requirements in mind field requirements made attendance impossible. Dates had to be repeatedly reschedules due to individual travel schedules and the security situation in the city delaying the group process and at times breaking the momentum. In addition group discussions also had to be shortened to one day events as many participants felt that they needed to spend time with their families since they were away from home so frequently and returned late at night from the field. Yet at the same time those who attended remarked on the feeling of liberation at being in a space which was for themselves away from work, from household pressures, in an environment looking out on a garden with fresh
air. Some brought their children with them and they became part of the art making and inquiry process. As part of the social networking that occurred through the group inquiry process, the group became a potential resource for information and support. One example is when Abida shared an incident of rape that occurred in the community she was working in. She said she felt helpless as she was not mandated to interfere and it would compromise the position of her organization even though the perpetrator was from the community was known. Ameena said that she was willing to take up the case and could inform a women’s rights group that could take legal action and get the survivor to a shelter. In the next meeting I learned that this had indeed taken place and legal proceedings had been initiated against the perpetrator without the community knowing who had informed on the case.

Other examples of the group being used as a resource included training and job opportunities for participants who had recently lost jobs or were looking to transfer out of current employment. I am also asked to run some training workshops and suggest resource people by participants particularly for research projects and I similarly I also connect with them when I need information about organizations and resource persons that relate to my own advocacy and activist work. Hence reciprocity has become a significant part of relationships built by specific individuals and myself through this inquiry process and continues.

As part of the reciprocal arrangement for participating and giving time to the inquiry project, participants were also offered an opportunity to participate in an independent introductory qualitative research course during May-July 2009 in Karachi which was conducted for students and practitioners of community development. They were provided with a voucher which ensured their registration in the course once they had consented to participating in the study. This was a free standing course offered with no course fee which I and some of my colleagues conducted. The interactive course was conducted over four weekends. Seven of my participants decided to attend the
course and also brought along friends and colleagues. At the conclusion of the sessions they got together to form a continuing education group to further their research interests however to my knowledge they were unable to continue meeting and keep the momentum going.
Chapter 3
Form, Substance and Cartographic Navigations

According to Gannon and Davies (2007)

poststructural work entails the politics of and practice of writing differently. It is through writing differently that thinking differently becomes possible. Neither comes prior to the other, but they are simultaneously realized through the folds and hinges of language. (p. 97)

In this thesis I use a mixed genre representation which Richardson (2004) defines as a process where “the scholar draws freely in his or her productions from the literary, artistic, and scientific genres, often breaking the boundaries of each of those as well” (p. 483). Here prose, performative writing and short stories are combined with more formal academic writing to complicate thought, highlight contradictions, workings of power and cracks in empowerment narratives. This allows for “the subconscious (to be) made conscious through creative rendering” (Sameshima, 2008, p. 156). For ideas to be thought, and things to be said, in ways that may otherwise not have been possible for me. Here I make data, write and analyze, analyze and write, make meaning and render; the process integrated with the personal, the professional, the ethical and the sensual.

Structure and form of representation in this text have emerged from intimate engagement with my data. Writing in this way has allowed me to connect the threads of my analysis moving through a process of clustering and thematically categorizing ideas and experimenting with different forms of representation. The metaphor of the crystal is useful in order to describe the form of this thesis and my choice of mixed genre representation. For Richardson (2004) the crystal combines both symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionality, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change and alter but are not amorphous…deepened, complex, and thoroughly partial,
understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. (p. 483)

As I wrote and rewrote each piece, each fragment became part of a larger whole contributing to my argument. I also found Richardson’s (2004) idea of ‘writing as a way of knowing’ and as a method of discovery and analysis to be inspiring during this process. Based on my own experience I absolutely concur with her when she says that, “By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are hence inseparable” (p. 473); and with Lorri Neilsen (2002) when she claims that “knowing and knowledge are fictions as much as fiction is knowing and knowledge” (p. 208).

Poststructural theory directs scholars to understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times. What I find liberating about this approach is that it frees me from trying to write a single text in a way that ‘everything is said to everyone’ (Richardson, 2004, p. 476). Writing in the context of this thesis has become a site for theorizing where the ‘telling and the told remain inseparable’ (Minh-ha, 1989). There is no textual staging which is neutral or innocent as “writing is always partial, local, and situational and that our Self is always present” (Richardson, 2004, p. 480). Hence it is the interaction between self and the data that led me to experiment with a mixed genre of writings to complicate empowerment narratives.

**Hybrid Forms of Writing**

Although I come to the arts from theatre, one of my joys in life is literary fiction particularly postcolonial fiction and Urdu short stories. The fictional lens opens the door to complexities and colours of spaces and people and the infinite possibilities of knowing the world. Somehow this form of knowing and writing seems to draw me in completely. I have never had the same connection with conventional academic writing as I have had with fiction. Saadat Hassan Manto’s short stories about
the partition of the Indian sub-continent such as 'Khol Do' (Open It); 'Thanda Gosht' (Cold Meat), *Siyah Hashiye* (Black Borders) and *Toba Tek Singh* were instrumental in making me politically conscious at the age of fourteen. Other fiction writers who have inspired me and whose works have influenced my thinking and the writing in this text include: Bapsi Sidhwa (1978); Rohinton Mistry (1995); Salman Rushdie (1991, 1995); Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1989) and Isabel Allende (1986); Mohsin Hamid (2000); and Mohammad Hanif (2009) to name just a few. These writers bring together local context, language and nuanced understanding of the postcolonial into their writing.

Fluck (2003) argues that fiction has a stake in social justice precisely because it is responsible for carving out a space where other faces can be seen and other voices heard. The writing became an act of defiance and hope. I also feel that fictionalizing gives my work an ethical dimension. I feel I was able to get voices heard in a way that protected my participants from being identified and brought together threads of their stories in a way that was easier to share. According to Rishma Dunlop (2008) fiction,

> becomes exploratory, explanatory, hopeful and generative … fictional text constitutes the boundary crossings transgressing over referential fields of thought and textual systems of representation. (p. 64)

Since I had no formal training in creative writing I decided to attend creative writing workshops while I was in Karachi. The course was taught by a well known Pakistani fiction writer Kamyla Shamsi and I indulged my lust for reading fiction while writing and experimenting with short stories; performative writing, and poetry alongside more conventional academic writing weaving them together as a means of representing data. I learned to work with images and metaphors. Sullivan (2009) writes,

> So if we want a person to know what we feel, either in our own lives or empathically or imagined, we must know how to offer them the sensory experience that we have had or imagined. We have to transfer something from one body to another – this is what image and metaphor is all about… tying the abstract to the concrete. (p. 113)
I understand the importance of making transparent the process of moving from data to the pieces produced in this text. Yet, the creative process of how the writer or poet moves from thoughts, images and sensations to what is happening on the page at some level tends to remain impervious to articulation (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 95). I would read transcripts of interviews and group discussions and then listen to the audio recordings identifying themes and storylines.

For example the context of Karachi emerged as a major theme for participants in our discussions. In particular violence and experiences of violence living in Karachi surfaced in almost every interview.

In an indepth interview Sakeena talked about emotional and the psychological toll of violence on herself and the people she works with

Violence in the everyday changes people. They don’t talk about the violence directly but they are less trusting, more high strung...the constant frustration and fear of violence in the city...within the household husbands beating wives, mothers beating children, people don’t have patience anymore.

Ahmed talked about the political context of violence, particularly ethnic violence

Political manipulation along ethnic line in Karachi coincides with loss of respect. It is also linked to military policy and the Afghan war, the post partition inheritance of ethnic disputes is exploited

Nasir talked about how violence affected community mobilization work and how he feared for his family

Issues are different from area to area in Karachi water, electricity, gas, sanitation p-you can mobilize people on these issues these are safe … it is harder when we talk about political violence, guns and drugs. In my own neighbourhood there are young boys carrying guns. We have grown up with this fear I have lost friends...Aap nahi kuch kar sakte yahan phir aap ka knowledge aur skills kisi khatey mey nahi ata (you can do noting, then your knowledge and skills are useless)

Last night there was (gun) firing outside my house. I know who one of boys is ...I could physically throw him out but I won’t because he has a gun, he has protection he is involved in street crimes…everyone knows but no one says anything. There is always danger and I do not have the social support to do anything. I cannot even stop
him from entering my neighbourhood and all the police have been bribed so they of are no help.

Rabia talked about her experience of being stuck with her field team in the middle of the riots after the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. It was these stories; my own notes from participant observation of living in the city along with archival research that I fused together to produce the piece ‘Karachi’ to represent findings from the study.

I found that creative writing and poetry gave me the liminal imaginative space to talk about and understand my data and writing in a way that almost became intuitive. The twists and turns in this liminal space were not controllable; they were intense and demanding, surprising and very often confusing and disorientating. Yet this way of writing also became a place of possibility, openness and heightened awareness and ‘a place to let go’ (Neilson, 2002). In letting go I also let go of the English language replacing it with Urdu and Sindhi. The acts were conscious and risky. At times I translated in some cases I chose not to. My choices to write in another language were political and epistemological bringing the physical acknowledgement of alternative ways of knowing and grounding it physically in an English text. Other choices were serendipitous aesthetic where translation would take away from the flow and rhythm of writing.

Some transcripts provided poetic occasions that moved me to fuse poetic and performative writing using words repeated over and over. For example the word *itefaqan* (by chance) was used in so many different contexts in interviews by participants to talk about how they came into the profession. However I found it difficult to verbalise the nuances of meaning so I wrote a lyrical piece, one with a tempo, a rhythm which I then found worked in the performative piece ‘Katha (A Story) in Four Acts’.

Excerpts

*Why this job*
I needed a job my husband left me and I needed to stand on my own two feet (apney pairon par)

I needed a job my father died

I needed a job because my sanity depended on it

I needed a job to be able to get out of the house

I needed a job to get my children into good schools and pay the tuition

I needed a job to support my family

I wanted a job to be able to apply what I had learned

My factory burnt down but God showed me a way – I am a quick learner

Work is my majboori but maza bhi ata hai otherwise I would have left the job

Ah this job was the only one that I did not require formal qualifications for! So it was itefaqan!

Itefaqan (by chance)

Itefaqan (by accident)

Itefaqan (I never planned it)

Itefaqan (it was serendipitous)

Itefaqan

A serendipitous moment I will never regret

As a result theory became implicit in my writing yet I was able to retain a complexity to both what was being said and how it was being said. My focus in this thesis is not on revelation, unveiling, forcing of an agenda. Nor is it prescriptive, telling people how to think. Instead I present disruptions of binaries; I find space for ruptures leaving the text open to interpretation. In some places in the text, I use the leitmotif of the Patang (the Kite) to remind readers that this is a fiction constructed by me and that I am complicit in its rendering.
**Audience Engagement**

Arts-informed research aims to shed light on the human condition (Gosse, 2008). It does so through scholartists creating open texts, challenging the audiences’ expectations and assumptions in order to create ‘disequilibrium’ (Gosse, Barone, & Kaplan, 2008). Open texts admit the imagination of the reader as opposed to closed conclusive texts. Gosse argues that works which are beautifully crafted can masquerade as art, and serve as propaganda. They exude certainty and serve to reinforce dominant paradigms (Gosse et al., 2008). These works are not art because

They do not proffer diversity in interpretation, or pursue new questions or puzzlement, but err on the side of soliloquy, of directly, authoritatively “telling it like it is”. True works of art employ design elements that invite discourse about multiple possible meanings rather than (even temporarily) closing off the conversation. (Gosse et al., 2008, p. 73)

According to Gosse (2008), “There shouldn’t be a solid theme or conclusion” (p. 69) in the representation. The objective is not to bring the audience closer to a singular ‘truth’ but to see facets of it in a different light and envision how it may be otherwise (Gosse et al., 2008). To quote Sunlop (2008) “We read ourselves as we read” (p. 65). Some artists go as far as to argue against any form of textual framing. For example O’Conner (1997) states “If a poem does not succeed without these words, these words cannot succeed even with the poem. If I were you, I wouldn’t read them” in (Prendergast, 2009, p. xxi). They argue that as an artist the work should stand on its own, it means itself, it cannot be explained and challenge the need for social science explanation.

For audiences unused to this approach to research and representation the notion of not having a concrete conclusion may be unsettling while others may actively embrace it as an interactive mode of meaning making.

Arts-informed research perceives the research text as co-creation between audience & researcher engaging the aesthetic. Readers should be conscious of the textual depictions as
fabrications and how textualizing strategies shape research narratives. The reader actively constructs possible counter-interpretations and readings. Meaning then is also made in the subjective interaction of researcher and research participant or collaborator. Therefore the fragments presented are ‘contemplative texts’ accompanied by self reflexivity and acknowledgment of my presence in the research.

Laural Richardson (2000) provides some guidelines for producing and interacting with such text. She suggests audiences and scholartists pose some key questions of the constructed text/artwork. For example,

1. Does it make a substantive contribution?
2. Does it contribute to the understanding of social life; does the writer/artist demonstrate a deeply grounded social scientific perspective?
3. How does this informed the construction of the piece?
4. Does it succeed aesthetically?
5. Does use of creative analytic practices open up the text and invite interpretive responses?
6. Is the author cognizant of the epistemology of postmodernism/postructuralism?
7. How did the writer come to write this text?
8. How was the information gathered?
9. Are there ethical issues?
10. How has the author’s subjectivity been both a producer and a product of the text?
11. Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view?
12. Does the author hold herself responsible for the standards of knowing and telling of the people she has studied or collaborated with?

13. Does this piece affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually? Does it generate new questions? Move me to write? Move me to try new research practices? Move me to action?

14. Does the text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived experience – a credible account of the cultural, social, individual or communal sense of the “real”?

My representations are aimed to be evocative; provocative; emotive and sensual and the audience is invited to experience it bodily, emotionally and intellectually. Reading and writing become acts of performance and resistance, in essence an intertwined act of performative inquiry (Dunlop, 2008). The expectation is for the audience through interacting with multiple texts to be moved by the artwork in some way and that the audience is as responsible for the interpretation of the text as I am in its construction.

Thus the impact of this research relies on the meaning it evokes for each person who engages with it. The aim is not to communicate a single, intended message. There is no single “correct” interpretation; the representations are intentionally ambiguous – open texts. Indeed the power of these works relies on their ambiguous and self-reflexive qualities. We rely on our readers and viewers to write their own version of the text. It is at this level of resonance, of personal connection, that individuals are likely to be inspired to moral action. It is through this kind of deep personal engagement that the politics and poetics of research work in tandem (Cole, 2004, p. 16).

My emphasis is on providing my audience with an open text as well as providing tools, maps and guides to interpret the text rather than telling you what meaning you should make. What is most important for me is how that story is told and the rest is based on trust that there will be a certain
type of engagement and respect while engaging with the text. I acknowledge that this does not mean that everyone who reads this thesis or sections of it will embark on some direct action which is transformative for them but they may begin to think differently. My emphasis is on making research relevant and connecting academy with community through it. According to McIntyre (2004),

As researchers we need to get people wanting to join in, needing to care. Revisioning the narrative of research by placing dignity and respect as the guiding values in the relationship shifts the emphasis from objectivity and distance to a shared humanity of creativity in connection. (p. 260)

The complex self-reflexive experiences and analysis of my participants and myself are presented in this arts informed thesis which trespasses, troubles, challenges and at times reinforces the borders and boundaries of existing assumptions around empowerment theory, practice and subjeckthood. Nothing was written in the order in which it is now presented nor were the experiences of my participants shared in a linear manner. Instead it was a serendipitous process of inquiring as I engaged in conversations and wrote. As you read through this text you may find the content and the styles to be uneven even messy. This is intentional. I and my co-collaborators both individually and collaboratively have constructed these narratives to demonstrate the messiness of our work and the contexts in which we are enmeshed. I would like to clarify that by stating that I and my fellow research participants are enmeshed in the narrative I am not trying to demonstrate that we are helpless or entrapped. Instead here I acknowledge the complicity of being part of weaving narratives. After all these are stories about stories. The stories and artwork are based on our lives, as well as our individual and collective discussions around our work. I attempt to share the complexities and negotiations of our everyday and how we are engaged in a constant interactive performance where we switch roles, play multiple parts, strategize and negotiate according to the circumstances we encounter.
I write to inform the reader not to sensationalize the situation. I am conscious that representations of violence are visible in the portraits I paint through my writing evoking vivid images yet it is not my intention to use violence in anyway to sensationalise the context of this work. I am conscious of Sherene Razack’s (2007) critique of representations of violence for audience gratification which she has termed “stealing the pain of others”. According to Razack (2007) depictions and stories of violence which allow for the consumer of narratives to feel part of a “fraternity sharing high moral ground” and “enjoying the sense of having been a witness to great evil” (p. 11). Razack (2007) and Ahmed (2000) theorize that the reader/viewer by being compassionate through uncritically witnessing and consuming violence deemed authentic participate in a form of consumptive violence where the consumer of narratives feels part of a ‘we’, a compassionate community who shares “high moral ground” (Razack, 2007) and enjoy the sense of having been “witness to great evil” (Razack, 2008). Instead I write to understand and make sense and theorize about the potential empowerment theory has for social change in context where violence plays a significant role. I write to frame my work to explain why context is so important when theorizing. I write to explain why I choose to study my country and my city. I write to make sense of the violence I and my participants have witnessed; to understand how are we entangled and implicated in the discourse and to hold myself and others accountable.

There is a purpose in this narration as it reflects who I am, how I know, how I see the world and who I have come ‘to be’ by staking claims and fashioning my subjectivity. I am in search of an approach that can do the same for others, or at least allows for the possibility for such re-encountering. An approach that acknowledges the flexibility of modes of being, of subject constitution, an approach which envisions or allows for the possibility of an ethic of re-encountering. My aim through this text is provide an aesthetic experience which will provoke thought. As one of
When I first began writing this text I kept thinking how do I put the reader to work in a way that would stimulate interaction as well as evoke and provoke thought and action? Short stories, prose and creative writing seemed to emerge through my reading and analysis of the data as the best way to tell the complex stories and in retrospect I do not think there was any other way to do it. Once the writing was completed I began to think about how put the material in sequence and whether there was any sequence as such? As I played around with the pieces moving one behind pushing another forward following different threads that connected the pieces I realized that each time the sequence changed it gave new meanings and connections to the text. I began to wonder if it was really appropriate for me to instruct people to take the conventional route and read from page 1 to page 100? Or should I divide the book in half? Perhaps the first section would contain more conventional academic work to frame the stories and second would contain the more artistic renderings for those who wish to engage with the creative writing first. I also considered placing the section containing the artistic renderings first and locating the framing of these pieces at the end so the reader can enjoy and make sense of the work without being told how. Or should the framing of the work come first so the reader feels that she has a sense of direction as to where the thesis is going.

In the end I decided that this text really has no end and no beginning. It is a bricolage of different pieces of writing that make up a composite whole. Therefore it should really be up to readers to decide how they would like to navigate and engage with this complex body of work depending on personal preferences and interests. As a result I decided to lay out a map to help
readers decide where to enter the text from and navigate a path. Each path taken will tailor an engagement in a unique way with me, with my participants and with this thesis.

The text is divided into three sections. The first section outlines the methodology, the rationale and the process. The second introduces readers to the context, the participants, and the intricacies of relationships and networks. The third section brings together the key arguments and discussions.

Since this is more a collections of short stories and creative writing pieces and not a novel or a conventional thesis my personal preference would be to jump right into the writing and read what catches your fancy. There are short notes for the reader before each piece which outline how the particular piece was constructed from the data so that the connection between the construct and the data is not lost. However if you are the sort of reader who would like to have the stories framed in broader strokes then perhaps you should start with the more conventional pieces of writing such as Chapter 6 ‘Native Informant Complicates Empowerment Narratives!’ followed by Chapter 8 titled ‘Constructing Community Mobilizers as Agents of Change’ and then keep reading all the way to the end.

If you are the sort of person who would like to know where the group interactions with my participants ended then start with Chapter 14, the readers’ theatre’ to get a feel for where the conversation on empowerment with my participants and myself stands and then work your way through the rest of the chapters. If you interest is in individual artwork produced by participants you could view the photo diary which I was graciously given permission to include in Chapter 10. If you feel that you would like to orient yourself with the context of my work then I suggest starting with reading the short story “Karachi” in Chapter 5 where you will encounter the poetry of Zeeshan Sahil and meet Atiq Shaikh as he reflects on the city during a power outage. If you know Karachi and all
its messiness then you might want to get to know my participants in which case I think perhaps start with Chapter 7 and the performatve piece in Chapter 9 ‘Katha’ (A Story) in Four Acts would be a good beginning. You could of course just open to a page that looks interesting and start right there. On the other hand if your interest is in Sexuality and Gender I would guide you to read Saima’s diary in the Chapter 13 ‘Log Kya Kahen Gey?!’ (What Will People Say?!) as she reflects on her experience as a single woman and an NGO worker on sexuality; gender and empowerment. You could also begin with my own ruminations and reflections in prose on why I chose this thesis as my area of focus which you will find in Chapter 4. What I guarantee you is that each piece has threads which connect to the others and as you read you will make connections of your own as you bring to the text you own encounters. If you feel at any point that you have taken a wrong turn just go back and make another route for yourself. There are fourteen chapters in this thesis and I cannot say that all paths lead to the same conclusion but this is why this interaction is such an exciting prospect.
Chapter 4
Research as Autobiographical:
Situating Self in pursuit of Empowerment...

The excitement of the chase and the found kite; the skill and innovation of kite making and kite flying; competing to cut the string of another’s kite; the lost despondent drifting kite; the cut rootless kite; the tangled string, the danger associated with cutting your finger on the glass coated manjha, string, or falling off a rooftop; possession of another’s kite; mending a found kite... The references are embedded in many literary and performative modes of expression within the context of South and South West Asia. The symbol of the Patang, the kite, resonates with me as researcher on multiple levels. I draw on the associated metaphors to tell a story, a story which draws on my emotions and intellect and demonstrates how I am woven into my research or more how the research is woven into me. This metaphorical narrative provides a point of entry into formulating a more collaborative pursuit of my research focus, empowerment, while reflexively acknowledging my presence, responsibility and limitations as researcher situated simultaneously in both global and local contexts. In the case of the narrative that follows, the metaphor of the drifting patang, represents to me the object-subject of my research ‘empowerment’ and how my pursuit of it led me to formulate my research question. It serves to document processes, highlighting my challenge in coming to terms with theory and the ground realities of practice. I reflect on my field experiences in community development and the literature I have encountered, expressing possessiveness; as well as pain and frustration at the manipulation, control and power struggle that narratives of empowerment are entangled in. I ponder on the ideals of social change and praxis embodied in the concept of
empowerment, moving from jaded pessimism, to ambiguity, to despair and then to hope. It is through this narrative that I demonstrate how I work my way through towards a more proactive political and pragmatic endeavour with a group of co-collaborators.

I tend to think in colours, my ideas spread out, visual, animated, three dimensional tangible, emotions linked with sound, smell and touch. Stimulated, senses aroused, I describe what I see and feel as researcher/academic/activist from the global south as I engage metaphorically with the core subject of my inquiry, ‘empowerment’.

A hand from an explosion bright red nail polish, sparkly gold rings, bits of sticky flesh
A lime green mobile phone slightly scratched rub against each other in a gunny sack among other bits of metal
He carries his loot from the exploded scene clinking
thinking
What price will it fetch in the Bazaar?
I stand immobilized.
Is this being really a worthwhile existence?
Can it be called being or existence?
Could I make a difference standing amidst and between?
What could possibly be done?
Or am I undone?
The weight of knowing is perhaps much harder than not
To wander among the living and the half and the nearly dead
I challenge you to
LIVE and try and make sense!
I will give you my bleeding heart if you can give me some direction.
In the post 911 era, according to Mohanty (2003) “global economic and political processes have become more brutal, exacerbating economic, racial, and gender inequalities” (p. 509) There is therefore an urgent need for demystification, re-examination and theorizing - about where do we go from here given this scenario?

I see a kite, a patang.

Its colours red and yellow dancing in the breeze, swaying back and forth in cloudless evening sky, as if to an invisible tune. It soars, letting the breeze carry it up towards shams the setting sun, it dips playfully beckoning and then looping and spiralling down again towards the dust. Full of potential it soars upward to the sky, the sound of its fluttering paper audible, enticing me to follow as the wind pushes it higher. I watch it for a while, observing its movements, curious at its behaviour, at the game it is playing, backandforth backandforth teasing me to pursue it. I feel oddly drawn to it, nostalgia for the freedom of innocent childhood games, a time when I was not so jaded, when I saw the world full of promise and possibility drawing me to it. I follow it with my gaze mesmerised. Its string, its dori trails behind indicating it may have been freed of ownership or that it may have been severed ‘cut’ from human hands controlling or manipulating it.

I reach out to grab the dori but the wind carries it off and I miss.

I begin to follow it quickening my pace. I chart a course, a mental cartography of pursuit through the obstacles that obstruct my path. I climb up stairwells and transverse the distance between roof tops exhilarated in the freedom of my pursuit and the game of catch.

My heart beating and my body alive. I am almost upon it.
I pause to judge the direction of the wind. But it is growing dark and with my vision impaired by the fading light it is now difficult to see. I seem to have lost sight of it. I am annoyed - to have come so far and to not be rewarded, how can that be? I feel this selfish urge to posess this object-idea-concept. How can its promise of freedom be so elusive, - where could it go it must be here somewhere-nearby.
I squint, survey, my eyes searching. Suddenly I see a glimpse of yellow in the distance, my mood changes, I am elated. I begin my pursuit again. I break into run as the kite gathers speed faster and faster my arms out stretched towards the sky trying to catch its dori.

As it moves back and forth its shape appears to change
its colours become muted merging into the nightsky.

There are shadows. My skin prickles, I am aware of others. Out of the corner of my eye I see them in the shadows in similar pursuit attempting to grab the string perhaps to possess and control it too. But it is my idea.

They must have been here from before, they too must think they deserve it, have an ownership of the beckoning patang. I run faster wanting to be the first. I am closing in on it now, I reach out and grab the string tightly, cutting my fingers on the manjha, the powdered glass coating it. I am surprised, the pain is sharp, blood, red spurting out. I let go. I suck my bleeding finger and hesitate for a moment unsure of my course of action. This was unexpected, ideas are not meant to hurt, yet mine has, it is too real, too personal, I have blurred the lines and now I am vulnerable. I only wanted to hold on to it for a minute to examine it closely to look at its colours to understand its qualities and the details, the elements that make it what it is.

Why should such intentions be rewarded with blood?

I am losing time and the kite is up in the air again my legs ache and my finger throbs yet I follow. Over trees and lakes, mountains and continents buildings and stairwells I climb,

stumble,

fall

continue.

Suddenly I see it shudder and I notice it is no longer flying with its teasing confidence. A tear appears in the red and grows bigger. I watch, conflicted as it begins to fall towards the ground. The excitement of the chase fading.

Yet now that it is in my reach I can examine it to my hearts content. This was after all what I wanted to get close enough to. To understand it, to feel it and to touch it, to discover its parts to see what makes it whole. Then why is watching it descend upsetting me?

The pursuit cannot be over yet, it is too soon, I still want to play!
I wonder, perhaps the exhilaration of the chase was more interesting than the object itself. I silently mouth “There is strength and substance left in you yet! Fly some more don’t come down yet fight!” But my words are of no consequence...it wobbles then makes an undignified descent towards the ground.

There is a movement and I can see figures pounce on my patang. There is a sound of cheering and glee, a flash of hands, and then an argument followed by sickening sounds of ripping, scrunching and victory...then silence.

I move forward tentatively as the shadows recede. I see bits of yellow and red paper and the skeleton of the kite. As if programmed to do so I begin to mechanically pick the scattered pieces of flesh and bone, ideas destroyed and mangled. An artefact crafted by human hands of flimsy paper and string has lost its majestic power to attract. I speak aloud as I examine the bits of bone blood flesh. Lovingly I reminisce “desired object, beloved idea, powerful binding force, ideal of freedom, is this what it has all come to?”

Symbolic interpretations.

Tattered, torn, soiled. It is only made out of sticks, cheap coloured paper and glue, its dori coated in powdered glass has made my fingers bleed and now lies tangled with random objects. I cradle the fragments lovingly. I finally have it in whatever mangled shape or form it may appear. I lift and re-examine the fragments, turning each piece towards the light looking at its detailing trying to understand what attracted me. There is little substance left to examine.

Deflated I let them fall to the ground. There is no hope now. And yet what was it in this object that drew me to it? Why did I attach such meaning to paper and stick? Perhaps I am not looking at it right, I pick up fragments again and turn them over and remember how it looked when whole, fluttering dipping and turning in the sky, my aspirations of freedom and flight clinging to it.

I wonder aloud

“Perhaps it was its spirit.”

I contemplate and mentally rephrase, “Perhaps it is its spirit! It has life left in it yet!” With help I could fix it, remodel it reshape it make it stronger, give it new meaning. Perhaps it may fly higher and stronger....I carry the fragments back home reflecting on options, alternatives, mind buzzing with ideas to be put into action, my researcher hand as
instrument of pragmatic process restructuring, reconstructing...
Section II
Chapter 5
Setting the Context

Note to Reader

This particular story focuses on the context of my research work, the city of Karachi and my participants. It frames the text and provides a context for understanding the challenges of working and living in an unplanned city of almost 20 million. As a story, it demonstrates how contexts and structures shapes encounters, facilitating and enabling but also blocking and restricting possibilities. According to Cornwall (2007a) importance of place in theorizing about empowerment is significant. Analysis needs to be grounded and contextualised, given the enormous differences between the countries that are the targets for development’s one-size-fits all interventions. Context also embodies the broad conditioning factors which help to shape understandings and experience. For Kabeer (2007) specificity of social relations challenges the assumption of stylized universalist assumptions around empowerment as a concept and empowerment strategies. Hence understanding historical shifts in societal and cultural norms and practices, migration patterns and historical disputes; the role of state and non-state actors; transnational actors; politico-religious groups; patriarchal and gender structures; religious and ethnic discrimination poverty and class; the density of donor engagement, the broader landscape of organisations and social movements are all important in theorizing about empowerment (Andrea Cornwall & Edwards, 2010). Context is therefore crucial in making sense of empowerment narratives.

The story ‘Karachi’ centers on the musings of a particular character Atiq Shaikh, an NGO worker. Through Atiq’s ruminations I take the reader through a partial topography of Karachi providing a socio-political context to locate my stories in. Migration has played a significant role in changing the cartography of the city. Transnational political and local ethnic and sectarian political
actors have over the last two decades made mutually beneficial arrangements which place the city and its inhabitants in an ongoing position of insecurity. For most residents of the city the state has offered close to no social protection services and the process of access to amenities and service is purely based on self organizing and local philanthropy. The frequent power outages in Karachi are a source of ongoing frustration for all home and work spaces. The hours spent waiting for the electricity to return accelerates as the summer commences. All my participants and I suffered through daily power outages which resulted in poor sleep and intolerable work conditions affecting mood patterns and delaying work.

The reader here is introduced to the politico-religious contexts that influences the everyday lives of community mobilizers as well as researchers like myself. The volatility of the situation in the city and the precariousness of existence are reflected in the story to provide the reader with a glimpse of what it is like to live and work in a city so fraught with tension and the smell of death. The targeted killings of ethnic political party workers and MQM doctors has once again become a strategy of rival political entities. Each one of us (including myself, my participants and fellow colleagues) who live in the city have such stories to share. Stories we hold close to our hearts of a lost loved ones, scars we hold within us. This fictional depiction is a cumulative representation of stories of such loss from my data. Stories we tell ourselves to construct our own identity moving between optimism, bitterness and despair. It also reflects the apathy frustration and what it means to live with violence in the everyday. It also reflects the challenges of doing research in such a context.

The story moves between past and present highlighting how encounters of the past shape the present and detail the history of the city in which the study takes place connecting the local and the global. How violence affects us and scars us and how we live with fear and insecurities and yet continue. Zeeshan Sahil (2010), Karachi’s poet wrote both in English and Urdu often expressing his
ideas through the voice of children and their presumed innocence to ask questions adults have no answers to. Sahil’s poem ‘Granny’s Theory’ draws on a childhood fairytale which explains the cosmology of the world. Yet the violent changes brought about in the world no longer have a fairytale or rational explanation. The symbolic shifting and jolting Sahil refers to evokes the feelings of fear and instability that we as residents of the city experience. Growing up in this city I can relate from childhood the never ending strikes, school closures and bomb drills. I too ask why us?
Karachi

Granny’s Theory

By Zeeshan Sahil
Granny says
The world is balanced
on a cow’s horn.
When it gets tired
Of carrying the whole world
On its horn
The cow shifts the world
to the other horn.
Getting moved
From one to the other,
For a few minutes.
The world is shaken up.
According to Granny’s theory,
Karachi is located somewhere
In this world
perched on a horn.
But these days the cow gets tired
Very easily
And shifts the world
From one horn
to the other.
We do not understand this
And like Granny
We are worried
That when the cow
shifts the world
From one horn to the other
Why does our Karachi
Always get jolted
(Sahil, 2010, p. 241-242)
(Translated from Urdu by Asif Farrukhi)
It was ten thirty on a sticky Monday morning and Atiq Shaikh was seated in his cubicle drinking his second cup of steaming *chai*.

He had just turned on his computer, waiting for the familiar sound of Windows 2007 to load when everything went dead.

‘God dam Karachi Electricity Supply Corporation!’ he yelled, livid, veins on his forehead bulging.

He had not slept the night before because of the load shedding and heat.

Even with the privatization of the electricity company the power outages are getting worse. Last year it was four hours a day this year it has doubled.

The unscheduled load shedding irked him. ‘How is one to function with this God Damn heat and no God Damn electricity? How is this country ever going to progress? Our rivers are drying up, our dams are near empty. Here we are in 2010 where the world is full of modern gadgets and solar panels and what do we do? We sit in the heat and we wait for God to help us! There is no hope for people like us...’

‘At least in Islamabad load shedding is scheduled’ he thought, ‘they are organized, it’s the military, they do everything by the clock. But this is Karachi. Nothing is predictable’.

‘I wish I had accepted that job with that INGO in Islamabad in 2005 when the earthquake happened’ he thought clenching his fists ‘then at least there would have been some option for growth and promotions’.

He sighed and cursed his luck for what may have been the millionth time. Why did I decide to do a degree in sociology? I had a chance to do economics! I could have been a corporate mogul with a car and a chauffeur! What did getting a degree in sociology get me? After spending two years studying outdated American and British textbooks and another year waiting to get my degree; ‘it’ (the degree) has no value!

‘There is no value for professionals in this field. Every Tom Dick and Harry is running his own NGO; Dentists, Lawyers, Dispenser, Car Salesmen. Crooks! All of them scammers!’

He got up to open the old wooden colonial styled shutters. The rude sounds of the unplanned city, combined with a gust of exhaust fume laden breeze caught him off guard. The smog obscured view outside seemed to invite derision and Atiq Shaikh had plenty of it to go around. He was bitter; felt bitter; looked bitter, and even the stale after taste in his mouth from the *chai* was rancid and bitter.

‘I could have been in Islamabad instead’ he repeated in his head with disgust ‘instead of this ugly death trap of a city’ he looked out at the jumble of buildings. Old dilapidated crumbling colonial shells barely standing next to the might of tall glass encrusted high-rises. Roads jam packed with vehicles of every shape and nature; horns blaring; competing for scarce space. Karachi had never been the cultural capital of the region it was no Lahore.

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7 Arif Hassan (1999) renowned Urban Planner and Architect of Karachi in his book highlights the multiple attempts made at urban planning in Karachi. He specifically sees Karachi as a city where none of the Master Plans have been implemented (Hassan, with, Younus, & Zaidi, 1999).
Sweat trickled down his temples and his shirt stuck to his back. It all seems so interminable, the same routine, the heat, the oppressive humidity and it was only the end of April.

He remembered a time when April used to be a cool month, when the breeze that came through this window was fresher.

‘This city used to be different too’, Atiq reflected, ‘it has changed and so have its people’.

In character the city is prone to amnesia, in addition to its unpredictability. Those who reside here have learned to live with such flaws. Perhaps it is the city that shapes its residents to be forgetful, to forget the blood on the streets, the targeted ethnic killings; corpses in gunny sacks; violent protestors’ lathis in hand and police brutality. We forget being woken by the sound of guns being fired, the awful stench of tires being burned and the sounds of gaskets exploding as cars are set ablaze. The next day the city wakes up and it is business as usual.

It is a shape shifter this city, and God knows what form it will take in its next mutation... Perhaps the national leaders may yet have their dream of morphing it from a multicultural society to a uni-religious and a uni-cultural shell. On the other hand the city has a will of its own.

Unlike Bombay, Karachi was a nonentity during the time of the Raj; a blip on the colonial radar; a crocodile story. However local mercantile activity on the port began to attract the interest of the East India Company and it became a prominent trading post. Wars were fought over who controlled the Khara Dar and Meetha Dar (The sea door and river door).

In the beginning, after 47’ this used to be the capital until the Punjabis moved it upstream to their side. Really it was we Mohajirs who built her – we came here on partition leaving our homes and lands sacrificing everything to come to the new Pakistan and be free of the British colonizers.

My mother travelled to Karachi on those death trains with the bloody corpses all around her to get to the ‘free country’ for Muslims. The promise was a false promise for most who flocked to the new country and land of the pure. The government sector failed to provide the migrants and urban poor with land for housing at an affordable price. Informal settlements, Katchi Abadis, began to spring up out necessity appropriating state and agricultural land. An informal sector now provides water, jobs, solid waste management, health and education services.

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8 There is a legend that the city got its name from a fishing village named after a battle of a Sindhi fisherwoman Mai Kolachi, who battled a crocodile (Farrukhi, 2010)

9 Mohajir literally meaning ‘one who has migrated’ Muslim immigrants who had come to Karachi from India after 1947 became known as Mohajirs and formed a political identity Mohajir Quami Mahaz (MQM) headed by Altaf Hussain which came into being when 1984 General Zia-ul-Haq banned all student movements. Later the MQM enjoyed state patronage in opposition to the Benazir Bhutto led Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) (Chaudhry, 2004).

10 At the time of partition the population of Karachi was 450,000 (Hassan, 1999, p. 24). According to Hassan (2009) this included the migration on partition in 1947 of (600,000 refugees). The Hindu population decreased from 51% to 2% , Muslim population increased to 96%; Sindhi speaking population decreased from 61.2 % to 8.6%; and the Urdu-Hindi speaking population increased from 6.3 to 50 % (p. 210)

11 Within the last generation these neighbourhoods (Kacchi Abadis) have changed from purely working class to become home to white-collar professionals and entrepreneurs (Hassan, 2009).
I wonder what my mother would think of all this now? Of her Pakistan and of this city? What did she get when she finally made it here? We were no better off. Only now we were persecuted by the Sindhis and Pathan because we were Hindustani.12 In retrospect perhaps she would have been happy dying in her own Lucknow rather than in her adopted city, Karachi.

There was a time when multiple faiths were represented, and different points of view were shared and discussed. People had the courage to speak out in those days and to dream. It used to be peaceful. It used to be relatively safe. But that was before all the killings and the riots and street crime. There were cinemas, dancehalls and bookshops in the center of the city. General Zia helped change all of that.

The non state religious actors that the General supported became custodians of public morality; budgets for cultural activities were drastically cut; prominent artists and writers were persecuted and had to go into exile; female news casters were forced to cover their heads. The Hudood Ordinances and Blasphemy law became weapons for the persecution of women and children. Students were incited towards militancy and violence and encouraged bigotry towards fellow citizens. The drug mafia became an important actor and invested in real-estate and transport as well as co-opted the local administration and police. The Urdu –English divide in schools grew as did the deeni-madrissah divide.13

Now the city is all ghettoized very few public spaces are shared between the rich and poor. Recreation spaces are only for those who can afford them14. You either live on this side of the bridge or that side of the bridge.15

A city poised on a tightrope is what it is. It takes just one incident for the entire city of almost twenty million to catch fire. The death of one girl for all the anger to be unleashed.16 And then the government set loose their dogs ‘the Rangers’ and the violence continued.17

Atiq looked below and saw the garbage heap that had collected at the corner of the street and thought of the over flowing gutter he had had to side step to cross the street this morning.

12 Although Karachi had witnessed sectarian and ethnic riots before, “the 1985 riots, and subsequent 1986 riots between Pathans and Mohajirs were unprecedented in the level of cruelty exhibited as well as the extent of death and destruction” (Chaudhry, 2004, p. 265).
13 The colonial system of English medium education persists in creating urban elite in opposition to state run educational system producing subjects categorized by their English speaking alternates as ‘Urdu Medium Types’ (UMTs). With the advent of the Islamist policies of General Zia mosque schools were substantially funded. They tended to present a militant view of Islam and aided in many cases in the Indoctrination and preparation of fighters to join the Afghan War. Many of the students in these madressahs have been foreign Muslim trainees. Recent government policies have now focused removal of foreigners from these madressahs and reforming their curriculum. (Hassan 2009)
14 (Hassan 1999)
15 The Clifton Bridge located near the US consulate is a marker for crossing into elite and gated communities. Since the bombing outside the US Consulate public transport vehicles, motorbikes and vans are not allowed to cross the consulate and continue over the bridge.
16 According to Chaudhry (2004) the riots of 1985 in Orangi marked the onset of Karachi’s contemporary ethnic conflict. The riots initially occurred between transport-users, Mohajirs and Punjabis , and transporters (often Pathans), and escalated into a protracted armed conflict between Mohajirs and Pathans. The death of a girl run over by a bus driver sparked the conflict.
17 Deployment of state security forces to quell the ethnic unrest in Karachi set the tone for subsequent crackdowns by repressive state apparatuses which continue till today (Chaudhry, 2004; Chaudhry & Bertram, 2009).
‘It is nothing but a landfill of stinking garbage that never gets cleared away. We just pile more and more rotting carcasses and the cockroaches keep coming from everywhere in a violent feeding frenzy. A city of migrants. An interminable flow of garbage washing up on its shores.\(^{18}\)

A crow landed on one of the electricity wires that crisscrossed and sliced the landscape outside. He picked on the carcass of a paper kite impaled on one of the electric poles.

‘And crows’ he thought – we are picked clean by the scavenging crows...cockroaches, vermin and crows this is what we have come down.\(^{19}\)

Pathans; Bangladeshis; Central Asian prostitutes; the bloody Biharis are still here not to mention the Punjabis and the Armed forces who have their hand in everything!\(^{20}\)

Overflowing and stretching its waistband engorging itself. The city had swallowed up his parents, and then his younger brother to fill its belly.\(^{21}\)

We are infested with cockroaches and vermin from inside and out.

And the Afghans. Who can forget our dear brothers the Afghans, the Mujahideen and now the Taliban. Oh and who can forget our benefactors the Americans and their drone attacks and their so called ‘War on Terror’\(^{22}\) and the IDPs who keeping flowing in.\(^{23}\)

Had it not been for the roaches and vermin we might never had seen guns in the hands of collage students.

Were it not for them we would never have become a trading post for drugs.\(^{24}\) Atiq had recently seen a BBC expose on Karachi where the city had been featured as a center for ‘networks of international espionage.’\(^{25}\) A social space where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other a ‘contact zone born out of conflict. A city divided across sectarian and ethnic lines

\(^{18}\) Urbanization: Approximately 37 million (underestimated) Hassan (2009) estimates that if the municipal boundaries were redefined close to fifty percent of Pakistan’s population occupies urban space (Hassan, 2009, p. 183)

\(^{19}\) The conflict in Karachi is a “complex amalgamation of civil war, state-induced unrest, cross-border intervention and violent state repression” (Chaudhry & Bertram, 2009, p. 298).

\(^{20}\) Hatred and ‘othering’ of multiple groups in order to consolidate own subject identity.

\(^{21}\) Khattak (2002) estimates than an average of 630 violent deaths (95% male) took place each year between 1990 and 2000. A case series study of persons suffering from intentional injuries and transported by Edhi Ambulances (the largest emergency service in Karachi) between October 1993 and January 1996 claims that approximately 58% of those violently injured die before they reach hospital. The most common weapon used was a firearm. On days of political strikes people were more likely to get injured, and killed, compared with days without a political strike. Violent injuries were concentrated in areas of single ethnic and political affiliation (Chotani et al., 2002, p. 59).

\(^{22}\) Of the 60 cross-border predator strikes carried out by the Afghanistan-based American drones in Pakistan between January 14, 2006 and April 8, 2009, only 10 were able to hit their actual targets, killing 14 wanted Al-Qaeda leaders. 687 innocent Pakistani civilians were killed. The success percentage of the US predator strikes thus comes to not more than six per cent. January 2006 in 60 American predator attacks targeting the tribal areas of Pakistan (Mir, 2009).

\(^{23}\) With the increase in Military Operations against the Pakistani Talibain almost 3 million people were internally displaced many of whom made their way to relatives and friends in Karachi. 12,000 IDPs reach Karachi in three days(“12,000 IDPs reach Karachi in three days,” 2009)

\(^{24}\) US supported Mujahideen in Afghanistan responsible for the scale of brutality and the influx of weapons into Karachi – (Chaudhry, 2004, p. 265)

\(^{25}\) (Farrukhi, 2010)
where violence and death are an everyday occurrence. A complex and contradictory entity riddled with bullet holes, plots of assassination and suicide bombings; ‘the epicentre of international terror’.

A city housing the Talibain’.

Who would believe that we are the financial capital of the country!? This place has no soul, no culture.

It is fickle treacherous two faced like all the people who exist within it. The crow cocked his grey head to one side as if listening to the insults and then taking offence took flight.

Atiq stood at the window looking out but not seeing. He lit a cigarette. Harris Khalique’s poem kept coming to his mind and he recited it aloud.

Let’s mourn and celebrate Karachi.
Mourn the young
Whose bodies are found in gunny bags every day
With their eyes gouged and limbs broken.
Celebrate the birth
Of every baby with lips like rose petals
And cheeks like plums.
Mourn the streets that caved in
Under avarice and mediocrity.
Celebrate the eating places
Which serve hot and spicy food all night long.
Mourn the libraries that were never opened.
Celebrate the poets who are still writing.
Mourn the cinema halls that were closed down.
Celebrate the artists who are still performing.
Mourn the bigotry, subservience, prohibition, primordial norms.
Celebrate the camaraderie, freedom, consumption, promiscuity.
Mourn the death inflicted on its citizens.
Celebrate the love of life in its air.
Let’s cry for all who are dead.
Let’s sing for everyone who is alive.  

He took a deep inhale and remembered his brother.
They had grown up in this city together. His brother had been a doctor and he had loved this city. It had been home to him. But his brother had left his clinic and never come home.
He had been at his clinic when his wife called to tell him that the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto had been assassinated.
The assassination had been in Islamabad but the riots happened in Karachi.

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26 I’m Alive and So is My City, By Harris Khalique (2010, p. 243).
The traffic had begun to slow down around five in the evening as the news started to spread about the assassination. Atiq remembered the fear. Karachi was the nerve center ripe for unrest. People were trying to get home to safety; they all knew what could happen in such a situation, they could sense the violent possibilities. Just one match is all it would take to ignite emotions. Then it started. They were caught in an inferno of burning vehicles and looting. Mobs of angry protesters armed with sticks, petrol bombs and various light ammunition started attacking vehicles, public and state property. Nobody seems to know who started it and how the mobs operated. People stuck in the traffic were easy targets. The flotsam and jetsam residents of the city were held at gunpoint for their wallets, purses and cell phones. It went on the whole night. Many people did not make their way home. His brother was one of them. Three days later Atiq found his body in the morgue. As usual nobody knew who had done this. His body was a statistic, one in fifty killed by ‘La maloom afrad’ (unknown individuals).
Chapter 6
Native Informant Complicates Empowerment Narratives!

*Imperialism, Neo-Liberalism, Political-Islam, Feminisms and the Cracks in between*

In this chapter I attempt to take a deeper look at the concept of empowerment through a contemporary feminist empowerment narrative or text and explore what it means to be ‘empowered’ within its framework. By ‘empowerment narrative’ I refer to stories or texts currently in circulation which we ‘consume’ and construct about how people can be empowered and how empowerment takes place. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to articulate and enumerate all empowerment narratives in circulation in development discourse as they change and are modified when told in context. Instead I choose to illustrate the work of narratives through a specific example relevant to the context I studied. The choice of this empowerment narrative is deliberate as its scope and implications are significant in structuring the broader discourse of the Women’s Movement in Pakistan, one in which I and my participants are embedded. I present this example by rendering and re-presenting my encounter with it. I deconstruct the text to explore how universalist concepts such as autonomy, rights, and decision-making are drawn upon to frame empowerment narratives by many actors within the Women’s Movement in Pakistan.

Situating my analysis within the sphere of poststructural and postcolonial feminism, I explore the context and content of the narrative to complicate its fabric in order to understand how the threads appear bound together coexisting, co-creating and cross-fertilizing. By threads I refer to paradigmatic thought processes, world views, belief systems which have come to be accepted as true and natural. Meta narratives complete with ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of truth, knowledge construction and strategies of intervention which have both
material and discursive implications. I also consider how relevant strategic essentialism is in a context where many women’s politico-religious groups now have genuine grassroots support and apply the same terminology and methods of service delivery for poverty alleviation; empowerment and the provision of social justice used by members of the Women’s Movement in Pakistan.

My story is staged in Karachi and I am about to enter the Press Club for a presentation on a research framework titled “Women’s Empowerment in Muslim Contexts: Gender, Poverty and Democracy from the Inside Out” (WEMC, 2008). Curiosity is definitely a pull factor. As a resident Karachiite and feminist researcher collaborating with a group of grassroots community workers to explore the notion of empowerment; reading the title I feel almost compelled to attend. This five year DFID funded action research study includes partners from the UK, China, Indonesia, Iran, and of course Pakistan and provides an interesting example of a transnational feminist activist academic community alliance. The project was formed to address a knowledge gap on how to achieve women’s empowerment and to develop a “new narrative” of women’s empowerment in opposite to a totalistic rightwing politico-religious ones (Wee & Shaheed, 2008).

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27 The use of liberal feminist ideology (universal human rights, autonomy, etc.) as a strategy for garnering international support.
The gate of Karachi’s Press Club is almost inaccessible. Cars are gridlocked and at a standstill, horns blare in a bizarre useless disjointed symphony; the smog is thick and choking. I hold my dupatta over my nostrils to filter air and manoeuvre myself past a polluting offensive rickshaw whose owner has deliberately removed its silencer. The familiar boundary wall of the Press Club is visible just ahead. The white washed wall is embellished with artistically painted slogans in black and red paint. Some of the slogans are in support of political parties such as “Jiye Altaf!” in support of the MQM, 28 or “Bibi Zindah Hai!” in support of the PPP and the assonated former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. 29 While others are more derogatory such as “Khapey Khapey” (I want I want) a popular political joke on President Zardari’s desire to own all of Pakistan (not govern it). Half torn posters from the previous lawyers rally 30 and missing persons protest 31 are also visible. A large kite painted red green and white crudely outlined in black symbolizing the MQM party dominates. I forge my way ahead between the motorcycles parked on the pavement.

I hear the uncomfortable sound of glass shattering and turn to see a crowd gathering to watch the tamasha as two drivers get out of their cars and are about to have a testosterone filled abuse hurling contest on who’s “sister or whose mother is...bhaichod matherchod taley ho sameny nazar na hi a a raha key gari aarai hai!...are you drunk can’t you see the car coming in front of you!”

As I hurry towards the entrance I notice the hunger strikers outside the club on the footpath with their listless banner to save the haris 32 of Mirpurkhas from oppression. The sounds of an impending fight have roused them from their hunger induced stupor and some seem to be joining the crowd. I also notice two young men in white starched shalwar kameezes and green turbans peering into the confusion. 33 Such is the cacophony of the everyday in Karachi.

I take a deep smog filled breath and squeeze my way through the mass of bodies of curious onlookers and come out on the other side to open space. I realize as I look down that I am still clutching my cotton thela close to my chest and think ‘force of habit’. In a city of twenty million plus it is all you can do to defend your breasts, cash and mobile phone. Ask any female Karachi my age or younger and they will tell you that when caught in a crowd this reaction is intuitive; it is almost bred into your DNA. Grab bag to chest (forget about butt there is no hope of avoiding the pinchers!).

28 Altaf Hussain is the head of the MQM party, the Muttahida Quami Mahaz (previously known as the Mohajir Quami Movement) which claims to represent the Mohajir community – Urdu speaking migrants from India who came as refugees from India on partition in 1947. Altaf Hussain presently lives in the UK.
29 “Benazir Bhutto is still alive!” Referring to the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto head of the PPP (Pakistan People’s Party). Claiming her spirit still lives.
30 After the Chief Justice was unconstitutionally removed from office in 2008 a series of protests led by lawyers and civil society organizations protesting for his reinstatement.
31 Since 911 hundreds of people have gone missing from their homes many suspect they have been illegally detained for questioning and transferred by the ISI (the intelligence service of Pakistan) into the custody of the United States.
32 Bonded labour
33 This is the uniform of the Sipah Sahaba (a banned politico-religious group).
Smoothing my rumpled kameez and slinging my thela back on my shoulder assured that its contents are intact (including my new digital recorder) I continue to cross the expanse of the garden and head towards the back of the colonial structure where I can see a multicoloured shamiana billowing in the breeze and women with photocopied flyers and placards rushing in and out of the tent’s opening. I reach inside my thela for the email flyer I had printed out this morning. I glance at the title again.

Dialogue on Women’s Empowerment in Muslim Contexts
Karachi Press Club, On Feb 10th, 2008, 5:30 – 7:30 pm

As I step into the enclosure I see a number of familiar faces from the women’s movement frantically trying to get the purple banner to stay up in the backdrop. I can hear the mike being tested “Helloo …wan toooo threeee testing”. The sufi kalam performed by Abida Parveen the famous Sindhi artist is being broadcast through the speakers “Are logon tumhara kya...main janoo mera khuda jane”. This kalam always seems to resonate with me – religion is personal it really is ‘between me and my God’ so who gave other people the right to interfere in our relationship?

I survey the layout, three columns of red wedding chairs and a stage. The ones to the left have already been partially occupied. The young women seated appear to have been bussed in from underprivileged communities mostly Katchi Abadis (Urban squatter settlements) and peri urban settlements. Most of these women are dressed in Arabicized clothing black or tan abayas worn over their shalwar kameezes their heads covered in hijabs. However women wearing naqabs (face covered) and burqas are glaringly absent. Their presence is perhaps meant to reflect inclusion and solidarity that the rather elitist women’s movement imagines it has created and continues to support (2005b). In the center, the front row is sporadically populated with women from the NGO sector some in sleeveless starched cotton shalwar kameezes, others in home spun cotton khaddar embellished with silver jewellery. These are women who my participants refer to as the “Aunties”; the old guard of the Women’s Movement in Pakistan and the current leadership of many NGOs. They are one’s who stood up against General Zia ul Haq’s draconian laws the Hudood Ordinances. Many of these women have been mentors to me and have supported my activism.

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34 Oh people what is it to you (why do you interfere) …this is between me and my God”.
35 The Arabized clothing the abaya (long overcoat) and head scarves (hijab) has become popular and fashionable particularly in the lower middle class in Karachi. The black burqa was more popular in previous generation is seen less now in Karachi. Women with their faces covered by a naqab are generally considered as more conservative and markers of membership to piety movements or politico-religious groups like the Jamaat-e-Islami.
36 My participants refer to the NGO culture as the ‘Aunty Culture’ – a class related designation.
37 The constitutional amendments allowed for the formation of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) with the function of advising the legislatures and executive on whether any law proposed was to be considered “repugnant to the injunctions of Islam” and to bring all existing laws into conformity with Islam. Thus the Hudood Ordinances were formulated (which are considering the most damaging laws in the context of women) through the CII (S. Zia, 2001). The Qanun-e-shahadat, a law which puts limitations on the competency of a woman’s testimony, was promulgated during 1984. The law under Article 151 (1) “permits the character of the female complainant in cases of rape to be impeached to show that she was of general immoral character” (S. Zia, 2001). The Hudood ordinances are considered the most damaging piece of legislation to constrict women’s rights in Pakistan. It also became the hook on which women’s movements galvanized and lobbied against. In November 2006 the Zina Ordinance was modified under President Parvez
I walk through the rows of chairs deciding where to place myself both physically and metaphorically ‘left...left of centre not right definitely not right...’ when I hear someone call out my name “Shama! Aap bhi aiee hain ...” (You have also come!)” it is one of the organizers whom I have know for a number of years through my activist and field work “…do ask some questions ...kuch sawal zaroor poochhaye...aur aap yahan baithain ...and please sit here...” I follow her towards a space she indicates in the center placing me with the Auntes and the NGO crowd.

I take my seat and eavesdrop on the running commentary provided courtesy of the woman behind me in a loud informative tone. She seems to be very connected and updated on all the latest gossip – which Federal Minister is being shifted to a new posting...who the next city government mayor will be and which funding agency is funding which projects and who the key person in USAID in Islamabad is at present...

Her narration stops in midsentence as screeching sound emits from the corner speakers, and the presenter begins a narration in a mix of English and Urdu.

‘Khwateen o Hazraat’ (Ladies and Gentlemen)

‘Welcome on behalf of WEMC, Women’s Empowerment in Muslim Contexts: Gender, Poverty and Democratization from the Inside Out.’

I listen to the presentation making copious analytical notes for myself in my field diary to reflect on. I note that the narrative appears critical of existing development discourse and colonial feminism and promises to address gaps in existing knowledge construction; build local capacity of researchers and present cutting edge activist academic work across borders.

Contextualized in the language of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and rights discourse the focus of WEMC is to develop a ‘new narrative’ of women’s empowerment aimed to bridge gaps between women’s lived realities, decision making and understand how to achieve women’s empowerment (MDG Goal 3). The narrative aims to make visible the strategies that are ‘indigenous and meaningful’ to women in ‘Muslim Contexts’ in asserting their rights and support to women who resist oppressive systems, including Islamist political agendas and other forces that impoverish and marginalise women, moving them towards a process of ‘democracy form the inside out’ (Wee & Shaheed, 2008, p. 5). WEMC’s purpose is to research and understand how women can, and do, empower themselves; to identify the forces that obstruct them and those that support their empowerment, so as to enhance the former, while reducing the latter (Wee & Shaheed, 2008, p. 16). Its intention is to map more than the mere forms of women’s actions: It seeks to map

Musharraf through the passing of the Women’s Protection Bill (Patel 2007) which has sparked significant debate between women’s rights activists and politico-religious parties. The bill removes rape from the Zina Ordinance and brings it under the Pakistan Penal Code, therefore eliminating the need for four male witnesses and allows convictions to be made on the basis of forensic and circumstantial evidence. Under the changes, adultery and non-marital consensual sex are still offences, however police no longer have the right to detain people suspected of having illicit sex. Instead a formal accusation in court is now required. The amendments change the punishment for someone convicted of having consensual sex outside marriage to imprisonment of up to five years and a fine of rupees ten thousand. Rape is punishable with ten to twenty five years of imprisonment but with death or life imprisonment if committed by two or more persons together, while adultery remains under the Zina Ordinance and is punishable with stoning to death. The Bill also outlaws statutory rape (Patel 2007).
women’s ‘desire for empowerment’ and the potential of this desire to transform the power relations that seek to control, reduce or quash women (Wee & Shaheed, 2008, p. 32).

This new narrative like other feminist critiques (Andrea Cornwall, 2007b; Andrea Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Parpart, Connelly, & Bartheau, 2000) is critical of development discourse and the implications this has on how women’s empowerment is conceptualized as well as the obsession with its measurement. It claims that transformation is dependent on women themselves questioning, challenging and re-shaping unfavourable gendered power relations in varied contexts. WEMC also claims that strategies are context specific and what works in one context does not appear to work in others; and that there is a lack of analysis and synthesis across different empirical contexts drawing together lessons learned (Wee & Shaheed, 2008, p. 4). The framework asserts that the process of empowerment is neither simple nor unilinear, and nor is it a technical exercise that can be effected in the short run or through imposition of top-down programs; instead empowerment is seen as difficult, complex, multi-dimensional, long-term and a locally grounded process where structural transformation must take place if women are to become empowered subjects of their own lives (Wee & Shaheed, 2008, p. 71).

This empowerment narrative also acknowledges the problematic assumptions of the liberal feminist universalizing discourse and makes clear that it does not see women as a uniform and undifferentiated group and that women are marked by privilege and discrimination based on identity (race, class, gender, religion, ethnicity). It also highlights the fact that patriarchies and specific gender systems differ hence the route to empowerment for one woman may not be appropriate or meaningful or possible for another. It also considers the possibility that empowerment in one sphere may not lead to empowerment in another and that women are engaged in processes of negotiation and risk taking within these systems.

Interestingly the framework is also critical of development interventions and their implicit bias towards modernization theory which assume that political, legal, economic and educational interventions will directly empower women. The narrative asserts that these resources may be used by women but they do not constitute nor substitute the process of contestation required for transformation of power relations that is essential for the occurrence of empowerment (Wee & Shaheed, 2008, p. 24). The framework suggests that up-scaling women’s strategic initiatives, down scaling them, or maintaining the exiting initiatives could all be equally valid strategic options depending on the conditions within which women are exercising their initiative. The narrative also asserts that there is a need to move away from assumptions that up scaling is a unilinear process or that up-scaling is necessarily always good (Wee & Shaheed, 2008, p. 30). The persistent tendency in development discourse to view women’s relative lack of power as stemming from their lack of education, health or other skills and assets is also highlighted as problematic in the WEMC narrative; as is the overall reluctance of development actors to address inequities emerging from structural inequalities; and conducting a nuanced analysis of the exercise of power. In response to this critique WEMC conceptualises power as a “relational, qualitative phenomenon shaped by contesting forces, not a quantity to have in incremental amounts” (Wee & Shaheed, 2008, p. 17).

Yet the WEMC narrative appears to cling to some very specific essentialist notions about empowered women subjects, the process of empowerment; and its outcomes; which raise potentially problematic contradictions within the overall narrative. These include the central focus
of the framework on autonomous decision making as an indicator of women’s empowerment; limited understandings of agency; dependency on universal human rights discourse; and naturalized assumptions of collective struggle.

Empowerment in the WEMC framework is defined as “an increased capacity to make autonomous decisions that transform unfavourable power relation” (Wee & Shaheed, 2008, p. 16). This implies that the meaning of empowerment is linked to choice. Choice is a key feature in both feminist and neoliberal empowerment discourse. One is considered an independent autonomous decision maker when one has the capacity to choose and make a choice. It also adds an element of responsibility since if one is autonomous and independent to choose, then one is also the responsible for ones actions, one’s life and one’s state of affairs (Goodkind, 2009). Although a central feature of the framework is the identification of blockages to empowerment it does not discuss the relational often personal nature of decision making. Without acknowledging this, analysis could easily descend into victim blaming by others and by oneself.

One of the assumptions about women in developing countries (particularly Muslim women) is that they have limited autonomy which is identified as a key for poor health and development outcomes. The WEMC framework appears to want to address this lack by the way it defines empowerment. The Beijing Platform of Action also repeatedly states the need to empower women as autonomous decision makers so as to improve their ability to make decisions regarding their reproductive health and hence their reproductive health outcomes. However Mumtaz and Salaway (2009) in their ethnographic study of women in Pakistan’s rural Punjab challenge this naturalized assumption. They claim that there is a need for context specific studies in order to critically rethink these assumptions around the links between empowerment and autonomy. Their studies have shown a weak or close to no relationship between women’s reproductive health choices and measures of autonomy such as independent decision making, unaccompanied travel and control over personal income. Hence one of the questions I put forward to WEMC narrative is ‘Can independence and autonomy be taken as unquestioned universals?’ Would I be correct in stating that the WEMC framework assumes that the process of empowerment through autonomy is a natural phenomenon?

Autonomy tends to be taken as the guiding policy and program planning paradigm by feminist organizations working on women’s reproductive and sexual health. Ahmed (2000) suggests a careful examination of the scaffolding of narratives on which the claims to authenticity and legitimacy are built in order to perpetuate systems of hegemony. Mumtaz and Salaway’s (2009) research reveals that there is an undue emphasis on independent, autonomous action in programs that focus on empowerment while strong emotional and structural bonds that tie women and men in families are ignored. The second key finding of their research is that the autonomy paradigm focuses too much on husband and wife relations excluding other key actors such as elder women and women to women bonds. They also suggest that there is an insufficient understanding of men and masculinities and the implications this has for women’s health. Their data also reveals that men under forty are in fact practicing family planning based on the message projected by the media and it was they who were taking the decision due to pragmatic economic reasons not their partners asserting their autonomy. Mumtaz and Salaway’s (2009) study also suggests that the autonomy paradigm tends to not take into consideration context specific and local dynamics of decision making, where decisions are not made by individuals but through negotiation, discussion
and asking people’s opinions the process termed (salah mashwarah in Urdu) closer to what Moazam (2006) has termed “relational autonomy”. Mozzam (2006) in her study of family decision making on organ donation in Karachi identifies decision making in the case of kidney donation as a process of negotiation and claims that although medical science may assume that patients or donors are independent autonomous entities, in Pakistani contexts decision-making is always relational (be it women or men) and not autonomous as defined in the liberal sense.

In addition Mumtaz and Salaway’s (2009) study also suggests that the universal assumptions around autonomy disregard the multi-posited constitution of gender relations. In their field based study where women had a direct role in earning income their findings indicated that gender relations had not changed. Women handed their income over to their husbands and wage earning women made an effort to reflect that men were the primary wage earners in the household. They used the income for increasing the wellbeing of their household and not on their own healthcare. Mobility which is also considered a marker of autonomy and empowerment is also linked to class and caste boundaries and is therefore linked to what is considered inside and outside locally constructed boundaries and who is considered more vulnerable where making it a much more complicated issue. In their findings, accessing health care was not related directly to mobility but rather to a collective negotiated decision to seek it or not. Hence relations with specific older women who are seen as powerful are of more importance to whether women actually get access to health care. Mumtaz and Salaway (2009) also claim that there is an erroneous assumption that women’s gendered position is unidirectional and linear in process and that greater autonomy will lead to an increase in uptake of reproductive health services. They challenge the binary notion of the traditional women who lacks freedom and control to the ‘modern autonomous woman’. They claim that “such an analysis leaves no room for the multidimensionality of women’s gendered position or the multiplicities of forms of femininity found in practice” (Mumtaz & Salaway 2009, p. 1354). Consequently life course, circumstances, roles, behaviours and practices are not fixed but instead are messy and affected by context; therefore the polarized notion autonomy limits analysis into how rules are negotiated and boundaries expanded. Empowerment narratives in development discourse by casting poor people as individuals who pursue entirely independent and goal-oriented strategies, deny the complexities of their relational ties and the contingencies of lived experience. Therefore according to Cornwall (2007a) power relations are of central importance in understanding the nature of empowerment and making “strategic choices is dependent on having the power to realize them” (Cornwall, 2007, p. 158).

Grewal (2005) makes a similar argument from a postcolonial perspective questioning the emphasis on liberal notions of personhood and independence interpreting this naturalized assumption as a gendered masculinist trait that has been glorified to reflect independence. She claims that it devalues relationships of interdependence such as friendship, loyalty, caring and responsibility and encourages separateness of people.

Although I have searched the entire framework I have been unable to locate a working definition for how autonomy is understood within the context of the WEMC research. I would

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38 Similar findings were also presented by Goetz and Sen (1996) in their study on women and microcredit in Bangladesh.
suggest that perhaps this term and its centrality within the framework needs to be reconsidered along with its underlying assumptions.

This lack of an operational definition for autonomy to me appears odd given that the WEMC framework centers on the concept and define power as a “relational, qualitative phenomenon’. According to Pease (2002) the way we conceptualize power has implications for the way we develop strategies for social change. Yet I am unclear if the relational definition of power also extends to that of autonomy. WEMC’s understanding of power appears to draw on the work of Foucault (2000) who sees power as relational and not a commodity which can redistributed or transferred. However based on the framework’s assumptions around the outcomes of empowerment this understanding of power is somewhat contradictory. If power has a relational quality then empowerment as an outcome too should be relational and hence its outcomes are unpredictable. Yet empowerment is defined by the narrative as

as an increased capacity to make autonomous decisions that transform unfavourable power relations...an increased ability to question, challenge and eventually transform unfavourable gendered power relations, often legitimised in the name of ‘culture’. (Wee & Shaheed, 2008, p. 16)

The narrative places immense emphasis on women’s capacity to make autonomous decisions and exploring what circumstances enable women to have the capacity to make autonomous decisions and what the source of their autonomy is (Wee & Shaheed 2008, p. 17). However what if women do not consider autonomy as central to their understanding of empowerment? If power is relational and shaped in context it may not necessarily manifest in the form of autonomous decision making and its exercise may lead to unexpected outcomes which may not be ‘empowering’ for women as defined in the WEMC framework. Therefore I would suggest based on existing literature that in order to understand empowerment a more nuanced understanding of power is required to address inequalities. In addition, since power is exercised and only exists in action (Foucault, 1980, as discussed in Gore 1992, p. 58) empowerment cannot transcend power relations as it is enmeshed in them (Parpart et al., 2000). If empowerment takes place in institutional, material and discursive contexts and people are empowered and changed through resisting disciplinary power relations “this very action may also strengthen their incorporation into the status quo” (Parpart et al., 2002, p. 4) and hence power may also manifest itself in forms contrary to the frameworks’ defined parameters. Sharma (2008) also makes a similar claim based on her ethnographic study on women’s empowerment through development projects in India. According to Sharma, such projects often carry predictable and unforeseen dangers and can provide unpredictable results. Consequently sites of contestation may not produce orderly manageable transformation and have the potential to generate bitter opposition, disruptive conduct and imperfect subjects (Sharma, 2008, p. x). WEMC’s ‘new narrative’ of empowerment does not seem to consider this possibility in its understanding of power.

Another contradiction that appears in this narrative is connected to subject construction and essentialism. Although the narrative is clear in proclaiming that all women are not the same yet I believe that the WEMC framework through its construction of the empowered subject may unwittingly perform an essentialising function. WEMC by presenting the empowered subject as one that is an autonomous decision maker, one that struggles against disempowerment, poor women
who live in ‘Muslim Contexts’ are constructed as regulated bodies who are expected to perform these roles and are assessed for signs of empowerment based on this naturalized assumptions. Kothari and Sethi (1991) argue that it is important to ask whether women in many parts of the world can be seen as autonomous individuals (outside the family) or whether their oppression in the family can be addressed by asserting their autonomy from it. There is an assumption that in order for women to be recognized as human they must become free autonomous individuals who can recognize their oppression and struggle to become citizens of a global civil society (Grewal, 2005, p. 130). Hence empowerment is assumed to be the natural state of being that must be aspired towards and someone termed “dependant” or “apathetic” and “lacking in self confidence” as opposed to autonomous is then measured against the normative ideal of empowerment and found lacking. Dependence is therefore pathologized and independence equated to adulthood and non-infantile behaviour (Goodkind, 2009). However Cruikshank (1999) challenges this assumption as well claiming that empowerment is actually founded on the subject’s ability to already be capable of action (not lacking in agency). “Actions are regulated only after the capacity to act with certain aims is instilled displaying the productive aspects of power to transform and act upon capacities of the poor” (Cruikshank, 1999, pp. 68-69).

The WEMC research framework is also premised on poor women as experts in identifying strategies for empowerment. According to Cruikshank (1999) constructing the poor in empowerment narratives is also linked to knowledge production about them as harnessing the social scientific knowledge of the poor ties to their empowerment and eventual self-government (p. 69). Empowerment therefore extends into a relationship established based on expertise (not only the expertise of the ‘experts’) but of the ‘real’ experts, the poor. Knowledge about those to be empowered through participatory methodologies has now become dependant on them and their participation making research on/for empowerment and programs for empowerment intrinsically connected through a technology of governance (Foucault, 1977).

Cruikshank (1999) and Sharma (2008) both draw on Foucault’s concept of “governmentality” and “bio-power” to elaborate on this phenomenon and its technology. Foucault (1990) analyses European history to trace the shift from modes of governance of repressive sovereign territorial control to a form of bio power where the focus of the system of governance became the care and well being of people living in a particular territory. He believes that this form of governance led to the development of a range of practices and institutions for surveillance and governance that regulated the conduct of populations and direct it towards particular ends. According to Cruikshank (1999) empowerment narratives through voluntary compliance seek to shape subjects through technologies of governance (subjects whose very problems they seek to address) into being capable of governing themselves, of acting in their own interests and in solidarity with others transforming them into active, capable and autonomous bodies. Since subjectivity is both enabled and constrained by relations of power ‘empowered bodies’ are constituted as an effect and instrument of power. Hence even the most philanthropic and altruistic of agendas “entail power relationships that are both voluntary and coercive” (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 3). Cruikshank (1999) argues that counter hegemonic and hegemonic usages of empowerment are both techniques of governmentality as the aim is to produce subjects who participate in the project of governance and mould their behaviour towards a certain end. She claims that “The will to empower others and oneself is neither a bad nor a good thing. It is political; the will to empower
contains the twin possibilities of domination and freedom” (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 2) where it is simultaneously both voluntary and coercive. To quote Cruikshank,

the left uses empowerment to generate political resistance; the right, to produce rational economic and entrepreneurial actors. Yet the tactics for empowerment mobilized in innumerable programs...share a political strategy: to act upon the other by getting them to act in their own interest. It is the content of the powerless people’s interests over which the right and the left disagree. (p. 68)

Hence one needs to be open to the possibility that the notion of empowerment may not be an unquestionable ‘good thing’ and that “Empowerment is a power relationship, a relationship of government; it can be used well or badly” (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 86).

Sharma (2008) builds on this understanding claiming that the empowerment narrative is a multi layered picture of “shifting formations and flexible technologies of government rather than a singular coherent discourse or method” (p. 4). As a result empowerment as an emancipation strategy doubles as a technology of government and development.

Empowerment according to Sharma (2008) can be seen as a self regulatory mode of governance. The purpose is to direct behaviour of individuals and collectives towards certain ends. Be these mainstream ideas of development or alternative/opposition strategies in terms of governmentality the strategies overlap. We act upon our subjectivity to govern ourselves. Such subjection appears to originate from ourselves because it appears naturalized and hence we see it as a reflection of our own freedom (Cruikshank, 1993). Such self-governance is then conflated with socially responsible behaviour reducing the burden on the state presenting model neoliberal citizens. Sharma (2008) in her analysis of the MS program in India sees empowerment as a transnational assemblage (something that is both situated but not locked in place) formed in articulation with processes that transcend and crosscut in both space and time by heterogeneous elements that are not necessarily internally coherent through a particular strategy (Sharma, 2008) Such assemblages are grafted, shift, morph institutions, strategies, goals, ideas which are made and remade through transnational circulations and articulations. Therefore empowerment becomes a ‘moving target’ whose meaning is continually changing from what is envisioned by policy makers as compared to what happens when drawn upon the ground. Global hegemonic discourse comes into contact with contextual (historical, geographical, philosophical, nationalism) understandings of empowerment and produces uneven and complex results – open ended and unpredictable which could be counter hegemonic on reframe hegemonic discourse. Sharma argues the fissures that occur in these various uses open up potential for political action.

The concept of agency and how it is defined in such frameworks therefore becomes important to focus attention on. According to the WEMC framework women’s capacity for agency has the potential to change structures of oppression and “disregard for people’s agency undercuts the foundation of empowerment, causing systemic failures” (Wee & Shaheed, 2008, p. 23). According to Wee and Shaheed (2008) “women can be empowered only through their own agency” (p. 44) which requires them to go through “their own processes and cycles of reflections, decisions and actions as subjects of their own empowerment” (p. 44).
The issue of agency is a contentious one for feminists and critical theorists. Recent theoretical analysis of the term brings new qualifications in the use of the term. For example Shirin Rai (2008) in her book *The Gender Politics of Development* cautions that agency cannot be looked at without assessing the risks involved in challenging oppression. She also suggests that measuring of agency needs to be accompanied with measuring vulnerability and doing one without the other would be politically irresponsible and possibly unethical. For Rai, measuring the risks associated with structural barriers to empowerment are important and that there is a need to recognize the importance of context when using the term (Rai, 2008). Although the WEMC framework does talk about violence as a possible outcome of exercising agency it is unclear if the term risk and violence can be used synonymously. Rai also argues that what is at times presented as empowerment may in fact be a ‘struggle for survival’ (Rai, 2008, p. 178) and suggests that this distinction may also make a difference in empirical research frameworks both in the analysis and conclusions drawn in particular contexts. Sharma (2008) on the other hand proposes a rethinking of how agency is understood. She suggests that there is a need to examine specific contexts where women are positioned as gendered beings (there are also different gender systems and manifestations). She believes that contexts are over determined by multiple discourses and relations of power related to subject construction and leading to ambiguous actions in different situations. What I gather from this argument is that agency is not always empowering and may deepen gender inequalities something that the WEMC framework does not take into consideration. According to Sharma (2008) even if women attempt to comprehend and contest hierarchies outcomes may end up very different to intentions. Therefore it is dangerous to assume that agency will lead to empowerment and hence it should not be presumed as a naturalized outcome.

Saba Mahmood (2005) offers the possibility of viewing women’s agency and subjectivity differently. Based on her study of Muslim women in the piety movements in Cairo she claims that liberal feminist theorizing of agency, autonomy and resistance represents conceptualizations of modernity and ignores the relationship between religion, activism and subject construction. She suggests that acknowledging the agency of women who are part of politico-religious Islamic movements puts feminists in an uncomfortable position as this make the understanding of empowerment messy and fear it may compromise their own critique of such movements. Indeed for the framework this would definitely make things messy since the framework claims that women who are part of piety movements and politico-religious groups are being delegitimized by religion and perpetuate disempowering power relations which can ‘easily be reproduced even by women who internalise these claims of culture/religion as legitimate’. From this I deduce that the WEMC framework assumes that these women ‘lack agency’ and therefore participate in these movements due to false consciousness and internalization of patriarchal norms through socialization. Extending the WEMC argument then implies that all such movements labelled as consequences of ‘fundamentalism and cultural backwardness ‘ and would then be treated as facts that do not require further interrogation.\(^{39}\) Cruikshank claims that such a position is implicitly elitist. It is also assumes that empowerment will only work if the poor help themselves. Hence subjectivity is balanced with their subjection as the poor are seen as obstructions in the way of their own

\(^{39}\) Something that Amina Jamal’s (2009) work with the women of the Jamat-e-Islami disputes (I have elaborated on her argument further in this chapter).
emancipation. The key to reform and revolution is through their independent and voluntary participation in their own emancipation.

Sharma (2008) challenges this assumed notion of false consciousness and claims that “women’s perceptions and decisions are guided by experiential consciousness and pragmatic concerns” (not by false consciousness) (p. 174). Mahmood’s (2005) study seems to provide a challenge to the WEMC framework to reconsider prior assumptions around such women’s movement being the result of internal oppression and lacking in agency. Her analysis questions naturalized liberal assumptions the universal desire for ‘freedom’, ‘assertion of autonomy when allowed to do so’, and that agency is only manifest in acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them. Mahmood therefore suggests the need to relook at previous empirical studies and analysis to question whether feminists misattribute acts of women as those of political agency as opposed to understanding the workings of power. Abu-Lughod (1990) reflecting on her own proposes that feminists need to locate resistance within fields of power not outside them and within the ethical and political condition in which the acts gain meaning.

Sharma (2008) further troubles the definition of agency by drawing on examples from her fieldwork of women who initiate violence and suggest such acts could also be categorized as a form of agency. Her fieldwork challenges notions of women as non-violent, egalitarian and nonparticipants in violence and also recommends re-examination of assumptions such as those embedded in the WEMC framework where women are presumed as victims of violence and not its perpetrators (Wee & Shaheed, 2008).

The WEMC framework following it pattern of strategic essentialism repeatedly draws on the liberal notion of human rights which holds a central place in the framework. This ‘new narrative’ states that

use of ‘culture and religion to deny women rights’ is ... a global phenomenon, ...and in the case of Muslim contexts those opposing women’s rights are either the upholders of patriarchal traditions or are newer political forces utilising existing patriarchal structures to disempower women. (Wee & Shaheed, 2008, p. 8)

Human rights discourse emerged in the last twenty five years as part of a regime of truth – became a universalistic ideal within contemporary moral discourse (Grewal, 2005). According to Kothari (2005), human rights are Eurocentric in many of their assumptions and goals, even though they may be one of the few tools available to struggle for the rights of the disenfranchised. Kothari claims that the rights discourse is grounded in an individualistic ethic and anf the notion of autonomy. This discourse has been drawn on by the Bush administration to justify military intervention in Afghanistan (Grewal, 2005, p. 133). Human rights struggles according became more urgent when the internationalism promise of equality, peace, and justice among states receded in a world of transnational corporations, fragmenting regressive nation states and emerging cosmopolitan groups (Grewal, 2005). Powerful states measure whether other states are democratic; training in human rights is given to grassroots organizations and a transnationalized discourse emerges as a means to monitor and evaluate good governance by International organizations, and NGOs index welfare of populations. However Jamal (2005b) in her analysis of the Women’s Action Forum(WAF) in Pakistan identifies the rights discourse as a strategic tool for
women’s activists in Pakistan and not as a means of subscribing to the liberal feminist discourse. According to her analysis the rights discourse provides a space for lobbying and advocacy in an environment that has very few supporters. The question for the WEMC framework is whether the use of rights is strategic or is this ‘new narrative’ consciously subscribing to the liberal feminist assertions of empowerment? The matter remains unclear.

Another naturalized assumption suggested by the WEMC framework is that of ‘collective struggle’ as strategy for empowerment. This implies that the group as a collective of autonomous individuals comes together in a collective struggle and the collective is seen as an autonomous political being/ entity with gender bringing women together. Hence women are essentialized as one group with a common tradition and common goals. According the Grewal (2005) the modernity discourse assumes that “females live their lives as ‘women’ solely rather than as part of communities, or that women see themselves as autonomous individuals” (p. 136).

Sharma (2008) claims that since subject formation is a complex phenomena it is problematic to assume that women’s groups are aware of or will come to realize their gendered interests as primary and collectively take action to struggle against subordination. Despite multiple identities and particular circumstances how can one assume that a group will equate to an aggregate of essentially similar individuals. Her research in India demonstrates how in practice there tend to be assertions of differences; power hierarchies; and competing claims based on multiple contradictory social positioning leading to subversive acts that challenge assumptions of the naturalized desire for equality, emancipation and feminist empowerment. However she does not suggest that one dismiss collective struggles as a strategy only that women activists must reflect on the strategies’ contextual complications. She also extends this argument to the term ‘community’ suggesting that although presented as uniform the ‘Community’ is an unstable entity and is formed and unformed by development discourse and imagination.

Clearly, sustaining the myths that women are inherently co-operative and selfless on the one hand, and, on the other, that they would readily break out of the webs of social relations in which their lives are enmeshed and act as autonomous sovereign individuals if only they had the material means to do so, is not doing women and particularly poor women much service. For a start, it fails to acknowledge the gendered power relations that women themselves may experience as more of an obstacle to the exercise of their agency and pursuit of well-being than relations with their husbands or lovers. It also fails to appreciate the very real implications of social connectedness for any account of agency, and with it the limits of the form of liberal individualism that is so hegemonic in mainstream development thinking (Cornwall, 2007, p. 164).

Finally I come to my last contradiction within the ‘new narrative’. According to the WEMC framework power dynamics in ‘Muslim Contexts’ actively disempower women through the use of culture and religion yet at the same time it also states that this is a global phenomenon which is not only specific to Muslim contexts and visible in non Muslim contexts as well (Wee & Shaheed, 2008). By constructing such storylines the narrative as I see it seems to become complicit in the essentializing of ‘Muslims’ even if that is not its intention. The narrative seems to critique essentialist notions of ‘Muslimness’ yet at the same time seems to hold it in its place as a unit of analysis where all ‘Islamists’ are presumed to have a “monolithic vision”. A vision that promotes a misconception that struggle for women’s rights are alien to Muslim contexts (Wee & Shaheed,
2008, pp. 6-7). Yet Jamal’s (2005a, 2009) research on the Jamat women in Pakistan clearly describes how this politico-religious movement in Pakistan actively seeks the political participation of women in a process of modernization and promotes education and employment. The narrative also excludes the role of women in these politico-religious movements and their active participation. Leaders of these movements have shown great success in using tools and terminology of NGOs in mobilizing and recruiting followers for cause of social justice (Zia, 2009). The new narrative also fails to interrogate the increased strength and following of these movements and remains silent on the role imperialist transnational actors and the ‘so called War on Terror’. According to Jamal (2005), feminism in Pakistan cannot be understood without acknowledging the politics of the struggle between Islam and modernity. In addition, Kandiyoti (1991) suggests that anti-Western Islamism is also a reflection of discontent with indigenous social class and cultural inequalities, conflicting interests within the population, and religious and ethnic diversities. To put it simply the context of Pakistan for feminist activism is complex. By remaining silent on these connections the new narrative is in danger of endorsing the dominant war talk in circulation even if the actors constructing this framework are personally critical of these actions.

The question is where does this complication of WEMC’s ‘new narrative’ take us? Despite all its contradictions substantiated by context specific empirical evidence why does this empowerment narrative still hold a dominant position?

Empowerment narratives imply visioning of a particular form of being; of social placement; order; capability and of subjectivity that prescribes a way of living. In essence they act as a particular and peculiar forms of governmentality where being is prescribed and one must conform in order to come to be or not be. The ‘new narrative’ appears caught within development and liberal feminist discourse despite its desire to subvert it. Nagar and Raju (2003) claim that

fraught with contradictions and caught between commitments to social change and market compulsions of the changing times, grassroots activism cannot be completely free from the baggage that neoliberalism and promarket policies bring to them. (p. 12)

Yet Jamal (2009) sees this stand as strategic in order to transcend culturalist power struggles at the local, national and transnational level to support their secular stance. She claims that women’s activists are wedged between fundamentalism, Orientalism and liberal feminism and are required to negotiate a strategic course (Jamal, 2005b). Since members of the Women’s movement (who see themselves as secular) and the Islamists are attempting to play a “developmental role in meditating different cultural projects and internal and external groups, and thus they are participating in shaping the nation according to their own ideals” (Jamal, 2005, p. 65). She states,

One of the most contentious discursive moves of feminist groups in Pakistan in relation to citizenship and democratic rights is their effort to establish Muslim women as sui juris, women’s rights to legal personhood, autonomy and independent decision making. (Jamal, 2005, p. 73)
This strategy is an attempt to establish women as individuals as opposed to their prevalent representation as situated in family, community and honour. Women of the Jamat-e-Islami would in contrast want to situate women within the family, community and honour seeing them as empowered citizens within this framework. Drawing on liberal ideals that include constructing an empowerment narrative based on Jamal’s analysis then becomes a strategic move. Buzz words such as MDGs; Autonomy; Agency and Rights and Empowerment provide a dual role of catering to mainstream development discourse and furthering the cause of the women’s movement in Pakistan. Shaheed (n.d) herself elsewhere acknowledges that the human rights framework itself is inadequate as it assumes that the state is the principle guarantor of rights and this is a fallacy in the case of Pakistan given the interference of nonstate actors. However she argues that the rights discourse provides a counterpoint, however in adequate to the use of culture and religion to justify structures of patriarchy. She suggests that the Women’s Movement needs to consider “appropriating and refashioning the cultural contexts in which they operate”. The WEMC framework incorporates on this idea and draws strength from its transnational affiliations, the rhetoric of the Millennium Development Goals and human rights builds on a scaffolding of knowledge production and consumption that allows for the narrative to be legitimated in multiple sites in the North and South yet instead of appropriating is somehow maintains a dichotomy. A dichotomy of the secular and religious in women’s lives and secular modernity is assumed and promoted by women’s activists as the route to women’s empowerment. By relegating women of politico-religious movements to the realm of the ‘other’ research projects like WEMC are able to maintain their own subjectivity and the integrity of their cause.

However reflecting on the WEMC framework I begin to wonder if the essentialist language used to describe politico-Islamic movements is really a strategic move. Even though the WEMC framework accepts that there are multiple definitions of empowerment it still clings to a particular liberal assumption of autonomy and decision making despite glaring evidence of these assumptions being problematic. Is this a battle for political space for the Women’s Movement? Given the increasing strength of politico-religious movements is this an outdated strategy? Can it really bolster their human rights approach? Does such a stand in any case make a difference to politico-religious groups or will they continue to see women’s activists as agents of the West?

According to Spivak and Rooney (1994) strategic essentialism can be deployed to mobilise people to do political work but it can also become a trap when the strategy no longer has positive effects. Therefore there is always a need to be subject to persistent critique “otherwise the strategy freezes into…an essentialist position” (Spivak & Rooney, 1994, as cited in Kapur, 2005, p. 90). Zia (2009) suggests that this strategy of appropriating the liberal discourse may no longer be relevant as the holes in the secular stand taken by the women’s movement are too large. For her essentializing politico-religious groups and not acknowledging the power of women in politico-religious movements for the Women’s movement in Pakistan is no longer an option. At the same time making policy suggestions to a failed state seems counter productive. The political agency of politico-religious groups has moved far beyond the mere attitudes or misinterpretation of religion. The movement has genuine grassroots support in many cases and it is precisely through their methods of service delivery, poverty alleviation, and provision of social justice that they have successfully institutionalized their cause. It remains for liberal progressives to either confront and challenge such structural takeovers through convincing alternatives, or perhaps be absorbed by this
larger force. Anything in-between, such as reinterpreting religion and using cultural and religious practices as empowerment as strategies are likely to fail or merely be co-opted by the very sophisticated and nuanced Islamist movement which includes women. Such mass participation as in the case of the Jamat women is evidence that women are not necessarily resisting but actively co-opting Islamist positions and looking to negotiate further Muslim rights from within patriarchal religion. For Zia (A. S. Zia, 2009a) the accommodation of religion within the secular stance of the Women’s Action forum has led to the weakening of WAF’s position and she sees this inclusive and apologist stance as soft and problematic. Her fear is that secular feminism will be rendered irrelevant leading to a new radicalized religio-political feminism in Pakistan. Dismissing these women as internally oppressed and accusing them of false consciousness will not remove their presence or the influence they exert of shaping local, national and transnational understandings of empowerment.

This leaves the Women’s Movement and WEMC implicated in a serious dilemma given the changing local and global scenario as to whether narratives that take on empowerment from a strategic essentialist perspective can in present circumstances achieve the movements strategic goals given the unpredictability of the discursive and material outcomes and the possibility that empowerment may indeed be a ‘moving target’.

The WEMC presentation comes to an end amidst scattered applause Tea and sandwiches are served in a side enclosure. Mosquitoes lodge their merciless attack and bats swoop down flying close to my head as I begin to move towards the exit.
Chapter 7
Community Mobilizers: A Poetic Introduction

Note to Reader

Prendergast (2009) writing about poetic inquiry states,

Poetic representations can provide the researcher/reader/listener with a different lens through which to view the same scenery, and thereby understand data, and themselves, in different and more complex ways. It is, therefore, a powerful form of analysis. (p. xxviii)

The use of poetry to introduce my participants to readers was not something I planned when I began writing this thesis. Although I had used poetry in its more generative\textsuperscript{40} form to reflexively talk about my rationale for coming to focus of this particular research topic, the process of moving from research transcripts to poetry somehow took me by surprise. As I listened to recordings and read through transcripts I began to notice a lyrical quality in the way participants talked about themselves and their experiences. I followed these instances in my notes trying to present this imagery into words while facing the limitations of language. The data was full of ambiguity, complexity and contradictions and I wanted to bring this to light, however linear progressive coding was not revealing the links and subtleties I saw within the data. One day as I was re-reading my notes I realized that I had written a poem using words and imagery from a transcript and that those few lines were able to capture the feelings and ideas that emerged when I first interviewed this participant. This led me to look for other poetic occasions\textsuperscript{41} in the transcripts and to read intensively about poetic inquiry as a form of analysis and representation.

\textsuperscript{40}‘Generated poetry’ draws from autobiographical material where the researcher shares understandings of her own and other’s understandings using her own words to describe interpretation discovered in research with others (Butler-Kisber, 2010).

\textsuperscript{41}Poetic occasion “if data is rife with ambiguity, open-endedness, paradox, mysteries, unresolved complexity, then we have found an occasion for poetry” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 119). However, according to Butler-Kisber (2010) “not
Somehow poetry is able to touch both the cognitive and the sensory. It has been used in social science research representations, particularly ethnography for many years. I read Laurel Richardson’s (1992) work on ‘found poetry’ and what is termed ‘poetic transcription’ which appears to have been instrumental in the development of poetic inquiry and opening spaces for alternative forms of analysis and representation. ‘Found poetry’ is the rearrangement of words, phrases and sometimes whole passages that are taken from other sources such as transcripts and reframed as poetry to depict stories (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Drawing on the processes of poetic transcription outlined by Butler-Kisber (2010) and those of quality outlined by Sullivan (2009) I moved back and forth across my interview transcripts underlining salient words and phrases; identifying reoccurring themes; adding words to help rhythm and flow; putting them together visualizing the contexts as I listened to the words. Reading them aloud to my mother so I could listen to them and watch how she reacted to the words. Focusing on “concreteness, voice, emotion, ambiguity; and tension” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 113) bringing images to life as a sensory embodied experience. Fine tuning, reordering, reworking. I wrote, walked away, reworked and reread.

Sometimes words come together serendipitously, however in other cases it took hours tracing the relationship of ideas and data and in some cases a couple of months to make connections. The narrative and lyrical dimensions mixed bringing found and generated poetry together. What resulted is a cluster or a series of poems that present a nuanced ‘prism like’ (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 95) multifaceted introduction to the study participants. According to Butler-Kisber and Stuart (2009) creating a series or a cluster of poems is a powerful way of expressing a range of subtle nuances about a topic while simultaneously producing a more general overview where a web of connections can be made within and among texts rendering richer meaning.

all transcripts lend themselves to found poetry” (p. 90) and when they do not the results can appear flat and contrived (p. 90).
The poetry in this chapter introduces readers/listeners to participants of this study; it also serves as a reminder that the constructedness of text is ever present.
Poetic Clusters

I see pictures and read about it in the newspaper
but it never felt like it was my problem
Then I entered the field
And something shifted
the pain flowed and it feels nothing like the words,
On pieces of paper

Crumbling mortar and flowing rivers
Tremors and aftershocks
Now it is water, water everywhere
Aid agencies and survey forms
I am coordinator she is my assistant
I am at the top and she is at the bottom
Answer questions and provide information
‘Listen people we are here to help
To change your lives don’t you know?!’
But they were tired of answering questions and filling forms
They set upon us with stones and abuse
Others just remained inanimate, silent.

I feel like a machine
mind closed to possibilities and potentials
A well oiled machine
Needs assessment fill form needs assessment fill form
Needs assessment fill form needs assessment fill form
False promises
Evaluation done report submitted close project
Evaluation done report submitted close project
New site needs assessment fill form collect data
My heart was sad I could not stay
Not ethically
I left

Hamearey Han Aurat Mazloom Hai (Here women are helpless)
Helpless women need to be empowered
She must know her rights
Be able to act and take decisions
If you do not know that it is your right
how can you ask for it?
How can you act?
She should have a choice
My role is to make her aware
So she can make the decisions that are right
For her

Meri zindagi key baaray mey koi faisla karna ho,
key mujhay shadi karni hay,
ya nahi karni hay,
bacha paida karna hay,
ya nahi karna,
yu mujhay yeah kaam karna hay ya nahi karna,
pehay us chez key baaray may mujhay knowledge ho,
aur phir mujhay haq ho key chahay mai koi ghalat faisla karu,
ya sahe karu,
wo mai khud kar saku.
Ye na ho key koi aa kay khara ho key kehday key aap sign karain (nikah nama per)
Agar zaraye hotay hay to log amal zarur kartay hay. Mauqa milta hay na to log amal zarur karnay
ki koshish kartay hay

(Translation)
If I have to decide or take a decision concerning my Life
Like if I wanted to marry
Or not
Have a child
Or not
Or if I want to work or not
I should have knowledge about the issue before I take a decision
Then I should have the right to take the decision even if it is the wrong decision
Or even for that matter the right decision
it is a decision I can make on my own
It should not be that someone comes and stands on my head and says sign (on the marriage contract)
If people have resources they take actions
If they have opportunity people take action
Or they at least try...

We no longer have patience
We no longer have the ability to tolerate
Hate features in each conversation
Anger has seeped into our pores
We exude venomous vapor and inhale poisons fumes of fear

Main pur umeed hoon
Main ney himat nahi hari
Dunya ko badlna parey ga
Aisa silsila akhir kab tak chaley ga
Logon ko apney haq mangney parey gaey
Ab
Akhir is key ilawah aur kya raha hai

(Translation)

I am filled with optimism
I have not lost faith
The world will have to change
After all how much longer can this last
People will have to demand their rights
Now
In the end what else is left but this

It was never planned
A serendipitous moment I will never regret
It requires heart and courage to see what I see and to do what I do
Others are too fragile to come face to face with this everyday
They have left this work to people like us
People who are differently-abeled are treated as infantile in this society
Their skills and abilities discounted even by their own
I keep saying they can do it, give them a chance
What difference does it make if they do not speak the way you do
Or hear the way you do
My struggle is on going I do not lose hope
I do what needs to be done be it speaking different languages
Playing different roles
I cajole, wheedle, pledge, threaten, blackmail emotions
Its’ all fair in the work I do
I do not use fancy words like empowerment
What I do is not a joke, it is serious work
It is not for the faint of heart
I do not expect a reward or a medal
It is
God’s work
At my age you have seen everything
Nothing shocks or surprises me beta
I have travelled from Kashmir to Kashmore and back on my own
A woman and on my own
I am afraid of nothing
I could sit retired comfortable at home but that is not me
It would be irresponsible of me
All these years in the government
It no longer has the capacity
to fulfill the needs of its people
Women in our country are suffering
They are treated worse than dogs
It is my responsibility as a good Muslim woman beta
Those women they know nothing they are illiterate
They live from day to day feeding their children stale chapatti and chilies
Their goats defecate in the water they drink
They need to be told informed made aware
So that they can make the right decisions
Their children need to be disciplined and taught to brush their teeth with Dentonic
When I go on a visit I ask them what they need
I tell them we are only here for three years then we will leave
You need to own this program we will not be here forever
Then I plan and make a proposal and convince donors
They all know my heart is in the right place
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He begins by clearing his throat
I am not scared to talk about the drug business
Karachi is a Mandi, a Market
They come from near and far to take a piece of the heroine cake
They he gestures over his shoulder
They are all involved
I never wanted to be here
In this business
It was my majboori, I had no choice
Now I am stuck so I have to come to terms with it
I had no skills but they hired me
uncle knew someone
I was destined to go abroad
Leave
This nation is going nowhere

‘I keep asking myself what am I doing here?’ He says
'Amongst these half dead IDUs and Junkies
I don’t think these people can be really empowered
They are hardened and society has no place for them
So they end up here
I see what I do as khidmat
Serving the less fortunate
I am a victim of injustice which is why I feel compassion for them
I try and motivate my boss to realize that we can improve our system
‘I tell him bitter truths’
He listens, nods and disregards’

He has given up that dream now after many failed attempts
He tells me he is studying research at school part time
He also tells me he has Googled my profile on the Web
I look “legitimate”
‘What are you going to do with this research?’ he asks
‘If this is step A then what is step B?’
I tell him that I want collaboration
Step B could be collaborative
He looks skeptical
Promises to meet
He looses his job
We never see each other again

We Sindhis are not violent people
We pay homage to the Sufis
Bhitai, Sachal Sarmast; Lal Shahbaz Qalandar
Our people believe in harmony
Have you ever heard of a Sindhi terrorist?
We are lazy people
It is the Pathans whose blood is hot
Martial races from the North
They do not see nor understand our interpretation of Islam

Here in Pakistan we have more resources than Russia and China
As much as the USA
The war is killing our people
If I could leave this country for a better life I would

It’s not easy being a single mother
To stand on your ‘own two feet’
To earn your own living and support your child
That is empowerment
I had no skills
I needed a job
My lawyer friend who helped me with my separation told about an opening
I thought it would be a desk job
It wasn’t
But I took what I got
Condoms pills sundry contraceptives
I became the carrier of hope for women
Here put it in my shopping bag before anyone sees
I like what I do but it is also my majboori

I was a mother to those children
They were my children and I treated them as such
I did what I could
Soap towels a place to be safe
Empowerment is love of self and others
It was a second home – a shelter
But the forms were filled
The funding over
There was nothing I could do
It broke my heart when we had to say goodbye
‘they said we will die if you close this place’
In the end I told them ‘we are going to help other children
You are fireflies so fly and spread your light amongst those in darkness’
I lied

I am beginning to identify myself as a women’s rights activist
I never saw myself as one before
The winds have changed and I speak up for my own rights
Even in my own home

I sometimes wonder ‘is what we are doing right?’
Ignorance is bliss as they say
Why talk about rights?
How does it help when there is no space for them to be granted
The poor know that justice is only for the rich
Yet I need to trust the legal system
Legal advocacy is how I have seen cases won
Legal literacy is important
I took this photo I took in the field

A white sheet dipped in red
Patterned
A corpse beneath
Butchered
Dead Wisps of hair escape in the wind

S/he will not be buried

Is it possible to rationalize such acts in the name of honor?
I reject this
There is no honor in such acts of butchery

This is not my culture this is not my custom
This is not my religion
This will never be my excuse

This is economics
This is politics
This is unlawful
It can never be justified

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Perhaps to be paid purges the spirit of volunteerism
A true community activist is a volunteer
A paid worker will never be able to generate that zeal and motivation
In the end it is just a job with promise of monetary remuneration

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There was a time when we were respected
People in the government offices stood up and shook our hands
Now we wait on the hard wooden benches like minions
We are not there to ask favors
We are there to hold them accountable
Yet our voices are silenced while theirs are heard from the top
blasted from megaphones
drowning all other sound

Go home old man
He will not see you today
He is busy
But I have an appointment
Yes but he is busy
Yes but that is what you said yesterday
I tell you he is busy
But his salary comes from my taxes
Go home no one pays taxes

I am free to roam the streets and come home late
Fly on a plane without permission
Enjoy a movie with my friends

but I am not ‘free’

I am not free to choose whom I marry or if I marry
I am not free to dance to my hearts content
Whirling and leaping in air, keeping to the beat of the dhol and tabla
Delicate hand movements providing pleasure to myself and my audience
For a fleeting minute I forget as my bare ghungroo boundfeet pound on the floor
But

I am not free to choose a lifestyle that has bells attached

My back hurts, my head pounds
I am wracked by guilt
I live two lives
One for them and one for me
I am splitting at the seams
Limbs crucified
We may live in a patriarchy
Yet not all men are the same

This NGO business is not so simple
It has a language attached
PRA, PLA, LogFrame, Formative Evaluation;
There is a short form for everything
Plus you need to know Angrezi and computer
No Angrezi No Computer no promotion
Sit in community mobilizer spot for rest of life

I feel like I don’t belong
In the training we learn about rights
We learn about HIV/AIDS
We Learn about gender, nikahnamas and the right to divorce
At home we speak a different language
We speak about marriage and the groom’s family demands
About salary and the cost of flour and sugar
We do not speak about choice instead we speak of fate
I feel disconnected like I live in two alternative realities
I feel pulled to the one in the training
The world which is full of possibilities
But I need to remind myself that this reality is only temporary
It will last only till the project lasts

Did you know I negotiated my own meher
I can say I have made a difference
If not in the lives of others then at least by example though my own
It was too low, the meher
So I told my new husband it was unfair and it should be the same as what his sisters were given
He agreed
My in-laws despise me
The call me the Women’s Studies headache
But
I made a difference in my own way
I made a difference

It is so easy to say we speak of rights, decision making and choice
Liberation, autonomy and freedom
Yet what do these words mean?
Is it so simple to speak of empowerment living the way we do?
Can one truly make an autonomous decision?
Does one really have a choice?
Where do we go from here?

I keep silent
I yell loud
I vent my anger on my spouse then apologize in regret

I turn to God for strength, acceptance and patience
God shows the Path
He will help you do his will
I have turned away from the Church
It is not my place of worship anymore
The priest says ‘one day you will return to marry your daughter
Then I will ask you...
I ignore him and walk away
My work satisfies me
My work frustrates and angers me
I am optimistic but things are getting worse
I see poverty everywhere
What awareness can I give people who are hungry?

I accept what I am told to do
I reject what I am told to do but perform the role anyway
I left my job and found a new one
I left my new job and found a fifth one
I work a second job
I questioned my supervisor and won my case
This work is a test of my inner strength
I will survive
I draw on my experience
I reflect on my experience to do better
I cajole, black mail and threaten
I compromise

I research and provide evidence
I participated in your research as an act of resistance
It was my duty I had to do something ...use what you can
Hold others accountable tell the truth for I cannot

I believe in transparency and honesty
One should be honest it is a matter of personal integrity
God is watching

One has to be professional and keep up with what is going on
Network, make connections, make friends, negotiate, learn the system
Be friendly and resourceful

The NGO life is not for me I work for myself and am happy

Others have left it was not for them
I stayed
It requires a particular temperament
The ability to tolerate, be patient and accept
I like what I do and that is why despite the challenges I am still here

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Chapter 8
Constructing Community Mobilizers as ‘Agents of Change’

In Chapter 6, I presented a specific example of a contemporary feminist empowerment narrative to explore what it means to be ‘empowered’ within its framework and proceeded to complicate this meaning in order to demonstrate the internal contradictions within the narrative and its material implications. I also drew on Sharma (2008) and Cruikshank’s (1999) interpretation of Foucault’s theoretical concept of governmentality (Foucault, 1977) in relation to empowerment to demonstrate how empowerment narratives can possibly be implicated in the technology of disciplining human bodies. In this chapter I take this idea of governmentality further and focus specifically on the construct of community development workers/mobilizers in empowerment narratives. Based on textual encounters with empowerment narratives I illustrate how community development workers/mobilizers are put to work and made to work (Ahmed, 2000) through empowerment narratives within development discourse. I encounter the figure of the grassroots worker in a number of empowerment narratives in an attempt to complicate its construction and explore how narratives tend to define and control agency, intentionally or unintentionally moulding bodies into unitary replicable composite entities revealing the disciplinary technology hidden in the narrative.

The narratives I encounter are published by acknowledged international and local theorists/practitioners in the field of empowerment. They include works by: Batliwala (1994), Chambers (1994, 1997, 2006a), Freire (1970), Kabeer (2001a), Khan (2009), Rowlands (1997, 1998), and Sen (1997). These narratives have been selected based on the following criteria: content focuses on empowerment process and outcomes; role of community mobilizers is specifically mentioned; the works are published; and have been referred to/ or are considered influential in the
context of empowerment and development in Pakistan (i.e., referenced in research frameworks, development programs and included in community development teaching/training curriculum in Pakistan). In the context of this chapter the term ‘empowerment narratives’ from here on refers to these specific narratives unless otherwise specified.

In order to complicate this construct of the development worker as catalyst and agent of change I draw on Sara Ahmed’s (2000) work who suggests asking questions of knowing and authenticity, or more specifically how “truth” is constructed and legitimized within such textual narratives. She suggests a careful examination of the scaffolding on which the claims to authenticity and legitimacy are built in order to perpetuate hegemony by asking “who works for whom?” (p. 61) As I unravel the texts I come to realize that there are economies at play in the construction of this authenticity and these economies draw on multiple encounters through specific symbolic markers and tropes in order to produce meaning.

I will first outline some of the core elements of the empowerment narratives I encountered such as transformation; participation; and the role of community development workers.

**Empowerment and Transformation**

The impetus to transform is a central normative concept which shapes how the goal of empowerment is envisioned in many empowerment narratives. Framed by the benevolent desire to address inequalities, empowerment narratives tend to shape the desire to transform in different ways. For example, some narratives are very clear on expected outcomes such as the United Nations, and outline change in concrete material terms and formulate targets such as the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) or measuring human development indicators (GOP, 2006). Others quantify it at a more micro level, setting gender disaggregated program targets such as number of community based organizations formed; number of community based schools for girls constructed; number of
microcredit beneficiaries; loan return rates to name a few (Dossa, 2009). Some stress changes in social relations and cognitive processes (Chambers, 2006b; Kabeer, 2001b), as well as change in specific structures of oppression (Collins 2000 and the levels (micro, meso and macro) within social structures (Wee & Shaheed, 2008). Some narratives privilege certain types of core changes over others such as dignity (Rowlands, 1997) autonomy and rights (Wee & Shaheed, 2008, p. 16).

Each narrative outlines a process of how this change is to take place and base this manifestation on a set of assumptions particularly on understandings of empowerment. This vision of empowerment thus determines the key questions of ‘who is to be empowered’ and ‘empowerment for what purpose?’ The scope and focus of transformation also becomes important in understanding empowerment objectives i.e. is the focus on individual empowerment or collective empowerment, or both? Where does transformation need to occur (the context and level) and who needs to be transformed? The self? The individual? Groups? Institutions? The powerful? The powerless?

Narratives also prioritize which comes first and how transformation should be manifested. Combined, these ideas set out processes to translate theory into action or answer the question of ‘how will all this take place?’

**Empowerment, Participation and the Role of Community Mobilizer as Change Agent**

In empowerment narratives transformation is a facilitated process one that requires a gentle push and support for empowerment to take place. This process/outcome requires an agent who is able to act. Each narrative has a rationale built in for the qualities and abilities these agents should possess, how this push should be facilitated, and how support should be provided to mobilize the target of empowerment. It is here that the community mobilizer becomes central. It is here that the agent of change enters the picture.
For example in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) develops a rationale for the presence of a change agent when he mentions the notion of “fear of freedom”. He defines “fear of freedom” as the fear oppressed people feel in cognitively dislodging themselves from their normalized situation of oppression. This idea is similar to the concept of ‘internalised oppression’. The role of the facilitator or external change agent for Freire is then to facilitate overcoming this fear of freedom by unveiling the world of oppression through the oppressed participating in a process of critical thinking and dialogue, so that internal change agents can create more equitable and non-exploitative systems. Here the external change agent whom he calls the ‘radical’ is not a ‘liberator’ but a being who must fight by the side of the oppressed facilitating a process of *praxis* (a dialectical cycle of reflection and action). Writing in the context of literacy education, Freire challenges the conventional approach to learning terming it a “banking approach”. Instead he proposes a process which collapses hierarchical relationships where both the radical (external change agent) and the oppressed become co-learners in the process of critical pedagogy. Freire sees outcomes of this form of participation to lead to a new awareness of self, a new sense of dignity (overcoming alienation), hope, and collective action for revolution. For Freire the oppressed must liberate themselves restoring humanity. Hence his focus in both on individual and collective empowerment (individual followed by collective). Radicals are cautioned of the danger of the oppressed gaining freedom and reverting to the role of oppressors. Hence the role the facilitator is entrusted with relaying and cautioning against such occurrences. In Freire’s case, power within, power with and power over can all be seen as utilised in the process of participation. He is very clear of delineating who can participate as change agents in this process. Oppressors can never be revolutionary as for them losing power over would not be in their interests, they only dehumanize others and stifle their humanity attempting to control thinking and action. Their inclusion would only result in “false
generosity” or “false charity”. Hence transformation can occur only from the bottom up which he perceives to be a painful process.

In the case of Batliwala (1994), her underlying assumption for empowerment is that demand for change does not usually begin spontaneously from the condition of subjugation hence “Empowerment must be externally induced” (p. 132). This implies that change agents need to initiate a process of participation. For her, all change agents must work from a “position of an altered consciousness and an awareness that the existing social order is unjust and unnatural” (p. 132). This assumes that change agents must first go through a process of transformation before they proceed to carry out their role and require both theoretical knowledge and mobilization skills. For Batliwala the role of external “activist” is “giving women access to a new body of ideas and information that not only changes their consciousness and self-image, but also encourages action” (p. 132). The change agent (who is assumed to be a woman) must seek to change other women’s consciousness through altering oppressed women’s self image and belief’s about their rights and capabilities...challenging the sense of inferiority that has been imprinted on them since birth; and recognizing the true value of their labour and contributions to the family, society and economy. (p. 132)

In Jo Rowlands’ (1997) model of empowerment, intervention cannot be done by force or opposition and she sees the role of the change agent as critical/pivotal in facilitating the process. Similar to Freire (1970), the role of the mobilizer must not be that of directing but of working in solidarity focusing on alliance building. The change agent as seen by Rowlands (1997, 1998) is like a “catalyst”. Since they are human beings and therefore are likely to emerge changed from their field experiences which could be positive or negative. Her emphasis in terms of approach for change agents is cognitive, focusing on personal attitude; the ethic of respect and humility in engaging with individuals and groups; a willingness and openness for learning to be mutual; a commitment to the empowerment process; a need to be consistent with the open-ended nature of empowerment process;
and self-awareness in terms of their own biases, priorities and areas of similarities and differences in relation to women with whom they are working with (Rowlands, 1998). She believes that field workers,

will have to develop the capacity to focus on empowerment of women as a gender issue and be skilled enough to keep the process moving without it getting ‘hijacked’ by existing power dynamics. (p. 29)

In case of a conflict in understandings of empowerment between the change agent and women she is working with, Rowlands (1998) advises that women should not be forced to concede to the change agents’ point of view. Instead they should gradually be facilitated to critically reflect on their assumptions and perspectives “challenging internalised oppression which pushes them to accept less then what they are capable off” (p. 27).

Kabeer (2001a) states that her framework does not try to determine in advance how transformation and consequently empowerment will potentially play out. Instead she suggests that feminist models have the potential to be catalytic particularly their emphasis on openness and flexibility. This is a slight shift from previous models that have a very clear process and trajectory in mind. Openness and flexibility implies a feminist ethic of participation which could include such considerations as caring; reciprocity; emphasis on identification; trust, empathy; non-exploitive relationships; emancipatory praxis; as well as cooperation & collaboration that reflect a personal commitment and solidarity (Mauthner et al., 2002). For Kabeer the concept of empowerment is inseparable from that of disempowerment. Power for her relates to the ability of individuals to make choices, and the condition of disempowerment relates to denial of choice. Therefore empowerment for Kabeer requires “processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability” (p. 19). Although she mentions approaches to evaluating work for its empowerment potential and outcomes she is rather vague on the specific role change agents are to
play. Yet the characteristics of the ‘change agent’ are clearly defined and one assumes that internalising her framework may be a requirement. For Kabeer not everyone can be empowered. She claims that to be empowered one has to have been disempowered as those who “exercise a great deal of choice in their lives may be very powerful, but they are not empowered...because they were never disempowered” (p. 19). It is not clear whether critical consciousness is also necessary for all since not all change agents may come from a position of disempowerment.

In the case of Gita Sen (1997) empowerment can be catalyzed by multiple bodies including non-government organizations (NGOs), peoples’ movements and joint collaboration between governments and NGOs. The examples she provides of possible models identify the role of change agents according to the scope and context of the projects. Activities include capacity building in terms of skills; information on rights, confidence building; energizing women, mobilization and motivating them; supporting women to form groups; providing information and raising awareness about their social situation; encouraging people to participate in programs; networking with other movements, NGOs and donor agencies; and developing strong media linkages.

Empowerment narratives which focus on practical hands on approaches are even more specific on the role of the change agent than the more theoretical ones. The role of the change agent in PRA /PLA (Participatory Rural Appraisal/ Participatory Learning and Action) (Chambers, 1994; Mikkelsen, 2005) is extremely explicit. Facilitators of change are given specific training and must internalise the notion that “local people to do their own analysis, to take command, to gain confidence, and to make their own decisions” (Chambers, as cited in Mikkelsen, 2005, p. 54). For the change agent, Chambers requires abandoning prescriptive reductionist notions of goal oriented decision making and prediction and instead focusing on understanding the dynamics and complexity of change and promoting a collective learning framework through which people can dialogue and
express their interests and reach consensus (Sellamna, 1999). Chambers (2006) in many of his workshops emphasises that PRA is an approach that evolves in context, and hence the facilitator must learn to adapt to context and hence instead of being prescriptive must learn from it. A central principle proposed has been for facilitators to ‘use your own judgement’ reflecting the flexibility of the approach and the need for all practitioners to contextualize their use of tools (Chambers, 2002, p. 2006). Knowledge and appropriate use of PRA tools for the change agent is mandatory. They form the basis of the discussion but Chambers (2006) warns that tools must not be used mechanically as this defeats the purpose of the approach. The facilitator must first attend a PRA training to be de-programmed and then re-programmed. Participatory learning methods, such as PRA are expected to provide facilitators with ways to open discussions in a non-threatening way, by focusing on local classifications, local concepts and local explanations.

Khan (2009) in his book Participatory Rural Development in Pakistan: Experience of Rural Support Programs describes the role of the community mobilizer or what he terms the Social Organizer (SO) in detail as defined in the model of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) in Pakistan. According to Khan (2009) the Social Organizer (SO) as catalyst is responsible for the “transmission of packages of inputs, services, technologies, and products to CO (Community Organization) members...who in turn try to adjust their behaviour” (p. 57). SO’s according to Khan (2009) are “frontline workers” and their primary role is motivational and of “paramount importance to the effectiveness and sustainability of the CO” (p. 57).

The model he presents envisions model and ideal catalysts as the backbone of the organization and the moving spirit to bring about change. The model SO is responsible for

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42 AKRSP is considered a pioneer model in rural development internationally and the AKRSP model has been integrated into the National Rural Support Program (NRSP) which covers all regions of Pakistan. The model was articulated by Shoib Sultan using the model developed by his mentor Akhtar Hameed Khan founder of the Comilla Model in Bangladesh and the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) in Karachi.
reformulation of traditional patterns of thinking and behaviour about individual and collective development and performs his or her catalytic role as there is “limited indigenous capacity to induce desired changes…accept and adopt new ideas, methods, and inputs” (Khan, 2009, p. 58). In addition Khan (2009) emphasises the importance of credibility, conviction and commitment of the SO in order for his/her role to be effective. He observes that the

role of the SO must change with the growth of the CO…(he/she) must have a clear vision, conviction of and commitment to the particular development approach and total accountability to the CO. Quality to listen and respect the local expertise…must be instilled in the staff from the beginning. The conceptual package requires conviction and discipline to implement. (Khan, 2009, p. 60)

Success of the SO is dependant the ability to identify the ‘right community activists’ based on three Cs (character, commitment and competence) and nurture them. However he observes that often the problem is that SO are not well equipped with necessary skills, burdened by numbers and targets and are regarded by community members as rivals not partners (Khan, 2009).
To summarise, based on these narratives, a good community development worker must

- be a good mobilizer and facilitate and support transformative action
- be a good communicator
- not be judgemental
- internalize empowerment theory
- be able to unveil the world of oppression
- be a co-learner
- be able to live in the field and accept its conditions
- be able to work from a position of altered consciousness
- have conviction and discipline to implement
- be able to alter oppressed women’s internalised beliefs about her oppression since birth
- be self aware of all personal biases and not let them intrude in their role as facilitator

To be a community development worker you must be empowered.

A good community development worker must develop the capacity to focus on empowerment of women as a gender issue and be skilled enough to keep the process moving without it getting ‘hijacked’ by existing power dynamics...and the list continues....(Batliwala, 1994; Chambers, 2002, 2006; Freire, 1970; Kabeer, 2003; Khan, 2009; Rowlands, 1997)

*Encountering Textual Narratives of Empowerment*

Empowerment narratives suggest that the role of the development worker is that of a catalyst/change agent, and as change agents development workers are participating in a noble almost sacred endeavour, that of supporting a transformative struggle. On reviewing definitions of empowerment within these narratives one of the commonalities which appear is of empowerment as
a process through which individuals gain mastery over their own lives and can take action and therefore it is also an outcome. The underlying assumption being that this process and outcome requires change agents/catalysts and also some form of participation from those who are to be empowered. The role of the community mobilizer is then to facilitate this process of participation in order for individuals and groups to empower themselves. Approaches like PRA put participation upfront; however other narratives are not so clear. In order to address some of the ambiguity of the use of the term, some narratives have attempted to develop typologies of participation. These have in a way attempted to articulate the various ways the term participation has been interpreted or applied within the development context. On a continuum, use of the term *participation* has ranged from passive participation where people are told what to do and have no ability to change it; to participation being motivated through community self mobilization. This typology however has been criticized as promoting an ideal form of participation which is problematic in ‘real life’ situations (Mikkelsen, 2005). Individual participation as suggested by Cornwall (2000) is variable and dependent on multiple factors. Hence it becomes problematic to propose a linear trajectory in terms of a pattern that it must conform to.

How participation is conceptualized is therefore dependent on how empowerment in defined, and the role of the community mobilizer is shaped by these understandings. It therefore becomes crucial to examine the notion of participation and the role change agents are expected to play. The notions associated with empowerment and participation suggest an open, flexible and democratic approach with weightage given to local knowledge and experience all considered ‘inherently good’. These values are considered intrinsic to the approach itself which suggest a higher almost noble grounding of theory as compared to any other development approach. In this way it becomes associated with a ‘series of incontestable maxims’ (Kapoor, 2005, p. 1206). In addition since these
theories have developed on the basis of a critique of mainstream development, holding them up to critical review becomes a challenge to the ground on which a narratives’ authenticity stands. If the outcomes of an applied theory do not measure up to its claims then it is generally the implementation or theory practice gap that is held to be at fault.

To term someone a change agent assumes that this person has been given or is acknowledged as having subject status and is not ‘other’. Such individuals must have or possesses a level of agency or more agency as compared to ‘target populations’ who are in need of empowerment. It is assumed that change agents must first go through a process of transformation one that entails a voyage of self discovery almost equivalent to a religious quest (Cooke & Kothari, 2001) to be of ‘quality’ before they can proceed to carry out their role and require both theoretical knowledge and mobilization skills. If agency is understood as an actor’s ability or inability to make purposeful choices, empowerment frameworks embedded in development discourse define the boundaries of choice for development workers be they insiders, outsiders or insider/outsiders. It is also therefore assumed that the assumptions are accepted by change agents and the frameworks are held to be true and internalised. The community mobilize is hence naturalised through these constructs and measured up against in order to obtain respect and status.

Empowerment narratives pre-define and pre-categorize community mobilizers as agents of change. Their identities are solidified through these textual encounters. They are assumed to have a nature and superhuman abilities to move beyond their own positions of disempowerment and maintain an empowered status. Obligations to community and employers are measured up against this construct. Community mobilizers’ play the role of success story in these narratives. Markers of legitimacy ensuring the story has substance, value, and truth. The slogan that silently echo’s with their presence is “if she can do it so can you” which is accompanied with a moral obligation for
community workers. “Now that you have transformed you must play your role in transforming others replicating transformation” and failure equates to ungratefulness and betrayal. Community mobilizers are essentially the marketing tool for the success of the empowerment narrative. Cracks and slippage in this construct would automatically make empowerment narratives fallible which would not be good for the business of empowerment and for the production of ‘empowered subjects’. Therefore failure of the agent to perform is never attributed to the narrative but to intrinsic flaws in the character of the community worker. This then also implicates change agents in the outcomes of any intervention based on these narratives. The onus of failure for not internalizing concepts, values, and transforming oneself is on the change agent and connected to the failure of the empowerment initiative. Failure to internalize training and concepts is seen as an obstruction in the way of their own empowerment as the key to reform and revolution is the independent and voluntary participation in their own emancipation (Cruikshank, 1999) as role models to be emulated by the communities. However identities are neither rigid, singular, nor necessarily cohesive; they are fluid morphing composites. Therefore naturalized notion of development worker altruism particularly women’s altruism (as an extended reproductive function) need to be challenged (Sharma, 2008).

Cruikshank (1999) argues that “Empowerment is a power relationship, a relationship of government; it can be used well or badly” (p. 86), and that it is important to dispel the myth of welfare as disabling agency. Empowerment narratives are founded on the premise that ability of bodies to already be capable of action. However “the object of empowerment is to act upon another’s interests and desires in order to conduct their actions toward an appropriate end” (Cruikshank, 1999, pp. 68-69). I argue that the appropriate end is shaped by the broader discourse of international development and that encounters with empowerment narratives are premised on encounters with development discourse. It is also important to remember that bodies are not bodies
as such but constructs that “materialize in a complex set of temporal and spacial relations to other bodies” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 40). As a result embedded in a context of development discourse the outcome of empowerment work may be contradictory and not as benign as it appears and the construction of development workers needs to be viewed in the context and power relations of this discourse as a particular encounter which always carries traces of broader relationships.

The language of empowerment and development is structured to make one forget how the discourse is complicit in the project of imperialism. It is therefore important to begin to understand how community development workers through narratives of empowerment become implicated in the larger neoliberal international development discourse and are put to work.

Despite emphasis on local people’s resources, “they can do it” (Batliwala, 2004; Chambers, 2006; Rowlands, 1997) there appears to be inability to envision “they can do it” without “us” or “our intervention”. There is an implicit elitism in claiming to know what is best for others (Cruikshank, 1999). Yet it is implied that our intervention should not be discernable and all credit should go to them the poor who are in need of empowerment. The question is will they (development workers) ever be included in the us? Hence to be included in the us category may be possible through the route of the good change agent. Inclusion requires a performance following a long list of rules constructed by empowerment narratives. The line between them and us is tricky. According to Lazreg (2004) “development, whatever this means, has become the marker that separates ‘them’ from ‘us’” (p. 129) facilitating a process of ‘othering’ that plays an instrumental role. Lazreg (2004) argues that “when proposing to carve out ‘a space’ for others one is implicitly locating oneself outside of that space, arranging it, and furnishing it to suit one’s own desire and interests” (Lazreg, 2004, p. 128).
The questions then emerge... who is to be included into the universal category of the subject (that which is not other) and how does this process of inclusion and exclusion take place? I would argue subject status is bestowed and taken away depending on when required and that the change agent in empowerment discourse is also a constructed subjectivity whose subjecthood is regulated by the rules of development. The line between ‘they’ and ‘us’ is tricky. To be included in the ‘us’ category may be possible through the route of the change agent as long as rules are followed. This threat can be seen as means of ‘manufactured consent’ hence a technology of governmentality. It could be claimed that the way we define the roles of change agents tell us more about ‘us’ than about ‘them’ (Kapoor, 2005). Hence community development workers in empowerment narratives are to a large extent embedded in this neo-liberal discourse and its web of power relations which set the terms for encounters with them and for them.

The change agent is not the only construct on the development stage and it is important to understand these construction as they help in maintaining the credibility if the empowerment narrative and keep development workers in place. Other actors are required to perform as well such as the community. According to Green (2000) the community in mainstream development discourse as the target of development interventions as passive agents awaiting the emancipator intervention of development organizations. Gujit and Shah (1998) have highlighted constructed romantic notion of community and the assumption that participatory approaches will empower local people with skills and confidence to analyse their situation, reach consensus, make decisions and take action. This mythical notion of community cohesion, natural, essentialist, foundational, homogenous, boundaries intact and identifiable, traditional essence, peaceful and in many cases primarily male ignores issues of conflict while assuming that all actions will be taken on the basis of cooperation and consensus.
An opposing picture of a non unitary body does not fit the concept of constructed community and would make for a distorted performance. A glitch in theory.

Action in this performance by the actors also requires consensus. It is assumed that participation in this performance will be empowering “regardless of the actual activity undertaken” (Cleaver, 1999, p. 598), and that a ‘good’ and ‘right’ collective decision will be reached (Cleaver, 1999). It is assumed that the will of the people is not imposed or prescribed and it is good and right. There is limited discussion according to Kapoor (2005) on the ‘quality’ of consensus and the power relations involved in reaching it within theory. The imagined community avoids messy questions like who is represented and whose interests are not; or who speaks and whose voice is heard. What about consensus being wrong and leading to further oppression? What about coercion and power dynamics? What if moments of self-realization and revelation don’t come and what if they are just a performances or mimicry to fit with the story? How do you know that this style of democracy is the right way to go forward? Will it spill over into challenging structures at the meso and macro level? Which spheres and how? (Cooke & Kothari, 2001)

For Cooke and Kothari (2001) the idea of participation in itself is flawed, idealistic and naive. This fetishisation of consensus (Kapoor, 2005) may lead to reproducing existing hierarchies, and possibly building new ones, and maintaining power relations masked by the language of inclusion resulting in ‘tyranny’ (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Reviewing Cook and Kothari’s work (2001), Christens and Speer (2006) also raise the concern that this noble process of empowerment can end up (although unacknowledged) as a complex dialectic between outsiders and locals or staff and villagers where both negotiate to fit local payoffs that match external agendas (Christens & Speer, 2006). Thus leading to reinforcing power structures and a patronage system and functioning
to maintain difference and othering for subjects to maintain their identity and hegemonic positionality. The existence of the subaltern continues to serve this function (Ahmed, 2000, p. 60).

If the performance does not go as planned then it is the actors i.e. the community or the facilitator or external agents that are “bad” not the script writer or director. Is it possible as Sellamna (1999) and Staudt (2002) propose, that such narratives reduce empowerment to a feeling rather than a phenomena “shifting focus away from economic and political change and ensuring the inability to produce structural change” (Sellamna, 1999, p. 6).

The script or theory also requires privileging local knowledge over all other. Based on my experience, the experience of the community development worker in many cases is marginalized in front of that of ‘the community’. ‘The community’ is considered good and non-scheming, and even their ‘scheming’ if acknowledged is put down to their marginalized position again holding the ‘change agent’ responsible for not being able to perform her assigned role. Acknowledging power differentials and lack of consensus would again challenge the script of the narrative. The notions of rationality and cultural determinism also play a significant role in this context. It is assumed if one is to be empowered that one will behave in a rational manner. Rationality is reflected in following the directives of the facilitator (i.e., to participate in a specific way and to form community groups). Individual non-participation and non-compliance is deemed as irresponsible and non rational behaviour and seen as a sign of unwillingness to develop relegating such beings to being bound in culture and tradition (Cleaver, 1999).

Cleaver (1999) is particularly concerned about the formation of social institutions such as committees and cooperative as the ‘natural’ form of social organization. Many of the theories presented also assume singularity of context in the sense that groups are formed in the community context and transformation and empowerment in these spaces will be sustained by enabling
environments. What happens when you are out of that space or out of the project bubble? What provisions do these theories make for ‘empowerment’ to be transported and reproduced in everyday life outside of carefully managed spaces / enabling environments? How will they get normalized and embedded in everyday spaces as well as social relations constituted at different scales? (Kesby, 2005).

The assumed trajectory is to move from informal group to a formalised ones through the assistance of the community mobilizer as outlined earlier. For Cleaver (1999) they may serve as a forum to exercise control and promote a specific type of behaviour as in the case of micro credit programs in Bangladesh (Goetz & Sen, 1996). Representation in such forums may not be truly motivated and could just reflect a form of compliance. Sellamna (1999) also sees this representation as a ‘depoliticization and a de-ideologized alienation of Freire’s (1970) emphasis on ‘consciousness’. This understanding fails to account for the real life impact of power and leaves open possibilities for one form of more overt forms of subjugation being replaced by more subtle forms, where self regulation becomes the means through which power is exercised (Sellamna, 1999).

It is also interesting how culture in this context plays a dual purpose. On the one hand notions of tradition and culture are idealized and draw on essentialist assumptions of community presenting it as a resource which needs to be tapped into; as the glue that binds individuals together in collective action. On the other hand when individuals do not comply or fit into this essentialist notion they become irrational, traditional and not modern. This movement between culture and rationality is reminiscent of the ‘orientalist civilizing logic which seems in a way to have been internalized implicitly in empowerment narratives. The binary distinctions between the traditional and the modern serve an extremely productive function in perpetuating the rationale of development. This essentialist visioning is also evident in the ontological binary categorizing within empowerment
theory groups and individuals. Oppressed/oppressors; empowered/disempowered; insider/outsider; uppers/lowers; overclass/underclass; voice/voiceless are embedded in empowerment theories. According to Sellamna (1999) people articulated with specific classes are reminiscent of the modernist dualist categories which, demonstrates the possibility of being trapped in the same dualist thinking despite claims of rejecting its simplistic way of establishing good and bad. Although many theorists (Abu-Lughud, 2002; Mohanty, 1988) have challenged the construction of essentialist constructs such as ‘third world women” “Muslimness” or “Muslim woman” the essentialist construction of the community mobilizer tends to remain stable.

Although Rowlands (1998) acknowledges “one person’s empowerment process may be another person’s disempowerment” (pp. 24-25) and that empowerment is temporal, context specific and empowerment in one sphere does not lead to empowerment in another. Yet there is little acknowledgement that ‘empowerment’ may not be a clear cut condition where disempowerment and empowerment can be different renderings of the same sets of experiences viewed from separate angles for different audiences. For Rowland’s (1998) if a woman’s view of empowerment conflicts with that of the change agent’s (as prescribed by the project/program) it is a matter of internalised oppression which needs to be resolved by convincing the woman over time to broaden her frame of thinking. This also then uncovers another assumption that marginalized women are unaware of the power relations of national and international forces on their lives (Lazreg, 2004).

Another glitch is the script is pointed out by Lazreg (2004) challenging the binary of voice/voiceless. Empowerment theories (Batliwala, 1994) assume that marginalized women are voicelessness and that the empowerment process provides women with space and capacity and through empowerment they are able to speak. The World Bank publication *Voices of the Poor* is a prime example of this sentiment. Lazreg (2004) sees this as a “romantic act of creationism” where
the empowerment and participatory process is seen to give “social birth to women, engendering her being, imbibing them with self presence through the act of speaking” (p. 125). This patronizing attitude fits with the picture of poor third world women frozen in time space and history, situated in oppressive cultural and religious traditions in need of liberation. Instances of this attitude are reflected in Batliwala’s framework as well. Both make the assumption that culture is what leads to violence and oppression of women, and this is what impedes women’s empowerment. These assumptions lead to a de-linking of ideology with material reality of everyday lived experiences of people (Mohanty, 1988). It could therefore be argued that instead of empowerment narratives making a claim to ‘free’ all those who have been ‘othered’ many seem to continue to allow for the maintenance of liberal feminist hegemonic status.

Given this context it becomes possible to consider whether complicity and desire may be written into empowerment narratives, with the potential for making it ‘exclusionary, Western-centric and inegalitarian? (Kapoor, 2005, p. 1203). Could desire to invest in the ‘other’ quite possibly be linked to the desire to maintain personal subject identity. Or for that matter enforce neoliberal structures through the instrumental use of participation? In a way this would allow for the reinforcement of power relations and the fulfillment of desire to become powerful in advancing the needs of powerless (reinforcing the dichotomy). If power relations are context specific and as Sharma (2008) suggests empowerment is more of a “moving target”; then role and construction of change agents as stable bodies devoid of context also needs to be challenged.

The requirement for having grassroots workers perform the role of agents of change seems to have become central to development discourse. According to Green (2000),

the “poor” must ultimately depend on external agents in their struggle for empowerment rests on a particular tautological construction of the relation between knowledge and agency which, divorced from empirical study and social theory. (p. 70)
This paradox at the heart of the participation rhetoric amounts to a shaping a discourse on how agency can take place on whose terms. Green (2000) suggests that a rigid separation exists where criteria is limited to the community setting but not to those who apply discourse in practice. The approach, be it intentionally political or de-politicizing may not necessary display predictable outcomes given the complexity of the interactions between multiple actors and the forms of agency they employ within transnational contexts. Therefore the transnational contextual complexity is essential to the study of community development. Oversimplifying concepts and employing a unitary mode of understanding is both problematic and dangerous.

To not face up or “not own up to the range of complicities ensures the reproduction of inequality and empire” (Kapoor, 2005, p. 1204) implies complicity and desire in values and goals as well as institutional arrangements. I believe that it is therefore now time to “turn gaze upon self before we investigate the Other” (Spivak, as cited in Kapoor, 2005, p. 1204) and to ask.

Do we ask more of them than we do of ourselves? - Do we seek to obscure our own participation in participation and is it possible to empower the other while maintain your own interests? (Kapoor, 2005, p. 1208).

**Conclusion**

Asking, “Who works for whom?” opens up other dimensions of the textual encounter as the encounter is not only about producing the change agent but putting her to work, making her work, which reveals relations of force and authorization (Ahmed, 2000). Through my analysis presented in this chapter I illustrate the need for alternative readings of the involvement of community development workers as change agents. A reading that looks at the complexities, singularities and interconnections between people such that power, privilege, agency and dissent are examined in context. An analysis that requires viewing change agents not as monolithic beings but as subjective
bodies whose lives and roles are embedded in context with their own knowledge base, contradictions and complexities and an acknowledgement that they too influence, distort and politicize empowerment narratives based on their own encounters with these stories. I see this alternative reading as a recognition that the theoretical construct of agents of change are open to more self definitions and interpretations; as well as acknowledgment that “abstract zones of transformation are connected to real struggles in material spaces and places” (Kesby, 2005, p. 2054).

This chapter reinforces my rationale for the need to create spaces for community development workers to critically engage with empowerment narratives and the methodology for this thesis. It also connects to other chapters in the thesis which reflect on how community development workers engage with their own subject positioning and the complex matter of resistance in the exercise of power.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{43} According to Foucault (2000) the potential for resistance is inherent in the exercise of power.
Chapter 9
Participant Encounters with Empowerment: A Story in Four Acts

Note to Reader

As an arts-informed text constructed through a mixed genre of representations, my purpose through this thesis is to shed light on core findings using different mediums to present my data. In the previous chapter I explored how the body of the development worker is constructed and put to work through specific empowerment narratives. In this performative piece constructed from stories told by my participants I share how the lives of NGO workers are intertwined with their work, as well as with their understandings of empowerment.

Engagement with empowerment narratives is a complex exercise. It may result in resistance, acceptance, affirmation or negation sometimes simultaneously. These interactions reflect the complex and contradictory relationship participants of the study have to empowerment narratives; sometimes reinforcing them, sometimes challenging and sometimes constructing stories about what it means to be empowered all enmeshed in a web of power relations.

Choosing performative writing to reflect these relations is an attempt to bring the brings the reader into contact with the worlds my participants inhabit. This genre of writing holds the potential to convey the complexity of lived experience in fiction that might not always come across in theoretical explication. Pelias (2005) sees performative writing as a “highly selective camera, aimed carefully to capture the most arresting angles” (p. 418). It “features lived experiences, telling, iconic moments that call forth the complexities of human life” (p. 418). Performative writing allows readers to experience text as a living medium where themes and content ‘(c)merge’ with/from readers interest as they read. As a consequence “writing thus becomes a form of performance that brings forth experiences that becomes present; first in the writing, and then in the reading” (Lind, 2008, p.
171) fashioning a space for writer and reader to engage through the text through equitable 
encounters; creating a structure where individuals can bring themselves into the text. Lind (2008) 
warns that “When there is such room, there will be discomfort, ambiguity, and uncertainty about 
what we will discover about ourselves through the story that is being explored” (p. 172)

‘Katha’ simply translated means a story in Urdu. This particular performative text *Katha (a 
Story) in Four Acts* is an attempt to re-present coded data and facilitate audience engagement in 
order to rethink the complexities of meaning making in context. The construction of this text is a 
process of working with data made through extensive conversations with community mobilizers 
regarding their role, motivations and experiences. The core themes i.e. balancing between family and 
work needs; precariousness of employment; strategizing to stay employed; good and bad 
communities; the glass ceiling of English’; women’s rationale for working outside the home; 
strategizing to empower; worker burn out; multi tiered power relations; community worker 
associations to “research” all emerged from the in-depth interviews. These were then further 
discussed and debated in depth in the second phase of the research study through arts-informed 
group workshops. The chorus in this text represents the discussions and voices thematically coded 
from video recordings emerging from the second phase. The artwork included is also a piece painted 
during the second phase of the study by a participant accompanied by narration. Not naming most of 
the characters in the text is a deliberate representational strategy as I wish to show the precarious 
replaceable and interchangeable status of the workers as reflected by the data. Through this text I 
therefore demonstrate how my participants encounter empowerment narratives in context and 
address issues of identity and subjectivity.
**Katha (A Story) in Four Acts**

Cast: Tahira – Community Mobilizer who works at an NGO
     Project Manager
     Chorus/Voices in their Head: 5 characters

**Act 1 Scene 1 : At Home**

Stage is set with a table and an iron and a line that runs across the back of the stage. Tahira is ironing clothes which she then puts on a hanger and hangs behind her on a clothes line. Toys and books are scattered on the floor.

**Tahira (to her children):** Breakfast is on the table. Your lunch boxes are ready don’t forget them. I have a training today so I will be late. Please do your homework and don’t bother Abba and don’t make a mess! I don’t have the energy to keep cleaning up after you! Tell Abba his shirts have been ironed.

**Tahira (to the audience):** I have so many things to get done today. The report is due; there is a community meeting to attend; the meeting with the project staff; the donor visit to prepare for, plus this training to attend. How am I going to manage?

Tahira bends down and picks up a toy.

**Tahira (to herself):** I feel so guilty I wish I had time to be with my children at home. But I am doing this for them. I need to get them into a good school. Then an after school tuition center...they need to go to collage...I do not want them to suffer the way I had to and be stuck without options. I want them to complete their education and succeed in life.
Act 1 Scene 2: At the Office – Meeting with Supervisor

Stage is set with a table and two chairs in the center. Manager sits on the left and Tahira on the right. Tahira sits down at a table. Project Manager enters and sits down.

**Project Manager:** I have reviewed your reports and we are behind target. The donors will complain that we are not fulfilling our end of the bargain. It will be an issue in the project evaluation, and it will be my neck on the line. Why is it taking so long to form the lending groups and why are our loan recovery rates so low?

**Tahira (hesitantly):** It is a little difficult in my field site to get people together. Not everyone wants to be part of one group.

**Project Manager:** Then you need to motivate them to join. They need to understand that this scheme is for their benefit.

**Tahira:** Yes that is true that it is for their benefit but not all of them are willing to come to the meetings. They want the loans but there are ethnic divides it is not that easy. Many of the disputes go back generations. Some are over land and kinship.

**Project Manager:** Yes but you are trained to address conflict resolution. Why don’t you run a workshop on conflict resolution, then it will be easier to get them together.

**Tahira:** I can try that but things will not change over night. It is a difficult community.

Lights fade – spotlight on voices left front stage

**VOICE 1:** Are there such things as difficult communities?

**VOICE 2:** Yes there are good communities and there are difficult communities.

**VOICE 3:** The problem is in selection. If a community is good then we meet targets. If it is not compliant it is problem.

**VOICE 4:** Maybe this is the problem. We want them to do what we tell them is good for them what if they feel that it is not in their best interests?

**VOICE 3:** Then they need to be aware of what is in their best interests. The reason they have been unable to develop is because they are unwilling to unite. They need to realize that there is strength in collective empowerment.

Spotlight off lights fade in on Tahira and Manager
**Project Manager:** Well try harder, do some awareness session. Tell them you will take the project to another community if they are not interested. You also need to put pressure on the group to get the defaulters loans back. We cannot let the donor think that the women cannot pay back. We took the money on the basis that women are credit worthy and economic empowerment will have a positive effect on their status and that of the community as a whole. We need to show that we can deliver. We are not using a welfare approach... we are working on the premise of empowerment. People have to learn to help themselves and we need to support them

**Tahira:** Yes of course I will try my best.

The Project Manager exits

**Tahira (to the audience)** I think I am good at what I do. People respect me in the community, they listen to what I have to say. Then why is it that I am unable to motivate them?

Perhaps I am at fault, perhaps I have not thought through all the possible strategies. Maybe I should just make separate lending groups for separate ethnicities. Yes that is the solution. Then they will come together within their own ethnic groups and talk to one another and trust one another.

**Lights dim and voices enter locate selves behind Tahira – spotlight on voices**

**VOICE 1:** Her brain is working. She is being strategic!

**VOICE 2:** But isn’t that against the idea of bringing the community together? Is it not building on divides?

**VOICE 3:** She is being pragmatic given the situation. She can bring the groups together later.

**VOICE 4:** One cannot have an ideal situation in the field. You have to work with what you have. After all she has no choice she needs to meet her targets.

**Lights fade out – curtain**
Act 1 Scene 3: In the Community

Tahira in conversation with (Muneera) a woman from her project site

(center stage – no props)

**Muneera:** Baji what should I do my husband is threatening to divorce me and take away my children. I am the one who is working in the bungalows washing clothes and dishes. He says that I must give him all my earnings, but if I do that how will I run the house and look after my children?

**Tahira:** You must tell him that you cannot give him all your money. You need to talk to him and explain why.

**Muneera:** I did that and he beat me see (she displays bruises on her arms and back)

**Tahira:** Tell him if he does that again you will go to the police. If he beats you he is violating your rights and he can be arrested and go to prison.

**Muneera:** Baji where will the police listen to a poor woman like me. Will you come with me to the thana or will you be there to save me when he beats me again? Don’t give me solutions that have no chance of working. You work for an organization you have power maybe you should talk to him.

**Tahira:** That might not be appropriate he may not like what I have to say. My organization would not support my getting involved. It is not our mandate. I can put you in touch with a group who deals with issues of violence they could help you. I am sure of it. They even have shelters you could go to if you needed to. They also provide lawyers and legal advice.

**Muneera:** Baji that will not solve my problem. If I don’t work what will happen to my children and who will look after them?

**Tahira:** Well we could take it to the women’s group and see what they suggest. They may be able to put pressure on your husband through their men.

**Muneera:** Yes we could see if that works.

**Tahira (to the audience):** I wish I could do more I feel so helpless but I cannot get involved in domestic disputes. All I can do is raise awareness about her rights. It is not my mandate. It would jeopardise my standing and that of the organizations in the community. Plus empowerment has to come from within. If the women’s group takes a stand it will be more sustainable and a good indicator of their empowerment. After all no one helped me I had to help myself too. I travel on my own, I motivated myself to take this job, I face my neighbours and family members when they decide to comment on my working for an NGO. I choose my own life path, if I want to do something I do it. The more aware you become the less willing you are to have your rights violated.
Lights fade – Voices enter – spotlight on voices

VOICE 1: Not supportive? Not mandated? Is it not the purpose of organizations that work in communities to assist in such circumstances?

VOICE 2: They do not have the resources.

VOICE 3: But they have four wheel drives how can they not have the resources?

VOICE 4: But their hands are tied.

VOICE 1: Then their hands should be untied!

VOICE 2: It would jeopardize their standing in the community, it would be a risk.

VOICE 3: Not interfering is strategic.

VOICE 1: This makes no sense – it is nonsense!
Act 1: Scene 4: At the Training

Tahira is seated on a chair daydreaming waiting for the training to begin.

Tahira (to the audience) I feel so burnt out. I am tired all the time. If it were not for my children I would quit and perhaps become a teacher.

Voice 1: But that would not let you travel as much.

Voice 2: You would not be able to attend trainings.

Voice 1: But don’t you feel this work is your calling? That you were meant for it, that you connect with people and can make a difference through creating awareness?

Voice 3: She used the think that way. She has lost her spark. Perhaps leaving may be good yfor her. It might bring back the spark you lost.

Voice 4: But as a teacher would you be able to make as much of a difference? You would be stuck in one place. Plus teachers are not well respected. At least here you are considered a professional.

Voice 1: You know motivation comes and goes. You need to bring it back so you can work. You need to be optimistic to do this work with heart.
Act 2 – Why this Job?

CDW/Voices/Chorus seated in a semi-circle around a screen and Projector at the Training

Chorus:

Why this job?

I needed a job - my husband left me and I needed to stand on my own two feet (*apney pairon par*).

I needed a job - my father died.

I needed a job because my sanity depended on it.

I needed a job to be able to get out of the house.

I needed a job to get my children into good schools and pay the tuition.

I needed a job to support my family.

I wanted a job to be able to apply what I had learned.

My factory burnt down but God showed me a way. I am a quick learner.

Work is my *majboori* but *maza bhi ata hai* otherwise I would have left the job.

Ah, this job was the only one that I did not require formal qualifications for! So it was *itefaqan*!

*Itefaqan* (by chance)

*Itefaqan* (by accident)

*Itefaqan* (I never planned it)

*Itefaqan* (it was serendipitous)

It was never planned.

A serendipitous moment I will never regret.
CDW/Voice 1: *Itfaqan* (there was an opportunity). They needed a local girl who spoke the language and I needed a job. I had no background nor any tangible skills. The NGO was not having any luck with the community so they needed local people from the community to gain entry. I had a BA and they were desperate so they hired me on the spot. My mother supported me.

*Itfaqan*....

CDW/Voice 2: I went to school for this. I have a degree.

CDW/Voice 3: I have a degree in Sociology, but that too was *Itfaqan*.

CDW/Voice 1: You mean you didn’t want to do a degree in Sociology?

CDW/Voice 3: No, I didn’t plan to do a degree in sociology. It just sort of happened. I was there to fill out forms for economics, but the deadline had passed. Someone told me apply in Sociology that their deadline is later. So I did and they took me in.

CDW/Voice 4: Well I planned it. This is what I trained for my whole life.

CDW/Voice 3: Really?

CDW/Voice 4: Yes.

CDW/Voice 3: Explain.

CDW/Voice 4: It’s a long story.

CDW/Voice 3: I have time.

Lights dim (painting projected on the screen)
CDW/Voice 4: My basic orientation to community development was from the church welfare model and CBO formation. I was the youngest member of my CBO at the age of 12. I saw things I felt embarrassed about and got a lot of exposure....I saw people cheating and misuse funds. I thought, I wanted to work in this field and I won’t be dishonest like them.

Look up there can you see the three colors (brown, pink and green) those are the phases of my life. At least this is how I see my life and the changes in it. So in the first section I see myself in my pre-adolescence phase or my childhood. I relate this to by experiences of growing up in an environment of religious discrimination and my identity. I got hatred, anger and discrimination from society. I could not even drink water from a Mussalman’s glass – these were the messages I got that I am worthless, less than and the object of hate. The outcomes of which were a feeling of helplessness, lack of self-confidence, tears, hatred and anger.
My personality became that of a violator, one who chooses violence as a response. I would start with violence on those who were weaker than me physically. Like boys at school...or people in my family. My sphere of authority daira-e-ikhtyaar was limited to those around me. If a Mussalman would say something to me, or slap me I would not respond to him. Instead I would come home and take my anger out on my younger siblings over whom I had power and control, ikhtiar. I would repeat this behaviour where ever I got space.

Then in 1983-84 I fell ill and this gave me a different vantage point to observe the world and human relations. I did not think that I would get better but I thought that if I do I will try and do something for society. I was 14-15 at the time. I got to see life and relationships up close and I began to understand the relationship between society and religion. I did get better and this was my turning point. After two or three years I went back to school and I got a different environment. I was friends with some people in class nine an NGO on Human Rights was working in my community un key saat uthna baithna hua ahista, I began to sit and talk with them ahista un key saath voluntary kam karna shuru kiya, I slowly I began to join them in their voluntary work and 1990 I got a job. I was very lucky because I was mentored and I was also self motivation to address injustice and inequalities subjected to. I recognized the need for minorities to have a platform from which to be heard effectively

You can see the colors in this phase of my life change to pink. I made friends who were interested in changing society and addressing issues of injustice. It is from here that an internal sensitivity, a different attitude began to change me and I began to develop myself. I began to move towards stability, strength, my vision my view on life became clearer my thoughts and attitudes began to come into sync with each other. But this change came from questioning, having the courage to ask why, why am I doing this? Why do I have to believe in this? Why are these restrictions placed on me? This is how I got my freedom combining my thinking, my feelings, information my essence. Society might see me as a baghi a rebel but I see myself as empowered.

It was later that I decided that I would like to work in this field professionally. Today this phase of my life is green it gives me peace at least in my thoughts and in my life. The intense anger that blinded me has gone. As you can see this is a collaborative project the institution represented in the green section is crafted by my daughter to represent my work space which I also see in a positive light. Working with my daughter and bringing her here is sharing part of my life with her so she too can learn and see and listen. I am not a psychologist I am just a regular human being who got an opportunity to transform himself and move from negative thinking to positive thinking through mentors and friends. I believe that it was my self esteem, the feeling that I am of worth that allowed me to get this far.

You see you don’t have to be ‘fully empowered’ in every aspect of your life to facilitate change it is an ongoing process. Your actions can still be transformative, you can still provide opportunities for those around you and facilitate their positive thinking and motivate them. Sometimes you may get pulled down but the main thing is to be able to pull yourself up and keep going and be at peace with yourself. It is so much harder than it sounds but I think this is the challenge. Also the people you work with are your inspiration
too. They inspire you to do better. Empowerment requires access to information, inner feeling, honesty and humility. Empowerment is linked to my inner core. One needs self empowerment to do what we do. It comes and goes one need to bring it back so you can work. You need to be optimistic to do this work with heart. This work is personal, one cannot separate the two.

**CDW/Voice 3:** Really?

**CDW/Voice 4:** Really.

**CDW/Voice 3:** Well then you fit the script.

**CDW/Voice 4:** Is there a script?

**CDW/Voice 3:** What haven’t you read the text?

**CDW/Voice 4:** What text?

**CDW/Voice 3:** The one that is said and not said, the one that goes something like

**Recite in chorus (sounds like rote learning)**

**Chorus:**

A social mobilizer must be a good facilitator and supports transformative action  
A good social mobilizer must be a good communicator  
A good social mobilizer must not be judgmental  
A good social mobilizer must internalize empowerment theory  
A good social mobilizer must be able to unveil the world of oppression  
A good social mobilizer must be a co-learner  
A good social mobilizer must be able to live in the field and accept its conditions  
A good social mobilizer must be able to work from a position of altered consciousness  
A good social mobilizer must have conviction and discipline to implement  
A good social mobilizer must be able to alter oppressed women’s internalized beliefs about her oppression since birth  
A good social mobilizer must be self aware of all personal biases and not let them intrude in their role as facilitator  
To be a good social mobilizer you must be empowered  
A good social mobilizer must develop the capacity to focus on empowerment of women as a gender issue and be skilled enough to keep the process moving without it getting ‘hijacked’ by existing power dynamics ...and the list continues....
CDW/Voice 4: But I am not all that.

CDW/Voice 3: Your story definitely sounded like the script.

CDW/Voice 4: Well, there are parts I didn’t mention.

CDW/Voice 3: Oh, what parts?

CDW/Voice 4: Well, it’s embarrassing. I see myself as very gender sensitive, but I cannot let my wife sit with my brothers at the table and discuss family issues. They would tear me apart.

CDW/Voice 3: Well then you should say something.

CDW/Voice 4: It is not the time.

CDW/Voice 3: Coward!

CDW/Voice 4: I am not a coward. Sometimes silence is best. It does not mean I agree, only that I did not say anything.

CDW/Voice 3: My story may not be as transformative as yours, but I refuse to remain silent. I speak up.

CDW/Voice 4: And then what happens?

CDW/Voice 3: They listen...well not all the time...but some of the time.
**ACT 3: English**

**Manager:** I am sorry, I cannot make sense of this report.

**Tahira:** But I spent the whole week writing it. I even included the diagrams and photos we took. I lost the file three times on the computer because the electricity kept going.

**Manager:** Yes, I appreciate your diligence and the effort, but your English isn’t good enough.

**Tahira:** Isn’t good?

**Manager:** Isn’t good enough!

**Tahira (to audience):** They hired me to do community work and mobilize people at the grass roots level. I speak four languages Urdu, Sindhi, Saraiki, Punjabi.

**Manager (to audience):** They hired me because I have an MBA and write good reports. Therefore I supervise her.

**Tahira (to audience):** But she has no field experience. How can she supervise me if she has no field experience?

**Manager (to audience):** I am a quick learner – besides anyone can do this mobilization business. It is much harder to learn English and use the computer. You just need to know the NGO language like LFA.

**CDW/ Voice 1 (seated in audience) raises hand:** Oh, I know that one Log Frame Analysis.

**Manager:** And do you know how to fill out an LFA?

**CDW/ Voice 1 (seated in audience):** No.

**Manager:** I rest my case!

**Tahira:** But I can read and write English!

**Manager:** Its not the same. It has to be the right English. And you have to speak it too *futa fut* with speed and with the right accent.

**Tahira:** How would I do that?

**Manager:** Well, that is more a matter of luck you know...the right school, the right social class. It’s a little complicated to explain.
Tahira (to audience): I really thought a good community worker is one who has experience, empathy and can mobilize community groups to address community issues collectively. I suppose the definition is changing....
ACT 4: Research

Shahid a CDW is typing into a computer flip charts with writing and diagrams are spread out around him

Voice 1: What is he doing?
Voice 2: He is writing a report.
Voice 3: No, he is entering data.
Voice 2: Data? No. No, it is a report. He is not a researcher, he is social mobilizer like us.
Voice 1: He takes out a large flip chart from the floor and begins to look at a diagram.
Voice 3: See, he is analyzing data.
Voice 2: No, he is not. He is documenting his fieldwork with the community.
Voice 3: See, look again. That is research.
Voice 2: Is not!
Voice 3: We do research?
Voice 2: We collect forms all the time.
Voice 1: Yes, that is true. We get the community to answer questions and fill in forms all the time.
Voice 2: Does that make one a researcher collecting data? Filling out forms?
Voice 1: I do FGDs too and interviews.
Voice 3: What are FGDs?

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (in chorus)

Voice 3: Oh, I do those too, like in community meetings.
Voice 4: I am a researcher.
Voices 1, 2, 3: You are?
Voice 4: Yes, I work on a research project therefore I am a researcher.
Voice 1: But your designation is community coordinator.
Voice 4: Yes, but I collect ‘data’, I take photographs, I fill out forms and I document it and then they use it to write their papers. Without me they would have no data.
Voice 1: True, I do that too, but that makes you a collector of data. How does that make you a researcher?
Voice 4: You may not have formal qualifications, but I know SPSS and I have been trained to enter data on it. I know words ‘pre-testing’ ‘data cleaning’. When I was in university I did a course in research. We learned how to do research and then conducted our own. I did a research in women’s jails. I interviewed the women prisoners about their conditions and then wrote about it.

Voice 1: Did it get published?

Voice 4: Well, it was bound....

Voice 1: But did it get published in an international journal?

Voice 4: Well, no.

Voice 1: Hah! Then you are not a researcher. Everyone knows that to be a researcher your work needs to be published!

Voice 4: I say I am a researcher!

Voice 1: Have you written a research proposal and gotten money to do research?

Voice 4: Don’t be silly, you know funders don’t give us money. They give it to the directors. But it is we who do all the fieldwork and the ‘real research’. Writing a proposal and making power point presentations at conferences does not make them researchers.

Voice 1: So are you saying they steal our work and give us no credit?

Voice 4: Well, I suppose yes... Yes, that is what I am saying!

Voice 1: Oh, well, that’s old news then.... In the end you may be doing research, but that will not make you a ‘researcher’. You will still be a ‘community coordinator’!
Chapter 10 Image as Medium for Complication

*Note to Reader*

In this chapter I share a photo narrative created by Rabia, one of my study collaborators. She used photography and its framing as a medium through which to express her critical analysis of empowerment narratives she encounters’ in her work. Rabia took the photos during the second phase of the research study after attending a group workshop on photography and engaging with group members in discussions on the ethics of representation (for details of the photography workshop and process please refer to Chapter 2). During the discussions she was particularly disturbed by questions of ethics in photographing community members from community development project sites. She confided that she was always photographing participants for documentation purposes for projects and felt uncomfortable with how these images were framed and manipulated in presentations and reports made by the organization she used to work for. She saw herself as complicit in using photographs to appease donor concerns that their funds were being used appropriately to empower communities. She shared that before and after intervention photos were a common strategy used by the organization to present positive changes in quality of life and reflect empowerment yet many of the photographs were staged. Another strategy she identified in her work context was how images of poverty were used to evoke pity therefore justifying the need for international donor funds. To quote Rabia,
“This really frustrates me. Why do we always have to frame people as poor and helpless? It depicts us as a nation of beggars in need of saving. We are not helpless and nor should we be begging. It is strange how in order to be funded to do empowerment work you have to manipulate emotions and tell stories in this way.”

A few weeks later Rabia decided she wanted to use images in a different way to provoke discussion in the group around the issue of representation and empowerment work. She said in the introduction to her presentation “I want to promote critical thinking around the work we do and not exploit people”. She chose to photograph the setting of one of the Kachi Abadis where she worked in order to get group participants to relate back to the hands on fieldwork they were each involved in. She took verbal consent from all subjects in her portraits explaining the purpose of her endeavour.

Rabia took over sixty different digital photographs over a month and then brought them to share at the next group meeting. I then asked her to sort through the photographs and identify those which that connected most to her critical reflections on empowerment. Once she had done this she shared these with the group narrating her analysis and describing the photograph. I have put her narrations and photographs together in this representation with her permission in order to share her reflections and engagement with empowerment narratives.
In Rabia’s Voice...

I started thinking about our discussions. So when I was in the field I began to look at things a little differently and started asking myself. What do I mean by empowerment in the context of my work? What I realized through my art making process and group discussions is that empowerment markers are truly relative and at times conflicting. I was thinking that the obvious or what we see is obvious, is actually enough to understand empowerment but perhaps it is not. Perhaps we need to relook at what we mean by change and ask ourselves what we mean when we say we have made a change or that there is a change in the community.
Look at this picture. Here is a woman who is a key decision maker in her household. She controls the budget, her sons salaries and what gets purchased. She is consulted in all decisions from marriage to what gets cooked within the household and her opinion is given significant weightage. At the same time she controls the movement of her daughter-in-law. Without her permission her daughter-in-law cannot leave the house. So this reflects that women are also oppressors and she uses her position to control other people’s freedom. We can rationalize it and say that yes her ability to control and her choice to control are linked to her relationship with her son and her own economic empowerment. Yet she is making a choice...there are other women in her position who may not choose to control others in the same oppressive way.
Look at this child he is laughing and playing. He looks happy ...we said in our discussions that happiness is an indicator of empowerment but he is not allowed to go to school because he has to look after his father’s cattle. So his opportunity and choice have been taken away from him. But he is still happy. So can we still use happiness as an indicator? Perhaps not in his case...
This woman is running a school canteen. You could say that she is empowered because she is earning her own income. This is why we promote micro-credit schemes. However you need to understand that without the store and the small income the family would starve...she told me it is her need for survival that drives her, she does not have a choice to work or not to work. Is this empowerment or survival? Are the two separate or interdependent?
This man is sitting outside his house holding his baby and looking after her while his wife cleans the inside of the house (you can see her foot in the background). He was reluctant at first to have his picture taken but then agreed. This reflects that we need to think about assumptions of gender roles and masculinity. The assumptions we have is that masculinity is one …it is not so. This picture is from within the community I work in. I had nothing to do (as a development worker) with this man taking on the role of looking after his child in this way (which many would consider a female gendered role). So men too are different and the way we run workshops always essentialize customary practices. We need to talk about men being different, supportive, caring as well as controlling. Our interventions are important but we need to shift our thinking. I wonder would he have been more comfortable reversing roles with his wife? Just something I was thinking about....
Image 5 Surrogate Mother

Here look at this child ... she goes to school but she is also responsible for looking after her younger brother and sister. She is only ten. This surrogate motherhood is a life long burden ... she is not a child but a mother with responsibilities of a mother. Her whole life like mine is linked to caring for her younger siblings. I make decisions in my life that may not seem empowering to you but they are based on my own critical thinking. I am empowered compared to many other people I meet. I have taken risks to get to where I am and to be who I am. She may not have the same opportunities as me.
These two old men are running a shop. Again a reflection of economic empowerment however they are in their mid-seventies. They told me that their children have abandoned them so their only option is make a living this way. We pride ourselves with having ‘eastern’ values where we look after our parents. However you can see here that we live in an illusion of making a distinction between the ‘East and West’ we just choose to create an imaginary identity for ourselves as ‘good’ people ‘not like the West’. We need to begin to challenge our assumptions. How many organizations are working on issues of seniors? We get funding for HIV/AIDS and reproductive health but no-one seems to think empowerment of elderly people is important.
These children should be in school but they are selling cholas (boiled chickpeas) on the street. Let us talk about empowerment of institutions. What failures in the system have led to these children being put in this position? Yes you may say they get a sense of empowerment from contributing back to their household but where is the role of the state and of civic society here?
This woman is looking after her dog and is also multitasking on her cell phone at the same time. She does not want to look after that dog but she says her husband will beat her if she does not. You see you need the depth of understanding along with the photos...things are complicated...when we write case studies we try and show that this person is empowered or not empowered it is so much easier to present the picture and the story we want to fit with it as either a success or someone to be pitied so we can get funds.
Chapter 11
A Marriage of Convenience: State and NGO Relations

Note to Reader

‘The Fire’, a short story I wrote about a year ago is based on an incident narrated by one of my participants during an interview. The story is about the main office of the Provincial Social Welfare Department in Karachi catching fire. As a result most of the department’s records were destroyed, offices had to be cordoned off, and a section of the Department relocated. Based on a well placed source, the investigation into the cause of the fire is still ongoing and employees as still in makeshift offices. It was also during my fieldwork that I discovered that there was no functional washroom for employees in the Department and that many men used the washroom at the nearby mosque out of necessity.

However I would like to put in a disclaimer that all characters in this story are fictional, as are the rest of the incidents which take place within it. This particular account highlights how empowerment narratives construct the binary of government versus NGOs which emerged as an important theme in my data. State employees are usually constructed as lazy, corrupt and unreliable characters. In contrast empowerment narratives constructed by international funding agencies tend to present INGOs and NGOs as the tenacious heroes of development work and the logical replacement to inefficient state departments (Alvarez, 2009; Kamat, 2003a, 2003b). A hierarchy and rivalry between state and NGO workers also tends to be present. Most NGO grassroots workers define themselves in opposition to state employees who are seen as inefficient, slothful, corrupt, behind the times and are always guaranteed a salary. Sate employment is a coveted position but many of my participants who were employed by the state expressed apathy, recalled better days and frustration at bureaucracy and mismanagement within the system. They saw NGO employees as more accountable
and better resourced in terms of training opportunities, travel opportunities, access to vehicles. This in line with studies that present non-state actors as being more honest, closer to the grassroots, efficient, and able to fulfill empowerment agendas. Public-private partnerships have recently been hailed as the ultimate solution to counter the ‘lack’ in state capacity to meet the needs of its population by state agencies as a possible solution (Jhumra, 2007). These sentiments were both echoed and challenged by many of my participants reflecting their lived experiences. This particular story highlights the contradictions and complexities presented in such oppositional binary essentialist constructs based on data from interviews and discussions with community workers employed by both state and NGOs.

In addition the story also highlights how development workers are cognisant of empowerment narratives and also complicit in their construction. Some of my participants who were state employees felt that the stories they shared with me were their method of resistance and arose out of a moral obligation to disrupt simplistic assumptions about empowerment work. Demonstrating a mix of strategies employed and how resistance takes different and sometimes indiscernible forms, the character of Sumroo Sahab both contradicts and uses these binary constructs to legitimise his subject status. His character portrays how state employed workers are also entangled in a web of power relations and how context influences the way they are put to work. His nuanced analysis of government employed community development workers as they struggle within the bureaucratic system stands as an interesting example of the interplay between agency, context and narrative. Similarly the character of Mrs. Ahmed also reproduces the construct of the ‘good development worker’ in opposition to the state as villain. This image is sometimes appropriated by NGO workers to legitimize and validate their work and identity. The dialogue between Sumro Sahab and Mrs. Ahmed displays the complex relations, delicate negotiations and strategies employed to
resist as well as meet their expected roles in empowerment narratives; as well as how development workers construct and legitimize their own identities within the context of their work.
**The Fire**

He distinctly remembered where he was when he first caught a whiff of something burning. It was an odd smell interlaced with urine and incense. Ali Bux Sumroo had been squatting over the commode of the mosque adjoining his office trying to forget the daily humiliation he suffered. He adjusted his position and cursed the Department once again for not having a functional commode on its premises for its employees.

It was ridiculous! Their vision was to provide ‘enabling environments’ and ‘tangible opportunities’ through policies, programmes and projects. People needed simple things like commodes that flushed for the environment to be enabling! How is one supposed to contribute to the promotion of social progress and economic upliftment when one is worried about one’s weak bladder? How is one to address the needs of the marginalized and vulnerable segments of society?

Sumro Sahab tried to redirect his mind to the task at hand – but it was no use, all he could think about was that he needed an out. He really felt like he had come to the end of his rope. I mean if you feel that you are of no use, a pawn on a global chess board, more specifically a government servant with no specific purpose or decision making power; if you feel that you cannot tangibly help most of the people who come to you; then what is the point in continuing? It is better to go somewhere else where your skills can be more useful. The question is ‘Where would I go at this age?’

Sumro Sahab had been in the Department fifteen years. He had joined right after he cleared the civil service exam three years after completing his Masters degree in Social Work. He was posted to Social Welfare and Health Unit for two years, then to the Education Unit for five, then to the Training Institute for three years in community development, and now for the last five years he was in the provincial head quarters dealing with NGOs. However he spent most of the time as a second PA to the Director, Madam. She would send him on chores for the department that had nothing to do with his work in community development. If there was a court appearance Sumro Sahab would be sent. If there was presentation to be made it was put on his head ‘Give it to Sumro Sahab his English is good and he knows how to use a computer’. Sumro Sahab would be called into the office if Madam had visitors to tell them about the great work the department was doing. If Madam had to make a public appearance Sumro Sahab would be dragged along.

He sniffed again; the smell was still there and it didn’t smell like burning plastic bags. He thought about his daily ritual of coming to the mosque next to his office to use the facilities and wondered what the women in the office did. They must have strong bladder control he decided; after all there are never washrooms for women in the bazaar anyway. Every time he took his wife shopping this was their ongoing issue, which relative’s house was close to which market so that

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they could plot the course of the trip. In case of an emergency they could pop in and say the obligatory salam dua and use the facilities.

His mind reverted back to the woes of working in the social sector. ‘The policy makers should really ask me why things are not working and I could tell them straight out as a professional. The problem is that it takes courage to hear the truth and accept it and they (our exalted leaders) are a bunch of shaturnurgs burrowing their heads in the sand. Cowards! Bowing to Party leaders for a cut! A continuous chain of lining pockets; cowering and colluding with the intelligence agencies, the military and the US Government. How long do we keep hiding behind the fake numbers and staring in wonderment at the state of our country? What is the point of putting a Sunny-Plast on a festering wound? We should just rip it off and deal with what is standing in front of us!

The fact is that we as country do not have a social policy. We have policy directives but nothing comprehensive. No policy directive clearly states what we mean by social services; the choices and range of services; or how we are going to provide these services; or for that matter how they will be funded. Everything runs on an ad hoc basis. Some days we dream up projects, other days we decide on arbitrary budget adjustments. We do not believe in research. It is more convenient for specific individuals to make decisions, then, there is no debate. Donors provide us with directives for state programs and since we have no principles we accept what we can even if it comes with hefty interest rates. After all beggars can’t be choosers now can they?

The truth is that our social sector is fragmented and lacks coordination across departments and ministries. There is no institution mandated with the responsibility of coordinating the social sector. The services we do provide are inadequate in both coverage and funding. We do not have the capacity to regulate our actions, those of international organizations or NGOs because there is no accountability. The whole sector is really a mess and no one is keeping track. In the end it is all about moral character. Either you are honest or not. Even then there is coercion.

He remembered the last project he was assigned to. It was a partnership between an international organization and the Provincial Government. The agency people had made him fudge the books; it was part of his ‘unofficial job description’. If he had resisted it would have meant yet another transfer. Work in the development sector is truly ironic and twisted. On one hand you have money coming in for programs and projects that is earmarked and never spent. At the other, you have so many poor people in this country who are suffering and you are not allowed to redirect those funds. So much depends on foreign relations and the political climate. One day your friend is your enemy and the next your enemy is your friend.

The government should just close shop and hand things over to the donors, NGOs and the corporations if it feels like it no longer has the capacity to function and fulfill its constitutional
obligations. Hah constitutional obligation! Which country in the world makes 18 amendments to its constitution and holds it in abeyance when it chooses!

We really are the masters of conspiracy and fabrication. We weave stories and tales to help us deal with our own complicity and humiliation. We weave stories and fibs to tell the public. It starts with a simple lie, one that we are delegated to tell. Lies we know will deliberately frustrate.

“Oh, sorry Mrs. Ahmed, you have come to see Madam today?”

“What is that? Acha you have an appointment? Oh, there is no record of an appointment. She is very busy. She cannot see you today.”

[Liész]

“But I called…”

“Sorry, today is not possible. There is an urgent meeting…”

[And the lie stretches and stretches and stretches…]

The smell of burning was stronger now and he wondered which idiot had decided to burn their garbage in the middle of the day. It was so typical of people to be inconsiderate! Why couldn’t they wait till night to do this? They all know how acrid the smoke from burning plastic bags gets. It creeps right up your nostrils and into your head and it lingers. He stood up, adjusted his shalwar and carefully tied is zaarband pulling at the colourful tassels, tightening it around his waist into a knot. He washed his hands under the tap in the tiled area cordoned off for ablutions and then went to pay the boy who kept track of the bathroom users.

Sumro Sahab had been responsible for working with NGOs and registering them with the Department for the last ten years. Philanthropic actors have always played an important role in Pakistan. Volunteer organizations and religious groups have always been involved in relief efforts and crisis situations. What has changed is that they have gotten more organized and professionalized. His job description included training and ensuring the authenticity of their claims. Someone had recently mentioned to him that there were approximately fifty six thousand or so NGOs registered in Pakistan with over twelve thousand registered in Karachi and the highest proportion of the NGOs were working in the education sector. Sumro Sahab did not trust numbers he felt most of the one’s being used were fabrications as no one really did any scientific research. Numbers presented are always fabricated he had learned from his fifteen years of

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45 Policies towards NGOs by international actors began to change because of perceived high levels of corruption and inefficiency in public delivery and organizations such as World Bank began to adopt a much more flexible and pro-active attitude in working with NGOs (Pasha et al, 2002).

46 (Ghaus-Pasha et al., 2002, p. 8)

47 According to the SDPI National survey conducted in 2002 it was estimated that (46%) of NGOs reported Education (including religious education) as their main activity. The second largest component in the nonprofit sector consists of organizations engaged in advocacy (18%) Among the civil rights NGOs, only 2 percent were involved in human rights activities (Ghaus-Pasha, Jamal, & Iqbal, 2002). Organizations providing social services are at 8%, while 5% organizations reported religious activities as their main service. Organizations working in health sector are relatively few (6%) (Ghaus-Pasha et al., 2002, p. 12).
experience as a government employee. What is on paper is not what the real picture is. For that reason he didn’t trust any of the NGOs either. He had been in the government long enough to know. NGOs can register and get tax exemption under the Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies (Registration and Control Ordinance) 1961; or the Societies Registration Act, 1860; or the Companies Ordinance, 1984; as well as The Trust Act II of 1882. Some organizations seemed to have been registered in even two or more places. There is no system of accountability. If someone were to ask him based on his experience he would put the numbers of registered NGOs as much higher maybe around sixty five thousand registered and more than a hundred thousand unregistered. People also did not realize how many religious parties were working in the social sector as registered NGOs.

In his experience of registering NGOs, corruption in the sector had now become as bad as that in the Government. It was not that organizations were not doing good work or that all NGOs were dishonest but it was different from before. Before people did things because they believed in it now there were all these rifts and NGOs have become businesses, well paying corporations fighting amongst each other for funds from donors.

“If change is to come it has to be from the top”, he declared out aloud. He broke out into a big smile and nodded his head at the clarity of his thoughts and their rather socialist leanings. Yes it has to be a revolutionary change otherwise there is no hope. As it is the state has been downloading its responsibility from the social sector for years. Now it has come with a new solution ‘public-private partnerships’ a more ‘competitive’ way to finance projects, build infrastructure and deliver services efficiently. If the corporations were to be involved then he was sure that the outcomes would be productive. They were interested in their bottom line and would not waste money.

“I am a realist”, he acknowledged. Everyone understands that individuals have increasing financial needs with the rising inflation but take some and give some back. Why take all and pocket it?

Sumro Sahab exited the mosque and headed back towards his office. On his way he noticed that a new billboard had been put up featuring the head of the MQM Party Altaf Hussain and the mayor of the Karachi Mustafa Kamal. Black outlines of kites had been painted with hurried brushstrokes and filled in with tangerine and green to symbolize the power of the MQM party over

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48 (Ghaus-Pasha et al., 2002, p. 4)
49 Lack of institutional structure, irregular governmental regulation policy, lack of open system of accountability and transparency have been cited as prime reasons the ineffectiveness of the sector (Shaukat, 2007)
50 (Shaukat, 2006, p. 6)
51 The rise of NGOs and their significance is marked by the presumed failure of state and the political parties to meet the aspirations, and development needs of the people. Consequently, people have started responding by organizing for themselves the provision of such (basic) services and the protection of rights (Shaukat, 2006).
52 Globalization and structural adjustment has also changed the way the state funds development projects (Jhumra, 2007). Most infrastructure projects are funded on a Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) basis by international companies. The costs are two hundred percent higher than if than if they had been built locally with local funds instead of borrowed dollars (Hassan, 2009, xxv).
the city. Bloody Mohajirs! He sneered. We welcomed them to Sindh and they think they can take it from us! They think Karachi is theirs! At least the provincial government is now PPP even if the city government is in their grubby hands. He nodded his head approvingly as he saw a competing billboard of the PPP with the dynastic line of dead Bhutos’ accompanied by black, red and green striped flags. Sumro Sahab nodded with satisfaction. At least the PPP will protect the interests of the Sindhis as an ethnic group. It was his Sindhi PPP connections that had kept him from being transferred the last time to godforsaken Mirpurkhas.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of sirens. He looked around and saw smoke billowing from the section on the top floor of his office building where all the Departmental records were kept. The office was on fire! As he got closer he saw his colleagues standing outside and a crowd beginning to gather as the fire gutted the entire office floor.

At the very moment when flames were leaping out of the windows of the three story dilapidated colonial building, Mrs. Ahmed was on her way to see Sumro Sahab to have the tax exemption certificate for her school renewed. This was her third attempt.

She had already sent an official letter. She had been told it had not been received.
She had personally delivered another letter and had it received with his signature.

She was then told that her file had been misplaced so now she was headed for a face to face direct approach and she was livid. She had to go through this headache every two years. The tax exemption certificate was extremely important. Without it her organization could not accept funds from donors or provide them with receipts with the tax exemption number. With the rising costs of living and fuel hikes meeting overheads was an ongoing challenge.

Her organization had been very lucky with donors to date. They did not have international funding. They chose to target local philanthropists for fundraising as they found it much more sustainable. These local donors gave money solely on the reputation of her organization for transparency as an NGO. They were able to target corporate social responsibility funds of corporations as well. Transparency was her central fundraising strategy and her social capital. ‘Come to the school and see what your donation can do’ was their slogan. ‘Come and contribute even ten rupees but come and see what can be done if you try to make a change. This is a living example of social transformation’ and you can be part of it. Our door is always open’.

Mrs. Ahmed worked as a volunteer at school for special kids all the way from the nursery to the intermediate level. They had started with ten children and now there were two hundred. It has been a major achievement. They had adopted a ghost school from the government based on an “Adopt a School” policy that had been devised by the Provincial Education Department. A ‘ghost school’ for those unfamiliar with the term is a government school which is constructed, has

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53 She did not use the word empowerment. According to a study by Bano (2008) local voluntary organizations tend not to use the ‘empowerment’ jargon.
children registered and has staff on its payroll who collect salaries but are never seen in the school. There are multiple government schools in the city which are non-functional and lying empty and the government keeps a record of them. This particular school had been used as a storage facility by the neighbouring office of the local borough mayor. It had taken her two years to get the project off the ground garnering support of the MQM and the school had now been running for five years. And so for seven years she had been dealing with government officials. Some days she wanted to laugh and other days she wanted to cry in frustration at the delicate dance she had to perform to get the paper work processed with department officials. She has become an expert and was always sent to do the ‘dirty work’ of dealing with government departments.

Not many people had been able to get so much work done through official channels. Many people whispered conspiratorially ‘What is your secret?’

She would tell them the truth.

‘First of all you need to go with an attitude that this is their job, as in the governments’ job and they are not doing you a favour. So when I go to their office I just go, I talk to them, tell them my case and I say that there is a need and it has to happen and it happens. I have been very lucky, by the grace of God, that I have not paid any bribe or greased any palms to have my work officially done, or officially registered. That’s the biggest achievement. These children have equal rights in this country so why should I have to grease anybody’s palms to be able get this work officially done. So, I am very forceful in my approach, I am very upfront in my approach, I don’t mince my words. I say to them ‘This has to be done and it has to be done now!’ So, believe it or not they do it. My approach is completely different because I am so direct and, so, they respect me for what I am because they are used to bowing to authority.’

‘But Mrs. Ahmed how do you get them to see you? That is the biggest challenge getting your foot into the inner office?’ Ask those curious about her strategy and wanting to learn from her.

‘If the official concerned does not see me I start with my personal phone calls, through my fax, my letters, (email is useless it does not hold authority). Then I directly approach them at the office and I wait for the person to see me and if still I have to approach through some other source, I try that as well, sometimes I have to. But basically it has been a direct approach. I approach, I speak, I write and I follow up with phone calls. Yes, if I am being pushed into a corner and I feel that the work is not being done, then I do approach the higher authorities, through the people who I know, personally, the political parties.

‘It has to do with people’s mindset really. I mean that person sitting in that chair has a certain mindset about the person who is going to talk to them. I talk in English to them, I speak in Urdu to them when needed or in Sindhi and I make myself very clear as to what needs to be done. And, maybe, they are impressed by my language or surprised or intimidated. You see I play around with my roles and character. I talk to them in a very casual manner but I also make sure that I get my message across and that work has to be done! And if it helps to be a woman then so be it, I use that to my advantage. If pity for the special children helps I use that too. Although I don’t think
gender is the issue here. It is just your approach. But otherwise I feel that the direct approach is the best approach’.

When she began working with this NGO she had been rather naive and inexperienced. Inexperienced not in terms of running a school (she had twenty years of teaching experience and still held her full time job); but inexperienced in terms of dealing with government officials. When she had approached them to adopt a school she had been ignored. She was shocked. There was a policy that people who wanted to adopt a ghost school could do so. It was part of the public private partnership scheme. They had all the paper work completed, all the legal requirements fulfilled and yet she was blocked.

Each time she visited the office it was a new story.
‘Oh Madam is not in.’
‘Oh your file has been lost’
‘Oh it is being considered.’
She finally barged into the Director’s office and confronted her.
She still remembers the scene.

There were two men sitting in front of her drinking chai. She had been kept waiting for three hours and had watched a stream of people go in and out of the office. Finally she gave up and walked in. She was furious.

‘I have been waiting outside your office for three hours. I want to help people. I am a human being, just trying to do a service to other human beings. As a human being you have to see other human beings’ suffering also and see if you can make a difference. We live in a country where you representatives of the state cannot provide education to its children. Schools for children with special needs are in appalling conditions under your Department. Here I am a professional willing to volunteer my time and you have no time for me. This is part of your job!’

Finally she was provided with a list of schools that could be adopted and now it had been five years.

Mrs. Ahmed’s determination however flagged as she arrived at the building and saw the crowd gathered. The implications of what this meant quickly dawned on her and she began to think strategy and headed back to her own office.

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Meanwhile Sumro Sahab kept glancing up at the flames and smoke and trying to remember if there was anything of importance that had been left in his office. He felt in his pockets for his key and wallet. Yes he had them on him. His motor bike was parked safely across the road so that was one less worry. Then he remembered his address book and pre-stamped envelopes he kept in his desk drawer. The envelopes had been his rebellion, his resistance to not giving up and letting the system get the better of him. He had devised the system when he learned that he had no budget to correspond with the NGOs registered with the department. So he requested each NGO to provide
him with three pre-stamped self addressed envelopes so he could continue to correspond with them. He kept this stack in the bottom drawer of his desk.

Sumro Sahab shook his head in resignation; there was nothing else he could do. Eventually he decided to head home and wait for news. As he mounted his motorbike he received a frantic call on his mobile phone from his wife. ‘Are you ok? I heard a bomb exploded in your office! Where are you?’

‘A bomb?’ Sumroo Sahab repeated in disbelief. How did a fire translate so quickly into a bomb? He responded in the gruff voice he reserved for his wife ‘There was no blast but there was a fire... What? No I can’t hear you ...huh...traffic... I am on my way home and yes yes I am fine’. With that he cut of the connection

How the rumours in this city spread. Silly woman! A bomb! All we need is more panic!

It was three days before staff was allowed to enter the building. Sumro Sahab climbed the rickety water soaked creaking wooden stairs to his office. The floor beneath his feet squelched and there was a stink of wet carpet and burnt furniture in the air that made him ill. The department had been full of paper and files. Typed yellowing papers in carbon triplicate. Stacks and stacks of paper collecting dust in government issued oversized grey files. The computerised era had not arrived for record keeping so they had lost everything.

Sumro Sahab could just imagine how merrily the bonfire inside had continued on for hours devouring every flammable scrap. He went over to the cordoned off area around his cubicle. His was one of the few desks that had been allocated a computer. It wasn’t even worth looking at the melted blackened plastic, there was nothing to salvage.

He bent over to try and open the desk drawer. When he was able to yank it open he saw that his address book and the envelopes had turned to greyish pulp. He gave up and walked out.

Seven days after the incident Mrs. Ahmed showed up with all her duplicate documents and a typewriter. Sumro Sahab was amazed at the woman’s tenacity and annoyed at her presence. He felt it shamed him to be seen in such a decrepit state. The woman was well prepared for any excuses he could furnish. She had anticipated lost files and destroyed equipment. She had brought a typewriter with her as well as stamp paper. She sat with Sumroo Sahab typed out the content of her tax exemption certificate on to the stamp paper. When all the signatures had been completed, she handed him the three obligatory stamped self addressed envelopes. Sumroo Sahab assumed this was her way of empathising with his situation and he took them from her grudgingly.

It has been one year since the Fire and the inquiry is ongoing. The wreckage and debris remains untouched. Sumro Sahab is still registering NGOs and goes each morning to visit the mosque. Mrs. Ahmed still has her tax exemption certificate valid for one more year.
Chapter 12
An Odd Local Match: State, NGOs, Donors and Women’s Piety Movements

Note to Reader

An interesting phenomenon I came across in the in-depth interviews I conducted with participants during the first phase of this study is how empowerment narratives seem to facilitate the most unlikely strategic alliances in the local grassroots context of community development in Pakistan. These alliances appear to be complex and delicately balanced, based on a very innocent moral imperative, “action to facilitate the greater good of poor communities”. As I read over my notes and transcripts the various linkages and alliances began to map themselves out. Before I knew it I had a web like diagram with multiple connecting arrows that I wanted to put into words to demonstrate the intricate pathways of these alliances that were emerging between NGOs; donors; local communities; piety movements and state employed community workers. Through the use of fiction I attempt to demonstrate how these delicate alliances are constructed and maintained and analyse their potential implications through a critical lens.

This particular piece of fiction is a story that has been in my head for a long time now. It first started to germinate in 2008 when I interviewed a participant who was a NGO worker, but was formerly employed by the state, and who also had connections with an urban based women’s piety movement. A storyline began to take shape and I fleshed out some preliminary characters. I also attended gatherings of women’s piety movements and through informal discussions learned about their welfare activities. As I continued my participant observation, proceeded to interview characters began to take more concrete form. Although I draw on participant narratives to shape my analysis, I would like to state for the record that this is a work of fiction and that none of the characters crafted resemble any of my study participants.
"A Trip to Mubarak Goth" is based on the interaction of three main characters ‘Sadia Baji’ a government worker turned NGO worker, Ismat Apa her old friend and now member of a women’s piety movement, and the silent Imam Bux, Sadia Baji’s illiterate Pathan driver. Both Sadia Baji and Ismat Apa represent relatively new mutations of development workers shaped by context. Sadia Baji disillusioned with the welfare state is out to provide her own brand of sustainable development aided by Ismat Apa who sees it as her religious duty to distribute welfare and provide religious guidance to the less fortunate. The story focuses on their conversations and how they support and contradict one another as they attempt to work together. I focus on the intersection of empowerment narratives in the context of their work as they set out on a trip to visit ‘Mubarak Goth’ a fictional adopted community in rural Sindh, a few hours drive from Karachi. The complex and strategically orchestrated alliances with international donors, religious groups and philanthropists all contributing to the same organization is an interesting phenomenon to explore. Sadia Baji is able to speak to all three organizations based on her positionality (class, age, ethnic group, connection to the state as a former employee) and her mastery of empowerment narratives. She draws on this power to fulfill her organizations’ goals and shape her own subject identity. Through this short fictional account I attempt to highlight complications and contradictions of empowerment narratives as they collide in context; and depict how civilizing discourse; discourse on sustainable development and religious proselytizing are all appropriated in the empowerment narratives at play. There is both resistance to, and endorsement of, these narratives as the conversation between Sadia Baji and Ismat Apa continue throughout the trip. They use these narratives to justify their presence and actions and their own identity as “good Muslim women” though essentializing and ‘othering’ of “village people”; “poor illiterate village women”; “feminists” and “Pathan Men” just to name a few. The exercise of power through surveillance, disciplining bodies is also clearly evidenced. Yet their work fits the mould of
empowerment narratives, words like “rights”, “needs based”, “culturally appropriate”, “literacy and community partnered schooling” are all present and legitimized in the minds of the two women and in their speech.
A Trip to Mubarak Goth

Sadia Baji reached for her house keys on the hook next to the front door and looked down to make sure she had remembered to take her extra black embroidered shawl. ‘Better to take an extra shawl if one is going into the interior’ she thought. She did a last minute check of her living room cum dining room to make sure things were in order and then headed out the door.

As she climbed down the stairs she looked in on her money plant that was flourishing on the corner of her landing. The plant was her pride and joy. She had salvaged a cutting two years ago and kept it in water till it grew roots and then transferred it into an earthen pot. The problem with apartment buildings in this city she thought, as she pulled on a shrivelled leaf, is that there is no place to grow things. We should all grow things like they do in the villages; this is what makes village people so happy! They are so connected to the earth.

Her apartment was on the third floor and there was no elevator so it took her a while to descend with her arthritis. She oriented herself at the bottom of the second floor landing and called out to Imam Bux with an authoritative voice. When she did not get a response she made another more authoritative attempt

‘Imam Bux!’

‘I wonder where that Pathan has gotten to! He knows I planned to leave at 6 am, we still have to pick Ismat Apa from her son’s house in Defence’.

‘Perhaps I had better try his mobile he may still be sleeping’ she thought. She put her hand in her purse and fumbled around till she got a hold of her mobile phone. It was a larger older model not one of those new fangled sleek looking ones with complicated buttons. She liked hers—practical, and with large visible numbers. She jabbed at the digits and waited for a tone. Instead of the regular ringing what she got was a rendition of Bibi Shirin the popular Pushto song at full volume followed by the sleepy voice of Imam Bux

‘Salam Baji’

‘Salam Baji! Kahan ho main nechey khari hui hoon!’ (Where are you I am standing downstairs!). ‘ Seriously these Pathan’s have no brains, total Akhrots’. She declared in Urdu before she hung up the phone.

Imam Bux appeared from behind the building where the servant quarters were located wrapping a large brown shawl around him rubbing his eyes vigorously. He hurried to the car and opened the car door on the front left side for Sadia Baji mumbling an apology.

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54 Akhrot is the derogatory term for Pathan’s which translated means walnuts or hard headed and slow.
Sadia Baji always sat in front. Travelling in the back made her somehow nauseous. Even in her days in the government department it had been something that people whispered about. ‘It is just not done for a woman to sit next to the driver in the front!’...’look at her sitting in front next to the driver...what is she trying to prove? Is she some feminist or something?!’

The insults for Sadia Baji were close to unbearable. She was well aware of class and gender boundaries and was compliant with them. Had she not worn a black burqa in her early days at the department? Had she not accepted the advice of male colleagues to not lift her naqab till she reached the office?

However the thing that irked her most about these insults was that she hated feminists! ‘Meddling troublesome women starved for public attention who promote Western values! This is what feminist are! Why must women prove themselves to be better than men? There are more subtle ways to bring about change which do not require endorsement of white women’s values! Have we not been colonized enough?!’

Now in her old age (she was sixty and a mother-in-law) Sadia Baji had dropped the burqa and reconciled to a large chador as well and the derisive comments. If it made Imam Bux uncomfortable for her to sit in front next to him so be it...he was in any case young enough to be her son...but she still hated feminists!

By now Imam Bux was in the driver’s seat and starting the car. The little white Alto spluttered to life. Sadia Baji looked to make sure that Imam Bux had no intention of moving the car till she was properly warmed up.

He knew better. Instead he got out and began to wipe the dew from the windscreen. This always happens in Karachi winters. The early morning ose always settles on car windscreens and windows hampering visibility.

Sadia Baji liked to be known for her punctuality. She was old school in this respect, none of the fashionably late rubbish, it was just poor form. She had been trained at a time when the civil service stood for something, a time when integrity was valued. She looked at the flashing digits of the clock on the dashboard it was already six fifteen! She had told Ismat Apa to be ready at six thirty, she was running late. She motioned to Imam Bux with her hand to hurry and then rummaged again for her mobile phone to call Ismat Apa.

She had known Ismat Apa for years, probably twenty at least. She was actually younger than Sadia Baji by three years but everyone called Ismat – Ismat Apa. Thank God she doesn’t have some awful musical tune playing. She chuckled as she thought of Ismat Apa clad in a black abaya and naqab moving in rhythm to Bibi Shirin. Well perhaps in her days before she joined her religious study group with Al-Huda and began to preach, but that was fifteen years ago. Now all music was haram for Ismat Apa. It really is a pity though to not be able to listen to music. Music is the voice of the soul. How can something that speaks to you from your heart be haram? Ismat Apa was a fan of Munni Begam and Lata Mangeshkar and had all their cassettes. She was sure there had been some mix up in the literal interpretations being promoted. For that matter how can basant and kite flying...
be *haram*? It is part of our culture, I am sure the Prophet (PBUH) would have flown a kite if they had them in Arabia’. She grinned at her own irreverence.

Sadia Baji knew where she stood when it came to her beliefs. She was a good Muslim and she didn’t need to be told by anyone what she should and should not believe. She had been very clear with Ismat Apa when she first started her Da’wa work. ‘Look we have been friends and I would like it to stay that way. If you have discovered your path I am happy for you but please do not attempt to push me into your classes or weekly study groups. I have my own path’. Their friendship had continued.

Ismat Apa picked up her mobile phone on the fifth ring. She cleared her throat and responded with a loud ‘*Aslam-u-Alaqum*’ in an extremely formal voice making sure to pronounce each syllable with precision in an affected Arabic accent. ‘*Walekum-as-Salam Ismat Apa* its me Sadia, I am running a little late this Pathan driver of mine Imam Bux overslept but I am on my way’ ‘That is ok Sadia we are doing God’s work he will ensure we reach our destination.’ ‘Acha Ismat Apa *Khuda Hafiz* I will see you in a short while’ ‘*Allah Hafiz Sadia, Allah Hafiz*’. With that the connection was cut.

Uff... this Ismat Apa and her Allah Hafiz ...what is so wrong with saying Khuda Hafiz both mean may God protect you... one was more Arabic the other Persian and Urdu is a melange of so many languages. Why must she always have this ‘holier than thou attitude’ and try and Arabicize Yes we are both doing God’s work helping these poor *jahil* illiterate women but why must she make me feel that she is closer to God?

She tapped the dashboard twice with the palm of her hand motioning Imam Bux to hurry ‘*Chalo chalo* Imam Bux we are already late Ismat Apa is waiting’.

Sadia Baji adjusted the reclining lever of the front seat and leaned back to reminisce. It had been a year since her retirement from the Government. She had worked for thirty five years with the Sindh Department of Social Welfare. Now she was part of a women’s collective of mostly retired government officers and their well wishers who wanted to help poor people stand on their own two feet. Their group had registered themselves as an NGO with the Department of Social Welfare. Her Sindh contacts at the Department had been most gracious in fast tracking the paper work. Not that there should have been any delays, they know we are well meaning colleagues who know what we are doing. Not like the riffraff she had to deal with when she was with the department.

She remembered when she was working in community organization capacity building and would get requests for registration.

‘*Madam we want to register – we need to deposit this cheque*’.

She would ask them ‘Where is your charter, your objectives, your board, your finance member? How can I just register you? Do you know what the purpose of your NGO is? What will you do for the community?’ To which she would get responses like
'Madam but Sain said to deposit the cheque and we need an account to do that!'

How do these politicians function? Who is there to make them accountable?

One day she had resisted and told the applicant ‘Go back to your Sain that gave you the cheque and tell him that things don’t work this way!’

The next day she had received a warning from the Director. ‘This is what you get for doing your job!’

Ahh forget it what is the point of thinking about a crumbling system. In the good old days there used to be budget for the work, more accountability, the Director would actually be out in the field. She had herself started sewing and handicraft centers. The women had been so grateful for the income from selling their work.

She had watched the decline of the system, there was no point in dwelling on what could not be helped. She was a woman of action and she was now making a difference with this newly formed NGO, The Mother and Child Health and Economic Upliftment Committee (MCHEUC). They had a board of six directors. The members were all men and women of good economic status who were devoted to the cause. Some were retired government servants, others were also in active service. The rule was none of the board members should come from the lower socio-economic class. As one of her fellow board members had insisted ‘you can’t trust the intentions, the neeyat of poor people...they may be tempted to steal so why tempt them by putting them in such a position’.

Sadia Baji had agreed she had seen so many cases of corruption over the years that it took very little for a person’s neeyat to change. After all they were accountable to their donors particularly the expatriate Pakistanis, good Muslims who sent their zakat money in dollars and pounds to her organization as part of their mandatory religious obligation to be charitable. That is how they had started. It was this zakat money that had given them the seed fund to start MCHEUC.

Later they realized that the funds were not going to be enough and that they would need more sustainable sources of funding if they really wanted to make a difference and expand their operation. One of her fellow directors had heard through inside channels that there was a large international development agency that was looking for local partners for a health education project. They had sent in a proposal and received a positive response. The funds had been dispensed to MCHEUC along with the health education material and a one year implementation phase had been launched in an urban and a rural site. When Sadia Baji was provided with the health education materials she had been astound! What sort of health educational material is this? Where do poor people have soap and running water? Where do they have English style toilets? Where do people in our poor communities sit on tables and chairs and eat such meals? She wondered who had been sub-contracted to develop this material. She had protested but had been outvoted by the board, now she was trying to modify the material so that it would look more context specific.
Imam Bux missed slowing down for a speed bump and Sadia Baji was jolted forward in her seat.

‘Imam Bux!’ She yelled after recovering from the shock
‘Are you blind? Nazar nahi ata? What were you thinking?!’

Imam Bux lowered his head sheepishly and said ‘Baji there were no markings, I didn’t see’

‘You didn’t see! Who gave you a licence in the first place! I bet you have never even seen the inside of the licence office!’

Imam Bux lowered his head and concentrated on the road. There was no point responding to Sadia Baji she would just keep at him. Better to keep silent and drive, that strategy worked best and this was going to be a long day.

They arrived at Ismat Apa’s a few minutes later. Imam Bux got out and rang the door bell. After five minutes the bolt on the inside of the gate slid open and Ismat Apa emerged in her arabicized garb, a long black abaya coat and a naqab only revealing her eyes. She was followed by a young girl of ten carrying a large heavy box. Imam Bux opened the rear door and Ismat Apa slowly lowered herself into the small car and seated herself with a loud ‘Allah Ho Akbar’. She then instructed the girl to hand the box to Imam Bux. Sadia Baji turned around and looked to make sure Ismat Apa was settled.

‘Apa are you ok? Are you comfortable?’ she inquired.

‘Shukhar Allah I am well. I have brought packages of chai for the women. Can you make sure that your driver puts the box in the dikki. We can hand them out after the session.’

Sadia Baji smiled, what would they do without such kind souls who volunteer their time to talk to those women and also care for their material well being.

‘I am sure the women will appreciate the chai. God knows they have nothing in their houses with the rising inflation and chai is something none of us can live without. The British have left but we still have their tea!’

Ismat Apa giggled an almost girlish giggle then quickly recomposed herself as Imam Bux opened the front door of the car.

Imam Bux manoeuvred the car onto the main highway and they set off to see their women. The road was bumpy and full of potholes. Imam Bux weaved in between the colourfully painted and decorated lorries, trucks and busses on the highway headed from the port to the interior.

Almost all goods were transported by road through this network of transporters. Many of the trucks appeared over loaded and tilted dangerously to one side. People were perched on top of busses holding on the rails and their possessions.
Sadia Baji was used to these sites. Although the roads had improved over the years the driving had not. ‘Ah there is no hope for this country’ she declared with a sigh.

Ismat Apa nodded in agreement and responded ‘We do what we can the rest is in Allah’s hands’.

‘But Apa when will they learn? When will these people learn? It has been sixty years since Partition and yet we cannot follow rules or have any consideration for people’s safety? Do you know how many fatal accidents I have seen over the years on this very road? All because of carelessness and inconsideration. Do you know one of the men from our adopted community was injured last week when one of these busses went off the road. He broke an arm and fractured is collar bone. Now he is out of commission for a month.’

Ismat Apa nodded ‘Yes these are all signs of a people who have lost their way. We need to return them to the true path of Islam if Muslims are to survive in these troubled times. For them Religion has always been seen as a matter of outward appearance only, not the spiritual inner self. You know Sadia there is such satisfaction in reading the Quran and understanding it. Most Pakistanis have never read the Quran with real understanding.’

‘Ismat Apa most Pakistanis can’t read full stop! Forget about reading Arabic they cannot even read their own language!’

‘Yes but if you are a Muslim Sadia then it is your duty to learn Arabic and read the Quran with meaning. What is the point of reciting mispronounced sections of the Quran by rote and not understanding a word? It such an empowering experience and it changed my life and it can change the lives of others. This is why the Da’wa is so important to spread the word of the ‘true’ Islam not this adulterated sufistic version that they practice in interior Sindh and Punjab with their pirs and shrines.’

Ismat Apa continued her commentary on the state of the Muslim Ummah and Sadia Baji dosed in the front seat. An hour later Sadia Baji instructed Imam Bux to stop for tea at a road side dhaba and to refuel the car. He pulled the car into the side lane and parked discretely to the side away from the large trucks and string cots spread out where the men were seated.

“Apa would you like some chai? With sugar?” He asked.

Sadia Baji would have liked to have gotten out of the car and stretched her legs but the men were watching so she remained seated and sent Imam Bux to get them their tea and some pakoras.

He returned shortly with two small cups of doodh pati chai and the fritters then left the two women alone and went to drink his own tea in peace

Ismat Apa balanced the pakoras on her knee and lifted her naqab a little from the bottom so she could draw in the tea cup and sip her chai.
‘Ah chai!’ She sighed with pleasure as she slurped. It was wonderful how such a small thing can be so satisfying.

As the caffeine entered their system and they munched on the pakoras both women began to talk about the plan for the morning. The session with the women was planned for eleven. It would be a one hour session where Ismat Apa would talk about health and hygiene. This was their weekly session. In each session Ismat Apa would pick a topic and then combine it with her preaching on Islam. Meanwhile Sadia Baji would check on the community school, meet with the men of the village committee and discuss the progress of the agricultural initiative.

Imam Bux returned to collect the tea cups and the women rolled up the newspaper on which the greasy pakoras had been provided and tossed it outside the window.

Sadia Baji turned around in the front seat to face Ismat Apa in the back.

‘Apa I just wanted to thank you once again for your support and your organizations’ support’

Apa nodded at the back. ‘Sadis what is to thank. God guided you to us and you did the right thing. I am so glad you came to me for support. Our doors are always open to do Allah’s work. As good Muslim women this is our duty to reach out to the community. We have mostly concentrated our work in the urban areas but we need to extend ourselves and expand into the rural areas. So many women are drifting away from religion. In the cities the women are too attracted to the glitter and glamour of urban life and Star Plus. They forget their duties as wives and mothers. Even my own daughter-in-law refuses to wear the hijab. I have told her this will not do. The Prophet (PBUH) directed Muslim women to cover them selves. We must be role models to those who are less fortunate or are in need of guidance. Our role is to guide them back on the right path. When I first began to attend classes I was in search of meaning in my life. I felt I was lost and I needed to return to the pure and true Islam of our ancestors. Not all these local versions that take us away from the true path the Prophet (PBUH) had revealed. Our path is the Quran and the Hadith. Reading the Quran and preaching it in the way it should be preached gives me peace. Those illiterate women in the villages do not read nor do they know what the Arabic means. We must start literacy classes Sadia for the women. Most of them do not even know the proper way to say their namaz and they do not understand what they are saying. We need to help them find peace within themselves’.

Imam Bux returned and they set out towards Mubarak Goth. The road was bumpier now and they turned off the main highway onto a link road on their left. On both sides they could see the mango trees through the dust. Their large branches spread out bare of fruit.

They passed a sign in English that read MCHE__ C Community School on the right side of the road. The U in the MCHEUC seemed to have peeled off. Sadia Baji made a mental note to tell the committee that it needs to be repainted. The board was dark blue metal and the writing was in white with an arrow pointing towards the right in a vague direction.
Apa leaned forward and tapped Sadia Baji on the shoulder. ‘Listen Sadia how come none of the other women from your board do not come with us on these field visits?’

Sadia grimaced ‘Apa what to do they are scared. Many of them have never travelled on their own. Some of them say that the interior is dangerous what if something happened? And then of course their husbands and brothers would have to accompany them which is a whole other headache. Can you imagine dangerous! How preposterous I have travelled all over the country so many time by myself for work and I have never had an unpleasant incident. I feel more unsafe in Karachi with all the crime and shootings and blasts than here! How is it that all the other women who work for NGOs travel across the country? Tell me Apa do you feel unsafe coming here?’

Ismat Apa shook her head ‘Sadia it is all about neeyat. If your neeyat is good then Allah will protect you and guide you. We are here to do good to help these people stand on their own two feet and support themselves. This is our neeyat, our intent so there is nothing to fear.’

Sadia Baji nodded in agreement. It felt good to be supported. This is what true community work is about. It has to come from the inside. It is not something that one can force on another. It has to be an inner choice to brave the hardships such work requires. She could be at home right now watching television, curled up in a razai enjoying her small pension and post retirement life, and yet here she was in this tiny car lurching forward on every bump, on her way to make a difference in these poor peoples’ lives.

Imam Bux stopped the car with a final lurch and the women got out. Sadia Baji’s knees hurt the arthritis in them made it hard for her to sit immobile for so many hours. Ismat Apa’s back hurt, it was a chronic problem. The two women slowly hobbled on the path that led to the school. They could hear the students reciting their lessons in different languages

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‘Apa their Urdu and English need to be good if they are to stand any chance. The problem is the English teacher herself is not sure of her spellings. It is such a headache even with a Matric pass they cannot speak the language.’

As they entered the one room school all the children stood up to welcome them. There were approximately forty ranging from ages three to twelve. The girls sat on the left and the boys on the right. Most were shivering with the cold and a few had runny noses. The room was painted a mango milkshake yellow on the inside and the outside, the standard government school colours. It had metal shutters and a corrugated iron roof. The desks and chairs were wooden. A few broken ones had been pushed to the back of the room. The teacher Miss Naz was a young woman dressed in a floral pink shalwar kameez, her head covered with a white scarf, a duppata draped around her neck. She froze in mid sentence as she caught site of two city women entering.
'Madam I am so sorry I did not hear you come in. Pppplease Pppplease (she stammered) have a seat we were just finishing our lesson. They are about to go for recess’. Sadia Baji stood still and looked at the teacher. She was secretly happy that the girl was petrified of her. This is the best way to ensure authority and accountability. She then nodded to the teacher and said ‘Yes that is fine I would like to see the register and then inspect the children’.

The children lined up and one by one were inspected for cleanliness and hygiene. Nails cut? Teeth clean? Uniform Clean? Hair brushed? Those who looked scruffy were pulled aside.

‘Why are these three children not properly groomed? Send them home immediately they cannot come to this school looking like this. We give them their uniforms, we provide them with tooth power and tooth brushes; we give them combs. There is no excuse. They need to learn discipline!’

With that Sadia Baji strode out of the class room. Outside she found Ismat Apa seated on a chair in the veranda of the school enjoying the winter sun. ‘Sadia we will need to call for the women, can you send the message to them that I am here and also that there are also packages of tea for them’.

Sadia called out to one of the boys in her broken Sindhi ‘Maiyon key sad kariach. Unhan key budha Madam achi pai ahe’ (Call the Mothers. Tell them that madam is here)

She then turned to Ismat Apa and clapped her hands as an idea struck her ‘Ismat Apa, I have an idea. I am thinking that today we should also visit their homes. To see if there has been any difference from the lectures the women are attending. We need to evaluate our progress and impact to our donors. We can announce a prize for the woman with the cleanest house. God knows! When I first came to this village a year ago the women were in such a state they were worse than cattle! Their husbands just use them for their needs and treat them terribly! Hai and so many children running around not in school, you should have seen their nails all black with dirt! Apa can you believe I saw a woman open a box take out a day old chapatti put salt and red chillies on it make it into a roll and give it to a two year old! Can you imagine a two year old!’ ‘That is when I decided we had to work here, these people needed us. I identified Mubarak Goth as our intervention site. I fought for these people because we have to help them’.

The village women began to arrive. They shook Sadia Baji’s hands and then Ismat Apa’s in the Sindhi tradition. Ismat Apa greeted each of them with a loud ‘Aslam-a-lekum’. The women brought with them their small children and sat breast feeding them while they waited for more to arrive. Ismat Apa went over to one of the women and admonished her for exposing her breast in public. The woman stared at Ismat Apa and responded angrily in Sindhi ‘who are you to tell me not to breastfeed my child this is the way it has been for generations. My child is hungry should I let it yell and starve? This is natural I do not have a bottle. Did you not breast feed your child?’ Ismat Apa did not understand her, so one of the younger girls timidly translated.

Ismat Apa had actually bottle fed her child. She found breast feeding rather vulgar and archaic. However she did not want to antagonize the village woman so she kept quiet. She
remembered Sadia Baji’s advice. ‘Change is a gradual process. Learn to understand their psychology and their situation. They do not know any better’

The women kept arriving and Ismat Apa seated them in a symmetric circle. She began her lecture in Urdu. ‘Safai Nisf Eeman Hai’ (Cleanliness is next to Godliness). Last time we discussed the importance of boiling water for drinking. How many of you have started this practice in your homes?’ There was a silence. Apa continued. ‘It is very important to boil water. This way your children and you will not get sick. If they get sick who will have the money to pay for the doctor. By boiling water you can avoid the expense of the doctor’. Some women nodded. Encouraged Apa continued. ‘How many of you have been saying your Namaz? You remember we agreed that we would try and say our Namaz on time. If you are just learning it then you can learn to say your Namaz together.’ Just then a child who was sitting in her mothers’ lap crawled into the center of the circle and let go a stream of pee. All the women started laughing and the mother quickly picked up the child and took her outside. The rest of the women remained seating.

Apa was dismayed she could not continue with the class. ‘See this is unhygienic we cannot sit here and talk about Islam. We need to clean this up’. One of the women went outside to fetch a rag. The lesson was not going as planned.

Apa tried another tactic. ‘We are thinking of starting classes for reading. How many of you would like to read?’ One of the elderly women seated to her left answered ‘Look what good is reading to us? We need money? If you can provide us with work we can do from our homes we are interested.’

Apa did not know how to respond. She thought the reading classes would be an excellent way to educate these illiterate women. Just then Sadia Baji entered the class room. Ismat Apa seemed helpless so she announced. We will be coming to visit you in your homes today. The one with the cleanest home we will reward with a baby goat, a bakri ka bacha. There was a murmur amongst the women. Many of them began to get up. Ismat Apa regaining some composure asked Sadia where the women were going? ‘Home to clean’ Sadia beamed back. ‘See this is a great incentive bribery works wonders’.

One of the women asked about the chai. She had heard it would be distributed. Sadia Baji asked the women to come outside and she would give each a packet.

As soon as she began to open the carton of tea women crowded around her. She turned around and yelled. ‘We are not animals! You know the routine. Stand in line and every one will get an equal share. No grabbing or pushing each of you will get a packet.’ Reluctantly the women began to line up. Sadia handed each one a yellow box of Lipton Tea. After the distribution was over she and Ismat Apa headed to visit the homes followed by a brood of children.

They walked into each home moved around inspect their surroundings and then made notes on clip boards.

Too dirty... flies....
Smart woman! She has covered the food.
Animal dung near the cooking utensils.
No boiled water.
Small child eating with dirty hands; garbage thrown next to house entrance...

At the end of their rounds Saia Baji gathered the women back at the school and made a speech. ‘Shabash see you too can earn a baby goat if you can keep your house as clean as hers and take pride in how you live. Even if you are poor it does not mean that you cannot live in a way that will prevent disease. We are telling you for your own good. In two weeks time we will award another goat so you will all have another opportunity to win a prize. Now you know all the mistakes you have made you can fix them.’ She then awarded the prize of the baby goat to the winner patting the woman on the head.

Sadia Baji and Ismat Apa said their goodbyes and made their way towards the white Alto. The rice fields in the background. One of the women handed Sadia Baji some tomatoes and cauliflower from her field to take with her. The woman with the baby goat walked with them to their car.

The two elderly women had had a long day and it was another two hours drive before they reached home to Karachi. Ismat Apa said her namaz at the back as Imam Bux weaved dangerously in and out of the heavy traffic. Sadia Baji sat in the front and snored all the way back covered with her extra shawl. The trip had been productive. School enrolment was up; the children’s skills at reading and writing were improving; the women were learning to be more disciplined; the goat strategy to improve cleanliness was a stroke of brilliance. She would have much to report to her colleagues at MCHEUC.
Chapter 13  
Entering the Bedroom: Talking About Sexuality

Note to Reader

In development discourse links between sexual liberation and women's empowerment have been extensively explored on a theoretical level, and in some regions women's movements have taken up sexuality as a central issue (Jolly, 2006). However, the links remain unexplored in relation to development work in practice (Jolly, 2006, p. 78). Sexuality in the development industry is seen primarily as a private affair, one in which ‘development should keep an appropriate distance’ – apart from helping to reduce unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. It has therefore been ignored in development discourse and treated as a secondary issue. The only exception seems to appear in dialogues on HIV/AIDS where the AIDS Pandemic has provided some openings to extend conversations (Armas, 2006). However these discourses have primarily been negative and normative. Lack of critical systematic reflection about dominant conceptions of sexuality, gender and hetronormativity according to Jolly (2006) explain silences and resistances observed in the development field. As a result sexuality is primarily viewed as a health issue, regarded as a source of danger, violence, harm and disease; as a problem which needs to be contained rather than as holistic and integral part of human experience (Andrea Cornwall, 2006). Empowerment consequently has been framed in AIDS issues as relating to information around ‘risk factors’ and health choices for population well-being. Such a limited view disregards the relationship of sexuality with employment, livelihoods, security, housing, education, governance and social protection. As a result according to Cornwall (2006) “Sex has been treated as a problem, rather than as a source of happiness, intimacy, fulfillment and pleasure” (p. 275).
Cornwall, Correa, and Jolly (2008) suggest that sexuality needs to be understood in the context of social rules, economic structures, political battles and religious ideologies that surround physical expressions of intimacy and the relationships within which intimacy takes place. In the context of Pakistan sexuality is a contested area. It is part of everyone’s life yet it is considered taboo to openly discuss. With the process of Islamist reforms imposed under the rule of Martial Law by General Zia ul Haq constitutional amendments resulted in women’s rights being severely curtailed under the Hudood Ordinances (for more details on the Hudood Ordinances see footnote # 38 p. 117). Control of women’s sexuality became a predominant trope in the establishment of state identity and legitimacy of rule and adultery became a crime against the state punishable by stoning to death.

‘Log Kya Kahen Gey?! (What will People Say?!) is a fictional account of a lower middleclass woman in urban Karachi coming to terms with her understanding of sexuality and empowerment through her lived experience. The story emerged as an amalgam of personal experiences and discussions around sexuality and empowerment shared by my participants. As I reviewed transcripts from in-depth interviews, videos of group discussions and artwork, sexuality emerged as a prominent theme in the data. I highlighted statements; put boxes around stories and pulled all the material together. The results were unexpected and fascinating. I began to see connections between the private, the personal and the professional. The connections were tentative and appeared in the making, ambiguous and conflicting. Fiction allowed me to bring these complexities together. It also opens a space to question assumptions around masculinities and hetronormativity.

The text is constructed as a series of journal entries by Saima an NGO community mobilizer. Saima is single and is in a relationship with Agha another NGO worker, who also sees himself as a
theatre activist. Due to economic reasons and her desire for unrestricted mobility Saima finds herself employed in a HIV/AIDS project which works with ‘vulnerable’ groups – sex workers. Her journal entries demonstrate her personal reflections and the messiness of struggles around her work and her relationships. Through her journal entries she raises questions around sex; sex work; agency; empowerment; feminist essentialism; hetronormativity and the political economy of development within the context of Pakistan. Fingers pointing at her, condemning her, follow her wherever goes. She lies to protect herself and her family name. She is conscious of the risk she is taking and keeps hearing her mother’s reaction “Log Kya Kahan Gey!” “What will people say!?” A young unmarried girl in a clandestine relationship ...what will people say?!”

A question, a fear, a statement, a condemnation.

This fictional narrative attempts to unravel the dynamics of sexuality, its interconnectedness and situatedness. Choosing to present the text as a series of journal entries is a conscious decision influenced by the silences, secrecy and taboos associated with sexuality. Saima is unable to share many of her fears and doubts with those around her as she is always in fear of what ‘log’ ‘people’ will think of her. Hence the journal is a place where she can be open about her experiences, questions and doubts. For those familiar with Lollywood and Bollywood cinema or Indian soap operas you will be able to pick up on how they intrude and are significant in Saima’s life as she draws on images of fear and strength from them.

The story ends when it begins to register that her male friend may be romantically involved with another male. She is still processing the idea and her response is ambiguous reflecting the findings from the data.
'Log' Kya Kahen Gey?! (What will 'people' say?!)

August 25th 2009

He was late again today. I waited for him outside the side exit of the hotel on Shara-e-Faisal where I was attending a workshop. The doorman kept giving me inquisitive looks but I pretended to ignore him. I had walked up and down the lobby for over an hour and felt like a complete fool. I tried calling his mobile phone but there was no answer. I was about to give up when I heard the distinct sound of his motorbike exhaust. He was wearing a navy blue *shalwar kameez* and a black helmet. He took off his helmet and my heart as usual started beating faster. It always happens when I see him ...

I still remember the first time I was introduced to him. I was assisting my coordinator in organizing an International Women’s Day event at the time I was working for a Women’s NGO. He was acting in a play highlighting incidents of violence against women in Pakistan. I watched the performance vicariously wishing I could be up there performing and singing instead of standing at the side lines.

At the end of the event the performers and organizers were invited for *chai*. I was standing and talking to my friend Karim, a *samosa* in hand, when he walked up to us, his long curly hair flying (I know this sounds dramatic but that is how I picture it – call it recall bias). He had a beard then, a full bushy beard and stage makeup on. He totally looked like a *gunda*, a thug (a man my parents would never approve of); but as they say you have no choice when it comes to who you fall in love with... perhaps it was my own rebellion...anyway it is too late to look back now... I made a choice.

Karim introduced us, ‘Saima meet Agha the star of the play and the molester of women!’ They had been in collage together and we made small talk and identified common friends. I asked ‘you don’t really molest women in real life do you? It seemed so real!’ He laughed an on stage roaring laugh ‘What do you think?’ he asked, his voice was gentle ...

Things seemed to happen too fast after that, it’s almost a blur. He texted Karim asking if he could have my number. I was thrilled and I recklessly agreed. He texted me, and I texted back...he texted me and called...I texted back...he asked me to meet him but I was reluctant...he persisted, we met...and then...that was two years ago.

But coming back to today, I was so angry, I felt humiliated to be waiting outside and being ogled at by the hotel guard. I was all ready to start berating him for being so inconsiderate...he has no appreciation for the risks I take being a woman in this country! But somehow his smile was so genuinely apologetic that I just couldn’t... He just said “*chalo chalo* you can get mad at me later” So I shook my head and got onto the back of the bike positioning myself sideways my arm on his shoulder for safety. And we rode off.
Seeing women sitting behind men on their bikes may seem so normal to people who live in Karachi, but to me it is almost sensual...erotic. I wait for these moments. The closeness, the public private touch, a sense of ownership... his sweat drenched kurta between my fingers, a flimsy barrier between his naked back and my touch. My nails dig into his skin and I can smell his smell and feel him. This is as close to each other as we can be under the circumstances. I press closer to him and it is not from my fear of falling off.

We stop at our regular ice-cream wala and he orders my favourite tutti fruity ice cream with dried fruit and nuts. We look at each other I spoon ice-cream into my mouth and he smokes a cigarette.

My mobile phone rings, its Amma asking where I am, I mumble “am on my way home, the training went on till late, taking rickshaw home in twenty minutes”. It is odd how easy the lies come to my tongue now and how good I am at it. Deception facilitated by technology. Ahmed pays for the ice cream and then hails a rickshaw for me. I climb in and tell the rickshawala to head towards NIPA.

I keep thinking I am bad, I am a horrible daughter, how can I keep seeing a man like this. I cannot keep going this way...but this contact it’s like an addiction, the conversations, the ability to be whomever I want to be with him...he understands me....I just cannot give it up...even when my Izzat, my honour, and my family’s Izzat is at stake. Log Kya Kahain Gey? What will people say?

I feel like I take too many risks I feel reckless...as if I can do anything, each clandestine meeting is exhilarating. I am sure people at work are beginning to notice.

August 27th 2009

Today I have been assigned another project. It wasn’t really my choice, in fact it was either this project or I look for another job. Sajda one of my colleagues told me I was lucky ‘other people were not being adjusted this way’ (adjusted as in being adjusted into another project within the organization). Funding for the legal advocacy project I had been working on has now been exhausted ‘so you should be grateful to not be on the street looking for another job’ she said with an air of finality.

I am grateful believe me I am, this is the third organization I have joined. In the NGO sector there is really no job security. Funding finishes and usually you need to start looking for another job. I like this work though and this job provides me with financial independence and the excuse to be out of the house and also to see Agha without raising suspicion. Plus I feel safe here, unlike the previous organization I worked at. The coordinator Sharjeel was really sleazy there and kept making passes at me. It was so subtle in the beginning, the way he approached me. I thought he was being friendly. I have attended gender trainings so I thought I need to keep an open mind, the NGO sector is different, there can be more familiarity amongst men and women; plus he is married.

Somehow Sharjeel just made me uncomfortable. I really cannot put my finger on it. Karim and I are friends since collage but I never feel uncomfortable with him. He is more like a younger brother, protective and understanding. But with Sharjeel it was different. Slowly his statements and
gestures started to became more overt. He started asking me to accompany him to programs and meetings. I went with him because I thought this was part of my job so I could not refuse.

One day he suggested we go out for coffee after a meeting and even though I refused he parked the car in front of an Expresso wala. I insisted we go back to the office but he was adamant. ‘What is the harm in having a little coffee?’ he asked pleadingly. He then began to tell me how unhappy he was in his marriage. ‘You know I love talking to you. You really understand me, not like my wife you know. You have such sincerity in what you say and do. When I go home all I hear is the soap is finished and the babies’ milk needs to be bought...she really does not have a brain that woman...you know it was an arranged marriage...I had no choice she is my Phupho’s daughter...We really should, spend more time together, your company relaxes me...’

After that day I started avoiding him and going to office became a nightmare. I told Agha and he threatened to bring some friends and beat Sharjeel up but I told him I was opposed to violence and that it was not a solution. If I had reacted overtly it would only be my izzat on the line not his... ‘log to yehi kahenge’ (that is what people will say). He was senior to me they would believe him. Every day when I went in to work I would be worried that Sharjeel would ask me to accompany him to another meeting. I would make excuses or insist that another colleague accompany us. I told Karim and he laughed. He said ‘Sharjeel has a reputation in the NGO sector, he keeps trying it with all the new girls... tells them how unhappy his marriage is etc. sometimes he gets lucky. Just keep your distance and ignore him’.

In the end however his presence had become oppressive and I could no longer ignore his overtures. I had to leave for my own safety and peace of mind. So this NGO where I work now is a thousand times better. All my male colleagues are very proper and so far I have had no untoward experiences.

August 30th 2009

We are getting funding from an international agency to work with ‘vulnerable groups’ to prevent HIV/AIDS (this is the Project I am being adjusted to). This means I have to move from the main office to the field office which is situated in another part of Karachi at our field site. I have no experience working in this area. I have been told that I will have to talk to ‘sex workers’. The coordinator used the term FSW and MSW this means Female Sex Workers and Male Sex Workers. The English word sounds so much better, more civilized, as compared to the Urdu ‘randiyan’. I can’t even open my mouth to say the word it keeps rolling around in my head. ‘Randiyan’ a word that should never be uttered by respectable middle class girls. I need the job, quitting would mean losing my freedom to move around the city on my own. What will my parents say when I tell them I have to work with these ‘randiyan’ and what will Ahmed say? I don’t think I can tell them. Not yet anyway.
**September 1st 2009**

There is no electricity again at home. I don’t understand how we are going to survive at the rate things are going. No water, no electricity, the sewage system is always blocked. It is so hot and the sweat is running down my back. I sit in our small courtyard fanning myself with a reed pankha. I wish we lived near the sea.

Not even a leaf moves in our mohallah there is no breeze. I can hear the babies crying in our neighbours house and a dog barking somewhere in the lane. What I wouldn’t give to sit at Clifton beach and enjoy the breeze.

Agha and I go there whenever we can get away. We see other lovers there too buying gajras as tokens of love and sitting watching the sunset and hearing the bells on the camels as they walk across the beach.

I miss him, I find it so strange this pain of waiting and the desire to be with him. Our encounters are so brief, it is always so difficult this meeting in secret. I don’t know how much longer we can hide this from our families. I am not sure what will happen when they do find out. My parents will never let me marry a theatre wala. My father thinks that such people are low class lafungas without morals. In fact he thinks all artists are of loose characters and spread immorality. My mother is more concerned with ‘log’ people her constant refrain ‘log kya kahain gey?’ ‘What will everyone say?’ keeps coming to mind. Some days the fear of it keeps me awake at night. Last night I had a dream in which I saw Abba catching us and then the whole event turned into a Punjabi Sultan Rahi film where everyone grows these large oiled moustaches pointed at the tips with lathis in hand and engage in mortal combat while I scream ‘Nahi!’ No! and then all these shadowy people without faces watching the tamasha (the ‘Log’) pointing at me screaming ‘Randi’!

**September 2nd 2009**

*Khudaya!* I met a real life ‘Aunty’ today for the first time. Abida the project coordinator and I were in the project office when Hasina knocked on the door. She was in her late forties dressed in a sleeveless yellow shalwar kameez with a green net duppata jauntily wrapped around her neck. She hugged Abida and sat down on the chair closest to her and immediately asked for an introduction. I noticed she wore a lot of makeup and smelt like Pond’s talcum powder which she had liberally dusted over herself as I could still see white patches around her plunging neck line.

Abida introduced me as the new program assistant. Hasina smiled extended her hand and greeted me warmly. They chit chatted for a while and made arrangements for Abida to visit her KK (short form for Kothi Khana, or brotheral) after which Abida escorted her to the door. After closing the door she came back to her seat ‘if I had not met her she would have been offended and taken it as an affront...she would also have felt slighted had I not introduced you so stop making those faces’. I assured Abida that this was completely fine with me and I did not want to intrude and that I was here to learn. Abida shook her head ‘your body language was obvious, you were acting like one of those holier than thou women who find sex work offensive. If you want to work with these groups you need to get over your moralistic assumptions or at least learn not to display them in public!’
She took a deep breath then continued. ‘This was more a social call for Hasina. She sees me as a friend and that is important for our work because she is an important contact. She also sees me as an important resource. For Aunties the networking is central to their business. You should have seen her when I first met her, she was really suspicious, I mean you can’t blame her given her line of work...she is an Aunty so she is always suspicious of police raids. In the beginning she thought we were a government agency workers spying on her. Now she trusts me so much that I even go to her KK in her own car. It is important to gain trust if you want information and want to work with them. They are the gate keepers to the FSWs. Hasina has told me that it is ok for me to visit and talk to her girls, get them to answer survey questions and give health education lectures. These are the types of contacts we need to cultivate. Everything works on trust. She tells me that I have gained her trust and she has proven it by also introducing me to other Aunties based on her zamanat, her word, that I can be trusted.’

It looks like Abida is really invested in her job for me all this just seems too overwhelming to digest’

**Sept 9th 2009**

It has been over a week since I joined the new project. Agha has been busy with a new play so I have not seen him. I might go to his rehearsal tomorrow; they are performing a play against the Military so it is possible they might not get an NOC (No Objection Certificate) for it from the police. He is very dedicated to his theatre group. They seem to get into a lot of trouble. He told me he once spent a night in jail because the powers that be (a particular political party) were unhappy with the content of their play.

Abida has continued to tell me more about the sex work industry and her ‘friend’ Hasina. She says Hasina has shifted her KK a couple of times ...the police raids ...they take the bribe and she moves...a group of women living in a bungalow sort of raises suspicion... but then these are the challenges of her trade... .

Hasina appeared at the office again today. She was in a good mood her latest venture for a night party in a rented house in Defence made her a good profit. She says it was better than the farmhouse party she had a few months ago. That one got raided and she and her girls barely escaped. She got an SMS warning from her son and made it out just in time. She says ‘But can you imagine all those clients half naked running around the fields in Malir with the police after them!’ Her hoarse manly laugh sounds like an actor in a melodramatic film.

I am still in shock. I cannot believe I had this conversation with her and that I will be dealing with Aunties and sex workers. Abida tells me it will take getting used to. She asks me how my parents feel about my working with this group. I lie and tell her they are OK with it and they are quite ‘modern’. I still have to figure out a strategy to tell Abba and Amma and Agha.

Yesterday as I was coming home in the bus I kept looking around. I was so scared passengers would somehow know who I am working with. Amma’s phantom ‘log’ were appearing everywhere pointing their fingers and wagging their heads in shame and admonition.
I told Abida about my fear of people knowing who I am working with. She laughed “who would have ever thought that I would be so nonchalant about talking about Aunties and this industry a year ago! Its normal to be apprehensive! I have two daughters. I would always keep thinking ‘Ya Allah meri izzat bachana! Oh God have my Honour! I am doing this work for my children for their education. Please keep my Izzat, I have daughters and they need to be married off’. But now I don’t worry, I am different. If someone looks at me or one of the men in the bazaar stare at me I stare right back. I did that just the other day!’ She giggled. ‘I was waiting for my husband in Bohri Bazaar and this man kept looking at me and so I went right up to him and asked him ‘Kya dekh rahey ho?!” What are you looking at?!” He panicked and ran!’ She laughed so much when she was telling me this tears poured out. She kept exclaiming ‘Me! Can you believe it! Me telling off a strange man in public!”

My talks with Abida give me confidence. It is reassuring to have her there, an older woman with experience of the world whom I can talk to freely. I wish Amma and I could talk this way. She didn’t even tell me about my mahwari, my monthly cycle. I thought I was bleeding to death until my friend in school told me it was natural. When I told Amma she handed me a thick piece of cloth and cotton wool to make a pad and told me to always hide these things and never allow my clothes to stain. It was when I joined the NGO sector four years ago that I learned about reproduction in a maternal and child health workshop. I have started using disposable sanitary pads now, I can afford them. They are much more convenient and easy to carry around. Although going to buy them is always so embarrassing. Every time I go to the counter with two packs in my basket I keep thinking the man at the counter imagines me using them. Once Agha was with me. I have never seen him so uncomfortable. He insisted on waiting outside the shop. I told him this was a natural process for women but he said it was something he didn’t need to know about. I felt hurt, if we are together then this is also part of me. He is usually so sensitive about my feelings why is this so difficult?

September 24th 2009

I attended a group discussion with FSWs today and I think that it is time for me to find a new job. The discussion took place in our project office I sat at the back taking notes trembling inside. I could feel my heart racing (and not in a good way). The women were all dressed in such revealing clothing, and their gestures and the way they sat – legs wide apart in public... not worried about covering their chest, bras straps showing. The gali galoch, the abusive language! It was just indecent and wrong! And then Abida introduced me to them as her assistant. They looked me up and down and started evaluating me. One of them leaned over and said ‘Shakal to thora sanwla hai, lekin body fit hai, mamey barey honey chahey ... She seems pretty, her color is a little dark, but her body looks fit although her breasts could be a little bigger...

I felt as if the room was spinning and I would vomit from fear. I burst into tears. Anjuman one of the FSWs threw her head back and laughed “Hum to sirf mazak ura rahey they...naya panchi hai! We were just joking with you. Look for us every one is fair game – bus eman paka hona chahey – try to marna hi hai aur yeh to bechari maiden mey utri bhi nahi hai yeh! Hamey kya sikhai gi! (Its all about how strong your morals are...we always have to make a pass its up to the client...this girl is
fresh she has no experience (in our field) what is she going to teach us?’) They thought it was all in good fun.

Abida tried to explain that I needed to be a little tougher and not so sensitive but I told her I felt humiliated at being assessed and evaluated this way. They had no right to talk about my body or my virginity or my lack of experience. Abida tried to explain “This was their humour, they were only joking it was their way of appraising you. You know you are young and pretty – competition”. “Competition!” I exclaimed “This is an insult. I don’t want to be competition! I don’t want to be associated with any of this. How can these women do what they do? How can they undress in front of a man...men...??!!! I mean it illegal, it is un-Islamic, it is wrong!”

September 25th 2009

I asked Abida if it is possible to re-adjust me to another project. I told her I felt that I could not do this work and that it was not morally possible for me to work with these women. I had not studied and completed a Masters in Sociology to do this sort of work!

Abida looked at me and shook her head, I could see the disappointment in her face. She said “I thought you were more open minded than this...most of these women are helpless. Our role is to talk to them and tell them the risks, it is then up to them to decide what they would like to do. Many of them have no choice, they are brought to Karachi and are being exploited. We are trying to make their lives a little better by listening to their stories and empowering them by providing them information about their health and referral services for abortion and STDs/STIs. We are protecting society! HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B are time bombs waiting to explode. We need to get people with high risk behaviors to protect themselves so that this virus does not spread. It is their choice to decide what is good or bad for them – that is what we get them to think about in our sessions. To do this work you need to be strong on the inside. The type of people you meet, the type of places you go, the circumstances you have to deal with ...its not like a normal job like teaching where you are protected. At the same time it is never boring, frustrating yes, but not boring because you get to see the world as it is and not as you imagine it from the inside of your home or on the television screen. These people are real and so are their problems. You can’t pretend that the world is alright and that these things only exist in movies. You need to be educated about your field!”

Since I was still adamant she agreed to try to look for another option “Give it a few more weeks and see” she said “If you still cannot stay on then I will try and see what can be done. Right now there is no other option within the organization.”

I feel bad about disappointing Abida, but I am just so uncomfortable about being around these women. They wear their black abayas to cover themselves when they go to the market like me, but underneath its all immoral and unclean. They are make a mockery of the purity of my Muslim dress. Now I look out for street walkers at the bus stops. How is it that I never noticed them before with their coded gestures. The hijra or Khwaja Sira as they prefer to be called are also out on the prowl. I watch the quick negotiations of these transsexuals and how they slip into cars with
prospective clients. There must be something mentally wrong with these men who think they can be women and the men who have sex with men! It is unnatural and un-Islamic!

October 1st 2009

I told Agha about my new work. He sat looked at me and burst out laughing! Then he said “Why didn’t you tell me earlier what was there to hide? This is so interesting. I have not had an opportunity to work with sex workers or hijras yet. They are such marginalized and stigmatised groups. It is ridiculous how all our politicians, businessmen and military junta avail of their services yet everyone pretends that it does not happen!”

I argued “But it is illegal and immoral!”

He countered “So is electricity theft and bribery yet we all do it. Why is their profession less moral than any other? Is it because sex is involved? I mean they do work for a living!”

Then he asked “Do you think they would be interested in attending a theatre workshop? You may be able to discuss a lot of issues that they cannot talk about in group discussions?” I told him I would think about it.

Agha sees himself as an activist. He works for an NGO but they are not using theatre there. It is mostly data collection and using conventional strategies for mobilization. His theatre is his evening job, his passion, his way of letting loose all the intense anger pent up in him. He says “theatre mujhey sher bana deta hai who meri pehli mohabbat hai, theatre makes me into a lion, she is my first love” and gives me a cheeky look. I swat him with my book. He has so much energy in him and so much passion. He can barely sit still. I always feel he is in constant animation moving his arms around, his face full of emotion. I feel his energy pass through to me. I wish I were as creative as he is. I sometimes tell him that I feel I lack creativity. He smiles and says “Everyone is creative! It is only about having the courage to let loose and express it!”

I feel relieved and thank Allah that I have a man who is understanding, open minded and modern. My family would never see it this way. I have been brought up in such a sheltered environment protected from the underbelly of the city and its goings on. Boys get to see everything.

Perhaps it is time I begin to re-look at my assumptions.

October 7th 2009

I attended a training workshop titled “Empowerment and Safe Sex: Reducing High Risk Behaviour in Sex Workers”. The trainer Aneela Baji talked a lot about safe sex and condoms. She has an American accent.

There was a lot of giggling when the word condom/gubara was used. It is funny to think of the word balloon in Urdu being also used for condoms but I suppose it is visually appropriate. I don’t think I will be able to say the word gubara again with a straight face.
Aneela Baji says condoms are the only solution. She talked about sexual rights and pleasure and that everyone has a right to have safe pleasurable sex as long as we are respectful of each other. She said “Sexuality is more than just sex, it is part of who we are, and what we think and how we feel about ourselves, it is not stagnant it changes”. But I don’t understand what she means by this. How can sexuality change? Is she saying that one day you can have feelings for a man and then later for a woman. I do not agree with her. She is mistaken.

She claimed that “Empowerment is about awareness and use of knowledge and taking action. For example if you know you are affected and have HIV – you can either choose to protect your family from infection or not. Protection is a form of empowerment it is a conscious decision – taking a risk of being ostracized – but still making the choice to protect your family from risk. For sex workers awareness is also knowing the risks of sexual intercourse – what is highest in risk is anal sex without a condom, then vaginal and then choosna, sucking. They know the risks but they still choose to take that risk. Over here we do not talk about gunah/sawab (what is a sin and what is not) its not about good or bad its only about high risk and low risk”.

Aneela also said the process of empowerment and training you give them (sex workers) is linked. For example by giving sex workers training on how to make a budget makes them think about how much they earn from each program (sex workers call a sexual act a ‘program’), how much they get in hand, what they spend and what will they do in the future – control over their spending and setting their own boundaries as opposed to living from day to day is empowering for them. In addition building leadership skills and self confidence is also a mode of empowerment. For example they are exploited by the doctors and by the police – if they are aware of their rights they can stand up to them and have a plan in mind to keep themselves safe.

She demonstrated how to put a condom on the right way and then asked us to practice. I tried to pretend that it was all work all business and I am very mature (even if this was the first time I had seen what a condom looks like when the small square package is opened). When I opened the packet there was this sound ring, when unrolled it is slippery and rubbery and long. I could barely touch it, it felt slimy, but balloon like. I kept thinking is a man’s organ this large and this long? I suppose putting it on in real life would be much more different.

Now I am curious about the whole business of sex. What would it feel like? What is this choosna (oral) and anal sex. Isn’t all this haram? Do men like this? Do women do this? Its not like I don’t think about it, but to talk about it is embarrassing. I can feel my face heat up as I write. What a besharam, shameless person I must be. My mother would say ‘Izzat miti mey mila diya!’ ‘You have mixed my honour into the dirt’. And yet it makes sense to know about these things. I feel somehow more confident better informed.

When I got back from the training, Abida was waiting for me. She was really excited. ‘I want to show you something...look I designed these gifts for the our ‘female’ clients (FSWs and hijras) ...they are makeup cases’. She opened her cupboard and brought out samples. ‘See these were my idea! When we go visit Kks or when the girls or hijras come here we need to give them something. You know how much they like gifts and make-up. I mean we give them free condoms of course with this makeup kit ...and it’s a useable gift’. I admired the makeup box which is compact in size and
can easily fit into a purse. It contained blush, multi coloured eye shadow, a lip gloss and applicator. It really is a good idea I would love one of these too.

This evening Agha picked me up from work on his bike. I had the condoms in my purse from the training and I showed them to him. It all felt really clandestine like I had some illegal substance hidden in my purse. He told me there are more varieties like flavoured ones and ribbed ones. I laughed and asked him how he knew. “Oh men talk about these things” he said and slid his hand under the table and placed it on my thigh. For a fleeting second I thought of a policewala coming after us and asking us for our nikahnama and then booking us for Zina (adultery) when we couldn’t produce evidence of being legally married, but then the thoughts flew out the window as fast as they had come.

Talking about sex seems to arouse both of us. I think my thoughts have been corrupted by my work. Sex is all I seem to think about. I wish I could just erase all this information I have been given and all the discussions I have been part of. What if I start talking in my sleep?

October 10th 2009

I went to see Agha’s new play today with Karim who brought a friend (my parents thought I was at a work function). The performance was on the life of a sufi saint Bulle Shah, drawing on a history of resistance against injustice many centuries before. There was dancing and singing and powerful dialogue. Agha played a supporting role but he was very good, and I felt proud of him.

After the performance we went out for ice cream with the theatre group. Karim and his friend also came with us. The group was enthused by the success of their performance. Abid the actor who played the lead character shared his thoughts about the current political scenario. “We need to consider the effects of the Islamist agenda, American Imperialists and the Military-Junta nexus. We need to remind Pakistanis that there are other forms of Islam that have been revolutionary in bringing about social justice for the common people and we need to follow their example.”

Another actor who played a side role in the play and whose name I cannot remember talked about the humiliation and restrictions artists have to undergo just to survive in Pakistan. He said ‘they see us as a sexually promiscuous bunch that can arouse the public to mischief... and they are right’ he smirked...I have a feeling he something mixed with his coke in his glass.

Karim’s friend (whom I later learned was an artist) joined in on the conversation. He cleared his throat and began a monologue which I found very powerful and intriguing.

“The tradition of artistic expression in what is now Pakistan can be traced all the way back to the Indus Valley Civilization and it needs to be respected not obliterated. This heritage is part of who we are. We are not Zia’s Pakistan! The Islamist agenda promoted under General Zia ul Haq the Martial Law dictator did not crush us. When he came to power after a coup in 1979, he sought support of the Islamic Religious Leaders. Their support was conditional on a series of Islamic laws being passed including the ban on all public performances by women. After this law was passed any performance made in public was conditional on receiving an NOC (No Objection Certificate) from the Government after being reviewed by the censorship board. This meant that any anti-
government performances or anything that offended the religious leaders was banned. Government sponsored propaganda relegated performance to an evil profession for people with low morals.

Art has the potential to lead to questioning and questing can lead to change. Any activity which can make people think, arouse their critical faculties and lead to their emotional awakening is suspect for these people. And theatre is a highly subversive activity since in spite of all censorship laws, it is far less controllable than film, television etc. This is because it has an amazing adaptability and the capacity to continue with extremely meagre resources. Therefore, once it takes root in the people it can be organized on a self help basis at a community and neighbourhood level, thus providing the people with an alternative platform for self expression and questioning, independent of state control. The hostile attitude of successive governments towards theatre and their efforts to put obstacles in its path by imposing requirements such as NOC’s (No Objection Certificates), police clearance ... and a ludicrous variety of censorship is quite understandable” 55

I was in awe of this man who spoke and I looked at Karim and mouthed “yeh kaun hai?” (who is he?)’ He blushed and shook his head gesturing baad mey, later.

October 13th 2009

Karim does not want to marry. This came as rather a shock to me.

‘I mean everyone wants to marry’ I rationalized with him ‘eventually’.

‘But I don’t want to marry, I am happy not to. I don’t want to produce children and have a wife. I am comfortable in my life the way I am. The problem is I do not have the courage to tell my parents...it would mean breaking away from them...if I refuse...I am a bad son because marriage is a religious obligation. But eventually I have no choice’

The conversation started when I told him I was worried about Agha not being serious and wondering when he would have the courage to talk to his parents. He asked me ‘what’s the rush? Why do you want to marry so soon? And what if he does not want to marry either?’

I explained exasperated by his insensitivity that as a man he would never understand as he was free to choose whenever he wanted from the vast buffet offered to him on the marriage market. He had all the choice, but for women it is different.

I am running out of time. My parents are constantly in search for a rishta, a match. If you don’t marry by a certain age you are seen as a burden on your parents aur phir log kya kahen gey? And then what will people say? Muslim men and women are obligated by religion to marry and reproduce. Here I am willing to take all the risks of facing my parents for Agha and he is taking so long to find the courage to ask them! And you are worried about being a ‘bad son’! Men in our

55 (Ahmed, 2000, p. 5)
country marry four times, they marry little girls. I mean my grandfather had two wives he took his second wife when he was fifty years old and she was eighteen.’

Karim shook his head ‘Not all men are the same nor do they want the same things. Why do you assume that we do? Why do you assume it is so easy for me? Perhaps you are stronger than me.’

‘So you want to play the field? Is that it then? No commitment? Only fool around?’

‘Maybe’ he said

I gave up on the conversation but I still cannot understand why Karim does not want to marry.

October 15th 2009

I am still in the process of training. I assist Abida in documenting the sessions we run and help with the logistics. We have a new team member who is a counsellor, she joined us last week. Her name is Asma and she has a degree from Karachi University in psychology. She has worked on an HIV/AIDS project on Napier road (the historical red light district). She tells me that she gets a lot of satisfaction from her work and that ‘God helps you if your intent is naik, pious’.

I was curious so I asked her how she had gotten permission from her parents to work in the project? She said ‘it took me a while to convince them but they finally came around when I told them I have not taken any oath or vow that I will not serve this section of the population. I told them that ‘In my clinic anyone can come they don’t tell me if they are a sex worker before I register them – a doctor cannot deny a patient treatment” so they agreed.

(Unfortunately since I have no background in medicine, nor a degree in psychology this logic is not going to work with Abba or Amma).

I asked Asma to tell me about the project she had worked on. I wanted to know if it was similar to what we were doing. She said ‘Sex work is illegal all over Pakistan but singing for three hours is legal on Napier Road in the evening. Unlike the KKS which are scattered across residential areas, on Napier Road at least there are families living in the buildings so there is some level of social support but the environment still contributes to behavioral patterns. The husbands, sons and brothers are all involved in the business. Although women are involved in control of the business, but you see our society is patriarchal and all major decisions outside of the business are made by men. Getting and ID card requires the name of a father not mother, getting registered in school requires fathers name. Most of the children there do not go to school. We tried to be innovative, we started a school with the health facility so that there would be no issue of registration but the project finished. Building relationships, gaining trust these are not mechanical formulaic processes even if they sound that way in funding documents’.

Unlike me, Asma seems to be very clear on her position regarding her relationship with FSWs whom she terms ‘clients’. She says you need to keep your personal life and professional life alag - separate. You cannot bring your work home or treat your clients as friends, to do that is just
unprofessional. She says ‘It is also about social acceptance ... otherwise people will say acha aap ki un sey friendship hai (Oh! you are friends with them) your clients...even if my immediate family will accept what I do it does not extend to the rest of the khandaan ... they talk and that is painful for my parents’.

This I can relate to – the phantom ‘log’ now follow me where ever I go pointing fingers at me. Their numbers are multiplying!

Asma says that you need to also have specific boundaries otherwise with the cases we deal with one can get depressed. She told me about a case she had handled in her previous job. A fourteen year old came to one of her health education sessions, she was pregnant. ‘I told her to come back and I would give her a referral for an abortion but she never came back I tried contacting her but.... It makes me feel helpless. Having a child for these girls is a loss of income and a fourteen year old, imagine the health risks. If I keep thinking about it I will go mad so I have to learn to keep my distance. I could do nothing for that child.’

I feel like I am heading in that direction - depression. I cannot sleep, I keep feeling anxious and I am always jittery. My dreams keep getting more and more violent. I keep seeing death and violence and now snakes. I feel our society is mad. The more I learn the more disillusioned I feel. Maybe I should ask Asma about my symptoms?

No I need to remember that the private needs to be kept away from the professional.

**October 16th 2009**

I am feeling a little confused. Agha seems to be obsessed with asking me details about my new job and our ‘clients’ (I have adopted Asma’s word it does sound so much more professional). I wonder, is he interested because of what they do? Or is he interested in what I do? Is he thinking that now that I work with this group I would be willing to also be promiscuous and have ‘sex’?

Sex was never part of our conversations before. It was more about our work and the stresses and strains of working in community development. What activism means, questioning our role... The episodes of clinging to one another on his bike were not talked about, they were only experienced. I wonder if Agha expects me to perform all these things the sex workers do when we are married?

**October 20th 2009**

I almost got caught. I hadn’t told Abba that I was no longer in the main office. We have a separate office at the field site so that we can ensure the privacy of our clients. Abba came to the office since he was in the area for some work and thought he would say hello. He called me from the office on my cell phone demanding to know where I was. I explained that the new office was for women only and I would explain when I got home.
When I got home Abba and Amma both interrogated me. I told them I was working with a group of women that was experiencing violence. It was top secret since there were issues of husbands trying to beat their wives. They still appear suspicious and I am not sure how long they will buy this story.

In a way I am telling the truth. All our clients experience violence in their everyday work. They come with bruises, bite marks, cigarette burns, scratches... They say men pull their hair, push and shove them. I ask them are they paid to be to be beaten up? They say no, but that they do not have a choice. If they refuse clients they refuse money.

Sajida a colleague in my previous job told me once that her husband beat her and had pushed her down the stairs when he was in a rage. I asked her why she lets him. She said ‘I have two children, if I tell him anything he will throw me out of the house and take away my children. What will I do then? Go to my parents? I married him against their will it was a huge step. This way at least I have my izzat and he is not a bad man.’

I am beginning to wonder how different ‘us’ community development workers to ‘them’ our clients. Sajida seems as powerless as they are. The only thing is that she has her ‘izzat’ and ‘they’ are ‘besharam’, shameless, without ‘izzat’. If Agha were to even think of being violent with me I would leave him ...it would be over.

October 24th 2009

I asked Abida today how she ended up working in this field. She laughed swinging her dupatta over her shoulder then frowned. ‘Ittefaqan’ she said ‘By chance’. ‘You see I wanted to be a doctor. I had taken sciences as my subjects but I was the eldest with six younger brothers and sisters. I still remember the day my younger brother was born. It was the same day as my 9th class exams. I had to make breakfast, get everyone’s uniforms organized get them all to school and try and revise for the paper. So unfortunately my household duties became more of a priority than my educational ones. My marks were not that good but I got into Inter Science. But then my grades were not good enough for medical collage. After that I wanted to go to KU, to Karachi University for graduate studies but you know the situation with the political parties and the student wings. There were killings at KU, the political parties’ youth wings had guns. My father said it was out of the question for me to go. So I studied at a collage closer to home but was married before I could complete my degree in economics.’

She took a deep breath and then continued ‘Life is difficult but I will give you some advice since I have seen the world. A woman must know how to make her own decisions. My husband and I live in an extended family. He told me I did not need to work. But after we had our first child I told him we need to be realistic. What you bring only lasts us the day we need to think about how we are going to provide for our children. I had a cousin who worked for an NGO as a telephone operator I asked her if she could find me a job. At that time my baby was only three months old. When she was a year old I interviewed for a position at the NGO. I thought it would be a desk job. I had no idea what I would be expected to do as a field worker. It was a family planning project. I think the other women hired were perhaps not even matriculates. We had to motivate women to use
contraceptives, provide health education to community groups and meet quotas. The first time I went out I was so embarrassed I carried my bag full of pills and condoms without distributing anything. I had never used contraceptives myself and knew nothing about them – me, a married woman, with a child! If you think about it though, not knowing about condoms was not really my fault. If condoms are never discussed and the media campaigns are so vague how would people like myself without any medical background know? I mean look at the campaigns on TV ‘AIDS La llaj hai!’ Ok so if ‘AIDS is incurable!’ what more can you tell me about it? There is no information so the fear and stigma grows and people still do not know how to protect themselves! Everything is hidden the same way sex work is, like some dirty secret.

Anyway I digress, coming back to my story at the end of the month when my field supervisor asked me for my sheet I just looked at my feet. She took me back to the field and said ‘I will show you how it is done’. Once I got over my embarrassment you won’t believe it I had the highest rates of distribution. No one could believe it – see its all about discretion – women do not want their husbands or mothers-in laws knowing. They would hide them in their tins of daal or in a bag of rice. They would even get a hold of me on the bus and ask me if I had any condoms on me and if I would slip them into their shopping bag.’ She said laughing.

‘Things have changed for me in my susral, my husbands’ family. Everyone knows they can depend on me. I know all the bus routes, what to do in an emergency, if anyone needs to see a doctor or go anywhere they call me because they know I can find my way around and ask the right questions otherwise doctors don’t tell you anything’

But then her smile faded and she continued ‘You know my day starts at 6 am, I prepare breakfast for my children and get them ready for school. Then I make breakfast for my husband, prepare lunch (I bring my own lunch to work), I then catch the bus for the office. I leave here at 4 pm get home by 5:30 make dinner and have it with my children. My husband has studied Hikmat (traditional herbal medicine), he sits at his clinic I sit there in the evening as well from 9-11 then we come home together. I usually go to bed by midnight. I always keep to my strict budget. If the money is finished don’t eat and don’t buy it is that simple. I have to make ends meet. I need to have a contingent plan with the inflation increasing. The money just does not last even with both of us working and my two jobs. The savings keep disappearing . I feel the school my children are in is not very good but I cannot afford to switch them.

I worked hard but three years ago the project finished and again I had to worry about my children and how to make ends meet. I told the milk man a month before the project was to end to stop brining milk (I told him we were switching to powdered milk)...what else could I say ... That period was a struggle I kept looking for a job I got some part time work and then someone needed a data collector so I helped with a baseline study. Then this organization contacted me and asked me if I would be interested in this project. They had first planned to have sex workers as outreach workers but the plan did not work out. So now they needed outreach workers. We needed the money but I was hesitant. My husband however supported me, he told me that I should go ahead he said ‘the man who has to clean the gutter one has to enter it first’. So this is my story this is how I came to be here.’
Abida’s story inspires me, she has been through so much and has so many responsibilities. But it also scares me. There are so many things I want to achieve still. I want to travel (even though Abba and Amma have strictly forbidden my leaving Karachi while I am unmarried). I want to meet new people and study more perhaps. I am not sure I am ready to have children and be a wife who has to look after her husband and constantly struggle. Sometimes I am jealous of Agha. Being a man he can go wherever he wants to, he never has to worry about his ‘izzat’, no one looks him up and down in the bus and tries to rub up against him or pinch his bottom. I wish I could just ride off on a motorbike whenever I feel like it too.

October 25th 2009

I asked Agha if he would teach me how to ride his motorbike. He just looked at me and burst out laughing. He said ‘Women don’t ride bikes! And where would I sit? Behind you?’ I said ‘They do in India! You told me yourself! See that girl in that Aamir Khan movie ‘Three Idiots’ what was her name? Han Karina Kapoor she was riding a scooty and Amir Khan was sitting behind her’. Agha looked annoyed ‘Yes but that was a movie and this is Pakistan not India why do you want to copy the Indians?’. I said ‘I don’t want to copy the Indians but it would be so liberating to be able ride a bike. If we are both equal then why should I not be allowed to ride a bike?’

After that he sulked the entire evening and then sent me an SMS at night ‘Do what you want ...you are khar magaz, stubborn, anyway’

I don’t think Agha likes being contradicted. Perhaps he is not as liberal as I thought he was... Mosquitoes are biting me as I write, there has been no electricity for four hours again...when am I going to get to sleep? I am going to be exhausted in the morning.

Agha just texted me a love poem a couplet, a sher from Ghalib

qata`a keeje na ta`alluq ham se
kuch nahee hai to `adaavat hee sahee

[ qata’a = break/intercept, ta’alluq = relation/connection,
'adaavat = hatred/animosity ]

Do not break/discontinue your relations with me,

If nothing else then your hatred is what I will accept

These are the adorable things he does....I guess partners cannot be perfect...one has to accept the flaws in each other and come to terms with them ... no matter how gender sensitive he claims he is, his mardangi, his manhood does get threatened.
**October 26th 2009**

Asma asked me today ‘Is that your brother who sometimes comes to pick you up on his bike?’ I looked at her straight in the face and said ‘No he is a friend’.

She looked at me in disgust. ‘I am sure your parents do not know about this friend of yours! It is women like you who give us all a bad name in the NGO sector! People in my extended family keep telling my mother that your daughter works in the NGO sector, look at the type of work she does and the people she associates with... which man will agree to marry her? Your daughter associates with men, they travel together, _ayashiyan kartey hain yeh NGOwaley_! I have never done any _ayashi_ and I am proud of what I do, I want to make a difference in peoples lives. But girls like you are the one’s who abuse the freedom and trust placed in us single women. Do you know I come here completely covered from head to toe so that ‘log’ people do not point a finger at my family. I observe the norms so that I can continue to work and keep the respect of my family so they do not regret the risk they have taken. Now if you get caught what do you think people will say? ‘Look all these women who work for NGOs they have no morals’ you will not only disgrace us but all women who work in this sector!’

With that she walked out and banged the door shut.

I am sure she is just jealous! What am I doing that is so wrong? Do I not have the right to love? The right to choose my own partner? This hypocrisy of living two lives makes me miserable. At one level I agree one cannot live outside of society but at another level when are things going to change? I am so tired of struggling. Why are the fingers always pointed at me? We talk about rights and the ability to make choices in all the gender workshops but on the other hand we can never escape society and our social positioning. Agha will never understand what it is to be a woman in Pakistan and to take the risks I have taken to be with him.

**October 31st 2009**

Today I went with Abida to see a KK. I had this scary impression of what a KK would look like on the inside. I guess I was a little disappointed when I went inside and found it to look like a normal house. They are just houses, apartments and bungalows in residential areas. The girls have duties like in a hospital or a police station. They have shifts, day shifts, night shifts. The rooms had air conditioners. Almost all the KKs have air-conditioning. The girls don’t come out in the heat if they can avoid it. They even had a generator for when the electricity goes. Abida told me that many of the Aunties have a car and a driver. They send the girl to the designated place for the ‘program’ and have her picked up when the client is done.

I am learning more and more each day about the sex trade. An act of sexual intercourse is called a program – they can have up to five programs in a night it depends on the client or number of clients. If it is a single client then they may give her a rest in between but if there are multiple clients (like when students or factory workers pool in their resources) then they keep going at her till morning.
Street walkers have the least control in terms of violence. They have no support mechanism like in the KKS. KK girls keep being trafficked between Punjab and here, they don’t stay more than six months (there are very few who are from Karachi). They tell their families that they are working in a company or a beauty parlor and send money home. Many would like to marry but the family pressure of earning does not allow them to. It is not like their families do not know what they are doing, most do and are happy to get the money and continue the exploitation.

I am beginning to realize that almost every workspace is somehow connected to sex work. I never knew how large this whole industry really is, and now with cell phones the network has expanded. Offices, factories, universities, schools, beauty parlors, you name it and there is someone or the other providing sexual services. Some of the girls have even been to Dubai! I haven’t even been as far as Lahore or Islamabad.

The girls seem to have all sorts of misperception around which client is ‘safe and disease free’. I really cannot blame them because I was pretty much the same no one told me and there is no easily accessible information as everything is taboo. For many of the men, women and transsexuals they see a ‘saaf sutra’ or ‘clean client’ as a client that dresses well, looks clean, smells nice and looks healthy. The women are more concerned about getting pregnant as opposed to getting infected. So if a client tells her ‘hum bachey nahi paida kar saktoy, I cant have children’... she is relieved and agrees not to use contraception. Many women go to specific shrines to have sacred threads wrapped around their wrists to protect them from getting pregnant. Some use a sponge or cotton wool soaked with Dettol inserted inside their vagina or they wash with cold water after the ‘program’.

‘You see this way we can’t be infected we are safe’ Reema one of the girls at KK told me when I discussed contraception with her.

Many say they are used to the life style ‘We were born to do this’ others say ‘Hamain to shauk nahi hum to apni zaroorat puri kar rahey hain, (We are not interested in doing this work we are just trying to meet our needs). Asma says that ‘unko hawas ho jati hain – yeh bus hona hi hona chahye – they are materialistic – always conscious of the quality and status so this work becomes a need. They do it for pocket money, stereo systems, electricity bills, for thrills. Many say we are not commercial we have permanent partners who pay our children’s school fees.’

The use of condoms is not as simple as the trainers keep telling us for sex workers. Awareness does not mean that they will use it. The biggest issue is the client wont pay for sex with a condom and never for choosna (oral) with a condom. There is no way to pressurise them. Even if a sex worker tells a client that they will make it pleasurable or remind them of the health of their families.

I wonder why men so concerned with pleasure in the short term and not about the consequences after?

I had all these strange impressions from watching movies about courtesans like Umrão Jan Ada about what it was like. There are no courtesans in Karachi. Khan Sahab one of our trainers told us that Heera Mandi the red light district in Lahore is very different as compared to what the movies
make it out to be and that I should read Fauzia Saeed’s book *Taboo* (Saeed, 2002) which has been translated to Urdu if I wanted to know more. Of course our Napier Road in Karachi is supposed to be tiny and not as glamorous. I told Agha I was interested in going to Napier Road to understand better and would he take me? He flatly refused and said ‘over my dead body!’

I don’t understand him – he is OK with me talking to sex workers and going to KKs but he won’t take me to Napier Road? He also won’t talk to his parents about us. They are from a Mohajir family and his parents want him to marry a cousin. So far I have been patient and have taken risks that I would never have thought possible just to be with him. But I am beginning to worry. What if he is not strong enough, what if he does not fulfill his promises?

**November 2nd 2009**

Discussions on violence are ongoing. The girls come back battered, bruised and depressed. We had a meeting with the Aunties to find some way to address this. We put the case to them as a protection on their investment. Abida asked the Aunties about the opportunity cost of a girl not working for a month if her arm was broken or her shoulder dislocated. They agreed that it made sense to protect their investment. They have now agreed to set up a system. If girls see a client and feel that they don’t want to stay with him they call the Aunty and the car is sent and they leave. But if they need the money then … well something is better than nothing so I feel positive that there is a change.

Asma is still cold towards me but I am trying to ignore her. Perhaps she is jealous that I have the courage to take risks and make my own choices and she is bound by social convention.

**November 12th 2009**

I am beginning to wonder if there is any point in what we are doing by just providing awareness to our clients - the sex workers…

Hasina, the first Aunty I had met, came today to the office, hugged me and started to cry. I put my arm on her shoulder and offered her some tissues. I was not sure what had happened. I noticed violent purple marks on her wrists. When she looked up one of her eyes looked swollen and discolored. When she had calmed down she said ‘Are you not going to ask me what happened?’ After our session on high risk behavior she had decided that she would not let her girls perform anal intercourse. Then she told me that she had been taken with one of her girls to a party in Thatta – where she had refused anal – the men had bound her up raped her and her girl, and locked them up in a cupboard till they was finally released by the client.

I felt completely helpless. It is a matter of their survival and physical wellbeing – there is no support we can provide – only listen and provide information – the police will say these women deserve this – the law does not support them since sex work is illegal.
November 18th 2009
I came in this morning and Abida looked worried. I asked her what was wrong and she was hesitant then said ‘Sometimes you are faced with situations where you are not sure if what you did was right. I got a call on my mobile from Sakeena yesterday, Sunday. You remember she is the Aunty who has that palatial house we visited and the one whom I was trying to persuade to let me talk to her girls. She said it was an emergency and this girl was in a lot of pain. I explained our clinic was closed on the weekend but she was insistent because the girl was screaming in pain (she does not send her girls out for anything so the hospital was out of the question). From the symptoms described it sounded like a UTI (urinal tract infection) so I took Allah’s name and suggested Voren which is a pain killer. She sent her man to the medical store he called me again from there. I spoke to the shop keeper and told him the dosage. I didn’t sleep the whole night I was so worried about the girl’. 

Abida is more experienced than I am, I don’t think I would know how to handle such a situation. Perhaps we should set up a weekend referral if we are getting such cases. What if something had gone wrong what would have been the repercussions...?

November 19th 2009
It turns out that the girl is ok.

I have been thinking after the incident with Hasina...We are not providing any social support through our project for FSWs or MSWs or Hijras for that matter. If there is a case of violence we do not interfere. If someone wants to leave the profession we are not at the level where we can help anyone to leave this profession. There are no provisions for such things like skill development and jobs in the project... and where can we match the income they get from their work? Most of the girls make more in a week than I make in a whole month!

The problem is that the focus of the projects are on sex workers as ‘the problem’ not the social norms and structures that allow for their exploitation. If we are protecting society from disease then we should be focusing on broad social attitudes as well. Why do the project people assume that what we are doing will make a difference? They do not work on changing the context within which sex workers live. Why is their scope and vision so limited? They think that it is so easy once someone recovers from drug addition or stops sex work for him/her to be accepted in society and that she will be given the same opportunities as a new person. People do not let you forget – the baggage and stigma goes with you along with that goes the question – can this person be trusted? The ‘log’ keep pointing and wagging their fingers. Society yehi smajti hai key yeh to hai hi aisey hum is pey yakeen nahi kartey – they are immoral, they will never change, they cannot be trusted. We may create a space of acceptance but it is a bubble we function in at the office... the world outside is not so accepting – our clients’ voice will not be given validity so these projects can only go so far in their intervention unless larger social attitudes of fear and intolerance do not change.

I spoke to Abida about my concerns. I asked her if she felt the same way and how I could raise these issues.
Abida looked at me and nodded hesitantly ‘Your concerns are valid. I have thought about this many times. I have been in the system long enough to know that whatever we do only has a limited impact. In addition when you enter a space with a goal to empower people even if you tell them you will not be there for long they have expectations, they are in a way dependent. They assume that you have more power and that the NGO will solve their problems for them. They don’t know how powerless we really are. Creating dependency is part of the strategy. We provide services which will entice clients to come and visit so we can register them. We provide free checkups, free medicines, gifts, abortion referral, free condoms, makeup sets…but the project will wind up soon then where will they go? They are back to square one without a support system and no change in the structures which make them vulnerable...lekin dependency dalni parti hai uskey bagahair who nahi ayege aur hamarey deliverable poorey nahi hongey, it is unfortunate but we need to make them dependant, if we will not they will not come to us and we will be unable to meet our deliverables’.

‘But are we not doing more harm than good?’ I asked her. ‘We tell people about protecting themselves but asal kharabi to yehi hai key jab tak kisi ko pata nahi hota who cheez demand nahi kareygey aur jab asal support ki zaroorat hoti hai to project khatam ho jata hai. Jab aap ko yeh pata ho jata hai key yeh cheez zeher hai to phir takleef zyadah hoti hai

(The main problem is that until people are not aware of something they do not demand it when they need the real support the project finishes. Until the time that you do not know that something is poisonous you are fine. It is when you realize it is poisonous but keep taking the poison because you do not have a choice that it becomes more painful).

Agha asked me to come with him to a friend’s flat that was empty for a few hours. He said ‘You have a long lunch break on Friday because of prayers. This way we will get time to spend with each other’. All I could think of was Asma and her insinuations. I told Agha ‘What sort of a girl do you think I am? There is no way I would go with you!’

He looked at me and asked ‘Do you not trust me?’

I didn’t answer him

I don’t know... can I trust him? What are the implications if I go to the flat with him? What is he expecting from me? Perhaps I have lost all ability to make sensible decisions. He knows my vulnerabilities and I think he is trying to take advantage of me. I think I need some distance from him.

**November 21st 2009**

A fourteen year old girl came in to our meeting with her mother last week. It had been only two weeks since the girl began ‘work’. She had a tiny body which had perhaps just hit puberty and was still maturing. She could not even handle her duppata, the scarf kept falling off. She was a child. An Aunty had brought her to the meeting thinking that since she has just started it would be good for
her to know upfront how to protect herself. She said “Isey samjhao key yeh apney aap ko mehfuz kaisey rakhey” (Talk to her, explain how she can keep herself safe).

The mother had negotiated the first ‘program’. It was supposed to be a ‘no touch only look’ deal ... the girl was crying she had been raped by a man whom she had been taken see. She was saying “Aap ami ko mana kar dain main yeh kam nahi karoon gi. Itney barey log atey hain...baray bary admi uncle hotey hain” (Tell Ammi I will not do this work, there are such old men, Uncles).

I felt so angry at the injustice of what I was witnessing. A mother putting her child through this torture. There was no matter of choice she was a minor. This was pure criminal activity but under project directives we could not contact the police and interfere. It is eating me on the inside.

At the meeting another Aunty there befriended her and her mother and invited them to her KK for a night party. The next time she came she was smiling. She was wearing big shining earrings, a bright silk kurta and mimicking the older girls. Believe me before this experience I had never seen this aspect of peer education – I kept thinking how could ‘we’ have stopped this. Her whole style had changed. She had been to the KK listened to all the stories of the girls there, seen all the finery and clothes and air conditioning. She had seen what was materially possible through the profession and heard the stories of the older girls, it had given her courage, she was doing this to support her mother.

I felt completely numb after talking to the girl. I still cannot understand what I should have done. Was it just better to do nothing and just talk about safe sex?

December 1st 2009

Karim has been reading a book and thinks I should have a look at it. He says it links to our conversation about marriage which we had left hanging. It’s called Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts (Shaheed & Shaheed, 2004). He gave me a copy.

I met Agha this evening and we went to the beach. I had the book with me and I opened it to show him. I came across a story about Umm-e-Salama, a Muslim woman in 8th Century, Baghdad. So I read parts of it aloud to Agha while he leaned back on the bench arms behind his head.

“Umm-e-Salama was a woman of aristocratic descent who contracted her third marriage with Abu al-Abbas as –Saffah. Apparently she found the future Caliph of the Abbasid dynasty to be an attractive young man and sent him a marriage proposal. She also paid for her own meher as she knew he did not have the means to provide the meher. Chronicles report that early in their marriage Abu al-Abbas as –Saffah promised his wife that he would remain monogamous and would neither take a second wife nor a concubine. During their marriage the future Caliph relied heavily on his more experienced twice-married wife to guide him in the bedroom and in other matters. When Abu al-Abbas as –Saffah became Caliph she continued to advise him on matters of state. It is also reported that one of his courtiers tried to entice him to not limit himself to monogamy and that Umm-e-Salama sent men to have the courtier beaten. Later the courtier redeemed himself by
telling the Caliph that a monogamous marriage was the best form of marriage for which Umm-e-Salama rewarded her handsomely”.

I ended the story and then looked at Agha for a reaction and I was not impressed by what he had to say.  

‘See she was looking and admiring men and restricting her husband from doing this. If at that time women were like that then why do people make such an issue of men doing the same today?’

I told him he was missing the point!

‘When we talk about empowerment it is not something new for women nor is the struggle new it has been ongoing for centuries. This story is from the early Muslim period, from the eighth century, women then seemed to have more courage, confidence and choice.

No you are missing the point’ he retorted ‘She obviously had a complex. What was the need for all these restrictions and conditionality on monogamy. Obviously she felt insecure...there should have been no reason if you love someone to impose these restrictions – she did not trust him! When someone has power then the main focus is how to guarantee my own satisfaction and desires before anyone else’s so this is how power gets misused. That is what she was doing!”

‘But it was his choice, his decision to be monogamous she did not place that conditionality’. I countered trying to control my anger.

He continued to argue ‘She knew her strength she was an upper class woman, she had had two husbands before. She thought about how to exercise her power and she did. In a way from the story you can see how people strategize in the use of power. Class makes a difference maybe it was not so simple maybe there were other factors involved in his agreement and he was not autonomous or independent the way we assume him to be as a man and she was a rich woman of means’

I really felt he was taking his argument in a completely different direction. I challenged him ‘Consider that she was a woman who in that day and age had the ability to acknowledge she was attracted to a man, admire him and make a proposal to him. She used her resources to secure her wellbeing given the context of multiple partners and slaves. She exercised her agency and empowerment to fulfill her desires and needs. You on the other hand do not even have to courage to talk to your parents while I take all the risks of sneaking out of the house to see you!’

He ignored my last statement and countered ‘Are you saying that tomorrow if your desires are being fulfilled by wearing jeans and cutting your hair and becoming modern you will do it? Are we talking about aping the west? Or is empowerment of women about enlightened thinking!’

It was as if he was just arguing for the sake of argument. I again attempted to reason ‘No Agha look you are blowing this all out of proportion! And yes if I choose to wear jeans and cut my hair that is my choice it does not make me any less Pakistani or a Muslim woman! Centuries ago women were able to exercise their empowerment they had the ability to make a choice which was
acknowledged socially by men. When we talk about women’s empowerment and her sexuality why do we get so biased? If a woman is marrying for the third time, if she finds a man attractive and she appreciates his beauty what is wrong with that? Men today marry four times and more plus have mistresses and other companions on the side but no one criticizes their behaviour. When a woman exercises her sexual agency why are fingers pointed at her? Why is she seen as the bad woman? It is this thinking that blocks women’s empowerment. A woman can be attracted to a man and she can acknowledge that! I was attracted to you it didn’t seem to bother you then? We are constrained but we also make space where it can be made. A woman can see beauty in everything even in a potato …this is an internal thing!’

I told Agha not to bother dropping me to a rickshaw I was quite capable of finding one on my own and left.

What a disappointment. It is only when you start having deep meaningful conversations with people that you realize despite all their talk of gender at the core they don’t believe it! I think I surprised myself today I never thought I could articulate all these things. It makes me feel confident and unsettled all at once. Where do I go from here?

**December 5th 2009**

Abida has not been at work for three days and I am worried about her. I called to check on her and her daughter picked up the phone. ‘Abba (my father) is not well’ She responded when I asked about her mother. So I deduced Abida is home looking after her sick husband.

**December 10th 2009**

Abida is back. Her face looks tired but she seems her usual confident self. ‘My husband had a heart attack.’ She said in a very matter of fact way ‘But he is fine now. We were at my in-laws home and he started sweating and feeling unwell. He wanted to go home, we called for a rickshaw but I decided we should go to the nearby medical center. We got there but the attending doctor did not know what was going on. I am the one who got him to put the tablet under my husbands tongue and take his blood pressure. Then I rushed him to the cardio unit at Civil Hospital. I was lucky that I had saved the money I got from my committee (savings group) otherwise we would have had to ask the family. We managed on our own kisi key samney hath nahi phailaney porey, we didn’t have to beg for help from anyone’.

**December 15th 2009**

We seem to have hit a minor disaster. The project requirement was to get the FSWs to form a community based organization. Instead the Aunties have formed one. I suppose that was inevitable as the girls move around while the aunties stay. I was worried that by getting them together we are increasing their networking but really they are being promoted with or without us. The problem started when the CBO took off in fast forward. They gave a deposit on a bungalow, printed receipt books for donations, printed a thousand pamphlets…we got scared. Our purpose was to facilitate a
support network... theirs was to network for business. We had to put the whole initiative on the back burner and divert their attention to home sessions. What a mess.

Agha and I are still not talking. Neither one of us has called each other. Good he needs to realize what sort of a woman he is in a relationship with. If he can’t handle my beliefs and values then he is the wrong person for me to be with.

I called Karim and told him off for giving me his stupid book. ‘Look what happened!’ I sobbed through the phone. ‘If you hadn’t given me that stupid book none of this would have happened!’

After listening to me patiently Karim responded in a calm voice ‘You know the book is only an excuse, it just gave you a chance to express an honest opinion to Agha and for him to provide his own thinking. Now it is up to you to decide whether you want to continue to be with a man who is threatened by a woman who has a grounded opinion.’

‘Uff you are impossible!’ I yelled at him and shut the phone.

**December 28th 2009**

My life is in turmoil. I feel like I am standing on shifting sand and cannot keep my balance.

I called Karim to apologize today. ‘You were right. Much as it pains me to say it you were right. Maybe I am outgrowing Agha. What do I do now?’

‘Well you wait for him to come around and realize what he is loosing. And if doesn’t call his loss! In the mean time you could if you are open to it come and see a film with me and my friend we are going to see the Urdu version of Slum dog Millionaire at Nishat. You remember the man you were in awe of when we went to the theatre?’ He said casually. ‘His name is Bilal by the way and he is the reason why I don’t want to get married...’

‘Oh!’ I said as the implications of what Karim said hit me. ‘Oh!’ words seem to fail me as a floundered to connect the dots.

Karim was repeating himself ‘So are you coming?’

I answered a hesitant ‘Yes’

So I went with Karim and Bilal to see Slum Dog Millionaire, a single woman sneaking around with not one but now two men! (As usual Abba and Amma thought I was at an office function). The phantom ‘log’ are still there but they are beginning to look more like wisps of smoke and their fingers are no longer visible to me.
Section III
Chapter 14
Instead of a Conclusion: Here Is Where the Conversation Stands

Note to Reader

Readers’ theatre is a staged presentation of data performed by a group or an individual with limited props. The script produced as an outcome is a rendering of data based on thematic coding so that narration appears as more structured and fluid (Donmoyer & Donmoyer, 2008). As opposed to most scripted productions, performers in readers’ theatre do not have to memorize scripts. In fact performers usually hold their scripts in their hands throughout the performance reading from them and performing more than one character. According to Donmoyer and Donmoyer (2008) the purpose of having scripts in hand is not primarily for pragmatic reasons but is more to ‘stylize’ what happens on stage. Stylizing in this case refers to a distancing device where distancing is seen as a strategy to challenge realistic modes of performance which aim to smooth over contradictions; creating harmony and a unitary production of ‘reality’. Readers’ theatre as a stylized form of performance is constructed to challenge simplistic interpretations and provoke thought, emotion, and critical analysis.

This particular readers’ theatre is based on a review of a production, the film, Slumdog Millionaire (Boyle & Tandon, 2008) during the second phase of the study. The choice of readers’ theatre as a genre of representation here is linked to an attempt by four of my collaborators and I to highlight contradictions in our group discussions and trouble the assumption of narrative harmony given the ambiguous nature of our data, its contradictions and lack of conclusion (for a detailed discussion of the process of producing this script go to Chapter 2).

As a narrative text, readers’ theatre presents a review of ideas and life experiences created through the script built around the analysis of narrative rather than the narrative analysis
(Polkinghorn, 1995, as cited in Donmoyer & Donmoyer, 2008, p. 213). Analysis of narrative refers to coding of data and presenting it in analysis form while narrative analysis refers to configuring data into a kind of meta story. This particular piece aims to do both. It is both a collaborative narrative analysis and a collaborative analysis of narrative.

‘Slumdog in Review’ (the readers’ theatre) draws on multiple intertwined threads in the film Slumdog Millionaire and teases it apart deconstructing the smooth story of empowerment presented in the film, drawing on lived experience and reflexive thought of my co-collaborators and myself. At the same time the reflections of the group are categorized and presented for further reflection and thought to the audience. It is then up to the audience to continue on making meaning from this engagement.

We (my four collaborators and I), see this script as a medium for performative writing and praxis. We reflect on the dominant prevalent development discourse in which we are embedded and which we encounter in our everyday lives. We challenge ourselves, our subject positioning and our assumptions through critical dialogue and lay ourselves bare. For us, transparency is central. We want readers/listeners to observe our bumpy process of meaning making in which we draw on an art form (readers’ theatre) to provoke and challenge the assumptions we have around our theories and practice. We then code our analysis and present it for you to ruminate upon. We would like audiences to reflect on their own positionality and the lens through which they view issues of poverty, injustice and oppression. We would also like audiences to articulate what they understand by empowerment and contrast it with our reflections and their own experiences. We want audiences to ask questions regarding their own beliefs and of our analysis through this work. Readers/listeners may not agree with us nor do we expect them to. We have been honest in our reflections within a specific context revealing our own inherent prejudices and calling each other out on them. We
expect the same from those who engage with our work. We would like you to reflect on issues of representation, particularly when it comes to empowerment, poverty, sexuality, violence and their transnational connections. We ask you to consider what the material implications of the production and consumption of empowerment narratives are? How do they make you feel? What do they compel you as audience to do? And how complicit are you in the production of these smooth narratives?

We are hopeful that audiences (be they development practitioners, theorists; activists; community mobilizers; policy makers or donors) will come away with more questions and that the smooth narratives one may hear or tell others will be filled with ifs, buts and rough edges. The process of writing this script is not only about methodology, it is about bringing theory and action together challenging dominant modes of knowledge construction. For us it is about forming our own representations and modes of knowledge construction that is as valid as any academic discourse presented in a journal article or conference. Knowledge here is produced in the space provided for dialogue. The version you are reading is an English translation, constructed for an English speaking audience by Shama Dossa. A similar construction is planned for Urdu speakers. The difference in the two is that in English there is no specified gender for each character which makes the script sound more egalitarian and the audience does not assume a man to be any less gender sensitive that an woman or vice versa. Unfortunately Urdu is a gendered language and so the Urdu version of this piece would involve allocating gender to narrators.

In this piece we attempt through this dialogue to cross borders previously held to be barred. Examples of these borders include discussions around constructs such as: ‘the professional researcher academic’; ‘the development worker’; ‘activist’; ‘women’; ‘men’; ‘sexualit’; xenophobia; ‘empowerment’; ‘terrorist’; transnational and cross border connections across India and
Pakistan; postcolonial and imperialist critique; artistic and ethical modes of representation; material implication of theoretical ideas; and critiques on development practice.

Disclaimer

This text to date has not been performed publically and would require further modification were it to be staged based on time constraints, language, and audience context. The script presented is the construction of a sub-group of four of the original study participants and myself using data from the group discussion process.
Script: Slum Dog Millionaire: A Performative Review

Set Instructions

Audience hears the fading title music of *Jai Ho* of the film Slumdog Millionaire to signify the viewing of the film has been completed.

A Sign Language interpreter stands on the left corner of the stage ready to interpret the conversation.

(Narrators and Characters are used synonymously in this script)

Narrator 1: Characters are local community development workers/mobilizers from Karachi who have just completed a viewing of the film Slumdog Millionaire. They are critically reflecting on the content and mode of representation in relation to the concept of empowerment based on their own experiences as community development workers in Pakistan.

Narrator 2: The film is a story of the lives of two brothers (Jamal and Saleem) and their friend Latika from the Bombay or Mumbai ‘slums’ and their life experiences. The film directed by Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan (2008) is based on a book titled ‘Q&A’ by Vikas Swarup (2005). The story centers round a rags to riches theme where the characters survive abandonment; child abuse; and murder; moving from childhood to adulthood.

Narrator 3: We have worked with theatre, photography, colour and paint through our group inquiry process on empowerment; so film is a new medium to open the discussion on what we understand as empowerment (our core subject of inquiry).

Narrator 4: (Nodding his head) I was interested in seeing the film since I had heard so much about it and it relates to the environment we work in and the work we do. Drug abuse; sex work; disease; poverty; police brutality; power of the media; violence; gender issues; poverty and vulnerability; this is what we see everyday in our work. I am glad we decided to watch this film. It is relevant to taking our discussion on empowerment forward.

Narrator 2: So lets consider the title... “Slumdog Millionaire”

Narrator 4: The title tells me that in a *ganda mahol* (a slum, a bad environment); a person was still able to move ahead/ make it through. It is a story of survival; of empowerment.

Narrator 7: The title takes me to a vision of the Mumbai Slums, the violence, the squalor... images I am used to.

Narrator 1: I think immediately of Slum lords, you know *Bhai Log*, the way they say it in Mumbai slang and what these men do.
Narrator 5: I didn’t know what the film was about, I was just happy at the prospect of being able to watch a film from start to finish for once. I knew it had won some awards. I thought it was about some dog though. I thought it would be a strange theme, although R.D. Burman has done the music

Narrator 1 & 2: (in unison) A.R. Rehman! R.D. Burman is dead which world are you living in!

Narrator 1: Oh sorry A.R. Rehman – I knew the composer was someone famous...

Narrator 1: I didn’t like the title. ‘Why Slum ‘DOG’? What say DOG? I mean there have been many movies about the conditions of children living in slums and the Bombay slum lords but why did they use the term dog? (Aside Dogs are unclean we do not keep them in our houses) the word DOG just makes it more derogatory!

Narrator 1: Perhaps they should have named it something poetic like ‘Keechar Mey Kanwal” (Lotus in the Muck) that would have sounded better. You know a story of beauty in squalor. Children are like flowers.

Narrator 7: (Derisive expression) Would you have gone to see a film with that title? Honestly? ‘Keechar Mey Kanwal”? The title ‘Slumdog Millionaire’ is great because it attracts you, makes you curious, tells you a little bit about what the film is ...there is some anticipation...that is why titles for works of art, especially films, are so important. I don’t find the ‘dog’ in the title offensive; to me it tells me of resilience, of fighting for a dream of the underdog coming true. A story of possibility... ‘empowerment’.

Narrator 9: (thoughtful expression) The first scene of the children running through the garbage and the alleyways...that was really depicting what animals do, yet they were human and the scenario was a real life one. They were living like animals.

Narrator 1: Indian films tend to represent Muslims this way, negatively. They tend to show Muslims as helpless or empowered only as criminals, as terrorists, as bhai log (criminals who run the slums).

Narrator 2: (Mocking tone) And yet you continue to watch them. I bet you have seen that Amir Khan movie Fannah a number of times! Amir Khan the great romantic Muslim terrorist! It has that great song (singing) Ya Ali Madad Ali Ya Ali...

Narrator 7: (interrupting) Tell me why is it so problematic for you that the boys are Muslim and the Bhai Log are Muslim? If this film were made in Pakistan and the boys were named Rajesh or Rakesh or the garbage pickers were Christian or Hindu would you still feel that discomfort? Just because the characters are Muslim and have negative roles aap ko takleef ho rahi hai? (it makes you uncomfortable?)

Narrator 1: (Shaking head) Look we are not like that with our minority communities. We do not treat them like that. We do not treat them the way they (the Indians) treat Muslims. Over there we see that Muslims cannot raise their voice. Look what happened with the Babari Mosque and the massacre in Gujarat. Very few people treat Muslims well there. We watch their television channels and their movies, but on their side, their opinion of us is that we are Aatang Waad – terrorists!
Over here every household watches Star Plus dramas and knows the Indian movie stars and movie songs. We play their songs at our weddings and listen to them in busses, but for them we Pakistanis are terrorists; we Muslims are always seen as negative! If there is a dispute here we do not do what they do. Our ‘style’ is different. In our country we treat them (minorities) very well and give them a ‘Warm Welcome’.

**Narrator 7: (satirical sounding)** Really! This is headline news!

**Narrator 4: (frowning and looking at Narrator 1)** I think your thinking is rather narrow. There are more Muslims in India than there are in Pakistan. This film is presenting a specific context based on real life environment people are living in. They are trying to show how people are living in such a context. They also show how the Muslims were treated – there is a reflection on the Bombay riots where Muslims were indiscriminately killed (don’t you remember the scene in the beginning when the mother was killed? Those were Hindu extremists).

**Narrator 2:** Who is this ‘we’ that you are talking about that gives ‘them’ a warm welcome? Do you think all Pakistani’s are Muslims? Or does one have to be Muslim to be Pakistani? Have you forgotten the Blasphemy Law? Out of the population of Pakistan minorities make up 3.7 percent. Yet 647 people between 1986 and 2005 have been charged under the Blasphemy Law for ‘maligning the name of the Prophet’. Did you know fifty percent were non-Muslim. Look at the injustice and victimization! Compare the proportion of people arrested to the population numbers in India! We even have to declare our religion on our passports!

**Narrator 4: (in a placating voice)** I did not see the film as a Hindu versus Muslim scenario nor as a Pakistani ... I was watching it as the experience of a minority and poor people being discriminated against and stigmatized. It could have been any minority...there are so many examples of how this happens with minorities.

**Narrator 3:** But the point is in the grand scheme of things Muslims are not a majority in India. Victimization of Muslims is not because we are a majority. Globally we are presented as a threat. When the media exploits Muslims we feel bad because we feel like targets. Look at the way we are treated when we try to travel abroad, it is always with suspicion, like we are not human but a bomb about to explode. The racial profiling is humiliating for women but particularly for men. I keep asking why do they keep targeting us? However we need to also look inward. Discrimination against minorities happen everyday, it is just that the number of minorities here are less, so the discrimination does not appear as visible because the numbers are less. For example have you not heard people saying oh don’t eat in a Hindu’s house, don’t drink the water from their house they are Christian. What work do Christians do they clean our toilets and the streets. Indian media unnecessarily targets Muslims which it should not, but we should not loose sight that we are also responsible for discrimination in our own country.

**Narrator 4:** Listen to us talk. In our work we are not supposed to discriminate but listen to what we have been saying ... it appears we are not as sensitive as I would have assumed ...
Narrator 7: Coming back to the point, the two boys were not ‘any minority’, they were poor people living in a very specific context. People whom the state did not care about, who were growing up in an environment of violence; a context that is very real to us (gesturing to the group) and real to me (gesturing to self).

Narrator 2: Can you really say that you saw the movie while disassociating yourself as being Pakistani, Muslim, man, woman, community mobilizer etc? I keep relating incidents in the film to those I have seen in Karachi ...we cannot get away from the legacy of partition or its violence. It has flowed through generations, it has made this country and this city what it is. It has been the basis of ethnic conflict, multiple wars, excessive military expenditure and military coups. Can you really step away from Kashmir? Do not the histories intertwine with the way you see yourself as Muslim and Pakistani? But are all Pakistanis Muslim? No! But you forget! When we see an Indian who is Hindu we see him or her with all the baggage our state has fabricated. It is there in the back of our mind; part of our education ...do we not see white skin the same way?

Narrator 7: Yes that is true. Look we laughed at the scene where Jamal pretends to be a tour guide and fools the American Tourists and then when their car is stripped of all its parts. It’s the way we felt in Munna Bhai MBBS (another Bollywood film about a Robin Hood type character from the Mumbai slums), when the Japanese tourist comes to the dhobi ghat (the communal space used to wash clothes) to see poor Indian people doing laundry and photograph them as a tourist attraction. I celebrated that tourists’ kidnapping in the movie by the Bhai Log ...there is this vicarious pleasure we feel in such experiences by putting ourselves in the actors place. This is all part of our experience of oppression...it keeps getting renewed again and again. How many people didn’t feel a twinge of satisfaction after 911? (not that the act of killing or the number of dead was in any way justified) ...it was just that for once it happened on their soil instead of ours...

Silence

Narrator 4: You know the film really did touch on what we have been talking about in our discussions. Power; powerlessness; the use of power; oppression and of course, empowerment. The way the boys were developing values...what was interesting was that despite going through all the same experiences together their personalities were different, they thought differently and acted differently. So it is not just about the environment that shapes you to act in a certain way and forms your thinking ...individuals can make different choices so maybe there is a genetic or biological link?

Narrator 3: No but look, their motivations were different, it was not biological – Jamal was in love with Latika while his brother was in love with fame and money. Latika was a possession to Saleem – so their actions were motivated by their different goals.

Narrator 9: Individuals are different we have different goals and motivations. Empowerment for me is about control over my concepts, my body, my thoughts and my behaviours. It is through this that I can then influence the system. We can talk about empowerment at many levels; state, nation, group, individual etc. But I feel the individual is at the core and I relate this to myself.
Narrator 2: I too start with myself, my actions, thoughts, my role ...I also think about the role of my family and their support is important.

Narrator 4: Can we separate self from the collective or collective from the individual? Are the two separate? The self is formed by the collective. One cannot say that the self is not influenced by society- or is not shaped by it. If I am empowered it will affect those around me ...I am linked to those around me. Empowerment in a way is an action or an ability taken to fulfill a shortfall, a kami, (a lack of)...once a need is fulfilled the action is stopped.

Narrator 2: But it depends on who identifies this need, and how it is fulfilled and who fulfills it. Jamal could have been interested in money but he chose love. What motivates people to choose? Is there a moral imperative at stake? Is there an inner core that directs a person’s thoughts and actions to have control over his or her life? Is the choice always based on the decision of the individual?

Narrator 4: (Nodding in agreement) Yes, these are important questions to ask. Questions we do not ask in our work where we follow project guidelines like machines. If we are all connected at some level, for example, if there is fear and discomfort in the environment we are all indirectly affected. But some are affected more than others. Why is that? Why are some more resilient than others? What makes some people capable of taking decisions and others to give up?

Narrator 2: How do you know that someone is giving up? They may not be internally...

Narrator 3: We cannot come to any one conclusion each perspective is relative to context

Narrator 4: Well we could say that empowerment is an ongoing relational process that takes different forms and meaning depending on circumstances.

Narrator 1: But that is not saying much! What would that mean in practical terms for our work? Such statements are meaningless.

Narrator 1: Providing the message is our job; creating a realization of the importance of issues is our job; however it has to click for them, the individuals and the community...it is a matter of perspective for each.

Narrator 4: But your perspective is different based on your socialization as compared to theirs...so their perspective and ideas are different...as are your relations with them...it is not so simple to say it is our job to create awareness and theirs to make a choice...look at who you are and what you represent for them...and look at who they are and what they represent for you.

Narrator 7: Even if we look at our group we are reflective of differences of perspectives and power relations. My thoughts are different from yours and influence my action.

Narrator 4: Actions have to do with satisfaction. If I am confined to a room and only know this room then I may be satisfied with it. But I may see this person and say that he is not internally satisfied. There are some collective values that give us satisfaction.
Narrator 9: But then don’t you think love was romanticized to link Jamal to the ‘right path’ to satisfaction. He could also have chosen to use a gun but he didn’t. His character would not have remained as innocent, smart, and loveable had he shot the gun. It helped to create these black and white characters. Except life in not black and white, we live in shades of grey. In the film, we see redemption in the end, it makes us hopeful, optimistic. However in our work there are few happy endings. We watch helplessly while people suffer because we generally do not have the means to help them with their issues. This is life and it is an ongoing struggle.

Narrator 4: What is important is to make a distinction on the ethical parameters of choice and action; that between harm and responsibility. Essentially, how to balance your desires between personal rights and responsibilities?

Narrator 2: (turning to Narrator 4) But look at that scene where the brother shoots the Don ...there was no option. Had Saleem not shot him he would be dead and so would Jamal. That is the way the streets work you know that. No police was going to protect them. How do you distinguish right or wrong ...should he not have used the gun? This was a movie but we live in Karachi ...how many targeted killings of young men do we see in our mohallahs (neighbourhoods) and in the news everyday... How many bodies in gunny sacks end up in ditches in Karachi? All I am saying is that in that moment, in that context, could you consider him to be empowered? And what about the girl, Latika, we have not considered her role?

Narrator 1: The women in the film both the mother and Latika were shown to be powerless. They played all the stereotypical roles as nurturer; protector; women in need of protection; sacrifice; acceptance...

Narrator 1: Yes, Latika was left behind, she was left in the rain; she didn’t try and seek shelter or impose herself...she moulded to what she was made. She begged on the street, she was manipulated to take that child and beg. She became a dancing girl and had sex with the brother...later she became the Bhai’s mistress. Whatever she was given in life she accepted her lot silently.

Narrator 7: When she was pulled in one direction with the boys she went. Then when she was pulled in another she went in that direction. Only in the end do you see her as making an independent decision to leave, that also because Jamal persuades her to. This was her one act of visible empowerment. During the entire film she suppresses her dreams and desires ...they were unable to be expressed due to fear. Halaat sey samjhota kar liya (she accepted her fate and adapted to it).

Narrator 4: (Shaking his head) I disagree it was not like that...she tried, she put chillies on that boy in his shorts, on Saleem, remember? That was an act of resistance...it did not transform her position but it was an act of resistance never the less. She tried to run away on the train with them but she was biologically weak so she could not get away. She stayed with the underworld group because she knew it was safer for her to be with them than on the streets. At least she had a place to live and food to eat. She was strategic! She capitalized on her assets which were her virginity and
sexuality. She did not want to but she sacrificed herself for Jamal which is something inherent in women.

Narrator 3: I don’t think the girl was helpless. She had a motive and a purpose. She was not drifting she too was in love with Jamal. She was strong and she was strategic. When she saw that the probability was too low for her being able to get out of a situation, or the risks were too high, she made a conscious choice to stay. Where she felt she had an opportunity she took it. She was doing what she could given her circumstances.

Narrator 2: Yes the gender stereotyping was evident, as was the stereotyping of the sex industry...Indian and Pakistani films about prostitutes like Pakeeza and Umrao Jan tend to show such women as helpless virgins where the purity of the heroine is preserved amongst all the ‘bad women’...but I would not agree that it is inherent in women to sacrifice...it is not a biological or genetic trait...both women and men sacrifice and can also be selfish.

Narrator 1: Do you think that manifestations of empowerment are gendered or is it that we make certain assumptions about what acts would signify empowerment? Sacrifice and patience for women? Action and persistence for men? Would such assumptions not be problematic if we see empowerment to be situation specific, complex, nuanced, complicated to understand and disentangle.

Narrator 4: Well look at one assumption that the film very overtly challenges – that of formal education. A chai wala (a tea boy) without any formal education can become a millionaire...he has the knowledge based on experience. His experience of schooling is limited to basic literacy and corporal punishment. It is similar to our field experience. Look at the information on sexual practice, that too, is learned on the streets much younger than any of us may have known or gotten.

Narrator 1: Sex work is also a performance, her body is being used but her soul is also part of it. She has an ability to block and reconcile – but there is empowerment even in this instance. In a way by accepting it this is also rebelling ...you know ‘if this is what everyone wants then I will become this way’. It is a use of resources or assets in this case her body and sexuality that is traded for money and she numbs her emotions.

Narrator 2: But don’t many women and men do that anyway in relationships ...sex in exchange for protection. Sex in exchange for gifts, sex in exchange for a desire being fulfilled ...it is an asset.

Narrator 1: It is not the same. We are talking about sex outside of marriage, it is illegal ...some do it for the thrill...not all of them are without options...college girls do it for self satisfaction and something on the side...mobile phones have made contact easier and they have multiple ‘engagements’ (if you know what I mean). Housewives do it for school fees ...it is a choice to cheat...where is your self-respect and self-esteem when you cannot be faithful with your husband? It is not that they cannot get money from other means but they say “kon ankhen phorey” (who would strain their eyesight to take a job sewing or working in a factory). ‘I can earn five thousand rupees in two hours ...who is going to work in a factory for all those long hours?’ And then as
quickly as they earn it they spend it...it is not about saving for the future, it is about instant material gratification.

**Narrator 3:** After the ban put on them during (General ) Zia’s time in the 1980s they left the traditional area and have now come to live in respectable neighbourhoods and begun corrupting our girls.

**Narrator 1:** Did you know that based on the work we have done in our organization first contact with sex work for women is usually through their husbands and boyfriends or fiancé...very few cases stop...Once I guess you have overcome the shame of taking your clothes of in front of someone and having sex...well out of all the women we have interacted with, if you offer them a job that will empower them to leave the industry into a respectable profession – they won't take it.

**Narrator 7:** You also need to consider consumerism and fantasy – media presents sex workers as bodies that can fulfill your fantasies what you think your wives and husbands can’t; plus no strings attached. The desires are the demand side of the market which is expanding and the city provides the variety and anonymity. For the sex worker the advertising is an enticement the same as it is for any other person – buy the product and you will become glamorous...it is consumerism at its best.

**Narrator 4:** We also need to consider that when you are constantly told that ‘this is what you are good for’ then it gets internalized and your self-esteem is crushed and your confidence to do anything else takes a back seat.

**Narrator 2:** So do we place values on empowerment based on the type of employment a person is engaged in and not acknowledge their choice to provide sex as a service? Is sex work not gainful employment and does it not have ability to empower those who see it as their profession?

**Narrator 3:** If a sex worker chooses to work that is her choice this is her empowerment. But I think we are discussing something else. At one level we are saying empowerment is for her to take the step to change professions but at another level we are saying that empowerment is that she should reduce risk and be safe while she practices her profession. These are different points of view.

**Narrator 1:** How do you know that those who are not sex workers are not at risk from disease and HIV/AIDS? They too are involved in sexual acts and intercourse with misinformation and no protection. Somehow discussions on sexuality appear to be focused only on those who fall into ‘high risk groups’ or those of low morals like commercial sex workers, drug users, *hijras* and MSMs (men who have sex with men).

**Narrator 3:** Yes there was also that film Fire ...that was also an unusual relationship...we don’t talk about such things either. It is women’s needs that are suppressed... I think that is why lesbianism is progressing.

**Narrator 1:** *Hamara jo culture hai, hamari jo values hai hum to is say gir kar ya hat kar to empowerment key barey mey nahi soch saktey.* We cannot talk about or think about empowerment
outside of what is not part of our culture or values or what is immoral. How would we be able to endorse such behaviour?

**Narrator 3:** It is interesting how at the end Latika covers her head. It seems to symbolise that all this time no matter what happened to her body she was pure at heart. How veiling now represents that she is a good woman and should be seen as such. It’s so typical of the film industry.

**Narrator 2:** Do you not feel that Latika was presented as a body controlled by or supported by men throughout the film? I mean there were no other women in positive roles were there?

*There is a sound of a loud bang and people jump, expressions of panic and a sense of foreboding on the faces ... everyone rushes off stage...*

**Narrator 9:** False alarm it was bus tyre that exploded.

*People heave a sigh of relief and return to the room.*

**Narrator 1:** I am so tired of this constant fear. One would assume living here all these years that one is no longer sensitive to the bomb blasts and firing.

**Narrator 1:** Yes it is part of our life now. We cannot do anything to change it so we might as well accept our fate.

**Narrator 2:** But coming back to the story – if we accept fate we have no room for transformation. Is that not what we are supposed to be facilitating?

**Narrator 4:** Yes but this type of work means taking a risk with your life!

**Narrator 1:** I am not willing to risk my life and oppose the Talibain or the Military or the Police. I can only do what I can within the sphere of what is possible for me. You may think I am a coward but I see myself as a realist.

**Narrator 2:** I agree. My life cannot be saved for all the money, protection or wealth...look at our former Prime Minster Benazir Bhutto– she may have had all the information and the exposure. She had Swiss bank accounts; met with foreign dignitaries; but she was helpless when the bullet hit her...the point is that with our security situation the way it is these definitions of self-empowerment go out the window. What difference does self reflection and community organizing make to them? It no longer matters what class, gender or ethnicity one is. In the end we are all targets. Personal safety and security is essential if you are to be given a chance to live. Why is living a life without fear of a suicide bomb blast or a targeted killing not part of any definition of empowerment? Look at the number of men, women and children killed by US drone attacks. Look at how many of our own have been killed in the ‘collateral damage’ for the so called greater good! For our own good! Saving us from ourselves!
Narrator 1: I love the way imperialist powers like to turn all their self serving ventures into saving and civilized missions. When will we learn to stand up to them? We are as responsible...our governments are as responsible.

Narrator 1: It is unfortunate that people only see the fulfillment of their desires as a manifestation of empowerment and not the effects of it. If the Talibain want to impose Sharia they could talk about it, dialogue with people, propose it as an idea; but instead they use suicide blasts to enforce their desires. These bombers may see themselves as empowered but they in their desire to express their will do not think about my will, my right to live without fear. In order for you (the Talibain) to express your thinking and to legitimate your way of doing things you suppress my ability to express and act.

Narrator 2: But are you saying that the person who is committing these acts (the bomber) is or is not empowered? Are you saying he does not have the ability to analyze his actions and to see the harm he is causing us? By your definition empowerment is having control over your thoughts and actions? If he does not have control over his thoughts and actions is he disempowered? Do all suicide bombers have a choice? Some of them are young indoctrinated children.

Narrator 7: (Turning to Narrator 2) I disagree things are not so simple, we always compromise and are bound. We do not live in an ideal world where rights and freedom of decision making are respected and that is what the film shows. We are all slaves to someone or another. I too am a slave to someone, someone who has led me; educated me; who has fed ideas in my mind, whom I have followed. Am I so dependent that I cannot think beyond or outside of what I have been indoctrinated to believe? Can I not have my own thoughts? Am I still not responsible for my own actions...how many excuses can we make for people...that they are brain washed; that they do things because they know no better? There is no excuse for their actions there is no rationalization. They are responsible for their actions.

Narrator 1: (Turning to Narrator 2) I also think you are providing them with an excuse that they do not think. First of all they are all not the same; they are individuals with a conscience. They have a choice they know the destruction they are about to cause. They know that they will not only kill themselves but so many other people in the process. How can you justify death of so many innocent people...well how are they any different from our armed forces or the US drone attacks or the NATO forces why privilege one group over the other...can you justify the destruction and violence they have caused...can you say that a gun empowers you?

Narrator 7: (facing the audience) In today’s world the Talibain are blowing up girls schools everyday because they say that education for women is an American funded agenda; they say that women should not go to a male doctor for a check up...is this not ironic? At one level you will not let women become educated, to become doctors, and at the same time you also won’t let women go to male doctors...I am powerless now because I cannot comprehend these realities...how can this make sense...how can people accept such illogical selfish and unjust actions?

Silence
**Narrator 7:** Did you know many Indian actors and politicians were not supportive of this Slumdog film...they felt it gave India a bad name.

**Narrator 2:** By the way did you notice there were no NGOs or government agencies as such in the film. The only space the state is represented is through the police and its torture tactics. There are many NGOs, community organizations and individuals in Bombay working with urban squatter settlements. Why do you think they were not shown? Is the work we do not important?

**Narrator 9:** Well NGO people do not make an interesting storyline.

**Narrator 2:** But isn’t that a problem. I mean in a way the film showed there was no use for us. People don’t need to be facilitated to be empowered. It is all about self-will and survival. Our work and the role of the state appears irrelevant.

**Narrator 3:** No I did not notice that NGOs were missing in the film. But when I heard about the film I thought that what it would talk about was some great change; but it was really about the lives of three characters. I felt the message after watching the film is about mind power. The hero was tortured yet he kept strong and kept going; so his empowerment was his ability in his mind not to be beaten and to keep looking for possibilities. He had an objective to achieve and he did it...his interest was not money. Even though he was on the show it was his love; his desire to communicate with her; to get back to her. Here love was power, it was not material resources or physical strength, love was stronger than all these types of power because it was unselfish and shared.

**Narrator 7:** It was his mind power not just love but the learning he got on the street. The street was his school. Aside from basic literacy it was all his own resourcefulness. Learning to read people, whom to trust...his survival instincts from living on the street told him not to trust Anil Kapoor when he gave him the answer in the mirror during the show. The way he made decisions based on his options...this was not luck it was intelligent thinking outside the box based on life experiences. The mind is the most powerful organ ...if you set your mind to achieve something you can do anything.

**Narrator 9:** Having the concept of empowerment and the ability to implement it in practice are two completely different things. I strongly believe that empowerment is not something in the air it is an ability act based on critical thinking and being open to other people’s point of view. I may have this ability in my own life (although even here I compromise because of my family, religion, laws etc.) but we also compromise in our professional life. On one side is your own concept but I compromise as an employee because it is my economic need. I forego one form of empowerment to gain another based on my need. Lucky are those whose inner beliefs match with those of their organization’s vision.

**Narrator 2:** We have had an interesting discussion but it was from a particular view point that we were looking at the film. What do you think other viewers who are not from our part of the world or from our profession may see? What sort of a message does it give?
Narrator 3: Well the director is white so he must have thought about white audiences – so they would understand given the language and everything...but I do not think that they will be able to relate to the setting and the characters the way we could because we are familiar with the issues and the context.

Narrator 7: I feel the director took a risk with making a non-action film and then not enough song and dance...it may not appeal to the Indian public. But I mean look at the cinematography – the yellow light in the police station during the torture scene. The opening scene of the aeroplane runway and the slum ...do you know that is what you see when you land at Bombay Airport; slums all around you. The lighting, the dialogue, the music, the mood...cutting back from past to present ...the flashbacks...it would have been so effective if the whole film had been in Bombay Hindi. Other film makers do that they keep the language.

Narrator 2: But then would that not have been a foreign film like Amir Khan’s Lagaan?

Narrator 7: Yes for Lagaan the primary audience is one that understands Hindi. In this case the primary audience are western...but when the dialogue switches to English it completely loses its effect.

Narrator 2: I was wondering, you know we didn’t really talk about the context ...well we did but not in the way that would discuss why the poverty exists in the first place? Somehow there seems to be no link between structures that lead to poverty that we witness. What keeps people in such poverty and perpetuates it? Who is responsible?

Narrator 4: Yes but what is the point of talking about these things ...what is being presented is a capitalist approach where the state is not needed to protect people because if you can take action you can protect yourself. What the film will show Goras (white people) is that ‘this is what poverty looks like’ so every time they have meeting on poverty alleviation they will remember that it still exists and looks like this. Maybe they will apply this to their own context as an educational tool.

Narrator 1: Maybe the film will make them feel – so that they are not disassociated from talking about poverty and witnessing it.

Narrator 3: Perhaps at the international policy level it may make a difference. This may be a language they can understand and it will create an impact and make policy makers more humane.

Narrator 7: I think that we are speaking of ideal situations but we will never have ideal situations. We need to come back to the practicality of what it means to be empowered. The ability to travel without fear; for my daughter to ride a bicycle on the road and travel on her own after college like the way the girls can in India; to wear jeans on the street because she chooses to.

Narrator 4: So exposure is important. Had you not been exposed to this way of thinking or travelled and seen other ways of being perhaps you may not have been so determined in you actions to facilitate your daughter’s empowerment.
Narrator 1: I feel listening to this conversation that we have now developed a checklist ...so when all the boxes are ticked the individual is empowered. Education, jeans, etc. Symbols of empowerment. So we see ourselves as better than others, say better than a woman who is limited to her home. We think that if we ‘educate’ her, show her the world, let her ride in an aeroplane she will become empowered. We seem to relate empowerment to a collection of things.

Narrator 5: In my case it motivates me to keep working because there is hope. It shows me that lives can change despite lack of opportunities. There is always a way so I have to keep trying ...and that if Jamal and Latika can do it then perhaps others in their situation can too.

Turning towards the Audience in unison

WHAT DO YOU THINK? HOW DO YOU FEEL? WHAT DID YOU EXPERIENCE?
Epilogue

It is November 2010 and I am seated in the US customs lounge at Pearson International Airport in Toronto, waiting. The situation is not unfamiliar yet I refuse to make it familiar and inevitable. I am on my way to share some sections of this research with a group of students at the University of Iowa. Unfortunately despite my Canadian passport (which states that I was born in Canada), I have been racially profiled for my brown body. My Pakistani passport lays hidden in my passport case. I ask how long I will be detained. I am met with a blank stare. I tell them I will miss my flight. I am told that is not the concern of the US government. I take out my phone to call Dr. Meena Khandewal at the University of Iowa and I am told to stop immediately.

Cell phones are not allowed in this holding cell.

I look at the clock on the wall watching the hands tick by.

I think about my research and consider my situation. I am genuinely scared, not because of my circumstances but because of the rage inside me. I take deep yogic breaths.

Disciplinary regimes govern my performance of civility even during such circumstances. I consider the intricate web of power relations that stretches the borders and boundaries of continents and try to rationalize. I begin to wonder if there is any purpose in trying to share this work and attempting to cross this treacherous border. Four hours later I am called to be fingerprinted. I am asked ‘why do you wish to enter the United States?’ I explain I am teaching a course in community development. I show them an email inviting me to the University of Iowa. An hour later I am told that I am free to go. No explanation, no apology.

I have missed my flight.

The next afternoon I face a packed room at the university. There are undergraduate and graduate students in the audience, as well as a few faculty members. I feel drained by the previous
days’ experiences. I have just learned this morning that there has been a bomb blast in Karachi and that the impact threw my mother backward as she climbed the stairs to our apartment. I am relieved that she was not hurt.

I begin with the following words

‘I am not here to provide any simple solutions. I am here to make your lives complicated’.

I hear a few giggles in the background. I have their attention.

I explain that the inquiry process used in this work is a means of complication, a tool for collaboration which challenges binaries of academic/non-academic; expert/non-expert; theory/praxis. It confronts questions of authority, voice, representation and what constitutes research; as well as the use of the arts as a means of provocation. Acts of representation and reading which may allow ‘the other’ to speak. It raises serious questions for assumptions around knowledge construction and research through a collaborative mode and opens the possibility for reclaiming and acknowledging alternative mediums of knowledge construction – challenging who can produce it (i.e., language, genres and forms in which knowledge is produced), how, and what possibilities such collaborations open as subjects, and the knowledge they produce.

We brainstorm on the word “empowerment”. I hear familiar words. I write them on the white board:

RIGHTS
AUTONOMY
DECISION MAKING
SOCIAL CHANGE
HELPING

I encounter yet another narrative of empowerment as it unfolds across the board.
I hear myself respond.

My goal is not to launch criticisms against specific state actors or NGOs or actors in women’s movements but to grapple with the complex and contradictory empowerment narratives in circulation within the colonizing enterprise of ‘development’ as a whole.

The importance for empowerment narratives seems to be in the consistency of the story, in its fluidity, its universal applicability and appeal; who is telling it and the ability to be accepted as ‘real’ and ‘true’. As a result an ideal narrative of empowerment is one that gives a convincing plausible explanation; it has a ‘plot’ and produces a sense of direction and a feeling of purpose for its audience. Each encounter reflects the complex interaction between subject, context and content and the potential possibilities as well as material consequences they provide. Encounters with these empowerment stories embedded with meaning about social structures; postcolonial contexts; human nature and processes of transformation amalgamate to give weight and feed into discourse through multiple genre representations. Each piece pushes the reader to reflect on how empowerment narratives are enmeshed in relations of power; how a narrative can be a source of both simultaneous empowerment and disempowerment and both engender and deflect resistance within specific contexts.

My encounters with empowerment narratives which frame and construct change agents or community mobilizers have been enlightening. Although Community development workers remain an excluded and empirically under researched as a group in development studies, their role and bodies are central to theories of empowerment and their agency shaped by the ‘terms’ of the encounter guided by colonizing development discourse. I suggest that empowerment theory is internally hierarchical in excluding these ‘lower level’ workers (Goetz, 2001) in precarious employment from participating in a dialogue that pre-constructs them as ideal homogenized entities facilitating a
process of social transformation and change. It appears that these subjects have been pre-
constructed to fit a particular purpose or mould in service of the simplified process of
operationalizing theory. I would have to say many of my participants would not be surprised by
these assumed roles and qualities since they themselves subscribe to many of them as ideals. What
becomes interesting is when one begins to scratch below the surface and critically discuss personal
experiences and take the stories, teasing out their contradictions as a form of resistance.

I decide to share some of the poetry based on participant transcripts in order to situate this
work in context.

Their facial expressions tell me that the words of my participants make sense to them. Some
nod their heads.

I feel my rage begin to dissipate.

This work holds meaning to the audience. They can relate to these acts of resistance through
complication. It has moved them in some way.

At the end of session a student asks “Ms. Dossa I understand what you mean by complicate
but where does one go from here?”

Good question ‘Where does one go from here?’

I hear myself respond.

I do not have a solution to resolve these complexities nor is that my intention. However what
I have learned is that that narratives of empowerment need to be read as raced; classed; and
gendered representations intertwined within the larger discourses of imperialism; neoliberalism;
feminisms and right wing politico-religious movements. It is by becoming aware of these power
relations that new spaces for public engagement and cross border dialogue can begin to take place.
There is a need for more ‘ethical encounters’, ‘ethical representations and readings’ of these narratives through a reworking of the terms under which they take place.
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