

Self-Employed, Self-Empowered: Working Women in Benares

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Methodology.....	4
Background: Women, Work, and the Informal Sector.....	6
Gender Roles and Employment in India.....	6
The Domestic Sphere and Informal Sector.....	7
What Has Been Done for Self-Employed Women.....	8
Women’s Agency and Human Capabilities.....	9
An Ethnographic Perspective: The Women of Kutumb.....	10
An Initial Survey.....	13
Mina Begum.....	15
Piece-Rate Workers.....	17
Gudiya Sahu.....	19
Kismira Devi.....	22
Bubli and Kushibu Narayan.....	24
Limitations: The Model, Middlemen, and the Muslim Religion.....	27
Conclusions: Power off of its Pedestal.....	28
Recommendations for Further Study.....	31
Appendix A: Kutumb Survey Results.....	32
Appendix B: Graph-Income.....	35
Works Cited.....	36

Introduction

*“Economic independence is the password to women’s empowerment.”
Sathi Nair, a Senior Administrative Services official in Andhra Pradesh.¹*

Twenty or so women sit peacefully on a cool cement floor at the Kutumb program center in Benares, India. The room floats like an oasis above the dusty heat of the street, and unobstructed light pours in through a large window. The women, heads bowed, black hair shining, are stitching and measuring, brows furrowed in concentration despite the lull of the lazy afternoon. They have come to learn a skill in order to make extra income, to be around women, exchange advice and stories from the everyday, and to escape the grit of the outdoor neighborhood, which sizzles like a pot of frying snacks and glistens like a car hood baking in the heat. Some women unveil themselves as they enter the room. All of look up as I enter, and smile when I offer a meek “*Namaste.*”

I have spent time in villages with female youth group leaders, with teachers championing for health education, with women writing PHDs on sex-workers, and with women who wake up every day to milk their cows and care for their crops. And the more I learn about how women are shaping the world, the more I feel energized to tell their stories. We are, after all, coping with a history that has hidden many of these stories for too long. Even as legal institutions around the world promise to provide equal opportunities for women, the enforcement of these laws often becomes relaxed due to ingrained social norms about a woman’s place or duty. However, remaining in her traditional “place,” the domestic sphere, does not always allow a woman to expand the potential of her mind, realize her ambitions, or contribute to the healthy development of the community that surrounds her.

Sophomore year at Middlebury College I read Amartya Sen’s *Development as Freedom* and realized that even one of the world’s greatest economists saw empowering women as a critical step in combating poverty and developing the third world in progressive and “freedom” focused way. Sen gave words to what I had sensed since the beginning of my interest in development and social work: without focusing energy on addressing gender issues, the steps leading us towards healthy societies

will crumble and fall. Martha Nussbaum, another noted economist, agrees, and writes that international political and economic thought should be “feminist, attentive (among other things) to the special problems women face in more or less every nation in the world.”² There is also ample proof that increasing female economic and social status decreases infant mortality rates, reduces fertility rates (lowering population), and allows women to become instrument of social change.³ Development efforts should attend to gender imbalances both for the betterment of women’s lives and for the betterment of society as a whole.

In *Development as Freedom*, Sen describes how women suffer in poor environments due to their states of dependency, illiteracy, and unequal opportunities. He stresses that *agency*, for both women and men, should be the goal for development.⁴ Agency describes the freedom an individual has to do and be whatever they desire. Dr. Ranjana Sheel, who wrote a PhD about women’s studies at Benares Hindu University, describes agency as “control over one’s body and environment.”⁵ If women can become agents, or possess unhindered choice in every decision they make, they can realize their full potential as independent individuals and contributors to their communities.

There is evidence that women who support themselves economically have a better chance at expanding their agency within their families and in their communities. As Sen writes,

Working outside and earning an independent income tend to have a clear impact on enhancing the social standing of a woman in the household and the society. Her contribution to the prosperity of the family is then more visible, and she also has more voice, because of being less dependent on others. Further, outside employment often has useful ‘educational’ effects, in terms of exposure to the world outside the household, thus making her agency more effective.⁶

As many post-development critics are quick to point out, money alone is not enough to reverse or revive the trends that keep women poor, such as illiteracy, patriarchy, and cultural traditions.

¹ Sathi Nair, *Women Power-Andhra Pradesh*, (March 2003), 26

² Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 4

³ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 200

⁴ *Ibid.*, 192

⁵ Interview: Dr. Ranjana Sheel, 23 April 2007, U. of Wisconsin Year Abroad Program Center, Lanka, Benares

⁶ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 192

Feminist critic Christine Koggel writes: “measuring women’s increased participation in the workplace does not give us the whole story about the effect on their well-being or agency.”⁷ For a fuller picture, Koggel suggests that we examine how women’s work is embedded in local practices and social institutions.⁸ In short, a woman’s experience in the workplace depends on location and culture-specific dynamics that do not always guarantee more agency. A study done in Ahmedabad, India, for example, showed that within the informal sector, women cope with less mobility, less access to information, less human capital, and lower pay than men in similar positions.⁹

My interest in working women in India has roots in my interest in working women everywhere. But this is not a paper on working women in just any place in India. The country is far too diverse, ever shifting, always transforming itself. Benares, also known as Varanasi or Kashi, city of light, is a city in Uttar Pradesh known for its ancient history, spiritual sites, and diversity. Some working women in Benares are trying to reconcile the attention needed by their families with the need or desire to support themselves financially. Others seem bent on following the traditional route of marriage, domestic work, and raising a good family. After my experience was all over, I realized that the backdrop I chose shaped the study in more ways than I could have planned. Perhaps backdrop is now an inadequate word. My experience is inextricable from a specific community in Benares, and the women I observed are bound to their communities and cultures. The limitations I set for myself during this study- observing women in a sector of Benares- allowed me to zone in on a small group of women over a very short period of time. Any analysis of my experience applies only to this group of women. Yet the issues at hand- poverty, tradition versus modernity, education, feminist economics, and overall, women’s employment-have all become buzzwords in the piping hot topic of development in India.

⁷ Christine M. Koggel, “Globalization and Women’s Paid Work: Expanding Freedom?,” *Feminist Economics*, Vol. 9 (2003): 169

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Paula Kantor, “A Sectoral Approach to the Study of Gender Constraints on Economic Opportunities in the Informal Sector in India,” *Gender and Society*, Vo. 16 No.3, (June 2002): 287

My purpose, then, was to observe the dynamics of a group of women trying to strengthen the skills necessary to become self-employed, and also to investigate how their self-employment has affected their sense of agency both within their families and within their communities. Does self-employment necessarily empower women? What are the constraints of women working in the informal sector? Do employed women have a heightened awareness of and responsibility towards the problems in their community? I predicted that self-employment could help women possess more agency, but my observations showed that the concept of agency is multi-faceted and difficult to pin down. My results display how women may simultaneously act as agents of change while still lacking total control over their own decisions due to familial obligations or cultural norms. By using an ethnographic approach, I sought to illustrate the experiences of a small group of women rather than analyze statistics over an entire community or city.

Methodology

Public anthropology, a discipline defined as “socially relevant, theoretically informed, and politically engaged ethnographic study,” is one method of addressing gender issues without remaining too invested in the theoretical domain or risking the unfortunate ramifications of unwanted, “top-down” development work.¹⁰ I drew inspiration from the idea of public ethnography, and continue to view it as an important approach to spreading awareness of certain issues without infringing on people’s desires.

Attempting to measure human agency proves tricky if not impossible. With my limited time and training, I found it easier to observe and interview self-employed women and let their stories speak for themselves, rather than attempt to quantify how much agency self-employment lent them. My first methodology consisted of participant observation, where I sat in on the Kutumb sewing class and visited several of the participant’s houses. This allowed me to get a feel for how women interacted with each other and with their own families.

During the first week of my study period, I conducted a survey that illustrated some of the women's attitudes about their own experiences and situations within their community. Because it was in Hindi, which allowed the women to explain themselves in their most comfortable language, and on paper, making it more private than a group interview, I believe it permitted some women to express what was truly on their minds. Unlike many of the interviews I conducted, where children clung to my clothes and constant interruptions were the norm, the survey allowed for a four-page piece of mostly unhindered opinion for each woman (see appendix A).

Nevertheless, the interviews still provided me with my most valuable information. Every day I set foot in Kutumb, I accessed a wealth of knowledge about what it takes to be self-employed and how this might change a woman's life. Besides the women in the class, I accessed helpful information and opinions from professors, doctors, and teachers.¹¹

The beginning of the paper dives into the background of women and work in India, with a particular emphasis on women in the informal sector. I then introduce my setting, at an NGO named Kutumb within the community of Nadesar, and summarize the model of the NGO as well as the key leaders of the organization. After a brief discussion of my initial survey, I offer an ethnographic approach to the lives of five women involved with Kutumb. With these life stories, I hope to allow the reader a glimpse into the experiences of self-employed women in Nadesar. I address key issues that surface, such as piece-rate work, arranged marriage, religion, and family dynamic, in order to fill in the gaps where the reader may not be accustomed to certain social, economic, or cultural practices specific to Benares or India.

¹⁰ Carole McGranahan, "Introduction: Public Anthropology," *India Review*, Vol 5, nos. 3-4 (July/October 2006): 255-267

¹¹ Language was an enormous barrier that I could not have overcome without the help of Shasi Singh, who saw me through every interview and survey translation. Her experience as a woman in India allowed her translation to come across clearly and compassionately, and her experience writing a PHD on women's health supplemented my understanding of some of the challenges women face in Nadesar. Her understanding of the issues at hand made her my most significant advisor, translator, and role-model throughout my field-work process.

Background: Women, Work, and the Informal Sector

My experience at the organization Kutumb, which seeks to provide women the skills necessary for self-employment, and my attempt at understanding the women there, would not have been as rich had I not attempted to delve into the more general background of women and work in India. Women have been earning money since the beginning of history. A commonly acknowledged assertion even considers prostitution as the world's oldest profession, meaning that in some ways women have earned money longer than men. Nowadays, India boasts female politicians, doctors, writers, farmers, and artisans (to name a few professions) who earn income to support themselves and their families. Yet domestic violence, poverty, archaic traditions, and communalism have made life for some Indian women challenging and ridden with fear. Earning income could be one way to empower poor women by allowing them independence through the opportunity to sustain themselves.

Gender Roles and Employment in India: A Very Brief History

In her book *Working Women*, Radha Dua traces the history of women's status in the workplace in India.¹² In the stone-age, she explains, many societies were matriarchal and women participated in all types of work. With the development of farming and new technology, men increasingly labored outside of the house while women remained to care for the family. A patriarchal society began to develop, but through the Vedic period,¹³ women still enjoyed most of the same liberties and partook in many of the same activities as men. Marriage was not compulsory, education was open for both men and women, and the traditions of *purdah* and *sati* had yet to develop.¹⁴ Yet along with the Code of

¹² Radha Dua, *Working Woman*, (New Delhi: Neelkomal Prakashan,, 2005), 3

¹³ Historians have estimated the Vedic Period to have taken place between 3000bce-700bce

¹⁴ *Purdah* alludes to the covering and concealment of women in order to protect them from men, and is most often manifested through the use of the veil and the confinement of women to the home. *Sati* describes the Hindu tradition of women throwing themselves on their husband's funeral pyre and accompanying him to the afterlife.

Manu¹⁵ came a delineated set of gender constructs that stuck through subsequent historical periods.

Fast forward to the 20th century, and women's roles in many parts of India remained confined to the domestic sphere or informal spheres of the economy. Gandhi's Independence period offered an opportunity for women to participate in the fervor of the movement while also demanding their own share of rights and acknowledgments in India's next phase of history. However, rather than continue on an upward path of equalizing with men in the workforce, women's participation in labor actually declined steeply from 1950-1985, even in the self-employed sector.¹⁶ According to scholar N.V. Varghese, the Female Marginalization Thesis describes how a "feminization of occupations contributes to marginalizing the economic role of women in the process of development."¹⁷ Through the process of developing, India has shoved women to the periphery, especially when their work exists outside certain boundaries of legitimacy that coincide with notions of modernization and development.

The Domestic Sphere and the Informal Sector

Today thousands of Indian women work separately from the public sphere and formal economy. Most of their work goes undefined and disregarded. One reason is because much of women's work worldwide occurs within the domestic sphere, and is not necessarily considered "work." Recently, as feminist discourse within anthropology has pushed for the recognition of domestic work as important for women's rights, the household has become the domain for legitimate work in some theorists' and policy-makers' eyes. A study done recently by Reuters in New York City estimates that a stay-at-home mother's worth is around \$138,095 a year, assuming she has taken on the responsibilities of housekeeper, cook, day care center teacher, psychologist, and several other jobs.¹⁸ The same study

¹⁵ The Code of Manu, according to Uma Chakravarti in *Gendering Caste*, set out a social structure where, in marriage, the father gave his virgin daughter to the husband. Along with other cultural practices, this control over women's sexuality perpetuated a rigidly hierarchical system of marriage and lineage.

¹⁶ N.V. Varghese, "Women and Work: An Examination of the Female Marginalization Thesis," *Women and Work: The Changing Scenario in India* (New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corp, 1993), 59

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Reuters, *Hindustan Times*, 4 May 2007, 4

estimates that a housewife works around 92-hour work week just by keeping up with family and household duties. However, limited members of most every society still only accept the claim that a housewife's duties consist of quantifiable "work." Because they do not actually earn money through their work, it often goes unacknowledged.

When Indian women do earn money working, much of their work occurs in the informal sector, or the unregistered, unnamed, and unofficial sector of the labor force. A statistic in 2006 showed that only 6% of Indian women workers work in the formal sector, while another 94% are involved in the informal or self-employed sector.¹⁹ And perhaps this division between sectors is detrimental for those whose work is defined as "informal." As union-organizer Ela Bhatt explains in her book *We are Poor but So Many*, the idea of labeling part of the labor force as the informal sector is harmful because it prevents workers from obtaining full rights. "Dividing the economy into formal and informal sectors is artificial; it may make analysis easier, or facilitate administration, but it ultimately perpetuates poverty."²⁰

In India, the informal sector has no signs of decreasing. As Bhatt elaborates in her book,

Economists assumed that developing countries would grow along the lines of the developed countries where, sooner or later, all jobs would belong to the formal sector. But with globalization, the opposite has happened; the private sector has begun to "de-formalize" and the public sector has begun to shrink.²¹

Bhatt's claim that the division between formal and informal perpetuates poverty rests on the idea that worker's rights are essential for a check on the potential tyranny of the employer.

What has been done for Self-Employed Women

No discussion of self-employed women in India would be complete without mention of SEWA, the Self-Employed Women's Association, established in 1972 by Bhatt and her supporters. Beginning

¹⁹ Ela Bhatt, *We are Poor but So Many*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 42

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18

²¹ Bhatt, *We are Poor but So Many.*, 211

with a few organizations in her home state of Gujarat, Bhatt helped SEWA grow to be the largest worker's union in India with over 700,000 members. SEWA seeks to give legitimacy and rights to self-employed working women all over India. One of Bhatt's main goals was simply to give an identity to the myriad of Indian women who toiled tirelessly yet received little chance to demand rights, access to information, or the opportunity for raises. In 1986, Bhatt visited a small village in Bengal where she met a frail woman who told her: "I have no work but the grind of work is killing me."²² Bhatt was deeply touched by those words, because they perfectly depicted the status of a woman working in the informal sector.

When asked about her greatest challenges during SEWA's journey, Bhatt "can answer without hesitation: removing conceptual blocks...the Registrar of Trade Unions would not consider us as "workers," hence, we could not register as a "trade union."²³ Besides lacking identity as workers, women in the informal sector often face isolation and exploitation. SEWA's great contribution, then, is to have united women who have no other means to come together. "The process of coming together is itself the first step in social transformation," writes scholar Uma Ramaswamy.²⁴ Due to its many instances of success, SEWA can serve as a model for other organizations hoping to give visibility to otherwise marginalized workers.

Women's Agency and Human Capabilities

In addition to Sen's version of agency, I will also allude to the idea of *human capabilities* throughout my exploration of women's empowerment. Human capabilities is another term used by Sen and Nussbaum to describe "what people are actually able to do and be."²⁵ In her book *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Nussbaum takes on a Universalist approach in

²² Ibid., 23

²³ Ibid., 17

²⁴ Uma Ramswamy, "Women and Development," *Women and Work: The Changing Scenario in India* (New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corp, 1993), 336

defending the types of capabilities humans should enjoy. Rather than linger in cultural relativism, which defends certain harmful cultural traditions due to their historical or cultural value, Nussbaum argues for an appreciation of cross-cultural norms that should be used to measure the quality of life around the world. Although attention to local context remains essential, Nussbaum pushes for the recognition of universal values such as the right to life, bodily health, free thought, education, enjoyment, political participation, property, and engagement in social interaction, among others, that should apply to all women, regardless of their cultural background.²⁶ As she so eloquently states:

But it is one thing to say that we need local knowledge to understand the problems women face, or to direct our attention to some aspects of human life that middle-class people tend to take for granted. It is quite another matter to claim that certain very general values, such as the dignity of the person, the integrity of the body, basic political rights and liberties, basic economic opportunities, and so forth, are not appropriate norms to be used in assessing women's lives in developing countries. How might one argue this more contentious point?²⁷

With Nussbaum and Sen in mind, I approached women's self-employment as a potential pathway towards the expansion of human capabilities. Before my experience in Nadesar, I was prepared to pay attention to which factors were impeding a woman's ability to choose her own pathway and what she could do or was doing to remove these obstacles or deterrents. Unfortunately, the glossy packaging of theory often falls to shreds when it confronts the reality it seeks to describe. The following perspective addresses a variety of issues that I considered applicable to the omnipresent question of how to expand women's agency. While a conclusive answer to this question remains elusive, perhaps simply raising the question is the most important step.

An Ethnographic Perspective: The Women at Kutumb

The focus of my study revolved around a particular organization, called Kutumb, in an area of Benares called Nadesar. Nadesar lies directly behind the city train station. My walks to the center everyday led me through throngs of vendors and future passengers waiting for trains, over the train

²⁵ Nussbaum, *Women and Development*, 5

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 78-80

²⁷ Nussbaum, *Women and Development*, 41

tracks, through a tiny opening in a back wall surrounded by piles of colorful trash, and into a street lined with makeshift canvas houses, auto-mechanic shops, and tiny food stalls. The inhabitants of Nadesar come from many different parts of India, with Punjabi and Bengali immigrants making up the majority of the group. The area is known for being predominately Muslim. My experience, though, led me to meet a mix of about half Hindu and half Muslim Indians. Most of the Hindus I met both in Nadesar and the city of Benares had the opinion that Muslims treated women poorly, refused to educate them, and were generally inclined to lead lives of struggle and poverty, whether or not this was true.

The Kutumb organization first began as a shelter for drug addicts, and later began taking in abandoned children. It has evolved into a privately funded NGO that provides education programs for children and women and has launched a self-employment program for women in the surrounding area. The program started in September 2005 with the hopes of providing women with training in the skills necessary to earn income. Around 35 women, ages 16-30, come everyday from 2-4 p.m. to practice sewing patterns, learn how to use the machines, and discuss any problems they have at home. The program also has a newer beautician course, and many women are involved in both classes. Dr. Ashish Kumar Singh, a hardworking doctor who dedicates himself to numerous clinics when he's not busy at the center, heads Kutumb. The other key players who run Kutumb are Puja Singh, Dr. Ashish's wife and a teacher, Promode Singh (no relation), the marketing director, Shashi Singh (no relation), a graduate student writing her PHD and offering counseling to sex-workers, and Mina Begum, the sewing course teacher.

Kutumb's approach to community development is holistic in many ways. The women involved can take literacy classes, seek counseling, or even become employees of Kutumb by spreading awareness, soliciting participation from other women, or teaching classes to the children who attend the small school that takes place in the mornings. The abandoned or orphaned children who live in the center run freely through the classes, and beg to play with the volunteers or advisors who often take breaks next to the fan. According to the Kutumb Project Report, the organization seeks "the

development of the community” and has realized that “it is not possible to achieve it without empowering the female section of this community on which the development of the entire family depends.”²⁸

Kutumb’s Women's Empowerment Program, as it has now come to be called, hopes that by helping women to become “literate, skilled, and responsible,” they will be more self-confident and capable.²⁹ The focus of my fieldwork was on the self-employment class, which seeks to provide hard training, “knowledge of social and economic investment for pilot projects for women,” “material through networking,” and to encourage them to “establish cottage industries.”³⁰ In its own right, Kutumb attempts to expand women’s capabilities by offering a combination of skills intended to make women less dependent or illiterate. The self-employment segment of the program aspires to allow women the freedom to make money for themselves, and this money will hopefully benefit other freedoms women should enjoy, such as health, education, freedom of leisure time, and food security.

The women who attended the classes were mostly between the ages of 18-24, and they all lived nearby in the Nadesar neighborhood. When I first stepped foot into their upstairs classroom, I encountered a bustling, airy space full of fabric scraps, humming machines, and a pleasant assortment of the brilliant colors that usually accompany a room full of Indian women. Most of the women sat calmly on the floor, tracing patterns on sheets of newspaper or calculating measurements on graph paper. The women who arrived late stepped into the classroom quietly, immaculately dressed and devoid of any sign of the heavy heat outside. The class was flexible enough that women could accommodate their home schedules and arrive late if need be.

I spoke to Puja about the conditions that the women might face coming from the Nadesar area. “Home security is a huge issue here,” explained Puja.³¹ “Domestic and sexual violence in the home is

²⁸ Kutumb Project Report, 2005, 1

²⁹ Kutumb Project Outline, 2005, 3

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3

³¹ Interview: Puja Singh, 16 May 2007, Kutumb Program Center, Nadesar, Benares

also a problem.” Puja sighed and paused, taking time to calculate why the issue prevailed in Nadesar. “Whenever a husband or family member does wrong with a girl, she accepts the treatment because it is from her family,” she finally stated. I would soon learn how fiercely the women in the class felt a deep loyalty to their families, often at the cost of their own preferences or opportunities. There were some ties, it appeared, which ran deeper than the promise of travel outside the home or the opportunity to work outside the house.

In fact, the main obstacle that Kutumb first faced when trying to organize the program was resistance from the parents. Many of them did not want to see their daughters leave the house everyday for such a chunk of time and brave the supposed dangers of the neighborhood on their way to sewing class. “I had to organize a meeting to talk to the parents and explain that we were trying to help their families,” said Dr. Ashish. “They have come to accept our program because we are supporting them.”³²

The program is now on its second round of participants, and apparently its good reputation had made its way around the neighborhood. Not one of the women I asked said they had had any problem with their family members when they wanted to enroll. I learned in later interviews that some women faced disapproval from parents who were worried about their daughters’ safety on the way to class, but any initial concern was eclipsed by the free skills the women could pick up by attending Kutumb.

An Initial Survey

My goal in conducting a small survey (see appendix A) was to get a feeling for some of the women’s motivation in joining Kutumb, their perceptions of their communities, their sense of agency in solving some of the problems they perceived, and what they planned to do with the money they earned after becoming skilled.

I made a disturbing discovery as Shasi and Puja helped me translate the survey into Hindi. When I asked them to translate the question: “Do you feel you have control over the decisions you

make about your future, in terms of marriage, career, and living situation?,” both women looked confused. Puja then explained that I should take for granted that the women *would not* have choice about these decisions. Their parents or husbands automatically made these decisions for them.³³ They encouraged me to change the question to: “Are you satisfied with the decisions your parents or husband have made about your marriage, career, or living situation?” All of the women except for one marked “yes.” Apparently, the women in Kutumb had little control over certain issues within their own families, at least according to two women who saw them every day.

Many women focused on their families in their survey answers (see appendix A). One woman described her need to earn money so she could “help my family problems.” Other women seemed to welcome the chance to have time for themselves. “I want to do something for me,” wrote one woman. A surprising statistic showed that almost all of the women gave their earnings to their mothers, even the ones who were married. This finding supported my suspicion that Indian women often manage the money in the family, even if they are not the ones to spend it (see appendix B). While relatively powerless in the public sphere, perhaps these Nadesar mothers exercise agency within their families as organizers, managers, and accountants.

One of my overarching questions in this study was whether self-employment increases a woman's awareness of or sense of responsibility towards the problems in her community. When asked about their reasons for becoming self-employed, 56% of the women described a desire to use their earnings for their families or to benefit their communities. One of the questions on the survey asked the women to state the problems they perceived in their community. The answers were varied, but there was an emphasis on unemployment, lack of education, and violence in many of the results. When asked to propose a solution to the problems, many women explained that spreading awareness was the best solution. The dissemination of knowledge was a potentially powerful method of enabling women to

³² Interview: Dr. Ashish Singh, 20 April 2007, Kutumb Program Center, Nadesar, Benares

³³ Puja Singh, conversation with author, 21 April 2007, Kutumb Program Center, Nadesar, Benares

assume power over their own lives. Spreading awareness about Kutumb, for example, tempted women to leave their households and engage in an activity with other women. This network of support could provide a defense against the vulnerability they often suffered alone.

Some even gave accounts of ways they had already attempted to inform other women about their opportunities. One woman's survey focused on how some families in her area will not let their daughters out of the house. She then described how she resisted this: "I have solved problems because my neighbor was not ready to send his daughter to learn sewing so I went to her house and told them that it is a good way, don't worry about the gossip." Interestingly, this woman, whose name is Shanaj, was the only one to claim that she was unhappy with the decisions her family had made about her future (see Appendix A). "I want to be educated and my parents just want me to be married," wrote Shanaj, who comes from a Muslim family that, according to Shasi, is "very conservative." Even as Shanaj is unhappy with her family's wishes, she has become an advocate for other women and encouraged another family to allow their daughter out of the domestic domain.

The answers inspired me to investigate further on certain issues, and also allowed me a basis from where I could explore more details of some of the women's lives and experiences. The following profiles, interspersed with information about relating issues, were compiled using formal and informal interviews and my observations during home visits. I hope they will lend a more personal light to the results of the survey by grounding the experience of women workers into four different cases.

Mina Begum³⁴

Mina is the 23-year-old teacher of the Kutumb sewing class. She is a commanding, confident woman with a white smile and a slightly bent nose. When I first met her, and asked her if I could observe her classes, she responded enthusiastically and told me that I, too, would soon learn how to

³⁴ Following taken from Mina Begum, Conversation, 17 April 2007, private residence, Nadesar, Benares

sew. All the girls in the class laughed nervously, and then laughed a little louder when I broke into a grin. "*Ji, ha, yes*" I replied. I appreciated her gesture; with her words, she located me as an equal, a woman of the same age, and not so much as a foreigner or someone to overly respect. She reduced me in a way I'd been waiting to be reduced; off the pedestal of affluent tourist to the realm of a curious, undergraduate student.

Mina had taken a certification course with a program in Benares, which allows her to now teach sewing. She supports her mother by tailoring and sewing. When I visited her at her house, she showed me the sari she was working on; it was made of heavy black and copper silk with intricate gold embroidery. The sari was already woven when it came to her, and she would sew on gold cord and sequins before it was taken to Gowdolia market and sold there. The thick piece is transformed into a dazzling, gaudy mass after she is done. She would gain 250 rupees for all of the work, and the sari could fetch 2,500 rupees in its completion.

She shares her one room house with eight siblings and her mother, a stout woman who has the appearances of a grandmother well into her sixties or seventies. The whole family sleeps in a collection of two or three beds in the center of the small room. The beds take up the space, and one is converted into a sitting table during the day. For reasons I still do not understand, her sister and brother closest to her age do not work outside of the house, although a younger sister helps her sew the sequins onto saris.

The family was having legal trouble with the house and Mina was the one who represents them in court. She was married to a tailor five months ago, but she still has not gone to live with him. When I asked her why, she smiles and replied "that is how it is done." She knew him before the wedding, and they had meetings with both families before they got married. On her survey, under the question asking "married/unmarried?", Mina proudly scrawled "*accha*" marriage, or "good marriage."³⁵

³⁵ Mina Begum, Survey results N, 23 April 2007, Kutumb Program Center, Nadesar, Benares

Mina is excited that I want to see her house. She stood next to me when I meet the rest of her sisters, and translated everything I say, even the Hindi, to her mother and aunt. She is energetic and talkative throughout my time in her house. "I wanted to teach at Kutumb because I had a training course in sewing and I wanted to spread my new knowledge," explained Mina. She thought women gain independence when they are able to work for themselves.

I asked her if the Muslim religion said anything specific about whether or not women should earn money, and she replied that "it is changing now, things are expensive and women need money," suggesting that despite anything the Muslim culture might proclaim about a woman's role, women are working out of necessity for survival. When asked whether working had given her a new perspective on the problems in her community, she paused and then stated resolutely: "Now is the time to make money. Maybe after that many problems will be solved." With the determination and commanding spirit that Mina possesses, I have no doubt she will deal with any looming problems in an artful and efficient way.

But in many ways, Mina works within a system that offers her little potential for expansion or the opportunity to demand more workers' rights. Her labor is known as piece-rate work, meaning she receives raw materials from a supplier, contributes the necessary labor, and then sells the finished project to another middleman who will then sell it for higher profit at a market. The payment depends on the number, weight, or size of the items produced. She can accomplish all of her work from home, yet has little control over marketing, fabric selection, or creativity.

Piece-Rate Workers

In her essay "Women and Development," Ramaswamy describes the state of piece-rate workers as vulnerable and dependent. According to Ramaswamy, the absence of a clear relationship between employer and employee helps the employer evade obligations under The Factories Act and the Shops and Establishment Act in the Indian Constitution. The lack of formal identity as a worker makes it hard for piece-rate workers to demand higher wages or unionize. Ramaswamy writes that self-

employed workers (who invest in the raw materials and sell it themselves) “have much more control over their work and earnings.”³⁶ In comparison with self-employed workers, piece-rate workers “emerge as the most exploited” type of worker in the economy.³⁷

Kutumb’s sewing program resembles a piece-rate system. Promode, the director of marketing, finds projects and buys raw materials. The women in the class have opportunities to work in groups and then deliver the final product to Promode, who then sells it to the employer or campaign.³⁸ Because their projects belong to a program that is meant specifically to empower them, they do not need to worry that Promode or the Kutumb program would consciously exploit their labor. Dr. Ashish even has plans to set up a marketing class for some women after the micro-credit program gets up and running. But most piece-rate workers have neither the potential to learn marketing skills nor the shelter of a women’s empowerment program.

Mina's true power, then, lies in her high level of skill garnered from her education and sewing certification, and her ability to pass these skills along to the women in the classroom. She helps run her large family at night, and then helps run Kutumb's family (“Kutumb” literally means family in Urdu) in the classroom during the day. Other women with similar economic depravity do not have the sewing and teaching skills Mina has garnered, and the often scrawny income that self-employment provides cannot always provide enough to keep women from sacrificing control over their own bodies. The next profile, about a woman at Kutumb who sells water bottles during the day and works as a sex-worker at night, illustrates a potentially darker version of self-employment in Nadesar.

³⁶ Ramaswamy, “Women and Development,” 329

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ When I first arrived, the women were busy sewing banners for the Communist Party for an upcoming election.

Gudiya Sahu³⁹

The first time I visited the Kutumb center, I was introduced to various teachers, students, children, and directors. Hardly any of their names or faces stuck in my memory; my first visit to Benares, after all, was full of new people and Hindi names I could hardly pronounce. But one character remained in my head, and it was to my delight that I met her once again on my return. The first time I met Gudiya, she took one look at me and then began a breathless, deep-voiced string of rapid dialogue to Shasi, who had been accompanying me around the building. The rate of her speech was impressive, and she had the boundless energy and expression of a child.

Gudiya is not a normal Indian woman. She wears her hair cropped against her head, she likes to sport jeans and an athletic jersey, and she's often wearing a backwards baseball cap. Most people initially mistake her for a man, and that's her intent; to be mistaken for and treated like a male. This unusual dress and hairstyle combined with her energetic demeanor and almost schizophrenic moods remind me of a twelve-year old boy's. But behind this outgoing, optimistic and seemingly immature persona lies a story of struggle and a dark cast of characters that in many ways, both physically and metaphorically, have deeply scarred Gudiya. Her ability to carry on with such enthusiasm and generosity make her quite remarkable.

I met her again at the train station. Shasi had wanted to show me her office where she offers counseling and health education to sex-workers. We pushed our way through the throngs of people who sat waiting for trains, or selling water, or simply milling about. The police, batons in hand and tan uniforms freshly pressed, glared at both of us with a mixture of curiosity and disdain. "Many times, it is the police who are the main customers of these sex-workers," whispered Shasi. "They don't like what I'm doing here, I think they are threatened."

We reached the end of a platform and suddenly a thin figure jumped up onto the cement from

³⁹ Following taken from Gudiya Sahu, conversation, 26 April 2007, Nadesar, Benares

the ground below. "Hallo, Didi!" Two bright eyes and a gap-toothed smile filled my view. It was Gudiya, and as soon as she greeted us she began her signature explosion of dialogue, all the while moving and yelling out to friends across the station. "Didi, look," she said to me, and I followed her outstretched arm to the tree and small temple near the wall in front of us. Shasi explained to me that Gudiya preferred to sleep outside, beneath this tree, and care for the temple by sweeping the ground in the morning. When I inquired as to why Gudiya did not sleep at Kutumb (the center serves as a shelter for abandoned children and needy friends at night), Shasi shrugged and told me that Gudiya's profession did not allow that. Gudiya was a sex-worker by night, and she served as Shasi's window into the train station's world of crime, prostitution, and drug trade. Honest and unabashed, Gudiya was in some ways the anthropologist's dream subject: she was fearless in the face of questions and unafraid to delve into her own traumatic past.

I asked her about her life as we were seated in the dark fan-room upstairs at Kutumb. "My family was very poor," she began. "I ran away when I was twelve because my brother tried to take wrong relations with me." She lifted her shirt to show me a large scar on her back, presumably where her brother had inflicted damage before she escaped. Gudiya ran away from her home in Patna, Bihar and reached Ilhabad, where a woman took her in. "She gave me a place to live and taught me wrong things: smoking, drinking."

She began to hang out around the train station in Ilhabad, and at age 13 married a porter by the name of Rahu. Rahu, a Muslim man well into his forties or fifties, already had two wives and Gudiya was his third. For the next nine years, Gudiya remained at the station selling water bottles. She got pregnant four times: one baby she gave away, another died, another she aborted, and the last one, Suhel, she kept. Her husband made a meager living working as a porter, but he was an alcoholic, drug addict, and he slept around. Gudiya alleged that he died from a disease when she was 21. She made her way to the Benares train station where she has been for the last year. Suhel lives at the Kutumb program center and sees his mother for an hour or two a day. Gudiya treats him no differently from the

other children in the center, and to an outsider appears almost indifferent to his presence.

Gudiya works by night as a sex-worker, but by day she sells water bottles and works as a "social worker." She helps Shasi at the health center, visits Kutumb and participates in the Beautician Course, and wanders around the train station checking on friends and lending money to those in need. "She's not greedy for money," said Shasi. "She has a very clear heart and she'll give away whatever she has, even if it's not much. I want to be a good girl," Gudiya explained as she rested against the wall and let the fan pour over her sweating face. "I want everyone to have a good life. I want a family and a house and I want to stay there."

When I asked her about how she would achieve her goals, Gudiya explained that she was trying to get a license to open her own chai stall at the train station. She did not have enough money yet, but she had been trying to stay on the police's good side in hopes they would grant her a license. Gudiya uses self-employment as a method of survival and as a way to lead the life she can control. She manages her own hours, decides where her money ends up, and chooses where she sleeps and eats. In many ways, she seems happy with her life and her decisions. She is at home at the train station, no matter how miserable the conditions appear.

Gudiya's behavior and form of dress mark her as a woman who has escaped her cultural gender constrictions by denying her gender. "I dress like this so everyone thinks I am a man and they don't tease me," she told me. She also explained how it allows her more freedom; she can sleep outside and watch over her temple, wander freely around the station during the day, and express the boisterous personality that has always been so inherent in her spirit.

As the interview drew to an end, Gudiya's restlessness kicked in and she jumped up from the floor mat. A Bollywood tune filled the air as she began to sing and dance seductively. She took her hat, smoothed her sleek hair, and put the cap back on her head, ending with a wink. "So you dress like that to be free?" I asked her as she paraded out the door. "Now that's women's empowerment!" remarked Shasi, and we all dissolved in laughter as Gudiya's voice ("Namaste, Didi!") trailed down the stairs.

Kismira Devi⁴⁰

Kismira is almost opposite to Gudiya in demeanor and energy. Yet she shares similarities to Gudiya's background: Kismira is also from Bihar and was married extremely young. She currently holds the title for oldest member of the sewing course at 27, and possibly the quietest as well. She arrived to class and straightaway took out her project from a pink plastic bag. For the next two hours, she remained focused, calm, and determined to master the skill at hand. In contrast with her deep brown skin, her smile gleamed with a white brilliance that only some of the children's at Kutumb could top.

Born to a poor cobbler and a midwife in Patna, Kismira recalls enjoying school as a child until her parents married her off at the age of 13. She moved to Benares and lived with her husband, who works as a mechanic, and his family. After four years of marriage, she bore her first child, and now has four children who stay with her mother-in-law when she comes to class. She said she started at Kutumb two months ago because she wanted to learn a skill and earn money for the family, and Kutumb “has a very good atmosphere.”

Her husband had no problem when she asked to attend the classes, and she describes her marriage as “good.” Yet I sensed she is lonely at home, and somewhat isolated. She remarked that she comes to Kutumb to “seek advice from other women,” and her favorite part of the class was that she is “alone in the house” and found “company of other women.” Since attending the classes and making clothes to sell, she said she feels “stronger.” When I asked her if she would seek out the company of other women after the class was over, she replied “no, I want to stay at home.”

Kismira hoped that after she graduates from the Kutumb program, she can earn money completing small projects from home. She is the kind of person who reaps satisfaction from simplicity, like an old woman content to watch the passing of traffic or a child who can play quietly for hours with

⁴⁰ Following taken from Kismira Devi, conversation, 3 May 2007, Nadesar, Benares

a puzzle. She held a deep sense of peace about her, even though she has a four children and only “one person was making a little money” for them, forcing her to take out loans before hearing about Kutumb. “I have no problems in my home or in my community,” Kismira stated contentedly. “Everything is good for me.”

Kismira's contentment with her marriage took me a little by surprise. I had expected that a woman married off at 13 would have nourished some form of boiling restlessness after some years. Instead, it seemed that Kismira had grown to love her husband and develop a deep loyalty towards her new extended family. Whether or not this was out of necessity or adaptation, Kismira seemed truly satisfied with her life. I wondered about the millions of other Indian women whose parents arranged their marriages, and whether they had learned to be satisfied with their condition as well. A discussion with Puja and Shasi, two leaders at Kutumb, shed light on their perception of arranged marriage.

“Most people around here think marriages should be arranged,” said Shasi. “But in the cities, time by time it is changing.” Shasi went on to insist that the tradition was strongest in the villages, but when asked about Nadesar, she admitted that arranged marriage was the norm there as well, despite its location on the outskirts of a city of an estimated 5 million. “Many girls do not agree with their parents, but they cannot choose their life partners alone,” added Puja. In 1990, Elizabeth Bumiller stated in her book *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons* that approximately 95% of Indian marriages were arranged.⁴¹ While this number has decreased slightly, it has remained remarkably stable in the face of other currents of globalization, such as the influx of Western culture through television and material goods.⁴²

Puja and Dr. Ashish's marriage was a love marriage, but Shasi complained that her parents were constantly trying to set her up with someone she hardly knew. “I visit my parents, but only for a couple days because it's always the same problem,” said Shasi. “Men can have 2, 3, 4 wives if he wants

⁴¹ Elizabeth Bumiller, *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons*, (New York: Random House, 1990), 25

⁴² Interview: Puja Singh and Shasi Singh, 7 May 2007, Nadesar, Benares

to, but women can never choose,” ended Puja. “Although, arranged marriage is a problem for a man too, he cannot always pick the woman.”

I concluded that Kismira must have just had a lucky match, and her husband seemed to encourage her involvement with the sewing course. He never resisted the idea of her becoming self-employed, especially because of his need for a supplemented income. Kismira had an advantage over many married women: she could take the time everyday to come to Kutumb because her children are old enough to be in school, and her mother-in-law would supervise the household when she was gone.

Kismira, the quiet worker, avoided the limelight whenever I talked to the women in a group. She was nervous in front of the camera, and refused a piece of cake when I brought one to thank the women on the last day. As each of them glided out the door, they lightly shook my hand, but when the line got to Kismira, she held my hand hard for a good fifteen seconds. She seemed to want to thank me for something, maybe for keeping her company, but the language barrier flared up despite my attempt at Hindi. She said nothing to me, only stared at me with the unnerving whites of her eyes, floating like steady buoys in the dark sea of her face.

Bubli and Kushibu⁴³

“My family situation is not good,” remarked Bubli Narayan on the way to her house one afternoon. “So I think I should go outside of my house and do something about it.” Bubli is a woman of 22 whose comments are typically this resolute. She is confident and casual. She knows what she is good at, and she tells it like it is. Earlier that day, everyone at Kutumb prepped for a henna party, or *muhhindi* as its called in Hindi. Bubli grabbed my hand as I entered the room and steered me to a place in the corner. “I am the best at *muhhindi*,” she said. “I will do your hand now.” And even if her design was a little shaky, the peacocks not quite straight, I knew better than to argue. As she painted the brown paste around my fingers and on my palm, she told me I would be coming to her house later that day.

⁴³ Following taken from Bubli and Kushibu Narayan, 30 April 2007, Nadesar, Benares

Bubli lives next to Kismira, only three blocks from the Kutumb program center. Bubli's cousin, Kushibu, ran to catch up as we left the program center and strolled past food stands and mechanics' shops. As we made our way towards a narrow opening in between tall cement buildings, a small man with gray hair stopped frying samosas and stared up at me.

"This is my father," Bubli proudly stated. He greeted me shyly before Bubli pulled my arm and we entered a dark corridor. The house compound consisted of one thin hallway as thin as a broad-shouldered man. A sliver of light pierced the dimness from the end of the alley, but Bubli took a sharp right turn into the first room. Kushibu began to speak breathlessly, as cousins, sisters, children, and mothers poured into the tiny quarter. They motioned for me to sit on a wooden platform across from Bubli and Kushibu's mothers, two solid women staring at me squarely from stony faces.

A young man with a beard ducked into the room, carrying a cold Pepsi and some Indian sweets. When I asked him what he did, Bubli waved her hand, dismissing him, and explained: "no work, family problems." He remained quiet and soon left the room, overshadowed by Bubli and Kushibu's loud chatter. Every five minutes, another family member would join us, crowding the room with bodies and arms. As I stammered in broken Hindi, approximately 20 eyes stared back at me, blinking every so often. I found out that between both families, there are 24 people living in four cramped rooms off of the narrow corridor.

"Does your mother think that the sewing class is a good idea?," I asked Kushibu, pointing to her flat-faced mother who sat watching me like a sleepy statue. "*Acchaa, he,*" her mother nodded. *Yes, it's good.* "But there are men in the streets," added Kushibu. "They worry about our way to class." Apparently the parents were concerned about safety when the two women wanted to join Kutumb. It is hard to imagine any harm coming to the large group of women as they walked the maybe three blocks to the program center. I walked much further every day, through the train station with its drug-addicts and beggars and criminals. But I nodded at Kushibu, and agreed with the mother. "Yes, they are worried for you," I told Kushibu.

Kushibu continued to describe her family, telling me that her brother is a tailor and a teacher. After the women finished listing off the employment of their family members, I ascertained that a tailor, a paan stand, a tiny food stall, and an auto-mechanic support a family of 24. It's no wonder Bubli felt the need to leave her house in search for work. With the concern their mothers expressed about safety on the streets, I imagined that the women would work from home once they are trained in sewing.

As I got up to leave, Bubli's normally expressionless mother sprang up from her chair. "She's saying you should take Bubli to America with you," laughed Kushibu. I smiled and made a comic gesture with my bag, as if to put Bubli inside and board the airplane. Everyone in the room laughed, surprised by the sudden movement. "You would miss your mother too much," I told Bubli. They both nodded, Bubli and her mother, looking at each other with an innate understanding.

The family ties were discernibly deep, and each person's life overlapped strongly with the next. If anyone, the women in Bubli and Kushibu's family are in charge, or at least their presence was most dominant in my company. Like many Indian families, the extended family lived together, and up to four generations shared the same walls. Bubli and Kushibu expect to move in with their husband's families when they are married.

I asked Bubli whether she would keep sewing and making money when she was married. She explained that if she has permission from her husband, she will continue with any work she does now. "If he is not good, at least I have a way to be independent and do everything myself," she added. "Things are very expensive now."

Besides attending Kutumb for the sewing classes, Bubli also spread awareness about Kutumb through the neighborhood and was hired by Dr. Ashish to teach a children's literacy class. Unfortunately, this caused tension between the cousins when Kushibu was not hired for the same class. "I got them both to motivate other women to join Kutumb," explained Dr. Ashish. "Kushibu is a really

good peer educator; she's very bold and unafraid to talk about touchy issues like sexual health."⁴⁴

During my time at Kutumb, Kushibu began to volunteer as a peer educator and was busy working on improving her English to be able to teach.

Limitations: The Model, Middlemen, and the Muslim Religion

The women in the sewing class joined shared the desire to earn extra money in order to supplement their family's income. Besides working in their homes, some of them participated in the sewing class's side projects. This work in the informal sector did not always qualify as self-employed labor, as Kutumb's structure sometimes provided raw materials, sewing machines, and a sales outlet. The man in charge of these small projects, Promode, would find outlets for finished garments and provided the labor for these products. Although women taught the sewing class, they were not involved in the marketing or sales of their own garments.

The women in Kutumb are a lucky minority; most women working in the informal sector are not simultaneously involved in a program whose model intends to empower them. Promode, for example, worked as the middleman for the sewing class's small projects because, as he told me, he enjoys social work.⁴⁵ But many Indian women laboring from home or at small factories are hired by a middleman, whose main motivation is the profit, and they risked exploitation due to their lack of mobility and access to information.⁴⁶

I wondered why women could not absorb the "middleman" position and market their own garments. This way, they would theoretically have more control over their own materials and management. But when asked, most women in the Kutumb sewing class stated that their parents or families would not permit them to engage in the public purchase and sale of their own goods. Puja and Shasi attributed this to the restraints of the Muslim religion. Muslims, as Puja asserted, do not want

⁴⁴ Interview: Dr. Ashish Kumar Singh, 8 May 2007, Kutumb Program Center, Nadesar, Benares

⁴⁵ Interview: Promode Singh, 2 May 2007, Kutumb Program Center, Nadesar, Benares

their daughters to be educated or to leave the house.⁴⁷ In a later interview, Dr. Ashish stated that Muslim parents “do not let their women work outside the home or with another group of women,” yet said that for Hindus it was not a problem.⁴⁸ I wondered how this explanation accounted for the half of Kutumb’s class who are, in fact, Hindu, yet who still say their parents forbid them from engaging in public exchange.

Perhaps a reason exists behind the discrimination that Muslims suffer in the Nadesar area. Within India, over 66% of Muslim women are illiterate. Writer Farida Hussain claims that when Muslim women attempt to resist the personal codes that block them from enjoying full rights, they are accused of playing into the hands of the majority and threatening Muslim independence.⁴⁹ Even if Muslim cultural practices prevented women from education or work outside the house, the theoretical basis of the religion does not forbid such activities. Hussain cites several passages from the Qu’ran that claim women have full rights to seek education or knowledge and “earn a livelihood.”⁵⁰

I concluded that the constraints suffered by both Hindu and Muslim women lent themselves more to cultural traditions or attitudes rather than religious doctrines. Every woman I interviewed expressed deep family ties and responsibilities, leading me to believe that the Nadesar community contained a culture deeply rooted in family bonds. A woman’s main goal was to provide for her family, and the factor that most controlled her life was the bond to this family and the economic need to sustain it. The empowerment I predicted might spring from self-employment seemed overshadowed by a sense of duty and an equal amount of love for the family, an institution in some ways stronger than government, NGO’s, markets, and civil society combined.

⁴⁶ Kantor, “A Sectoral Approach,” 288-289

⁴⁷ Interview: Puja Singh, 2 May 2007, Kutumb Program Center, Nadesar, Benares

⁴⁸ Interview: Dr. Ashish Singh, 8 May 2006, Kutumb Program Center, Nadesar, Benares

⁴⁹ Farida Hussain, “Are Muslim Women Aware of Their Rights?,” *Women Power- Andhra Pradesh* (March 2003), 26

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 26

Conclusions: Power off of its Pedestal

In Nadesar, self-employment does not *necessarily* empower women. Perhaps if this self-employment includes contact and exchange with other women outside of the home, it comes closer to guaranteeing women the agency so championed by development theorists. Yet the money alone does not seem enough to undermine the ingrained cultures that root women to the confines of the household. In fact, some instances of self-employment may encourage the perpetuation of this confinement, as they allow women to contribute to the family's income within the domestic sphere they live in.

This responsibility to the family and social restrictions did not necessarily mean that the women in Kutumb were not enjoying agency and some form of capabilities. In many ways, they created and protected their own capabilities within the confines of their strong family duty. Perhaps simply earning their own money, even at home, was a step towards achieving full capabilities.

The network that Kutumb provided seemed to me the most positive aspect of the class. The women I observed enjoyed a relaxed, safe atmosphere every day they were involved in the program. While a woman employed at home may or may not improve her livelihood with her extra income, depending on the socio/cultural context she inhabited, the shared support and knowledge that the Kutumb's "Women's Empowerment Program" seemed invaluable and almost guaranteed improved visibility and education for the women involved. I realized that the main source of empowerment at Kutumb was the shared discourse, the opportunity for dialogue, and the promotion of women's education and skills. The benefits reaped by self-employment shrunk in comparison to the chance the women had everyday to be in contact with other resilient females.

My idea of agency restructured itself as soon as I realized that most of the women I interviewed already nurtured the desire to make choices for themselves and help their communities if they wanted to. Nevertheless, the need for outer social transformation still lingers. As Ramaswamy writes, "Equity and empowerment of women cannot be achieved by economic programs without first attaining a social

breakthrough.”⁵¹ The social benefits of a self-employment *program* seemed to overshadow the small social boost that women might gain while working at home or alone. Because women crossed the boundaries of the household domain, they challenged their parent’s notion that it was more important or safe for them to remain at home. Perhaps this action can make headway in the journey towards independence and social transformation.

When I began my observation at Kutumb, I was prepared to discover how one self-employment program could transform women’s lives. What I found, though, was that most of the women I talked to had already taken measures to change their own lives. They did not need a solution to their problems. They just needed an outlet for an ambition they had been nurturing for years. As Ela Bhatt once said, “There is ample proof that women can and do build strong, vital organizations around issues that are relevant to them, find viable solutions out of their own experiences, and in the process change our society and environment in a healthy, respectful, nonviolent, and sustainable way.”⁵² I cannot know whether many of the women at Kutumb will depart from the accepted conditions of their families and cultures once they have been self-employed for awhile. But I am also unsure if they want to. Maybe their subtle acts of strength that I observed will slowly transform their cultures from within. I think each of them wants a chance at economic success, a healthy environment to raise their children or take care of family members, and the chance to educate those around them. And when explained in those terms, I do not see a difference in their goals from millions of men and women, rich and poor, around the world.

On my last day at Kutumb, Mina walked me to the opening in the train station wall where I would leave to catch my rickshaw. As we walked, she began to describe her anxieties about her family’s future. She was about to move in with her husband and did not know how her mother was going to survive without her. “We are so poor. Maybe I can come to America with you and get work

⁵¹ Ramaswamy, “Women and Development,” 331

⁵² Bhatt, *We are So Poor but So Many*, 5

there,” she pleaded. The line between ethnographer and subject, between student and teacher, began to blur, as it often does in India. “You are so strong, you work so hard, you are supporting everyone,” I struggled, trying to reassure her. She stopped in her tracks. “I *am* strong,” she said, and smiled.⁵³ We started again, passing women who hauled bundles of straw on their heads, or dug trenches between the rails, or discussed business on their cell phones. She hugged me goodbye, and as the rickshaw pulled away, I knew she would manage, even under the most testing circumstances. Because she would have to, and that must be how women survive.

Recommendations for further study

Because this study focused on a specific group of women, the same approach could be taken in communities all over India or all over the developing world. A project that focused on self-employed women *outside* of the support of an NGO like Kutumb might give more insight on the realities of self-employment in the informal sector. Perhaps doing focused participant observation in the home would give a better sense of agency for women in the domestic sphere, as my visits were usually brief and superficial. It also might be interesting to do a number of surveys regarding women’s happiness or sense of control in order to better analyze a different aspect of their quality of life and continue to delve deeper into the goals of gender-based development work.

⁵³ Mina Begum, conversation, 8 May 2007, Nadesar, Benares

Appendix A: Kutumb Survey Results
April 23-25, 2007

All women filled out their surveys on their own, except for Gudiya, who had someone ask her the questions and she told them the answers. She has had no formal education.

1. 16 women surveyed

KEY: A. Ritu Pal, B. Kismira Devi, C. Sita, D. Sunita Sonkar, E. Kanjun Chohan, F. Bubli Narayan, G. Sima, H. Gudiya, I. Shamshira Katu, J. Salma, K. Shanaj Sek, L. Razia Naj, M. Sanjeeda, N. Mina Begum, O. Rubina Bano, P. Yasmin

2. ages 19-29

3. 4/16 married (25%), 11 unmarried (1 had recently left her husband), 1 widowed

4. 8 Hindu, 8 Muslim

5. 8 (50%) had been up to or past 12th grade, 13 had been up to or past 8th grade of the Muslim women, 50% had been up to or above 12th grade of the Hindu women, 50% had been up to or past 12th grade

6. They were all from the Nadesar area

7. Why do you come to Kutumb?

10 were in the sewing class or both, 6 in the beautician course only. Some women also came to Kutumb to teach children's/women's literacy classes and to teach the sewing/beautician course.

8. Why do you want to learn these skills?

The reason's for coming usually centered on the desire to learn a skill.

A. "So I can collect money and help my family problems"

D. "I want to be employed"

E. "I want to do something for me"

H. "I want to do something to be able to open my own shop."

L. "I learn it because it will give me some work, I will be strong."

9/16 (56%) explicitly mentioned wanting to learn a skill in order to teach others, help others, or spread their knowledge and income.

9. Had you ever earned money yourself before these classes?

4/16 (25%) had previously earned income or done paid work (either informal or formal sector)

10. Who do you give your earnings to? choices: a) my mother, b) my father, c) my brother, d) my sister, e) my husband, f) myself

12/16 (75%) gave their earnings to their mothers (even those who were married), 1 gave hers to her husband (25% of those married), 1 to her father, and 2 kept it for themselves (13%)

11. What are the problems you perceive in your community?

A. Lack of education, child marriage

B. Miscommunication, unemployment, illiteracy/lack of education

C. Unemployment, poverty, lack of education

D. Unemployment, illiteracy, lack of awareness, family disorganization, people don't respect women

E. People look down on each other (caste/class/thinking)

F. Girls are uneducated. I think girls also want freedom like boys.

G. No problems

H. Many problems occur at the railway station. Girls do wrong work (prostitution, drugs, crime). If people do not comply with the police and do wrong work, they get beaten. (Shasi explains this wrong work as: sexual favors, stealing food, stealing oil from gas stations). Police corruption.

I. I have had fights and people beat each other in the community.

J. Electricity being cut

- K. Many problems. They don't want to send their girls out of house because all training costs money (fees).
- L. In my community women have many problems. Husbands do not respect their wives so wives also do other works (clean house, wash laundry).
- M. Tension and many problems and unemployment (brother/brother tension).
- N. I have faced many problems. My neighbor gossiped about me.
- O. Neighbors gossiping, bad thinking (about me leaving the house) but my house situation is not good (poor) so I want work.
- P. In my country: unemployment. In my community: fights, it is not a peaceful life

12. How would you solve these problems?

- A. I would peacefully tell everyone that child marriage is not good for life physically and impedes physical development and invited many diseases
- B. If we take away unemployment, the problems will be solved
- C. I would go to houses where mothers prevent their daughters from leaving or learning anything, and make them aware
- D. I will go to every house, one by one, and I will educate everyone and spread awareness
- E. I have patience and courage and my family helps me
- F. I would meet the mothers and fathers and tell them to teach their daughters and give them money and in the future, they will support you
- G. No answer
- H. I talk to the policemen and try to make good relations and I went to tell them that they cannot do it.
- I. I need a big person (leader) to solve the problem. This is very necessary.
- J. The problem is everywhere. I want to give a request to the leader.
- K. I have solved problems because my neighbor was not ready to send his daughter to learn sewing so I went to her house and told them that it is a good way, don't worry about the gossip.
- L. We can solve the problem through communication.
- M. My elders solve the problems. The problem of employment should be totally finished.
- N. I only do my work, I don't understand them.
- O. I tell my neighbors the truth about working. I tell them it is a good way, not a wrong way.
- P. There should be more regulation for my community. Then I can solve many problems and there should be employment.

13. Are you happy about the decisions your parents have made about your future?

All women checked "yes" for this question, except for Shanaj, who checked no and then wrote: "I want to be educated and my parents want me to be married." Shanaj is from a Muslim family who is, according to Shasi, very strict.

14. Are you satisfied about the decisions your husband has made about your future or your life?

Out of the married women, two checked yes and the other two checked no. The widowed woman also checked no about her former husband.

15. What will you do with your earnings from your self-employment?

- A. I want to take more education and do something for my society
- B. I want to spend my money on my children's study
- C. I want to spend my money on myself.
- D. I want to spend my money on my house.
- E. I want to spend it in a good way.
- F. I spend my money on my family.
- G. I want to spend my money on problems
- H. I want to take care of my children and other children also (Shanti: "She helps others, many times").
- I. I want to spend my money on good work. I want to learn more and get a better job.
- J. I give my money to my mother and she spends it on clothes, or I can buy clothes.

K. I want to complete my hobbies like sewing, beautician, henna, painting, and education, and earning money by whatever means.

L. Education and myself

M. I want to spend my money on poor people and problematic persons. I want to give higher education to my children. I want to help old people.

N. I want to spend it on my family.

O. I want to spend my money on my house and family.

P. I want to use it for my education.

16. Did anyone ever object to you coming to Kutumb?

Most women said no one had objected to their participation at Kutumb. One woman said that one of her family members objected at first. One woman said her parents did not want her at the classes and would have preferred her to be married and at home.

17. Do you believe that women have the same responsibility of helping their community as men?

All of them said yes

18. Do you want equal rights as your brothers, husband, and father?

**Note: I had intended this question to be phrased differently, because I wanted to see if the women felt they already had equal rights as their male counterparts. However, due to a problem with translation, the question was phrased “Do you want equal rights.” This made the question much less interesting and basically negligible.

19. Do you think housewives should leave the house to work?

All women said yes. Some quotes:

D. “We should work with other women to take away unemployment”

M. “I think it is very important for housewives to leave the house like working women”

Process Summary:

Inspired by both time constraints and language limitations, I constructed a survey for the women in the sewing and beautician course. In the end, only 16 women were surveyed, but I was happy with the pool because half were Muslim and half Hindu and they had a range of education levels, marriage status, and ages. I had surveyed 4 more but later excluded these surveys because the women were below the age of 18. The survey was in many ways more like a questionnaire, with several of the questions requiring a sentence or two explanation. Some questions were multiple choice or yes/no questions. All of the women had no trouble completing the surveys, and most of them took around 20 minutes to do so.

I completed the entire implementation and translation process a little more than halfway through the ISP period, leaving me ample time to follow up on some of the answers. The answers inspired me to investigate further on certain issues, and also allowed me a basis from where I could explore more details of some of the women’s lives and experiences. The bulk of information that the survey provided me really helped me get a sense of many of the women’s attitudes about their reasons for working and their goals.

Some surprising statistics that arose were that almost all of the women gave their earnings to their mothers, even the ones who were married. This finding supported the accepted belief that in Indian households, it is often women who manage the money in the family, even if they are not the ones to spend it. Another encouraging statistic was that half of the women planned to use their earnings for the benefit of their families and poorer members of the communities.

I realized after its completion that the survey contained some questions that turned out to be far too simplistic or redundant, such as the yes/no questions which addressed women’s rights and the desire for women’s rights. Shasi helped me translate the survey into Hindi, explain the purpose to the women, answer some of the women’s questions, translate the answers back to English, and explain some of the answers when I had questions about them. She was positive and practically tireless

throughout all of the translation, even though her English is broken at times. Because it is not her first language, I expect that some of Shasi's translations were estimations. I am sure some of the phrasing is slightly off from what the women intended, but I estimate the basic meaning is the same. I had trouble translating one of the questions into Hindi, and the result was that I ended up with a redundant question that I have no use for. Due to all of the translation, I accept my results as seen through Shasi's eyes. She has spent countless time with the women at Kutumb, and I think she truly understands many of the problems in the community. With this in mind, I found it perfectly legitimate to depend on her interpretations of the answers and her explanations of the answers I found unclear.

Appendix B: Graph of what women did with income



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