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LIMITED EMPOWERMENT
IN A SOUTH INDIA WOMEN'S PRODUCER ORGANISATION:
EVALUATING THE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT APPROACH

by
EILEEN STEWART, B.A.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Norman Paterson School of International Affairs

Carleton University

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The undersigned hereby recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research acceptance of this thesis submitted by EILEEN LOUISE STEWART as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

This paper argues that women's economic organising at the grassroots level can contribute to emancipatory development, a development process premised on empowerment rather than modernisation, but that this economic empowerment approach has some significant limitations and should be seen as only one element in a broader empowerment strategy. Presenting primary data in the form of a case study of one small-scale women's producer organisation in Tamil Nadu, South India, the paper evaluates the claims made by both advocates and critics of the economic empowerment approach, an approach to women's empowerment which starts with women's practical need for economic resources but which also aims to achieve women's overall empowerment in the long run.

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List of Acronyms

AIA-DMK	All India Annadurai - Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Tamil Nadu, India)
ATO	Alternative Trading Organisation
BC	Backward Community
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CDC	Craft Development Centre (Government of India)
CHAD	Community Health and Development Organisation (Vellore, India)
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CMC	Christian Medical College (Vellore, India)
CODES	Community Development Society (Vellore, India)
DAWN	Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Tamil Nadu, India)
GAD	Gender and Development
GDI	Gender-related development index (UNDP)
GEM	Gender Empowerment Measure (UNDP)
GNP	Gross National Product
GOI	Government of India
GTZ/SHF	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit / Self-Help Fund
HDI	Human Development Index (UNDP)
IDRC	International Development Research Centre (Canada)
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MBC	Most Backward Community
NGO	Nongovernmental Organisation
PO	People's Organisation
SC	Scheduled Caste
SEWA	Self-Employed Women's Association (Ahmedabad, India)
SHARE	Self-Help Association for Rural Education and Employment (Vellore, India)
SIPA	Association of South India Producer Associations (Madras, India)
ST	Scheduled Tribe
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VO	Voluntary Organisation; Village Organisation (BRAC)
WID	Women in Development
WO	Women's Organisation
WWF	Working Women's Forum (Madras, India)

Chapter 1

Introduction

Before working in SHARE, sometimes I only had one meal a day. I suffered hunger. Today, we eat three meals a day. Before I was afraid of everything, even to go alone to town. Today that fear has gone.

Because some of us now can work in other jobs, like doing the craft work in SHARE, we do not have to work in their fields. Now the landlords must treat us better, because they are afraid no one will work in their fields.

What is our aim? To remove women's slavery, to build women's solidarity!
(Excerpts from interviews with SHARE members, Appendix D, 1996)

These are the words of some of the women of SHARE (the Self-Help Association for Rural Education and Employment), a producer organisation "of women, by women, for women"¹ working in 31 villages near the town of Vellore, in Tamil Nadu, South India (see map, Appendix A). The women make baskets from palm leaf and sisal fibre to sell to alternative trading organisations in the North. They are also beginning to organise and implement other activities and services, like a tutorial programme for poor children in their villages. SHARE is one example of the many grassroots women's income generation organisations at work in rural areas of India. It is, however, unique, shaped by its local context and with its own history as an organisation initiated from the outside, growing over time into an autonomous membership organisation rooted in the villages where SHARE women live and work. Today, SHARE is part of a growing South Asian movement for the empowerment of poor women through grassroots economic organising, a strategy which has been termed *economic empowerment*. It is the objective of this

¹Slogan from SHARE pamphlet.

paper to make use of the empirical example of SHARE to evaluate the economic empowerment approach.

My own interest in economic organising for women stems from my belief in the importance of addressing the different but inter-related issues of poverty and women's subordination. According to many analysts and practitioners in the field of development, income generation, when it includes the formation of local women's organisations, has the potential to address basic needs while providing a platform for collective action on a range of issues. However, my own experience with income generation programmes for women, and my research on the subject, leads me to be cautious about the claims made for this set of development strategies.² Such programmes may provide only marginal incomes for poor women, and the "empowerment effect" which excites so much attention does not emerge in every case. Additionally, the income generation approach has frequently been seen as an alternative to the redistribution of resources.³ Wealth creation through income generation should not be seen as a substitute for real transformation of an unjust and unsustainable economic system.

This paper takes as its starting point an alternative vision of development, distinct from the mainstream modernisation paradigm which continues to equate development with economic growth. It is a vision of emancipatory development which emphasises equity and empowerment. This emerging empowerment approach is being shaped by grassroots organisations and activists, as well as by academics and development professionals who are satisfied with neither the results nor the ultimate goals of the modernisation approach. Informed by a feminist analysis rooted in the struggle for

²My experience includes a ten-month internship with a CARE Canada micro-enterprise credit programme for rural women in eastern Guatemala in 1990-91, a six-month placement as a researcher with the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) in 1992-93, and five months visiting women's producer groups in South India in 1996, to collect data for the present paper.

³See, for example, Remenyi, 1991; Blumberg, 1996.

women's emancipation, it is also influenced by grassroots women activists who do not identify themselves as feminists but who are engaged in a similar emancipatory struggle, working for changes in existing gender relations and other structures of oppression in order to improve women's lives in concrete and immediate ways.

South Asia is a region where women's disadvantaged status is starkly revealed by statistics on female poverty and the gender gap in social indicators such as life expectancy and literacy (UNDP, 1996). It has become a testing ground for development initiatives which address women's poverty and disempowerment through access to credit, micro-enterprise activities, the formation of producer co-operatives and the organisation of informal sector workers. The economic empowerment approach, which makes such economic interventions its starting point but which aims to achieve broader empowerment goals, is gaining popularity in the region.

Marilyn Carr, Martha Chen, and Renana Jhabvala, the editors of a recent collection of cases studies entitled *Speaking Out: Women's economic empowerment in South Asia* (1996) explore a range of economic approaches to women's empowerment and draw out some of the lessons to be learned from the collective experience of both well-known organisations, such as SEWA in India and BRAC in Bangladesh, and less well-known groups, such as the women construction workers of Tamil Nadu, India. From this exploration of women's economic organising in South Asia, they conclude that economic empowerment is the most effective strategy to achieve women's overall empowerment. Based on a case study of the South Indian women's producer group, SHARE, this paper contests Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala's claim, arguing that the economic empowerment approach, while it can be part of a larger strategy of emancipatory development, is not in itself sufficient to address the multiple forms of oppression which confront poor women in South Asia.

Original research for this paper was conducted during a five-month trip to South India in 1996, funded by the CIDA Award for Canadians. My host organisation in the region was the Federation of South India Producer Associations (SIPA). Through SIPA, I was able to contact a number of grassroots women's producer associations, and to select SHARE as the subject of the case study presented in this paper.⁴ Drawing on the case study of SHARE, placed in the context of a wider literature on economic empowerment for women and examined in the light of relevant theory, I will argue that women's economic organising at the grassroots level can contribute to emancipatory development, addressing both poverty and gender subordination, but that this contribution is limited by structural obstacles which the economic empowerment approach is inadequate to confront.

This introductory chapter has provided some background to my own interest and involvement in the areas of income generation, grassroots development and gender issues, and has touched on the important themes for the paper as a whole. Chapter Two elaborates the theoretical framework of the paper, introducing key terms and concepts. The emergence of the *empowerment approach* from the evolving theories on women's role in development is discussed, and the *economic empowerment* approach is introduced as one of several approaches to women's empowerment current in South Asia. The central role of *organisation* in women's empowerment is also examined. Chapter Three focuses on women's economic empowerment in South Asia, describing this approach in more detail and presenting the two sides of a debate over its place in the struggle for broader empowerment goals. The advocates argue that economic empowerment is the best starting point to bring about women's overall empowerment in South Asia, while the

⁴See Chapter Four, Section II (Research Methods), for selection criteria.

critics see some significant limitations to this approach and argue that it should, at best, be seen as one part of a broader strategy for emancipatory development.

Chapter Four presents the case study of SHARE, after first setting out some aspects of the context in which the organisation operates. The case study is divided into two parts: a description of the organisation, SHARE, in terms of its objectives, history, leadership and membership; and an examination of SHARE's impact through the eyes of the women producer members of the NGO. Chapter Five offers an analysis of the preceding data, in the light of the theoretical framework, and revisits the debate over economic empowerment with insights from the empirical example of SHARE. It concludes that SHARE can best be termed a "limited empowerment" organisation. This case study thus tends to support the argument of the critics of the economic empowerment strategy, that economic organising, while a valuable element in the search for overall empowerment, is not itself an adequate approach to address the many barriers to women's empowerment in particular and emancipatory development in general. The final chapter of the paper presents the conclusions which stem from this exploration of the economic empowerment strategy for women in South Asia and the limited empowerment achieved by one women's self-help organisation in South India.

Chapter 2

Empowering Women at the Grassroots: Theoretical and Conceptual Issues

This paper argues that women's economic organising at the grassroots level can contribute to a process of emancipatory development, addressing both poverty and gender subordination, but that this contribution has inherent limitations and, therefore, economic organising is not on its own an adequate strategy to achieve these goals. Section I, below, opens with a discussion of a development vision that runs counter to the mainstream development enterprise, placing empowerment rather than modernisation at the centre of the development project. It is from this perspective that this essay examines the particular strategy of women's economic organising. Next, section II outlines three different theoretical perspectives on women's role in the development process, Women in Development (WID), Gender and Development (GAD), and the empowerment approach. Section III introduces two competing theories about the ways in which oppressed peoples respond to their oppression, the false consciousness theory and the theory of everyday resistance, and adopts the resistance theory to explain the ways in which poor women in South Asia respond to and resist the multiple oppressions that they face. Drawing upon this analysis it is possible to theorise about the process of women's empowerment, an issue which is taken up in Section IV, which presents four different approaches to women's empowerment current in the South Asian context, in terms of their assumptions about the causes of women's disempowered status and their resulting prescriptions. Finally, section V of this chapter explores the role of organisation in bringing about women's empowerment, a cornerstone of the economic empowerment approach which is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

I. Emancipatory Development and Women's Empowerment

The modernisation paradigm has been the dominant approach underlying mainstream development theory and practice since the 1940s.¹ The growth-oriented theories of economic development upon which this paradigm is based have proven themselves to be seriously flawed, however, as the decades-long pursuit of material prosperity for the Third World has resulted instead in "increased poverty, joblessness, environmental degradation, and, most recently waves of refugees trying to enter the privileged First World" (Mehmet, 1995: 135-136).² The impact on women has been particularly severe:

with a few exceptions, women's relative access to economic resources, incomes and employment has worsened, their burdens of work have increased, and their relative and even absolute health, nutritional, and educational status have declined (Sen and Grown, 1987: 28).

Growth-oriented development has attempted to respond to such criticism by "adding on" aspects of its critics' ideologies, for example, sensitivity to environment and gender issues (Mies and Shiva, 1993). What is needed, however, is a new approach to development, based on a different vision.

An alternative vision of development is put forward by Gita Sen and Caren Grown, authors of the platform document of DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), who state:

We want a world where inequality based on class, gender and race is absent from every country and from the relationships among countries.
We want a world where basic needs become basic rights and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated (1987: 80).

¹The modernisation paradigm has passed through several different phases - growth, growth-with-equity, structural adjustment (Mehmet, 1995), and back to growth (UNDP, 1996) - but it has retained throughout the basic assumption of a dichotomy, and a hierarchy, between tradition and modernity, where the concept of modern is a Western, Eurocentric one.

²The term "Third World" is used throughout this paper, despite its problematic nature, as the term in current use among many authors from the South who adopt a critical view of mainstream development (Mohanty, 1991; Parajuli, 1991; Sen and Grown, 1987).

Sen and Grown take a socialist feminist approach in their discussion of development issues, emphasising the multiple axes along which oppression occurs and the need for fundamental changes in political, economic, and social systems in order to achieve a world of equity and freedom. In contrast with modernisation theory, in this view development is an on-going process of change and exploration, with no finished product, no "developed" state to be achieved. Continuity and conservation are as important as change, but the first requirement of development is liberation from oppression, including the oppression occasioned by the development project itself. This is emancipatory development.

The emancipatory development vision articulated by Sen and Grown rests on the feminist concept of *empowerment*, defined by Srilatha Batliwala as follows:

Empowerment is manifested as a redistribution of power, whether between nations, classes, castes, races, genders, or individuals. The goals of women's empowerment are to challenge patriarchal ideology (male domination and women's subordination); to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality (the family, caste, class, religion, educational process and institutions, the media health practices and systems, laws and civil codes, political processes, development models, and government institutions); and to enable poor women to gain access to, and control of, both material and informational resources (1994: 130).

Batliwala, reflecting on women's empowerment from the basis of her study of grassroots development projects for women in South Asia, attributes the current popularity of this concept to an interaction between feminism and theories of popular education derived from the works of Freire. Noting that the growing popularity of the term in development circles has resulted in a lack of clarity about its meaning, Batliwala defines empowerment in more general terms as "the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power" (1994: 130), which she identifies as material assets, intellectual resources, and ideology. But such a

definition still leaves room for a range of competing interpretations of empowerment, particularly in terms of the strategies and policies required to achieve it, the *process* of empowerment.

The mainstream development agencies have recently adopted empowerment terminology, presenting empowerment in terms of the goals of increased autonomy and decision-making power for disadvantaged groups, "a more equitable sharing of power and a higher level of political awareness and strength" (Bhatnagar and Williams, 1992: 177), but constructing the empowerment process as something which can be added on to the liberal growth-plus-welfare-oriented policies of modernising development. This approach assumes that while certain inequities need to be corrected, fundamental changes to the western model of capitalist democracy are not required. Fundamental changes may, however, be prescribed for Third World societies that have not adopted this western model, where the "modern" has yet to replace the "traditional" in the dichotomous imagery of the liberal, humanist discourse. This liberal view of empowerment is also an individualist one, with economic and political gains made by individuals within the existing system as its indicators of progress (Young, 1993).

Kate Young disputes this liberal version of empowerment. She offers a definition on two levels. On the surface, "empowerment is about people taking control over their own lives: gaining the ability to do things, to set their own agendas, to change events, in a way previously lacking" (1993: 158). This superficial conception of empowerment is compatible with the definitions adopted by the mainstream development agencies. However, the original connotation of empowerment as a feminist demand goes deeper than this:

it involves the radical alteration of the processes and structures which reproduce women's subordinate position as a gender. In other words, strategies for empowerment cannot be taken out of the historical context

that created lack of power in the first place, nor can they be viewed in isolation from present processes (ibid.).

At this level of analysis, it is not enough to augment women's ability to participate in decision-making within existing structures. What is required is a process which enables women to address the fundamental causes of their disempowerment.

Young argues that, within the development mainstream, the term "empowerment" loses its original political content and shifts to a focus on individual self-reliance and entrepreneurialism:

With the emphasis on individualism, co-operation becomes submerged, and there is no mention of the need to alter existing social structures. In this version of empowerment there is also little emphasis on the necessity for those who wield financial and political power, whether at the family level or within society as a whole, to accept the obligation to change themselves (1993: 159).

She further argues that empowerment "implies some degree of conflict: empowerment is not just about women acquiring something, but about those holding power relinquishing it" (ibid.). It is this latter conception of empowerment, which incorporates the idea of fundamental social change achieved through collective action, that is adopted in the present paper.

Empowerment is a central concept in the elaboration of an alternative vision of development. It encompasses both the process of emancipation, the shifts in power relations which begin to enable the oppressed to take control of their own futures, and the ultimate goal of an equitable and just society.

II. WID, GAD, and the Empowerment Approach

The idea of empowerment is linked to evolving feminist theories around the issue of women's role in development or, from a different perspective, the importance of gender relations in the development process. The liberal feminist Women in Development (WID) approaches of the 1970s constructed women's empowerment as a

process of achieving equality, especially income equality, with men through integration into mainstream development. The more recent Gender and Development (GAD) and empowerment approaches, on the other hand, are critical of modernising development and see women's empowerment as a more complex process, addressing the multiple elements of women's oppression. Thus, while women's empowerment is the ultimate goal of all feminist development theories, the understanding of empowerment, both as a goal and as a process, differs according to the theoretical perspective adopted. Both WID and GAD approaches are outlined below as both continue to influence the empowerment project. This section concludes with an examination of the emerging empowerment approach to women in development.

Some key terms used by both WID and GAD theorists to discuss women's needs and interests are relevant to the following discussion. Kate Young introduces the distinction proposed by Maxine Molyneux between practical gender interests, "arising from the fact that women are allocated certain roles by the sexual division of labour", and strategic gender interests, which arise "from the fact that women as a social category have unequal access to resources and power" (Young, 1993: 153-154). Young modifies these terms, referring instead to practical needs and strategic interests. The former category refers to the daily struggle to provide for the survival and well-being of the individual and her family, the latter to a process of challenging and changing the structures of women's subordination. Young has also introduced the useful concepts of women's "condition", or material state, and "position", or social and economic status in relation to men (1988).

Caroline Moser, building on the work of Mayra Buvinic, identifies a series of different policy approaches to women in development. The first of these, the welfare approach, focuses on women's reproductive role and seeks to "bring women into development as better mothers" (Moser, 1993: 58). This approach, argues Moser, originated with international development assistance in the 1940s and 50s, and remains

"the most popular social development policy for the Third World in general and for women in particular" (ibid.). However, in the 1970s and 80s a new set of approaches emerged as women academics and professionals began to present evidence of the negative impact of development projects and policies for women in the Third World. The publication of Ester Boserup's book, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, in 1970 is often seen as the starting point for a movement which resulted in the Women in Development, or WID, approach. Moser argues that WID should not be viewed as a single perspective, however, but rather it breaks down into three distinct strands: equity, anti-poverty, and efficiency.³

The equity approach is the original WID approach, according to Moser. It is firmly based in liberal feminist principles promoting legal, political, and economic equality between women and men. This approach criticises the growth-oriented modernisation paradigm for its negative impact on women, but stresses the importance of women's access to economic resources, placing "considerable emphasis on economic independence as synonymous with equity" (Moser, 1993: 64). It was and is unpopular with both development agencies and Third World governments because of its strong emphasis on women's subordination and the importance of equality, and was swiftly labelled and dismissed by these institutions as Western feminism. This label was to some extent justified and Third World feminists and activists also criticised the WID theorists for lack of attention to the diverse experiences of women in the South. Finally, the equity approach was sharply criticised by socialist feminists and alternative development theorists for its adoption, by default, of the underlying assumptions of the modernisation paradigm of development. The equity approach demanded women's equality and

³Although these three approaches appeared in sequence, the later approaches have not replaced the earlier ones. Each retains some popularity with its own constituency (Moser, 1993).

integration into the development enterprise, but it did not question the validity of that enterprise itself.

Moser identifies a second strand of WID which emerged with the basic needs approach to development in the 1970s:

The anti-poverty approach to women can be identified as the second WID approach, in which economic inequality between women and men is linked not to subordination but to poverty. The emphasis shifts from reducing inequality between men and women to reducing income inequality. Women's issues are separated from equity issues and linked instead to the particular concern for the majority of Third World women, as the 'poorest of the poor' (Moser, 1993: 67).

It is this approach which has resulted in the proliferation of small-scale non-governmental income generating projects for women, such as the project from which SHARE, the subject of the case study presented in Chapter Four of this paper, evolved. Moser criticises the anti-poverty approach for its lack of attention to strategic gender needs, in terms of improvements in women's autonomy and decision-making power. Thus, the anti-poverty approach retains the weakness of the previous equity approach, the adoption of a modernising, market-oriented, integrationist approach to women in development, while losing the feminist emphasis on the ultimate goal of overall gender equality.

Finally, Moser identifies a third strand of WID, the efficiency approach, which has been adopted by many development institutions and has thus become the predominant interpretation of WID today. This instrumental approach views women as a resource for the development process. For example, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), considered a world leader in the field of Women in Development, in a 1995 statement entitled *CIDA's Policy on Women in Development and Gender Equity* affirms its commitment to gender equity but continues to place its emphasis on economic efficiency, setting out the principle that "[i]nvesting in women leads to lasting economic growth, improved family welfare, and a reduction in poverty"

(CIDA, 1995: 4). Recent international conferences on a range of issues (Population, Food, "Women") have also stressed this view of women's advancement as a vehicle to reach other goals. Women's development, we are repeatedly told, will produce desired ends such as reduced population growth, better health and education, higher production. This approach completely abandons the feminist elements of earlier WID theories.

GAD, the Gender and Development approach, was proposed as an alternative to WID partly because of this co-optation of WID, in its efficiency formulation, into the mainstream development project. GAD is less easy to codify than WID, because it places emphasis on diversity and local knowledges rather than on overarching categories. However, GAD is significantly different from WID in its theoretical bases. GAD shifts the focus from women only to include gender relations and the need to see gender as part of a complex social web which includes class, race and other axes of division and oppression (Young, 1993). The "basic problematic" for GAD, argues Young, is to be found in "the structures and processes that give rise to women's disadvantage" (1993: 134).

While GAD shares a concern for the feminist goal of equality between women and men with the original equity approach to WID, it is based on a different form of feminism. The equity approach sought equality within the mainstream development project, a liberal feminist strategy. GAD theorists, on the other hand, take a socialist feminist approach, seeing the need for fundamental changes in the social and political structures which perpetuate oppression.⁴ WID seeks to bring women into development, particularly through improving their economic opportunities. From a GAD perspective,

⁴Young argues that GAD has "fulfilled the role in the women and development field that radical feminism has to feminism" (1993: 143). However, the emphasis on multiple axes of oppression is a feature of socialist feminism.

"changing the symptoms of disadvantage - giving women training, credit, etc. - is not a solution but only a useful first step in women's empowerment" (Young, 1993: 134).

Both WID and GAD are complex theoretical constructs which continue to evolve. Each has some identifiable features, but each spans an overlapping range of theories and strategies intended to define a development project which will improve both women's *condition* and, certainly in GAD and in the original equity formulation of WID, women's *position* in the Third World. Both, however, originate in the North and thus their contribution to an understanding of the diverse and complex realities of Third World women is a limited one (Mohanty, 1991).

In contrast, the empowerment approach has its origins in the work of Third World feminists and activists, including the DAWN project (Moser, 1993; Batliwala, 1994). It emphasises the role of grassroots women's organisations and networks in a long term process of collective action to transform social and political structures from the bottom up. This process begins with a focus on practical gender needs as the means to reach strategic gender interests. Moser suggests that the central aim of the empowerment approach is "to empower women through greater self-reliance" (1993: 74). This statement, however, seems to coincide with the usage of empowerment current in mainstream development discourse, and to limit the potential of empowerment to individual rather than collective gains. Sen and Grown certainly go further when they advocate for "long-term systematic strategies aimed at challenging prevailing structures and building accountability of governments to people for their decisions (1987: 82). Jane Parpart (1995) describes the empowerment approach as a diverse movement, or network of movements, growing up from the grassroots and privileging the local knowledges and self-defined agendas of women and men in the Third World. This is a view which places reliance on the vision and *resistance* of oppressed people, rather than assuming that they must be brought out of a state of *false consciousness*, an assumption which characterises

much of the writing on WID and GAD.⁵ These concepts are explored in the following section.

The empowerment approach is based on two "oppositional approaches" to WID (Chowdhry, 1995). It draws on both the socialist feminist analysis which emphasises the intersections of class and gender (Sen and Grown, 1987), and, more recently, on postmodern/post-colonial feminism with its emphasis on difference and the importance of discourse (Mohanty, 1991). However, "scholars and activists in this perspective are determined to develop an approach that is rooted in the experiences of women (and men) in the South rather than those of Western women" (Chowdhry, 1995: 37). They reject WID for its essentialising imagery of Third World women as victims of development, for its co-optation into the liberal market philosophy of the mainstream development agencies, and for its participation in the project of modernisation (Mohanty, 1991; Chowdhry, 1995).

There is more common ground between GAD theories and the empowerment approach, with the former emphasising the need for feminist political actions to address systemic oppression and the latter emphasising local, grassroots actions to address women's practical needs, then building towards broader networks to address strategic gender interests in the future. The two approaches are thus in some ways complementary in their theoretical and prescriptive contributions to the project of emancipatory development. However, GAD remains largely a construct of Northern feminism and has been criticised for continuing to essentialise Third World women, "too often fall[ing] into modernist stereotypes" (Parpart, 1995).

The importance of the empowerment approach is as a practical alternative to previous approaches to women and development. It is grounded in on-going Third World

⁵Some empowerment theorists also adopt a false consciousness perspective (Batliwala, 1994).

women's activism and therefore takes on a multiplicity of forms. In order to evaluate SHARE, the particular case presented in this paper, it is necessary to examine the movement for women's empowerment in the South Asian context, both in terms of emerging empowerment strategies (section IV, below) and in terms of an understanding of women's responses to oppression, a critical factor in the empowerment process.

III. Resistance to Oppression: a gendered approach

In his landmark book, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, James Scott (1985) documents the on-going ways in which Malay peasants resist and subvert the agendas of the rural elites who dominate them. He presents an important thesis, that oppressed peoples do not necessarily accept the dominant ideologies of their societies, but may articulate an alternative, usually hidden, discourse and may, in addition, carry out covert actions in resistance to oppression. This insight is contrary to the widely held but inadequate "false consciousness" perspective, which argues that oppressed peoples do accept dominant ideologies which then operate to maintain unequal power relations. Batliwala, writing on approaches to women's empowerment in South Asia, adopts this perspective when she claims that:

Women have been led to participate in their own oppression through a complex web of religious sanctions, social and cultural taboos and superstitions, hierarchies among women in the family..., behavioural training, seclusion, veiling, curtailment of physical mobility, discrimination in food and other family resources, and control of their sexuality... Most poor women have never been allowed to think for themselves or to make their own choices... Because questioning is not allowed, the majority of women grow up believing that this is the just and 'natural' order (1994: 131).

Scott's thesis indicates the logical fallacy in this argument - because poor women are constrained by a "complex web" of oppressive structures, and many women may never

speak out about the oppression they experience, it does not follow that poor women regard their oppression in the light of "the just and 'natural' order".⁶

Bina Agarwal provides a nuanced discussion of the contrasting concepts of false consciousness and resistance in relation to gender, grounding her arguments in the South Asian context.⁷ She draws on Scott's thesis in her discussion of the hidden resistance of rural women in India, but concludes that:

in the spectrum between approaches that emphasise false consciousness ... and those that emphasis full consciousness (as Scott's does), the situation in relation to gender appears to be somewhere in between, closer to Scott's position but not entirely congruent with it (1994a: 92).

Women's responses to oppression span a range of attitudes and actions which can include both acceptance of some aspects of culturally specific gender ideologies as well as a critical perspective, stemming from the standpoint of the oppressed, which resists and rewrites aspects of those ideologies. Thus, Agarwal argues that:

on certain issues, many women articulate and appear to believe in ideologies that benefit men, for instance maintaining that childcare and housework are women's responsibilities, but on many other issues there is observable resistance, such as towards family authority structures, male control over cash, and domestic violence (ibid.: 91).

Elements of the dominant ideologies around gender can, in fact, become a source of strength, enabling women to resist and reshape the boundaries that constrain them. Johanna Lessinger demonstrates that a dual ideology of women's role in South India serves to create both constraints and opportunities for women's employment in the city of Madras, where many women are engaged in petty trade. The ideology of female modesty creates the constraint of spatial separation between the sexes, but the ideology of

⁶Scott has been criticised, however, for the lack of gendered analysis in his work (Agarwal, 1994a; Kapadia, 1995).

⁷Agarwal (1994a) sets out the points of divergence between these two perspectives using Amartya Sen's 1990 article, "Gender and Cooperative Conflicts", to represent the false consciousness approach.

"sacrificial motherhood" and an outward redefinition of the sphere of socially sanctioned space by women who work as petty traders both help to create opportunities for certain women (both class and age are significant variables in determining which women) to legitimately work in areas construed as "outside", although the form of outside employment remains constrained by the attempt to stay within the new boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour (Lessinger, 1989).

It is evident that reality is too complex to be understood simply in terms of "false" consciousness or fully conscious resistance, with the latter implying some objective standard of "correct" consciousness. The resistance theory must take into account the importance of dominant ideologies, elements of which may be brought to bear to improve the position of the oppressed. Rather than rejecting dominant ideologies outright, those who are oppressed may adopt modified versions of those ideologies, changing the emphasis, adding and discarding some elements, but holding on to many of the same basic assumptions. Resistance can be based in both alternate ideologies and dominant ideologies re-interpreted by the oppressed.

The "everyday resistance" of the oppressed is a hidden force, a kind of social potential energy. It provides an impetus for change to a more just society but lacks the mechanisms to make change come about. Agarwal contends that such covert resistance is an important part of the way South Asian women respond to multiple oppressions, including gender oppression, but that their resistance, while it remains covert, lacks the potential to engender significant change. She suggests that there is a need for a new awareness among poor women in South Asia, not so much a recognition of their oppression, as the false consciousness perspective would suggest, as the development of belief in the possibility of change, of making their resistance to oppressions based on gender, caste and class effective. Only a shift from *covert* to *overt* resistance and from

individual to *group* resistance has the potential to effect lasting social change in the region, argues Agarwal, concluding that:

the situation of disaffection reflected in women's everyday forms of individual resistance provides a necessary (if not sufficient) ground for mobilisation on a mass scale, that is, for progression from a situation of *individual-covert* to *group-overt* forms of contestation and resistance (1994a: 84, original emphasis).

This conclusion illuminates both the basis of gender resistance and the potential of women's organising as a mechanism for bringing about changes based on that resistance, moving from resistance to empowerment. What follows is a discussion of different approaches to women's empowerment through organising in South Asia.

IV. Approaches to Women's Empowerment

The women of SHARE, the subject of the case study presented in Chapter Four, proclaim a vision of "removing women's slavery", a goal which aims at transforming fundamental aspects of their society. A feminist vision for emancipatory development includes an similar emphasis on women's empowerment through changes in the social relations which form the basis for gender subordination. The question of how to operationalise this vision is contested, however. Srilatha Batliwala documents three experimental approaches to women's empowerment which have been adopted by South Asian NGOs. These three approaches, integrated development, economic empowerment, and consciousness raising:

are not mutually exclusive categories, but they help to distinguish among the differing interpretations of the causes of women's powerlessness and, hence, among the different interventions thought to lead to empowerment (Batliwala, 1994: 135).

I have added a fourth category, political action. These four approaches are summarised in the table below. All four are situated within the empowerment approach, adopting strategies of grassroots organising and activism to meet women's practical needs and to

bring about long term systemic change. They differ in their emphasis, however, with the first two models focusing on practical needs while the latter two emphasise strategic interests.

Table 2.1 Four Approaches to Women's Empowerment in South Asia

Conceptual Models for Empowerment	Integrated Development	Economic Empowerment	Consciousness Raising	Political Action
Identification of the Problem	Lack of access to a range of resources and services	Lack of economic resources, barriers to economic activities	False consciousness, limited consciousness	Systemic oppression
Types of Solutions Proposed	Provision of services plus income generation	Income generation, credit services, workers' associations	Consciousness raising	Group-overt resistance, legal action, political action

(partly based on Batliwala, 1994)

First, *integrated development* is described by Batliwala as an approach which sees women's lack of power as a result of limited access to a range of resources and services. The focus is on women's survival and livelihood needs, and, often, on the needs of the family and/or community. Some NGOs which adopt this approach select a specific activity as an entry point to bring women together, then expand their programmes to address a range of issues, while others encourage the formation of women's collectives which take on many activities from the outset.

Second, the *economic empowerment* approach "attributes women's subordination to lack of economic power...[and] focuses on improving women's control over material resources and strengthening women's economic security" (Batliwala, 1994: 136, Box 2). This privileging of economic advancement as the key to women's empowerment is reminiscent of the WID approaches discussed above. Economic empowerment differs from WID, however, in that it works from the grassroots and it sees women's economic

advancement not as an end in itself but as the key to a larger process of empowerment and emancipation.

Economic empowerment organisations adopt a range of methods and strategies to accomplish their objectives. In a practical guide to the promotion of women's enterprises, a central strategy of economic empowerment, Martha Chen summarises the methods adopted by organisations working in this sector as follows:

delivering services to women workers; **mobilizing demand** for goods and services produced by women workers; **lobbying for appropriate policies** in support of women workers; **addressing structural constraints** faced by women workers; and/or **organizing women** workers into trade associations, cooperatives, or solidarity groups (1996: 12, original emphasis).

Chen notes that the first of these methods, "delivering services", especially credit, is the most common type of intervention, and that the last three on her list, "lobbying for appropriate policies", "addressing structural constraints", and "organizing women", are much less common (1996: 12-13). This paper argues that one element, in particular, is generally missing from the economic empowerment approach - that of addressing the structural constraints faced by women workers. While each of these types of interventions rests on a different assumption about the obstacles to women's economic activities, each has the same objective - women's economic advancement, seen by adherents of this approach as the best way of bringing about women's overall empowerment. The economic empowerment approach is the subject of the following chapter, and the central question for this paper as a whole is the potential and limitations of this approach to women's empowerment.

The third approach identified by Batliwala, the *consciousness raising* approach, emphasises the need for women to develop an "awareness of the complex factors causing women's subordination" (Batliwala, 1994) and so focuses on education and

"conscientisation", from Freire's *conscientização*, as it is interpreted by South Asian activists. Batliwala, an adherent of the false consciousness theory discussed above, finds this approach most promising, but she notes the weakness inherent in its lack of attention to immediate, or practical, needs. From a resistance perspective, consciousness raising can still be seen as a valuable process as it deepens women's analysis of their situation, but only insofar as it is instrumental in bringing about a transition from individual-covert resistance to group-overt resistance, as described in the preceding section.

Group formation is a central component of all of three approaches documented by Batliwala, and all three emphasise the importance of the group as a means to achieve long term change. A strong group is presumed to have the potential to act collectively to address issues beyond the scope of the original project or programme. This is the mechanism which creates a bridge between activities focused on women's practical needs and actions to promote women's strategic interests. The three approaches to empowerment described above all assume that their specific form of organisation will provide the basis for this transition to collective action.

A fourth approach which can be added to the three proposed by Batliwala is the *political action* approach to women's empowerment. This approach emphasises the need for collective political actions by women's organisations to directly challenge the structures of women's oppression, rather than assuming that such action will emerge organically from the group formation process. This is the approach of feminist movements which organise to confront issues such as gender violence and, in the South Asian context, gender deprivation (Kumar, 1993). It is also the approach of popular women's movements, such as the anti-liquor agitation carried out by women in Andhra Pradesh, South India (Batliwala, 1994: 133), and the articulation of gender demands by peasant women during the Bodhgaya land struggle (Agarwal, 1994a). Once again, organisation is a key feature of this approach to women's empowerment, but, if

successful, such movements can grow beyond the bounds of formally constituted organisations at the local level into broadly based popular movements. The political action approach makes the transition from individual-covert to group-overt resistance a starting point, rather than attempting to bring about this transition indirectly as the other three approaches do.

It is useful to separate out these different approaches to empowerment, in order to understand the strategies adopted by different organisations working towards empowerment goals. However, there is also a need for some synthesis of the four elements to develop a more comprehensive empowerment model. The integrated development and economic empowerment approaches focus, at the operational level, on women's practical needs, while the consciousness raising approach shifts the focus to strategic interests. Political action is often organised around women's practical needs, but it has the potential, when integrated with an analysis developed through a consciousness raising strategy, or when it operationalises women's hidden resistance to gender subordination, to address strategic interests more directly than any of the other three approaches. All of these elements are important components of an emancipatory development strategy.

V. Organisation and Empowerment

Society is forced to change only when large numbers of women are mobilized to press for change. The empowerment process must organize women into collectives, breaking out from individual isolation and creating a united forum through which women can challenge their subordination (Batliwala, 1994: 132).

Sen and Grown, in describing the strategies required to move toward their vision of an equitable society, emphasise the central role of women's organisations in bringing about emancipatory development (1987: 89). Economic empowerment, the approach to emancipatory development which is to be evaluated in this paper, is based on an

organising strategy. This section explores the role of organisation as a process and of the resulting organisations in bringing about empowerment.⁸

There are several aspects to the role of organisation in women's empowerment.

The first is consciousness raising. Kate Young writes:

GAD proponents would argue that lessening women's burden of responsibilities and providing greater access to resources is important, but equally important is the need to create spaces in which women can begin to socialise their experience, to break away from the highly circumscribed sphere of family, kin or village, to question common justification for their situation, to understand the role of ideology in constructing the individual's understanding of her or his experience (1993: 142).

She further argues that GAD "places emphasis on *organisation* as a space in which women can share their views and learn to dissect the competing untruths and mystifications of the human condition" (Young, 1993: 144, emphasis added). While Young seems to adopt the false consciousness theory of how women respond to oppression, there is room within the resistance theory also for consciousness raising, a process of deepening women's awareness and analysis of their problems and of developing the awareness of the potential for collective action to bring about change, a *group* consciousness (Agarwal, 1994a).

A second aspect of the role of organising in women's empowerment is the development of women's solidarity and confidence, a stepping stone to taking action to make change. Women who participate in empowerment organisations emphasise their growing self-respect, as individuals, but they also speak about the confidence they feel in their group. Women describe their ability to give and receive support and companionship, but they also speak of the role of the women's organisation as a strong

⁸Like "empowerment", organisation is a term and a strategy adopted by mainstream development agencies. The point of distinction lies, similarly, in the ultimate goals of the organising process. Organising for real empowerment is intended to result in collective action to make change, not merely in service delivery or employment, although these may be important secondary goals.

force in the community which enables them, through its supportive presence, to begin to move beyond the boundaries of gender norms (Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala, 1996; Chapter Four of this paper).

Third, and most important for reaching the ultimate goal of overall empowerment, organisation can enable women's groups to take collective action to change their situation. This ranges from actions to enforce aspects of the dominant ideology which benefit women, as in the actions taken by members of BRAC village organisations in Bangladesh to prevent husbands from deserting and abusing their wives (Selim, 1996), through actions aimed at bringing about legal and political change, as in the struggle of unionised women construction workers in Tamil Nadu, South India, for the implementation of the Tamil Nadu Manual Workers Act to extend statutory benefits to construction workers (Ramakrishnan, 1996), to actions which call for more radical change, as in the demand by women participating in the Bodhgaya peasant movement for land reform in north-east India to have land titles registered in their own names (Agarwal, 1994a).

Organising has a further role to play in the economic empowerment approach, an institution building role. Women develop managerial and leadership skills working together in organisations with an economic focus. Economic empowerment interventions, especially income generation and credit provision, are often initiated by large, outsider NGOs which hope to see the local women's organisations become autonomous in the long run, in order to ensure the sustainability of the economic benefits which are provided by the group. The NGOs can then move on to organise in other locations, building up a network of strong local-level organisations which can sustain improvements in women's incomes, and which might also come together in regional level networks in the future (Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala, 1996). These four roles, consciousness raising, women's solidarity, collective action, and institution building are the reasons for

the importance of organisation in a women's empowerment strategy. But organisation as a process takes place within real organisations. The following exploration of development organisations and women's organisations which work within the emancipatory development struggle makes the link between the vision and the practical reality of women's economic organising.

As David Korten notes in his work on the role of voluntary action in development, the category NGO "includes a bewildering variety of organisations that have little in common with one another" (1990: 95). Korten sets out a system of classification to make some sense of this diversity of organisational types. He identifies four types of organisations, of which two are relevant to the discussion here: voluntary organisations (VOs) "that pursue a social mission driven by a commitment to shared values"; and people's organisations (POs) "that represent their members' interests, have member accountable leadership, and are substantially self-reliant" (1990: 2).⁹ Conceptually distinct, in reality the divisions between these two organisational types are often blurred, as VOs may change over time into organisations more closely resembling POs. The distinction is valuable, however, in that it makes use of criteria which emphasise internal organisational characteristics to establish the separate categories. POs, according to this classification, are true grassroots organisations organised to carry out the priorities of their members and so directly involved in the empowerment process. VOs may be part of the empowerment project, especially when they foster the formation of local POs, but they are at least one step removed from the actual process of empowerment.

Korten's classification of voluntary sector organisations operates at the most general level. Another system of classification specific to women's organisations is suggested by Sen and Grown, a system developed "from the desire to build and

⁹The remaining types in Korten's four-way classification are "Public Service Contractors" and "Governmental Nongovernmental Organisations" (Korten, 1990: 2).

strengthen our own movements and networks, that is, from the perspective of empowerment" (1987: 90). They classify development-oriented women's organisations into six types. Three of these categories are relevant for this paper, as they include organisations involved in the economic empowerment project: worker-based organisations, issue-based grassroots organisations, and a category of donor-created organisations which have their origins in the spate of funding to women's projects in the past decades, and which are typified by women's co-operatives and long-term income generation projects (ibid.: 89-93).

The worker-based organisations include both formal trade unions and associations of informal sector workers. Sen and Grown argue that "the experience and the potential of such organizations are encouraging, although their resource position may be weak, reflecting the poverty of their membership" (ibid.: 91). The issue-based grassroots organisations often focus on economic issues, and share the constraint of a weak resource base. Typically initiated by middle class, urban women, these organisations are seen by Sen and Grown as having "considerable potential" if they are able to strengthen their constituency among poor women. Finally, the donor-created organisations are the weakest type of organisations from an empowerment perspective, shored up by outside funding, but this category includes some organisations which have evolved into participatory and locally-managed grassroots organisations in their own right.

Korten also sets out a classification system for NGO strategies and their evolving roles in a process of transformational development. He identifies four generations of NGO strategies, from *relief and welfare* delivered by large international or national level NGOs, through *community development*, with NGOs working at the village level, to *sustainable systems development*, and *people's movements*, both of these latter strategies involving networks of organisations rather than individual NGOs, working at regional, national and international levels (1990: 117). This framework is useful in its emphasis on

expanding definitions of the development problem, resulting in changing strategies for organisations and development networks. It is Korten's discussion of the *community development* generation of development strategies and the potential to move beyond this phase to the succeeding generations of his model that is most relevant for the present paper.

Community development, according to Korten, focuses on small-scale, self-reliant local development. This can take the form of "development delivery", designed and managed from outside the community, or participatory grassroots development with empowerment goals. In Korten's view, however, community development approaches reflect an inadequate understanding of the structural obstacles to change. He states:

Even NGOs engaged in more empowerment-oriented local organizing that acknowledges the political dimension of poverty, commonly assume - at least by implication - that village organisations of the poor, by their own initiative, can mobilize sufficient political resources to change relevant power structures (1990: 120).

He refutes this assumption, taking the position that, despite the will to make change, local level organisations working in isolation are unlikely to be able to make a significant impact on the power structures that oppress the poor. However, Korten argues that empowerment-oriented NGOs (VOs and POs), do have the potential to "move toward politically oriented empowerment interventions and to seek to build community capacity to stand up to local injustice" (ibid.: 123). This will lead them into the third and fourth generation forms of organising.

The flaw in Korten's theory is a lack of attention to the need for on-going organising at the grassroots level. He sees a need to shift to political action around broader issues, but glosses over the need to retain a local level strategy to address people's

survival needs and locally situated forms of oppression.¹⁰ In fact, he calls this type of organising the "critical flaw" of the second generation (community development) strategy: "it requires countless replications in millions of communities, all within a basically hostile political and institutional context" (1990: 123). In contrast, the economic empowerment strategy presented by Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala (1996), and discussed in detail in the following chapter, emphasises the need to ground development in the struggle to respond to specific, local needs, and to allow political action to grow from this point of entry.

The analysis of SHARE presented in Chapter Five makes use of the systems of classification proposed by Korten (1990) and by Sen and Grown (1987) in order to evaluate the achievements and potential of that organisation within the emancipatory development process. Chapter Five also emphasises the importance of the process of organising in SHARE's development as an empowerment organisation.

VI. Summing Up

The empowerment approach to development outlined in section II of this chapter is rooted in Third World feminism and activism and emphasises the need for local, grassroots actions to address the multiple forms of oppression which confront poor women. Women's economic empowerment, introduced in section IV, is one manifestation of this approach. Chapter Three takes a critical look at this economic empowerment strategy as it is now being articulated and practiced by NGOs and women's organisations in South Asia. Chapter Four presents the case of SHARE, a women's producer organisation in South India, which provides an empirical basis for an

¹⁰Korten notes that he does not consider the succeeding generations to be mutually exclusive and that each plays an important role in the development project; however, he does imply a hierarchy and the need to move on to the third and fourth generation strategies in order to effect a process of transformation to a more equitable society.

exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of the economic empowerment approach. Chapter Five returns to the theoretical framework elaborated in this chapter in order to evaluate SHARE.

SHARE is evaluated according to three main criteria. First, from the discussion in section II, the organisation is examined from the perspective of the empowerment approach, both in terms of the articulation of empowerment goals and the translation of such goals into collective action towards women's overall empowerment. This is linked to the potential of grassroots organising to bring about a transition from individual-covert to group-overt forms of resistance, as discussed in section III. Second, drawing on section IV of this chapter, SHARE's role as an economic empowerment organisation is evaluated. This paper argues that there is a need for a more holistic approach to women's empowerment, which incorporates consciousness raising and political action, rather than a reliance on a single approach such as economic empowerment. Finally, the theories on the role of organisations in the empowerment process, presented in section V, above, are used to classify SHARE and to determine the potential of its organisational approach.

Chapter 3

Women's Economic Empowerment in South Asia

The statistics on the disadvantaged status of women in the South Asian region are clear. According to UNDP's *Human Development Report*, for example, "[a]bout 80% of pregnant women suffer from anaemia - the highest rate in the world" (UNDP, 1996: 41). In India, the rate is 88%, and the country ranks low on both the gender-related development index (GDI) and the gender empowerment measure (GEM) developed by the UNDP (UNDP, 1996).¹ In India, as in South Asia as a whole, vast numbers of women live in conditions of extreme poverty. In relative terms, women's access to resources is severely limited by their gender. It is this combination of circumstances, female poverty and gender subordination, which has resulted in a growing movement for women's economic empowerment, an empowerment process which makes women's access to economic resources, especially cash income and credit, the starting point. Section I of this chapter offers a definition and analysis of the economic empowerment approach. Section II presents the case for economic empowerment, as articulated by advocates of this approach, while section III responds with some critical voices. Section IV sums up the issues discussed in this chapter. Chapters Four and Five will then re-examine these issues through the analysis of the empirical example of SHARE.

¹The GDI "attempts to capture achievement through the same set of basic capabilities included in the HDI" (UNDP, 1996: 32), while the GEM "concentrates on participation, measuring gender inequality in key areas of economic and political participation and decision making" (ibid.: 34).

1. Economic Empowerment for Women in South Asia²

Batliwala's threefold classification of experimental approaches to women's empowerment in South Asia describes the economic development (or economic empowerment) approach as one which "places women's economic vulnerability at the center of their powerlessness, and posits that economic empowerment has a positive impact on other aspects of women's existence" (Batliwala, 1994: 135). Economic empowerment organisations vary in terms of their organisational principles and their choice of methods to improve the economic position of poor women, methods which include schemes to provide women with access to credit, income generation programmes, the formation of producer co-operatives, unionisation strategies and the formation of groups to improve conditions for women workers, especially in the informal sector. What they share is the conviction that access to secure incomes is a necessary first step in a process of empowerment for poor women.

The economic empowerment approach is linked to the WID analysis of women's role in development by a shared emphasis on women's economic status. Moser, quoted in the preceding chapter (section II), notes that the original equity approach to WID sees women's economic independence as the key to gender equity and prescribes employment creation and improvements in women's existing occupations as the most effective ways to achieve this goal. Similarly, the economic empowerment approach focuses on economic independence as the key to women's empowerment. The programmes implemented by economic empowerment organisations, however, have more in common with the anti-poverty strand of WID, which prescribes income generation programmes targeted to low-

²The definition of economic empowerment developed in this section draws on two main sources: Batliwala's (1994) discussion of emerging approaches to women's empowerment in South Asia and Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala's (1996) collection of case studies of economic empowerment organisations in the same region. Both focus on current grassroots and NGO organising work taking place in the South Asian region, building a definition based on practice. The resulting focus on women's income, rather than control over productive resources such as land and property, is reflected in this paper.

income women in order to meet the immediate needs of this disadvantaged group (Moser, 1993).

What distinguishes economic empowerment from the WID approaches is its situation within the broader empowerment project. Thus, the ultimate goals of economic empowerment are not simply to bring women into the mainstream, nor to alleviate women's poverty, but rather to transform society in a multitude of ways to reflect the vision of emancipatory development described in the first section of the preceding chapter. The structures of oppression which must be addressed are not limited to gender subordination, but include political power structures, both national and international, and subordination based on factors such as class and caste. Women's empowerment is one part of this process, with local women's organisations taking on issues related to women's practical needs, then branching out and building networks to address broader strategic interests.

This distinction also serves to divide income generation projects implemented by development agencies which espouse the third strand of WID, the efficiency approach, taking an instrumental view of women's development as a means to achieve other ends, from those initiatives implemented by economic empowerment organisations. For example, a programme which aims to augment women's incomes in order to achieve a positive impact on child health, and is therefore satisfied with an income level sufficient to enable women to provide nutritious food and medical care for their families, differs from an economic empowerment intervention which may look very similar on the surface, but which aims to provide women with the security and strength to organise and address a variety of issues which concern them.

Thus, the goal of economic empowerment is twofold. First, it sets out to meet poor women's immediate needs by expanding or improving the income earning opportunities open to them. Second, building on this base of increased economic

security, and on the group formation process that is central to this approach, it intends to enable women to address the broader issues of gender oppression and achieve empowerment in all aspects of their lives. Adopting the resistance theory to understand how poor women respond to oppression, together with Agarwal's categorisation of resistance as covert or overt, individual or collective (Agarwal, 1994a, see Chapter Two, section III, above), economic organising for empowerment can be seen as a means to shift resistance from the ineffective individual-covert mode to a potentially effective group-overt mode. Advocates of this approach would argue that this transition develops organically as women gain income security and group solidarity. Critics of economic empowerment approaches, on the other hand, question whether such a transition does, in fact, occur. Sections II and III of this chapter take up this debate.

The first stage in the economic empowerment approach, organising to improve poor women's economic opportunities, must itself confront one aspect of women's oppression, the barriers and limitations which surround women's economic activities. Economic opportunities for women in South Asia are limited by both ideological and structural factors. Haleh Afshar and Bina Agarwal describe four categories of ideological barriers to women's economic activities in Asia:

- (1) The ideology of seclusion.
- (2) The ideology of exclusion.
- (3) The social construction of femininity.
- (4) The demarcation of roles by gender. (Afshar and Agarwal, 1989: 2)

They argue that "each of these, individually and in combination, affect in complex ways women's attempts to earn a livelihood" (ibid.). This is certainly the case for women living in rural South India, the setting for the case study presented in the following chapter of this paper.

Seclusion, or gender segregation, the spatial and symbolic separation of the sexes, is a powerful ideology throughout the Indian subcontinent, although it manifests itself in

different ways in different regions of the country. In some parts of North India, separation of the sexes is strictly maintained by an elaborate system of seclusion and veiling of women. Those who must work outside the boundaries which define the home sacrifice their modesty and reputation to necessity. In contrast, in the South, women can move about more freely, unveiled, but they must still avoid "physical proximity, eye contact or direct social interaction with unrelated men" (Lessinger, 1989: 107). Kalpana Ram, in her study of women's economic activities in a South Indian fishing community, points out that "space is simultaneously an economic resource in itself and a cultural construct" (1989: 144). South Indian women's access to the resource of economic space is limited by the particular manifestations of the ideology of seclusion, which vary according to caste and community.

Direct exclusion from certain forms of economic activity, the second category of ideology mentioned by Afshar and Agarwal, is also a reality for women in South India. Artisan castes have elaborate rules around the gender division of craft activities; women are explicitly barred from the use of some tools and processes (Brouwer, 1987).³ And, as elsewhere in India, women in the South must not use the plough, although they do other agricultural work, especially the labour intensive tasks of transplanting and harvesting the rice which is the staple food of the region (Mencher, 1988). These examples of direct exclusion, however, are less common than the process of exclusion through the action of the third ideological category introduced by Afshar and Agarwal, the social construction of femininity. This set of ideologies dictate what activities are appropriate for, and therefore open to, women on the basis of their gender. On construction sites, for example, women carry out the most menial tasks and receive the lowest pay, while men are the skilled workers, like masons, who are paid a higher wage (Ramakrishnan, 1996).

³Caste as well as gender is a factor mediating exclusion from specific economic activities in India.

This division is not simply a result of women's lack of access to training. CODES, a small South Indian NGO which has experimented with training women in non-traditional occupations, including masonry, has found that the women masons are very rarely able to get work because people are reluctant to employ women to carry out a "man's" job.⁴

The last category presented by Afshar and Agarwal, the demarcation of roles by gender, includes the ideologies which assign domestic responsibilities to women. In South India such responsibilities are different for women of different castes and communities. For lower caste Hindu women in rural Tamil Nadu, domestic responsibilities include unpaid field work, if the family owns a piece of land. In addition, during the harvest season, women of the lower castes must go to the fields of the large landowners to help harvest their rice in return for a share of the paddy to augment the family stores.⁵ Beyond these responsibilities, which can be considered part of women's domestic work, lower caste Tamil women bear the ultimate responsibility for the survival of their families and so must work for an income to support the family if male family members cannot, or do not, bring home enough money for the family needs (Mencher, 1988; Kapadia, 1995).

The above discussion outlines some common elements of the ideologies which construct gender in South Asia as they affect women's access to economic resources. Other ideological systems also come into play, notably caste hierarchies, affecting women differentially. These systems interact with the economic structures which also pose significant obstacles to poor women's economic activities in the region. Sen and Grown, in articulating their feminist vision of development, refer to the "structural roots" of poverty: "unequal access to resources, control over production, trade, finance, and money" (1987: 80). In an economic climate which places paramount importance on debt

⁴This example is drawn from my visit to CODES in 1996.

⁵Paddy is the whole rice plant.

reduction and GNP growth rates and little importance on social services and the alleviation of poverty, the new economic orthodoxy in India since 1991⁶, these structural roots are growing deeper (Varma, 1996). The new policy of liberalisation and structural adjustment has an impact on Indian women, especially poor women, through the growing emphasis at the policy level on women's role as providers of social services. As Moser notes in her description of the now popular efficiency formulation of WID: "[w]omen are seen primarily in terms of their capacity to compensate for declining social services by extending their working day" (Moser, 1993: 70). Economic structures also limit the employment options open to both poor women and men and set a low value on the work that is open to the poor - primarily agricultural labour in rural India.

At the conceptual level, attempts to improve women's access to economic resources can take one of two approaches to the factors which constrain women's economic opportunities. The first is to work within the existing constraints, finding ways to improve women's access to income without directly challenging gender norms or the injustices inherent in the prevailing economic system. This approach is adopted by economic empowerment activists on the assumption that as women gain access to income they will themselves be able to challenge the oppressive structures which surround them, either individually or collectively, bringing about the second stage of the economic empowerment project. The second, more radical, approach is to address these obstacles directly, organising to challenge the ideologies and structures which limit women's access to a full range of economic resources. In reality, it is always necessary to do both, to adapt to existing conditions and to work to change them, if any progress is to occur, but a

⁶India has been on a path of economic liberalisation since the 1970s, but it is with the New Economic Reforms of the Eighth Five Year Plan, brought in by the government of Narasimha Rao in 1991, that it has fully adopted the prescription of the international financial institutions (Datt, 1995).

tendency towards the former approach is a feature of the economic empowerment strategy as it is emerging in South Asia.

One reason for this non-confrontational approach to women's empowerment is the emphasis on meeting women's practical needs in the short term. Confronting the barriers to women's economic activity directly requires a longer term process than working within those constraints. The economic empowerment approach sees this longer struggle as more appropriately entered after women have achieved a measure of economic security. A second reason, according to Batliwala, is the absence of a fully democratic environment, with the result that:

many approaches to empowerment in South Asia tend to avoid overtly political activities; activists provide women with opportunities and services, and encourage a certain level of awareness, but avoid more serious challenges to the dominant ideology or power structures (Batliwala, 1994: 137).⁷

One type of economic activity open to women in South Asia without directly challenging gender norms is home-based work. Home-based work allows women to earn income while maintaining the ideals of purity and seclusion and carrying out domestic responsibilities. Usha Jumaní (1987) argues that many Indian women prefer to work in the home for reasons which include the avoidance of social sanctions against outside work and the ability to combine household duties with work responsibilities, indicating the strong influence of the social construction of gender on women's worksite preferences. These preferences, shaped by culture and society, are rational ones, but they do not fit the logic of economic rationality. Women home-based workers in India are

⁷In India, while many of the structures of democracy are in place, there are also serious and dangerous deficiencies. One such deficiency with a direct impact on women, especially poor, lower caste, or religious and ethnic minority women, is the prevalence of police rape. Documented by Indian feminists, police rape takes two forms: attacks on individual women and "incidents of mass rape which are acts against a community or class which is engaged in a struggle with those who hold power over it" (Kumar, 1993: 128).

vulnerable to exploitation because of their limited contact with the outside world (Mies, 1982), and the remuneration for home-based production activities is usually "pitifully inadequate" (Lessinger, 1989: 105).

Lessinger, adopting the approach of addressing the constraints to women's economic activities directly, concludes that "there must be an ideological assault on the whole structure of gender segregation which so hampers women economically" (1989: 122). Other analysts, like Mira Savara (1993), recommend measures to improve conditions for home-based workers, adopting the contrasting approach of working within existing constraints. A similar approach has been adopted by many economic empowerment organisations which have implemented income generation projects for women in India, projects which are frequently structured in accordance with women's preferences for home-based work or women-only worksites. Critics of economic empowerment strategies question whether such strategies serve to support and reinforce the system of oppression, a point which will be taken up in section III below. Advocates of economic empowerment strategies, on the other hand, argue that it is necessary to begin with the practical and achievable goal of improving women's access to income, while maintaining the goal of full empowerment in the future.

The definition of economic empowerment which has been developed in this section can now be summarised. Economic empowerment is an approach which aims to meet women's immediate needs through economic organising, usually within the boundaries set by gender ideologies and structural factors (rather than by confronting these limiting factors directly through political organising). The ultimate goal of this approach is women's overall empowerment, shifting the ideologies and structures which oppress women in the long run. The advocates of economic empowerment posit that economic organising is the best way to achieve this long term goal. The mechanisms to achieve this transition from economic empowerment to full empowerment will be

discussed in the following section which presents the case for the economic empowerment approach.

II. The Case for Economic Empowerment

...if women are organized - or better still if women organize themselves - to contest discrimination in day-to-day economic transactions or to demand access to local economic resources, or simply to manage their economic activities better, they will lead the process of empowerment in directions which are appropriate to their own needs, interests and constraints; ... what may seem like simple shifts in women's status within their family, community or village often represents significant shifts in women's consciousness, perceptions, security and power (Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala, 1996: 217-218).

Moser, describing the empowerment approach, characterises it as an approach which "seeks to reach strategic gender needs indirectly through practical gender needs" (1993: 77). Batliwala similarly draws on her study of women's empowerment programming in South Asia to conclude that "experience clearly shows that empowerment strategies must intervene at the level of women's 'condition' while also transforming their 'position' " (1994: 135). The emphasis on meeting women's immediate needs is common to most empowerment theories, not a special feature of the economic empowerment approach. What is particular to this approach is the contention that economic organising is "the *most* effective entry point" (Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala: 188, emphasis added) for women's empowerment, and that overall empowerment will grow from the joint basis of economic gains and group solidarity, an argument articulated in the quotation at the head of this section.

The case for the economic empowerment approach is persuasively presented by Marilyn Carr, Martha Chen, and Renana Jhabvala, co-editors of a collection of case studies entitled *Speaking Out: Women's economic empowerment in South Asia* (1996). They challenge what they perceive as a false conceptual dichotomy between interventions

and grassroots actions which aim to improve women's economic position and the political struggle to improve women's overall position in society. Thus, they suggest that the distinctions between the different approaches to women's empowerment proposed by Batliwala (see Chapter 2, section IV) are misleading, as economic empowerment organisations do not attribute women's disempowerment to economic factors alone, nor do they limit their activities to economic interventions. However, they do argue, as noted above, that economic organising is the key to women's empowerment, and each of the case studies they present can be classed as economic empowerment according to the definition developed in the preceding section of this chapter. That is, they are all interventions which seek to meet women's immediate needs through economic organising, and which also aim to address gender oppression in the long run, although they generally confront the structures of women's subordination only indirectly.

The organisational strategies adopted by the groups included in *Speaking Out* are divided by the editors into four categories: women's village and community organisations initiated by NGOs to provide women with skills training and access to credit; women's co-operatives, both producer co-operatives and credit co-operatives; women's banks; and informal sector unions. These strategies can alternatively be divided into three types: those that provide women with employment directly through group income generating activities (producer groups), those that provide women with access to credit so they can start individual activities to earn income (credit provider groups), and those that support women in their existing occupations (women's unions). The most appropriate strategy, the editors of the collection argue, is determined by local conditions. Women's unions are most needed and most effective in urban settings where large numbers of women are engaged in poorly paid and insecure informal sector occupations. Producer groups tend to be located in rural areas where women's employment options are

more limited. Credit groups are found in both rural and urban settings, providing poor women with access to the important resource of affordable credit.

Several reasons are put forward for adopting an economic organising approach to empowerment. First, it has the potential to address women's survival needs directly and immediately. Second, improving women's incomes, according to the advocates of this approach, results in direct empowerment at the household and village level as women gain increased bargaining power and self-respect. Third, participatory organising at the grassroots level, an element of the economic empowerment strategy, enables women to articulate their own priorities, which almost invariably include access to income. Thus, economic empowerment responds to women's expressed needs rather than to the priorities of outsiders. Fourth, economic empowerment *works*, as evidenced by the well-publicised success of organisations like BRAC and the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, SEWA and WWF in India. The key question in evaluating this approach to empowerment, however, is whether it is able to meet its ultimate goal, that of initiating a process of overall empowerment for poor women. What are the mechanisms by which economic empowerment leads to full empowerment? The two critical elements, argue the economic empowerment advocates, are cash income itself and group solidarity.

Batliwala's description of the economic empowerment approach (1994), in which she separates it conceptually from other strands of the empowerment project, implies that it is based on the assumption that access to cash income alone is sufficient to bring about women's empowerment. Advocates of this approach generally do not articulate such a unidimensional view, however. A more rounded argument which is put forward emphasises the positive impact of income on women's position in the household, a primary site of gender oppression. A case study from Northern Pakistan claims that "[w]omen's income-earning activities have led to a rise in women's status within the traditional family unit and an increased capacity to negotiate for changes at the household

level" (Malik and Kalleder, 1996: 37). Writing about the impact of producer co-operatives sponsored by SEWA in rural Gujarat, in western India, Sharit Bhowmik and Renana Jhabvala argue that:

Through producer group activities, women have realized increased income, economic stability and greater bargaining power and decreased dependence on employers, middlemen and moneylenders. In sum, they have become economically empowered. As women have become economically empowered there have been changes in gender roles at the household and community levels. In some cases, men have begun taking responsibility for household tasks (1996: 125).

And a case study of Proshika in Bangladesh claims that women's increased income results, at least in some cases, in a decrease in conflict and violence in the household (Rashid and Shahabuddin, 1996). This emergent shift in gender roles, resulting from women's increased financial contribution to the household, is reported by the authors of all the cases collected in *Speaking Out*. It is presented as an important mechanism by which economic empowerment leads to overall empowerment. The second mechanism instrumental in bringing about a transition to full empowerment is the group formation process.

Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala, drawing conclusions from the collection of case studies, emphasise the central role of women's organising in the economic empowerment strategy, stating that: "it is very clear that, in the South Asian context, women's economic empowerment and overall empowerment cannot come about without organizing" (1996: 193). It is here that they locate the potential for interventions which improve women's economic opportunities to initiate a broader empowerment process, arguing that women's solidarity developed through the organising process results in a sense of strength and the ability to make change. For example, the case studies of BRAC and Proshika, both large and well-established economic empowerment NGOs in Bangladesh, report that village women's groups act together to prevent husbands from abusing or deserting their wives

and to confront injustice from the village elites (Rashid and Shahabuddin, 1996; Selim, 1996). Working together, women have also brought about policy level changes, examples of which include:

the struggle of the women in the informal sector in Tamil Nadu to bring the Construction Workers Act into existence; the ability of the women in rural Bangladesh to alter the policy of the Forest Department in their favour; the changing of policies in Gujarat in favour of women gum collectors; and the work of the co-operatives in Andhra Pradesh in changing the co-operative law (Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala, 1996: 194).

And women have gained leadership experience through their work in economic empowerment organisations. Sen and Grown, while they are not uncritical of this approach, maintain that such organisations have "enabled women to understand how to cope with local power structures, how to articulate demands, and how to use organizational strength to counter gender biases and rigidities inside the home" (1987: 82).

The various cases presented in *Speaking Out* also report additional gains made by women participants in economic empowerment projects, gains emphasised by the women themselves. These are gains in self-respect and confidence. The authors of a case study of women's thrift and credit co-operatives in South India report that:

women consider other impacts of participation in the co-operatives to be as important as, or even more important than, the financial benefits. As a result of co-operative membership, women have realized greater confidence, security and independence and have gained respect inside and outside of the household as well as a greater awareness of issues affecting them and their communities (Ray and Vasundhara, 1996: 98).

These gains are also part of the empowerment process, initiated by women's economic organising.

The case for economic empowerment, then, centres on the linkages between strategies to improve women's income security and the transition to empowerment gains

in other aspects of women's lives. The advocates of this approach to women's empowerment argue that increasing women's incomes and improving their income security begins a process of shifting gender norms at the household level, a process which may extend to the level of the local community as women also gain increased mobility, confidence and self-respect. Further, economic organising brings poor women together in groups where they are able to develop a deeper understanding of their oppression as a gender and as a class and enables them to take on collective actions to combat the structures of their oppression.

There is a strong case for economic organising as an important strategy in the struggle for the empowerment of poor women in South Asia. However, there are also powerful critiques of this approach. The following section presents some of the critical perspectives on the economic empowerment strategy.

III. Critical Views on Economic Empowerment

...ample evidence exists that strengthening women's economic status, though positive in many ways, does not always reduce their other burdens or eradicate other forms of oppression; in fact, it has often led to intensifying pressures. (Batliwala, 1994: 130)

While economic empowerment has many advocates, there are also critics who express their scepticism about the empowerment potential of the economic organising approach. They question the proposition that economic interventions, on their own, lead to a more general empowerment process, and, as Batliwala cautions above, point out that improvements in women's economic status can even have negative consequences in some circumstances.

The criticisms of economic empowerment strategies fall into several categories. First, some critics focus on the limitations inherent in the initial economic interventions adopted by economic empowerment organisations to meet women's immediate needs.

The majority of organisations working in the field of economic empowerment adopt the approach, discussed in section I, above, of working within the framework of the existing constraints to women's economic activities rather than directly addressing the dominant ideologies and structures which create those constraints. This tends both to limit the scale of women's enterprises and to locate women's economic organising in the informal sector.

Moser comments that:

Despite widespread recognition of the limitations of the informal sector to generate employment and growth in an independent or evolutionary manner, income-generating projects for women continue to be designed as though small scale enterprises have the capacity for autonomous growth (1993: 69).

While some economic empowerment projects take women's existing economic activities as a starting point and set out to address some of the exploitative elements of the workers' situation, this strategy is also limited by the interaction between ideologies that assign low status to the activities of women, especially poor women of low caste communities, and the economic structures which assign a low monetary value to poor women's occupations due to a surplus of available labour and the vulnerability of the individual women workers.

Handicrafts production, often seen as a women's activity easily carried out in the home or in a women's workshop, has been adopted as an income generation strategy by numerous development projects implemented by both mainstream development agencies and economic empowerment organisations. It has received some sharp criticism, however, as in the following quotation from Patricia Stamp, writing on gender issues in Africa:

Income generation projects, popular with WID policymakers, are of questionable value or are even harmful to women. Projects that push women to make objects for sale trivialize their main work as food producers and reinforce the "home economics" stereotype of appropriate

women's activities. Furthermore, market demand is rarely investigated before craft production is encouraged.(1989: 50)

While this argument is specific to the situation in rural Africa, it is more generally applicable in its emphasis on the need to understand women's real experience with work and on the need to pay attention to demand before initiating projects for handicrafts production. Jasleen Dhamija makes a similar case. She argues that crafts which are open to women, so-called "feminine" crafts, are "essentially time-consuming, provide little income, and are not easily upgraded to yield a higher price" (1989: 196). Despite this situation, handicrafts continue to be promoted as an appropriate enterprise for women.⁸

A related argument is presented by Bina Agarwal, who contends that the emphasis on women's employment and the income generation approach to women's disadvantaged economic status neglects a more important factor, the gender gap in access to arable land:

the gender gap in the ownership and control of property is the single most critical contributor to the gender gap in economic well-being, social status and empowerment. In primarily rural economies such as those of South Asia the most important property in question is arable land (1994b: 1455).

Addressing women's unequal access to economic resources from a redistribution perspective, rather than from the less confrontational income generation/wealth creation perspective, is, however, not generally a feature of the economic empowerment approach.

Another category of criticism focuses on the second stage in the economic empowerment model, the potential of economic organising to achieve its broader empowerment goals in the long run. Sen and Grown caution that:

Short-term ameliorative approaches to improve women's employment opportunities are ineffective unless they are combined with long-term strategies to reestablish people's - especially women's - control over the economic decisions that shape their lives (1987: 82).

⁸A *Guide to Small Entrepreneurs*, recently published by the state of Tamil Nadu, was accompanied by a leaflet which lists "100 Viable Projects for Tamil Nadu". While this general list does not include handicrafts, the attached "List of Industries Suggested for Women Entrepreneurs" does include this activity (Directorate of Industries and Commerce, 1994).

They challenge the thesis presented by the advocates of economic empowerment that economic organising in the informal sector, through the formation of producer groups, credit groups and women's unions, is an adequate strategy to address women's subordination and the economic structures which oppress the poor. Some of the examples presented by the advocates of the economic organising strategy, when viewed with a critical eye, themselves illustrate the limitations of this strategy for women's empowerment.

A senior researcher with BRAC in Bangladesh, writing about the empowerment impact of BRAC village organisations (VOs), states that:

membership in the VO leads to ... a different world-view for women: empowering them to conceptualise themselves as members of a class of 'poor women' and to relate people around them from a position other than as 'daughters-in-law' of the village (Selim, 1996: 61).

BRAC women are empowered to come together to prevent husbands from abusing or deserting their wives and to confront injustice from the village elites. However, it is not evident that they take direct action to address the structures that make them 'poor women'.⁹ Rather, the collective actions described are directed at enforcing existing social standards, making use of the normative aspects of the dominant ideology, rather than challenging the system of subordination. BRAC's strategy of group formation, consciousness raising, and income generation, does not appear to be sufficient to bring about a process of full empowerment.

The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, a credit provider organisation, is often presented as a successful example of the economic empowerment strategy in action. Its strategy of lending to women only, as the most needy among the rural poor, has been credited with initiating a process of social empowerment for rural women in Bangladesh,

⁹It is not evident in Selim's article, nor was it evident to me as a researcher visiting BRAC in 1992-93.

influencing gender roles and reducing family violence (Rahman, 1996). A very different perspective is presented in Aminur Rahman's recent study of the bank and its impact on gender relations in rural communities. Rahman argues that the bank actually has a negative impact on women's status within the household (ibid.). His field work suggests that the majority of loans are being used by men, and that the resulting situation, where women must try to get money for the loan repayments for which they are responsible from male family members, creates an additional level of dependency.

Contrary to the well-publicised image of the Grameen Bank as empowering rural women by giving them access to credit which is intended to enable them to earn an income and improve their position within the household, Rahman argues that:

the exclusion of men from direct credit opportunities intensifies the exploitation of women within the household and at the same time it limits the possibilities of achieving broader changes in men's attitude toward women in the society. If men are absolutely excluded from direct access to credit then gender conflict is likely to be aggravated, tensions increased, and women's role in household decision-making may even deteriorate (1996: 18).

This argument, that economic empowerment interventions can exacerbate rather than alleviate gender conflict, is similar to that put forward by Batliwala (1994), quoted at the head of this section.

A related argument emphasises the tendency of the economic empowerment approach to act in parallel with the mainstream development policies which see women's increased financial contributions to their households as a substitute for social services. Women's income earning capacity can become a rationale for reduced support to the poor. The emphasis on women's ability to help themselves - to be agents of development - is a strength of the economic empowerment approach, but that very strength can be used against women, as Cathy Rakowski argues in her concluding chapter to a recent book entitled *EnGENDERing Women's Wealth and Well-Being*:

there is a danger in the romanticization of women's courage and resourcefulness at the expense of acknowledging their burdens and obstacles, and there is a risk of overlooking men's burdens and obstacles as well. Romanticization can lead to reduced demands for institutional or legal reform because women manage to cope or circumvent obstacles. It also can lead to excessive reliance on women's resourcefulness in compensating for cutbacks in services, to inattention to mechanisms that encourage greater contributions by men to family and economic life, and to subordination of women's labor in the name of development (1995: 294).

Another criticism of the economic empowerment strategy is articulated by feminists who adopt the GAD perspective. They argue that many women's income generation projects are based on a WID approach to development which seeks to improve women's economic position by bringing women into the development mainstream, but not to bring about fundamental changes in the existing economic system. Kate Young, writing from this perspective, criticises WID for its emphasis on income as the determinant of women's empowerment:

A key WID strategy is getting women access to cash income either as individuals or members of some form of collectivity. ... From a GAD perspective, the market is much more ambiguous in its impact. At the individual level, some women will be able to benefit from entry into the market; some will gain greater bargaining strength within the family because they can contribute to their own upkeep or that of the children. **What is doubtful is whether individual gains will translate themselves into the overall empowerment of women as a gender** (1993: 142, emphasis added).

While the economic empowerment approach is not entirely congruent with WID, this criticism of the emphasis on cash income is applicable to both. The underlying premise of economic empowerment is being called into question here: that access to secure income is a necessary first step in a process of empowerment for poor women, and, further, that access to income will contribute to their overall empowerment.

These critical voices challenge the advocates of economic empowerment, questioning the both the methods and the potential of economic organising. They bring

valuable insights to the discussion of the potential of economic organising for women's empowerment, highlighting the limitations and drawbacks of this strategy. However, few of the critics would suggest that economic organising should be abandoned, rather they argue that it should be improved, and its limitations should be taken into account in building a more comprehensive strategy for emancipatory development.

IV. Summing Up

Several conclusions can be drawn from the above discussion of economic empowerment for poor women in South Asia. The attention to immediate needs is an important component of the economic empowerment strategy, addressing the *condition* of poor women, but attention must also be paid to women's long term interests, their *position*, and it is here that economic empowerment programmes sometimes fall short. Although, by definition, these programmes have women's empowerment as an ultimate goal, lack of attention to the structures which disempower poor women can prevent economic organising from fulfilling this vision. Economic organising can be a starting point for a process of overall empowerment, transforming existing resistance to oppression into an effective form through the establishment of strong and sustainable women's groups, but this "empowerment effect" does not always emerge.

Economic empowerment programmes generally take the approach of working within the ideological and structural constraints that limit women's access to income. In doing so, they may reinforce, rather than shift, gender norms which restrict women's mobility, their access to economic space, and the range of employment options open to them. And while access to additional income does change things for women, these changes are not uniformly positive and enabling.

The issues raised in this chapter on economic empowerment will be reviewed in the light of the case study of SHARE, a small-scale producer NGO in South India. The

case study is presented in the following chapter. Chapter Five takes up the analysis of the case and returns to the debate over the potential of the economic empowerment approach.

Chapter 4

Evaluating Economic Empowerment: A Case Study of SHARE

The previous chapter has outlined the debate over the economic organising approach to women's empowerment, with reference to the South Asian context. This chapter presents primary data from Tamil Nadu, South India in the form of a case study of one women's producer organisation, a concrete example from which to evaluate the claims made by the advocates and the critics of the economic empowerment approach. First, however, section I provides contextual material to establish a background for the case study. Section II gives a summary of the research methods employed in the field. The final sections of the chapter present the research findings, which take two forms: 1) a description of the organisation, SHARE, and how it functions; and 2) a discussion of the impact SHARE has had on the lives of its members. The following chapter will take up the analysis of this case study in light of the theoretical framework elaborated in Chapter Two, exploring the central argument of this paper, that women's economic organising at the grassroots level can play an important role in emancipatory development, addressing both poverty and gender subordination, but that this role is limited by the inability of such a strategy to address the structural elements of women's oppression.

I. The Context

The following section gives an overview of some aspects of the context in which SHARE operates, concentrating on four key areas: 1) the political situation in the state of Tamil Nadu and current economic policies in India and Tamil Nadu; 2) the interaction of caste and class hierarchies in Tamil Nadu; 3) the social construction of gender in rural areas of the state; and 4) the economic opportunities open to poor women in the area studied. Barriers to the economic advancement of poor, lower caste and minority women

in rural Tamil Nadu, and barriers to economic organising to address their situation, are highlighted here.

Political/Economic context¹

In the state of Tamil Nadu, as in much of South India, regional politics reign supreme. "Dravidian" politics, the politics of Tamil nationalism, have dominated the region for much of this century (Hancock, 1995). Since independence, parties have come to power through a combination of Tamil nationalist rhetoric and populist promises, as well as through the personal popularity of the several former movie stars and others from the film industry who have become party leaders or spokespersons. In the rural areas, politicians and governments are judged by what they deliver in terms of infrastructure, for example, electricity, improved roads, or housing. In the 1996 election many rural voters turned away from the Chief Minister, Jayalalitha of the AIA-DMK party, because she had failed to live up to her promises on this front. Voters throughout the state also rejected the governing party because of the perception of extreme corruption during its term in office, replacing it with the rival DMK, previously defeated for similar reasons.²

Corruption is also widespread in the Indian bureaucracy. Kickbacks, often in the form of "gifts" are routinely demanded by government officials. This has a strong impact on the NGO sector as many NGOs rely on government funding to implement some of their activities. The stated commitment of the central and state governments to rural development is operationalised through programmes designed to make funds available for

¹Some of the information in this section is drawn from discussions with key informants in the NGO sector in South India.

²The DMK and AIA-DMK are the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and its offshoot, the All India Annadurai-DMK. The DMK first took power in Tamil Nadu in 1967, campaigning on a platform of Tamil nationalism. Since that time, "with the exception of three periods when the central government controlled Tamil Nadu, the DMK (or its rival offshoot the AIA-DMK) has remained in power" (Hancock, 1995: 916).

activities such as skills training and micro-enterprise development. Yet, in order to access these designated funds, it is often necessary to "grease the wheels" of the system.

The Indian economy is currently in a state of transition, with a new policy of economic liberalisation, IMF style, being strongly pursued by the central government since 1991 (Datt, 1995), but not yet wholly replacing former policies, incentives, and systems intended to foster self-sufficiency and village production, important aspects of the Gandhian/socialist ideology of India's post-independence rulers.³ Handicrafts, for example, have been fostered by the Indian government, as noted in a 1988 IDRC study on the role of artisans in Asia:

the [Indian] government has a set of policies in place for the promotion of the small-scale industrial sector, including crafts... India is one of the few countries in Asia that has policies for both the protection of craft products and their promotion (Pye, 1988: 55).

While protection for the craft sector has been scrapped with the new regime of economic liberalisation, many programmes for the promotion of the artisan sector remain in place, including subsidies for training and marketing activities which can be accessed by NGOs like SHARE and SIPA, the Federation of South India Producer Associations, of which SHARE is a founding member.

The impact of India's new economic policies is glaringly obvious to an observer, especially in the cities. Coca Cola signs, McDonalds restaurants serving mutton burgers, and Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets - all unknown prior to 1991 - abound. Foreign-owned factories producing goods for export are springing up around many of the large cities, including Madras. Garment factories employ young women at wages that offer

³While Nehru rejected Gandhian economics in favour of a Western, technocratic model of planned industrial development, a failed experiment later replaced by an agriculture-led strategy (Mehmet, 1995), the emphasis on village industry and popular participation which forms part of the Gandhian legacy has remained an element in India's development planning (Jarochowska, 1994; Fernandez, 1987).

them an opportunity for more economic advancement than any informal sector work, although these jobs come at the price of poor working conditions, no job security and the need to step outside the limitations and protections afforded by traditional gender roles (Shrestha, 1996). These obvious and immediate results of economic liberalisation can be seen clearly, but the long-term results are still a matter of debate. Protests to the changes come from all levels of society. Kentucky Fried Chicken was the target of enraged attacks by local farmers, protesting the chain's sourcing policies, during my stay in India in early 1996. Many academics and activists also decry the new order, arguing that while it may improve India's international image, it will contribute more to underdevelopment than to development in the long run, promoting only "jobless growth" and eroding needed social services (Datt, 1995; Rao and Ramakrishna, 1995).

The implications of economic liberalisation policies for the small-scale handicrafts production units which form the basis of many economic empowerment organisations, like SHARE, are still unclear. Where the products are directed to outside markets, as with handicrafts marketed through alternative trading organisations⁴, this policy shift may not have a strong impact. However, the long term stability and sustainability of the alternative marketing approach is itself questionable, a point which is elaborated in section IV, below. Where products are directed to local markets, cheaper substitutes may displace artisanal production. In addition, if economic liberalisation leads to increased unemployment in the formal sector in India, as critics of this policy suggest (Rao and Ramakrishna, 1995), the gains in wages and working conditions which economic empowerment organisations have brought about in certain informal sector

⁴Alternative trade, or fair trade, is based on a set of ethical principles which include fair wages and safe working conditions for producers. Alternative trading organisations (ATOs) are marketing organisations "committed to trading with concern for the poor and disadvantaged producers for their socio-economic development" (SIPA, 1993: 3).

occupations may be eroded by the pressures of increased competition for informal sector employment. A decline in demand for informal sector production may also result, as domestic purchasing power declines with formal sector employment.

Another aspect of the political context for women's economic organising in India, with more immediate implications for SHARE, is the relationship between government and the NGO sector. India's contemporary NGO movement has been influenced by a number of factors. Traditional ideals of altruism and social duty, harnessed by the leaders of the independence movement in the first half of this century, continue to motivate activists and philanthropists to become involved in the development project. Gandhian ideals of people's participation, village self-sufficiency, and harmony among different castes and communities also have a strong influence on indigenous NGOs involved in rural development (Jarochowska, 1994).⁵ A third factor, linked to both of these, has been the evolution of state policies intended to promote rural development by re-activating the widespread popular participation of the independence movement through the Panchayati Raj system of village councils and through the promotion of co-operative ventures in the rural areas (Fernandez, 1987). The failure of this experiment, attributed to the rigid stratification of Indian society and to weaknesses in the administration of these programmes, has led to a movement by voluntary agencies to "support the formation of viable institutions through which the poor can participate effectively" (Fernandez, 1987: 42), that is, a movement to support grassroots self-help groups (ibid.).

It has been argued that "one common denominator for all [Indian] NGOs is the very low degree of any control over their activities" (Jarochowska, 1994: 78). This is in

⁵Gandhian thought has also influenced development efforts directed towards women, constructing women's nature as "essentially domestic and - if freed from the strictures of child marriage, sati, and dowry - as a resource for the nation" (Hancock, 1995: 911).

contrast to the co-operative sector which has suffered from a high degree of government intervention, starting with the aggressive promotion of co-operatives by the central government in the 1960s and 70s (Fernandez, 1987) and continuing today with the stifling intervention in the co-operative sector by some state governments (Ray and Vasundhara, 1996; Swaminathan, 1996), outlined below. However, Indian NGOs have varying degrees of involvement with the state. Some are so closely aligned with the government as to fit Korten's (1990) category of "Governmental Nongovernmental Organisations" (Jarochowska, 1994), while others refuse to accept any government funds on the grounds that they would lose their "independence and voluntarism" (Fernandez, 1987: 43). Many more fall in between these extremes and do make use of some government funds while attempting, with variable success, to maintain their autonomy. SHARE fits into this last category and appears to have been successful at establishing its independence (see section III, below).

The political climate around the co-operative sector in India varies from state to state, but has some common elements throughout the country. An article in an Indian English language daily characterises Indian co-operatives in general as "covert appendages of State governments, propped up through subsidies and virtually keeping the general body of their members captive in the benevolent or indifferent tutelage of the bureaucrats" (Swaminathan, 1996: 19), an opinion supported by the comments of analysts working in the voluntary sector (Fernandez, 1987; Ray and Vasundhara, 1996). Government intervention in the co-operative sector in Tamil Nadu state is particularly intense. Co-operatives have virtually no autonomy, internal elections have been frozen since 1993 and worker members of producer co-operatives no longer feel a sense of

ownership of their organisations.⁶ According to my informants, the state government claims that its intervention is due to mismanagement and corruption in the co-operative sector. While this claim may be grounded in fact, the new government-appointed managers have often proved corrupt, diverting resources badly needed by struggling organisations. A senior member of SIPA, the Federation of South India Producer Associations, summed up the impact of this government intervention in the co-operative sector: "It's killing the whole thing" (Panchaksharam, 1996).

Overall, the political and economic context affects women in rural Tamil Nadu in two ways. The neglect of the rural areas due to urban-based populism on the part of the Tamil Nadu state government and the reduction in social services due to the central government policy of structural adjustment combine to create the need for women's self-help initiatives. However, despite some resources available from programmes to support small-scale industry, government intervention (such as in the co-operative sector) and government corruption present obstacles to such organising.⁷

Caste, Class, and Community⁸

In Tamil Nadu, the most salient social and political division is drawn on the basis of caste (overlaid by class), between the Tamil/Dravidian lower caste majority and the Brahmin religious elite. Mary Hancock describes it as follows:

a cultural nationalism framed in terms of the Dravidian linguistic and ethnic identity of the southern populations has been a dominant element of political and social life since the early 20th century. Proponents of

⁶This situation prevailed at the time of the research project in the first half of 1996, with no end in sight despite the promises of the new government to organise elections for the co-operative sector.

⁷Women's political organising is further constrained by threats and violence which are ignored or, in some cases, perpetrated by the police, as mentioned in Chapter Three, above.

⁸Community, throughout this chapter, usually refers to a caste group or religious minority (i.e., Muslim, Christian), not a location. Within the villages of Tamil Nadu, people of different communities live in separate enclaves.

Dravidianism defined their identity in opposition to that of northern Indo-Aryan populations and to that of Tamil Brahmins, who were regarded as descendants of the early Aryan conquerors of the southern populations (Hancock, 1995: 908).

While Brahmins remain part of the social elite, referred to as a "dominant caste" or a "forward community", Hancock comments on the "political marginality of Brahmins in southern India" (ibid.: 912). It is the relatively high status but non-Brahmin castes of cultivator/ landowners that dominate the rural areas (Kapadia, 1995).

Despite the strong collective identity of the Tamil/Dravidian majority in the struggle against Brahmin domination, the reality of social segmentation on the basis of caste, religion and ethnicity remains a factor among non-Brahmin Tamils. In rural villages, different caste and religious communities live in distinct areas and interact within their own enclave more than outside it. Minority groups in Tamil Nadu, including Muslims, Christians, and aboriginal peoples (called "tribals"), do not identify with the Tamil majority, and maintain their separate identities through language, dress and customs. Muslims, for example, often speak Urdu in their own homes and Tamil only as a second language. Despite this emphasis on separate identities, Hindu-Muslim tension is not as severe in the South as in the North - it is inter-caste violence between Hindu communities which is reported almost daily in the media.⁹ The area around Vellore, where the research project was carried out, has enjoyed a relative peace over the last decades, although some points of tension were described by the SHARE members interviewed.

Women who work in the fields belong to the lowest status caste groups (Boserup, 1970; Mencher, 1988), termed "scheduled castes" or "backward castes" by the

⁹The caste hierarchy is under considerable tension, due to both the lower caste liberation movement and the shifting relationships between caste and class, as some lower caste communities have developed economically.

government. Most of the SHARE women interviewed for this study had previously worked in the fields as coolies (field labourers), indicating their overall position in the caste hierarchy, but the organisation is not homogeneous, bringing together women from different lower caste communities, as well as Muslim women.¹⁰ The women of SHARE take pride in their freedom from caste prejudice, asserting that "there is no caste in SHARE!" They did report that there had been inter-caste tension within their organisation, but this was always presented as a problem of the early days, now overcome. Some women also spoke of their own struggles with higher caste landowners: "They wouldn't even come near us or touch us", remembers one SHARE member. "We worked in the fields where they got their food - there was no untouchability about those food products!" (Interview 12, Appendix D). There is some indication that the alternative economic opportunity provided by SHARE has had a positive impact on this overt manifestation of caste prejudice, a point elaborated in section IV, below.

Gender

Tamil Nadu, like India as a whole, is characterised by great regional diversity and social fragmentation along lines of caste and community. Gender can only be understood as it interacts with factors such as class, caste, religion, and locality. Yet sweeping generalisations about "Indian womanhood" are frequently heard, propounded by politicians or earnestly put forward by development workers as the saviour of the nation or community. Women "embody the nation" and are essentialised as "patient, pure, courageous, and self-sacrificing" (Hancock, 1995: 911). Eating last after male family members and guests have been fed is one symbolic representation of the identity of the Indian woman, as is the image of the woman who sacrifices her own well-being by taking

¹⁰I did not learn about the specific caste groupings represented in SHARE, much less their complex interactions and inter-relationships, a task beyond the scope of my few months in the field.

a smaller share of food. Such self-sacrifice is seen to demonstrate woman's strength, as well as her caring nature. For lower caste women in rural Tamil Nadu, Karin Kapadia reports that "in household discourse, it is *female* 'selflessness' and 'self-sacrifice' that are represented as great cultural ideals - these ideals are not viewed as relevant to the male identity" (1995: 41, original emphasis). The impact of this construction of femininity is material, rather than purely symbolic, as evidenced by the social statistics from the *Human Development Report* quoted in Chapter Three (UNDP, 1996).

Kapadia, writing on gender and kinship in rural Tamil Nadu, highlights the discourse of women's resistance to gender subordination with the following saying, commonly known among the lower caste Tamil women she interviewed: "Kinship burns!" Kapadia learned from her informants that this saying "exemplified women's negative experience of marriage ... [but formed] part of a female discourse that was seldom spoken" (1995: 44). And, while she notes that lower caste Tamil women have had some freedoms denied to higher caste women in the region, such as the ability to divorce, with compensation, and to re-marry, Kapadia argues that these freedoms are now being eroded.¹¹ She writes:

Thus, even in traditional Non-Brahmin kinship, where women have historically enjoyed higher status and relative independence as compared with Brahmin and North Indian women, women have found ... that in a crunch, it is their interests that are likely to be "sacrificed" to protect male interests (ibid.).

Female identity, rooted in local ideologies around gender, is one site of oppression for women in rural Tamil Nadu. It is also a source of strength and a site of resistance. Responses to oppression, as discussed in Chapter Two, drawing on Scott (1985) and

¹¹ This erosion of customary rights is attributed by Kapadia to the spread of "dowry" marriages. See Kapadia, 1995: 41-42.

Agarwal (1994a), include a range of attitudes and actions which can include both the acceptance of some aspects of the dominant gender ideologies, and also a critical perspective stemming from the standpoint of the oppressed, which resists and rewrites aspects of those ideologies. For example, women in SHARE both make use of the image of women as strong and responsible, as sacrificing mothers, and resist, up to a point, other aspects of locally defined female identity, particularly norms around seclusion.

Most of the SHARE members interviewed placed great emphasis on the role of SHARE in making it possible for them to "go outside". However, almost all of these women had worked out in the fields before they became SHARE members. "Outside", for the lower caste rural women who work in SHARE, means crossing the traditional boundaries which define their seclusion. These are generally the boundaries of their home village, although the rules are somewhat fluid, most strictly enforced for unmarried women and newly married women. Muslim women also face stricter norms around seclusion than do Hindu women. "Going outside", as the phrase is used by the SHARE members, means the freedom to go alone to the nearby town of Vellore or further afield. It means the freedom to decide on their own movements, within certain limits, an expansion of the traditional boundary circumscribing women's movements to the household and the fields around the home village and placing women under the authority of male family members.

The impact of gender ideologies on women's economic opportunities in the study area is profound, and economic organising must take this factor into account. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the most common strategy for economic empowerment organisations is to find ways to work around the constraints imposed by gender ideologies, rather than to confront them directly. In the case of SHARE, this has resulted in the choice of home-based work and women-only activities. However,

SHARE's activities do present a challenge to local gender norms which has resulted in some conflict in the communities where the NGO works, but also in some empowerment gains for the worker-members. This is discussed in section IV, below, and further elaborated in the following chapter.

Economic Opportunities

Women's experience of work in South India as elsewhere includes unpaid work in the home. Beyond these domestic responsibilities, women's experience of work and employment is mediated by caste. Ester Boserup (1970) cited research from rural Andhra Pradesh, South India, on the influence of caste on women's work and wages. The study she drew upon is dated, published in 1956, but it does illustrate the impact of caste on norms regarding women's employment. The researcher identified four distinct social groups within the village. Women of the two groups with higher status and wealth worked in the home only and did not earn income, while:

In the third group of ordinary low-caste people, women assisted their husbands in the fields and they also went to the market. They worked mainly within the family framework and in their own fields, although they might work for a wage in the busy season. The fourth and lowest social group was composed of women belonging to the poorest of the low castes who were expected regularly to seek paid work for the support of their families (Boserup, 1970: 70).

Kapadia's 1995 study, based on recent field work in a village in central Tamil Nadu, bears out this observation. She describes the impact of gender ideologies on lower caste women, stating that, among the lower caste communities of rural Tamil Nadu:

Both wife and husband have to do wage work to survive, but *the final responsibility for providing for the family lies with the woman*. So in these castes, it is socially acceptable for men to spend a large part of their incomes on themselves, even though their families are in need. Women, on the contrary, are expected to spend their entire incomes on feeding their

children and husbands, and they are socialized to see this inequity as required of them (1995: 42, original emphasis).

As mentioned above, almost all of the SHARE women interviewed had worked as coolies before becoming members of the NGO. Coolies are field hands, both women and men, although women are paid less than their male counterparts. Women's agricultural tasks are "primarily the messy and delicate work of transplanting and the more arduous work of harvesting, both of which also require considerable training and expose the women to various health risks" (Mencher, 1988: 101-102). Virtually all the women working in SHARE still go to work in the fields during the rice harvest. They are paid with a share of the paddy (the whole rice plant) which will fill their stores for some time to come. They cannot afford to miss this opportunity, as rice is the staple food in the region, and it is too expensive, even in the government ration shops, for poor families to meet their needs without working for some paddy at harvest time.

A few of the women interviewed for this study had worked in construction. Women work on construction crews throughout India, carrying heavy loads of earth and bricks to and from the site. Wages are low, about 20 Rupees per day (80 cents in Canadian currency at the time of data collection) and working conditions are often bad (Ramakrishnan, 1996). In addition, construction work crosses the boundary into the "outside" world with consequences for the women's reputation and status, while field work is an accepted role for lower caste Tamil women.

As noted in Chapter Three, above, some analysts argue that it is access to arable land, rather than employment, that is the critical gender gap for women in South Asia (Agarwal, 1994b). The land tenure system in rural Tamil Nadu is described by Kapadia, whose field work was carried out in Aruloor, several hours to the south of Vellore, as consisting of two major forms of landholding: "(1) land that is owned (*sondam*); and (2)

land that is held on a share-cropping tenancy" (1995: 184). She notes that land is almost invariably held in a man's name, and that Tamil women do not have traditional rights to land. The situation is similar in the villages around Vellore. Although women do not own land directly, SHARE women may have more access to land than poor women in other areas of Tamil Nadu.¹² According to my informants in SHARE, the land distribution pattern in the study area is less unequal than in many parts of the state, with many poor families owning a small plot, and with medium, rather than large, land holdings as the norm for the larger landlords in the area. This is a factor which may have reduced the obstacles to SHARE's success, as local elites may be less dominant and less firmly entrenched than in an area with a more unequal landholding pattern.

The limited economic opportunities and the cultural constraints on women's access to employment and land, together with the expectation that lower caste women should earn an income to support their families, make it easy to understand the rapid growth of SHARE, an NGO which offers women an alternative source of income and, as a by-product, is beginning to have an impact on women's position in the villages around Vellore.

II. Research Methods

The research for this study, funded by the CIDA Award for Canadians, took place between January and May, 1996, in Tamil Nadu, South India, with the central objective of evaluating the impact of a grassroots women's producer organisation from the

¹²Kapadia (1995) reports that lower caste Tamil women do not usually own or inherit land and property, but are rather entitled to receive some customary support from their brothers who have inherited the family wealth. However, one SHARE member said that she has inherited a one eighth share in a house from her grandmother (Interview 7, Appendix D). Another, a widow, expressed her sense of injustice at the loss of all the land her husband had owned to his brothers (Interview 3, Appendix D). These stories indicate that there are some mechanisms whereby women can gain control of land.

perspective of the producers themselves. My first contact in South India was with SIPA, the Federation of South India Producer Associations. With SIPA's help, I was able to make contact with a number of grassroots organisations, members of the Federation, and to select SHARE as the focus for the case study presented in this chapter. Selection was based on several criteria. First, I wanted to study a successful, locally managed, grassroots women's organisation, in order to gain insight into the grassroots empowerment process from a "best case" (or rather a "good case") perspective.¹³ Second, the ability and willingness of the case study organisation to accommodate a researcher was a key factor in my decision. Finally, the availability of accommodation at the project site and accessibility from Madras also influenced the selection of SHARE. Data collection for the case study was carried out in the area where SHARE works, in the villages near Vellore, a small city located about three and a half hours by local bus inland from Madras (see map, Appendix A). In addition, background data were collected at SIPA and through visits to other producer groups in the region.

At SHARE, one key source of information was a limited version of participant observation. This included observation of, and some degree of participation in, the NGO's events and activities, as well as home visits and home stays with leaders and members of SHARE. A second source of information was discussions with key informants, including several of the elected leaders of SHARE, women with eight or nine years schooling who speak some English. Although language difficulties slowed

¹³At the selection stage, the determination of what constituted a "successful" organisation was based on a review of SIPA's member profiles and discussions with SIPA staff. The main criterion used by SIPA was economic viability, given that all members of SIPA conform to that organisation's "Code of Ethics for Partners in Fair-Trade" which states that the producer group "shall be a group of persons (preferably a legally constituted - Voluntary organisation/Co-operative etc.) committed to working together/with [sic] the poor and the disadvantaged for their socio-economic development. It shall strive to ensure the participation of Producer members at all levels and work for adequate income to the workers which shall be sufficient to meet their basic needs as well as health-care, education, ability to save" (SIPA, 1993: 1).

communication, we were often able to find simple words to discuss even complex issues and concepts. SHARE staff members with more English skills also acted as key informants, as did other members of the local NGO community. Third, group interviews were conducted with the SHARE craft teachers, members of the organisation who take responsibility for supervising one or more of the craft production centres, and with the executive committee. These interviews with SHARE leaders were helpful in learning about how the organisation is structured and how it functions from day to day. The history of SHARE and the plans and hopes of the leaders for the future of the NGO were also topics in the group interviews.

The cornerstone of the data collection process was a set of in-depth interviews with SHARE members, conducted through an interpreter, a young woman who had recently joined SHARE's programme staff.¹⁴ Interview respondents were selected with the help of SHARE leaders and staff to form a purposive sample covering a range of different life histories and experiences with the organisation. Women of the several different religious and caste communities represented in SHARE were interviewed, some young and some older members, some long term and some new members. Interviews were conducted in the respondent's home, with a few exceptions. The interview technique was open-ended, allowing respondents to ask for clarification, add additional information and include topics we had not proposed, but following a set of guidelines (Appendix C) about the main areas to address. During the interviews, the interpreter translated both questions and responses as I took notes. There are surely some mistakes arising from the translation process: changes in emphasis, omissions or factual errors.

¹⁴This was not ideal, as it was difficult to bring members to speak critically about their organisation with a staff member present. My own position was more ambiguous, but it is probable that members also saw me as connected to the NGO's leadership and were therefore reticent in their criticism of the organisation.

Also, the interpreter's biases as well as my own will have overlaid the original meanings to some extent. However, I do feel that the interview data are substantially correct.

This is a qualitative study based on observation, participation, and interviews. I did not set out to learn, nor did I learn, about the precise economic impact of SHARE for the women members, nor about the financial viability of the organisation as a whole. I did learn about their collective struggles and successes in the past, and about some of their plans and hopes for the future. I set out to get a picture of a producer organisation from the point of view of the producers, and I was able to learn a great deal from the women of SHARE, despite barriers of language and culture.

III. The Organisation

SHARE is a self-help organisation for rural women in North Arcot Ambedkar District of Tamil Nadu, South India. As of 1996, more than 850 women from 31 villages worked at income generating activities as members of SHARE.¹⁵ The members are rural women, predominantly lower caste Tamils, although a small number are Muslims. The majority of these members make palm leaf baskets, which are sold through alternative trading channels to buyers in Europe and North America, as well as to some commercial buyers in India. SHARE is now branching out into new income-earning activities, with programmes for handloom weaving and wool carpet weaving. In addition to income generation activities, SHARE also provides services to its members, and to their communities. Member services include the delivery of raw materials and collection of finished goods, marketing the craft products, training and technical support, emergency loans, and access to affordable health care (through a special arrangement with a local NGO-run hospital). Community services include evening tutorial classes for school-age

¹⁵See membership table, Appendix B.

children, a model day-care centre in one community, and sponsorship of activities like sports tournaments, debates, and open workshops for community members.

History and Description of SHARE¹⁶

SHARE is a relatively new organisation in its current form as an NGO, yet it has a history stretching back to 1974 when the first women's craft centre in the area was formed under the auspices of CHAD, the Community Health And Development organisation of the Christian Medical College (CMC) in Vellore.¹⁷ Prior to the formation of the craft groups, CHAD had established a presence in the villages around Vellore with a health education programme for women. Many of the women who came together to form the income generating groups had previously been attending the health group meetings. There they had expressed the need for alternatives to the field work which is the main income earning activity open to poor women in the countryside. The decision to produce handicrafts was based on several factors. First, the women wanted work that could be carried out in the home and in the home village, allowing them to keep up their household responsibilities and to avoid the stigma of working "outside". Second, the handicrafts selected, mat weaving, sisal fibre work, and basket making, could all be produced with locally available materials, little equipment and short-term training, making it a relatively easy activity to begin. A local market exists for the first of these crafts, mat weaving, although this activity later proved to bring in unacceptably low returns for the producers

¹⁶This section is based on group interviews with SHARE leaders and discussions with several key informants, including SHARE's Co-ordinator and staff members at CHAD. Also, see Appendix B, Important Events.

¹⁷The Christian Medical College (CMC) and the nationally renowned CMC Hospital are well-respected institutions with a long history in Vellore. The CMC established CHAD to address health issues in the rural villages which surround Vellore. The CMC has connections with local and international Christian communities, but these have not been passed on to SHARE, which has developed as a secular organisation.

and was dropped. Finally, handicrafts projects were widely popular as income generating activities for women at the time (Dhamija, 1989).

At this time, in the 1970s, the craft groups were part of an income generation project implemented by CHAD. Management and leadership of the project rested with this local NGO, staffed by university educated health workers and community development workers. In 1980, the craft groups, then operating in some dozen villages, came together to form a co-operative society, the Edayansathu Women's Co-operative. This move was initiated by CHAD in order to turn over the income generation programme to the crafts producers and to create a self-sustaining, locally managed organisation. However, CHAD continued to oversee the work of the co-operative. By 1985, the organisation took a step towards local management and elected leaders from among the craft workers. Leadership and management control were increasingly handed over to the membership community during the subsequent years, although CHAD retained a presence within the co-operative structure. Some aspects of the co-operative experiment were successful, as the organisation expanded in terms of numbers, production and internal leadership capacity, but there were also serious problems, mainly due to state government intervention in the co-operative sector in Tamil Nadu, a problem outlined in section I, above. In 1991, the women working in the Edayansathu Women's Co-operative finally decided to abandon this organisation and form an independent NGO, the Self-Help Association for Rural Education and Employment, or SHARE, in order to gain greater autonomy.

The transformation to an NGO structure has been a positive one for SHARE. The organisation once again functions as a democratic body, electing leaders from among the producer members. In many ways, SHARE still functions as a co-operative, but the

different regulations governing NGOs have led to some changes.¹⁸ As an NGO, SHARE cannot pay cash dividends to members so the NGO has instituted an annual incentive bonus system for members, providing the craft workers with useful items like stainless steel kitchen vessels instead of money. Members no longer have equity in the organisation, but collective ownership was never a reality in the earlier co-operative structure. In fact, the co-operative has not yet been wholly dissolved, because the government threatens to seize its assets, down to furniture, filing cabinets, and records, if it is officially closed down.

SHARE has been able to make use of government resources in the form of subsidies to the craft work training programmes, while reportedly refusing to pay the bribes occasionally demanded by government officials. Mr. Murugesan, the SHARE Co-ordinator, says: "I tell them to ask the women [the elected leaders of SHARE] for this money. They will refuse to give it" (1996). The leaders of SHARE are proud of their strong stance on this issue, which they have been able to sustain by building good working relationships with some allies within the government structure. The NGO has found ways to negotiate a path through the difficult terrain of government regulations and corruption, serious obstacles to the organisation's work, moving through the interstices of a system which often prevents rather than facilitates the development it is meant to foster. Today, SHARE has emerged as a strong and optimistic membership-based women's organisation. Plans for diversification of income generating activities and the provision of a range of services in the communities where SHARE members live and work are

¹⁸All Indian NGOs must register with a central registrar of societies and conform to certain guidelines regarding their structure and operations. Although these guidelines are very flexible, allowing the NGOs to take on a range of different forms, they do exclude elements of the co-operative structure, in order to establish a distinction between the two types of organisations.

debated in the executive meetings, although these plans are constrained by the limited financial resources available to the organisation.

The services SHARE is beginning to provide are reflected in the new objectives adopted by the NGO, discussed in the following section. The organisation is committed to organising cultural and educational events, including public debates, sports meets and workshops open to all villagers. It has begun to provide afternoon tutorial classes for children whose families cannot afford to pay for the tutoring necessary to get through the competitive school exams. These classes, conducted by the SHARE craft teachers, emphasise literacy and math skills, but they also include games and stories and a great deal of encouragement for the children who attend. The classes I observed had a fairly equal gender ratio. According to my informants, school attendance has become the norm for girls in the area where SHARE works, although a few must still leave school to work in the home or for pay. SHARE offers bursary/scholarships to a few families who cannot afford to send their daughters to secondary school.¹⁹

SHARE is very proud of its new model *balwadi* programme in one village. Funding for this day-care/early childhood education centre for pre-school children between the ages of three and five has been provided by GTZ/SHF²⁰ of Germany. The SHARE *balwadi* is different from the government-run day-cares that are operating in some of the villages. The enthusiastic teacher has designed an ambitious programme which combines play and creative activities with more formal learning of letters, numbers and facts. The children also receive a nutritious meal and snack each day.²¹ The centre is

¹⁹School is free, but books, uniforms and transportation are not.

²⁰GTZ is the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, a state service organisation for development owned by the Federal Republic of Germany. SHF is the Self-Help Fund of GTZ.

²¹Although the government *balwadi* programme is intended to provide a similar standard of teaching and care, it has fallen short in practice, according to my informants.

run by a committee which brings together parents, the teacher, SHARE leaders and SHARE programme staff. Parents pay 30 Rupees monthly for their children to attend, although some parents with very low incomes pay less. This money is intended to finance the centre for the future, as the funding support from GTZ/SHF is temporary. SHARE leaders are monitoring the success of this programme and hope to establish others in other villages where SHARE women work, if all goes well.

A landmark event for SHARE has been the construction of its own office building and training centre in 1994. The new buildings, which also include warehouse space for raw materials and finished products, are located in a village central to the NGO's operations and close to the main bus route to Vellore. The organisation was able to purchase some land of its own, and to get some money from the government to subsidise the new buildings as the training activities carried out there are supported by government funds. The site is now officially a GOI Craft Development Centre. The women I spoke to placed great importance on having their own central office on their own land. They also took pride in the fact that the building was constructed with their volunteer labour, an example of the dedication and commitment of the worker members of SHARE.

SHARE's main source of funds is the revenue from the craft sales. However, most of this income is channelled back to the craft workers, with the NGO retaining only enough for minimal administration costs. For its on-going programmes, SHARE draws on outside funding sources. Training programmes are subsidised through the central government's Craft Development programme. GTZ/SHF, Germany, funds the model day-care programme and has funded some other small projects for SHARE, including an exchange programme between three producer organisations in Tamil Nadu (SHARE Documents, 1996). SHARE is now seeking funding for some of its new proposed activities, for example, a project to provide milch cows to destitute women as a source of

both income and nutritional support. Other new activities taken on by the organisation are carried out by mobilising community resources, such as volunteer time (construction of the new office, tuition programme) and savings (village-level savings and emergency loan groups) (Interviews with SHARE leaders, 1996).

SHARE has not experienced success with every endeavour. The organisation made an attempt to incorporate income generating activities for men into its programme several years ago. SHARE leaders recall that, while the men stayed for the training which includes a monthly stipend, they did not persevere with the craft work once the training period was over. This is probably due to a combination of factors, including the meagre incomes to be earned by craft work, the wider range of employment options open to men, and the effect of gender ideologies, since the palm leaf craft work, although not a traditional craft, is now established in the district as a women's activity. SHARE leaders continue to discuss how and to what extent the organisation should support poor men and boys in their communities.

Over the years, SHARE and its predecessors have overcome some resistance to their work. This resistance has taken two main forms: inter-caste tension among the women members, and community opposition when the organisation or its members have challenged gender norms. Examples of the former are invariably presented by SHARE members as problems in the past, now overcome. One of the leaders of SHARE, a woman from a Scheduled Caste community, recalled the resistance she had to face from new members when she first worked as a craft teacher in a village dominated by a higher caste.²² Today, however, the SHARE women state with pride that "there is no caste in SHARE!"

²²The "Scheduled Castes" are the Hindu communities with the lowest status, once called "untouchables" by the English. This designation is used by governments in India, together with a complex official hierarchy

The second form of resistance which the organisation has encountered is external, a response by male community members to perceived challenges to gender norms. Women in the early craft groups formed before 1980 faced resistance when they tried to find a meeting space. They were refused permission to meet in the village temples and some men put pressure on local landowners causing them to refuse to rent space to the women. In 1986, one craft production centre was burnt to the ground by young men who were angry at the women's lack of respect, demonstrated by their sitting with their legs stretched out while working together in front of the centre. The women told me that these problems no longer occur because "SHARE is strong" and no one interferes with them now. However, women who work outside their home villages still face opposition or harassment in their home communities for crossing the traditional boundary to women's independent mobility. Many women must overcome family resistance to join SHARE, although it seems that the reliable income from SHARE work usually reconciles the family to the new situation. The ways in which SHARE women have been able to make use of aspects of dominant gender ideologies in order to minimise and resolve conflict is dealt with in the following chapter.

Objectives

What is our aim? To remove women's slavery, to build women's solidarity!

Women must develop. We should not live in slavery; we should come out and work. (Excerpts from interviews with SHARE members, Appendix D, 1996)

of disadvantaged groups which works its way up from the "Scheduled Communities" (SC), through "Most Backward Communities" (MBC), and "Backward communities" (BC). These designations are linked to government subsidies and other benefits, such as reserved spaces for higher education and government jobs. SHARE uses the terms because it reports to the government on those activities which receive some government support.

These two quotations reflect the central objective of the NGO - stated in SHARE documents as "women's development through income generation". Restated, and taking into account the women's words, SHARE's primary goal is the economic and social empowerment of rural women in the area where the organisation is working. This goal has developed as the organisation has grown and changed. According to long-term CHAD staff members, the original women's craft project had as its aim poverty alleviation through income generation, with the programme directed towards women for practical reasons which included the evidence that women's incomes tend to be spent on the family, the limited opportunities for employment open to women in the area, and a desire to improve women's material condition in particular by ensuring their access to a stable, independent income.

This focus on poverty alleviation began to shift when the craft groups were united as a women's co-operative in the 1980s. As the group began to develop into a locally managed membership organisation, transferring authority from CHAD staff and leadership to women elected from among the craft workers, empowerment goals began to emerge. Poverty alleviation, while still the central focus, was no longer the single goal. Women's roles as leaders and decision makers within a democratic body led to the articulation of a broader vision which incorporated changes in the ideological boundaries which limited women's opportunities to earn income and to organise.²³ Since the formation of the NGO in 1991, a move which has freed the organisation from the direct government intervention which plagues the co-operative sector and placed more responsibility in the hands of the elected leadership, the goals of the organisation have expanded still further to incorporate the concept of "women development".

²³Democratic in principle, although the state government intervention in the co-operative sector limited both the autonomy and the democratic process of the organisation.

SHARE has recently developed a new statement of objectives to serve as guidelines for its on-going work. These are secondary objectives designed to help the organisation achieve its primary goal of empowerment. These objectives were set at a meeting in 1995 with all of SHARE's elected leaders and craft teachers present as well as producer members representing each village where SHARE works, and a committee of advisors drawn from the CMC and CHAD. The objectives identified at the meeting break down into four categories: improved incomes for poor women in the target area through expansion of the NGO and through diversification of craft activities; the promotion of non-traditional employment for women; the provision of services in the communities where SHARE works, and "Women Development".

This last objective was repeatedly expressed by the women I spoke to as one of SHARE's most important goals, but the meaning of this phrase was not entirely clear. It seems to mean an improvement in certain aspects of women's *position* as well as women's *condition*. When I asked for an explanation of this objective the SHARE members spoke of a wide range of changes for women, including greater mobility, greater decision making power, more economic opportunities, more political representation, and more respect, but they did not include factors such as changes in household responsibilities, freedom from gender violence, or changes in economic structures which reduce the employment available in poor, rural communities.

SHARE members I interviewed, and those I spoke to informally, also expressed their own very specific objectives for the organisation, as in the following quotation:

We should have more activities for earning income, like typing, tailoring, making paper. We should give school prizes to boys as well as girls - at least three prizes to help more families. We should reach out to those most in need, like physically handicapped women and widows or deserted women, to help them and their children (Interview 14, Appendix D).

The role of SHARE, seen through the eyes of the members, is a broad one, with income generation activities at the centre, but with expanding responsibilities towards the communities where the members live and work. It is more than poverty alleviation, but less than political action, as the organisation's approach to needs that the income generation activities cannot address seems to be to take on the role of a welfare provider. There is a contradiction between the strongly worded calls to "remove women's slavery" and the kinds of interventions the NGO feels able to take on. This is a common contradiction in the field of emancipatory development, a gap between a vision of what should be and a pragmatic view of what is possible.

Leadership

SHARE's organogram, included in Appendix B, shows the General Body as the controlling body of the organisation. In reality, the General Body, made up of all the members, meets annually and elects an executive committee of seven members every three years. The executive serving at the time of my research was the second committee elected since SHARE's formation as an NGO in 1991. All of the seven executive members were drawn from the group of teacher/monitors, a group with special status in the organisation. These women are respected leaders in SHARE and so were nominated and acclaimed for executive positions but the need for wider representation on the executive committee is now being discussed in SHARE. The organisation has taken pains to ensure minority representation on the executive, reserving a space for a member from the Muslim community.

There are twenty teacher/monitors, selected at the time of SHARE's formation for their craft skills, dedication and hard work in the co-operative organisation that preceded SHARE. The NGO calls them the teaching staff, and each teacher/monitor receives a small monthly stipend but continues her own craft work to earn her primary income. The

teachers tend to have a higher level of education than the majority of craft members, several having completed secondary school. One older SHARE member interviewed, a leader in her own village centre, spoke of having convinced a young member to become the monitor for that centre: "I told her - you have some education, you should be a monitor and a leader in SHARE. I could not do it myself because I have no education" (Interview 9, Appendix D). Most of the craft teachers supervise one or two village centres, where new members are trained and where many of the women come to work. The craft centre is also a production unit including the members working at home. Each centre has between 20 and 30 members. The teacher/monitors are responsible for distributing the raw materials delivered for each order and dividing the work among the centre's members. They set the production schedule for the centre and report to the executive if there are any delays. They also inspect finished products as the first step in quality control procedures. Monitors take responsibility for conflict resolution in the centre and for keeping the members up to date on the organisation's activities and plans. They meet monthly to discuss production. In these meetings they also discuss any problems raised by women in their centres and talk about SHARE's plans, both for the coming month and in the longer term, information they can then relay back to their village centres.

The leadership of SHARE rests with the executive, with input from the teacher/monitors and an advisory panel of professionals from outside the organisation, but the organisation's co-ordinator, Mr. Murugesan, also plays a central role in decision-making and management of the NGO. Himself from a poor community, Murugesan was trained in community development at a Gandhian college. He was originally an employee of CHAD, SHARE's parent organisation, and remains the liaison between SHARE and CHAD, having now more than fifteen years of experience with the

organisation. Wholeheartedly committed to SHARE, Murugesan is regarded by members with both affection and admiration. Women I interviewed called him their mother, their treasury, even their God, attempting to express the importance of his role in the organisation and the strong rapport he has built up with the craft workers over the years.

In effect, the co-ordinator functions as the organisation's manager and as a member of the executive committee. It is clear that Murugesan has taken pains to foster the growth of SHARE as a democratic, member-based organisation with internal leadership and management capacity. As a respected and educated individual his words carry weight in any discussion, but the leaders of SHARE do not always agree with one another or with the co-ordinator. Many issues are hotly disputed and decisions arrived at by democratic process. In the day to day management of the organisation, Murugesan shares responsibility with SHARE's elected secretary and president. They may defer to his experience and education, but he consults with them before taking action and has increasingly handed over responsibilities as they gain experience. When the co-ordinator is away, the elected leaders take over management of the organisation. SHARE is still in transition to full local control, but that transition is well underway. Murugesan himself will probably remain involved in the NGO in the long term, but he is becoming dispensable as the organisation develops.

Murugesan as an individual has had a strong impact on SHARE and the formation of its objectives and identity. Committed to "women development", he argues for the inclusion of advocacy around women's issues as part of SHARE's objectives and operations. SHARE's stated objective, to encourage women to take on non-traditional occupations, was his suggestion. "We are not feminists," he says of himself and the elected leaders of SHARE, identifying feminism with urban women who want to change things like women's modest dress in their search for a western vision of freedom

(Murugesan, 1996). Yet, Murugesan wants to see the organisation take on women's issues, like a campaign against rape, citing some examples of famous rape cases in India, notorious because of the complete failure of the judicial system to punish the offenders, and widely publicised by the urban women's movement (Kumar, 1993, Chapter 8).

SHARE's leaders share a vision of their organisation as a focal point for change in their communities, change that will make things better for women and their families. They agree on their aims and objectives, but often debate the direction the organisation should take. Should it attempt to provide income generating opportunities to men as well as women? Should it move beyond its primary role as a producer organisation and take on social programming in the target communities? How should the organisation deal with the issue of child labour? SHARE sets policy based on its objectives, with the primary objective being to give poor women the opportunity to earn a steady income. The organisation has expanded rapidly over the past several years and plans to expand further, taking in more members in nearby villages.²⁴ This growth is, however, horizontal rather than vertical. More women will join SHARE, but the incomes of the existing members are fairly static, due to the low returns to handicrafts production. SHARE is also expanding in terms of its programming, adding on activities like the *balwadi*, the study centres, scholarships for girls to complete high school, a savings club programme to help members who need emergency loans, and a project to help destitute women by providing them with milch cows. Each of these new programmes are a source of spirited debate among executive committee members and craft teachers over priorities and programming strategies.

²⁴See membership table, Appendix B.

The income generating programmes of SHARE also require on-going planning and evaluation as the organisation grows and circumstances change. Direct marketing links with Alternative Trading Organisations (ATOs) in the north are new for SHARE, which previously marketed its products through SIPA. The NGO is now learning at first hand about some of the constraints to marketing handicrafts products abroad, even with sympathetic buyers. SHARE members want to see more orders and more work so they can increase their incomes, but orders from ATOs are not growing and may even start to fall off. SHARE recently hosted a workshop for South Indian producer groups facilitated by OXFAM India to try to find ways to sustain the benefits of their income generation programmes in the context of static or reduced support from northern ATOs which are facing hard times at home and are unable to market all the products of all the producer groups vying for their attention. SHARE is trying to improve its position through experimentation with design, which takes the form of annual design workshops and competitions, a search for new buyers and diversification of its handicrafts activities. A handloom weaving project has recently been started, along with a carpet weaving workshop for women who have been trained but cannot find work in this area.²⁵ Other activities the organisation is considering include production of bandage packs for the CMC and CHAD hospitals, food and sweet production, rattan work, and paper making.

SHARE has a tendency at this point in its development to try to implement every good idea proposed to the executive. This reflects the optimism and the commitment of the women leaders of the NGO. My concern as an observer was whether the organisation and, in particular, its leadership were spreading themselves too thin and thus creating an

²⁵The Indian government has a carpet weaving training course for women in the area where SHARE works. The training takes one full year, during which time the women receive a monthly stipend. After the training, however, they have no equipment and no way to market carpets if they could make them.

unsustainable system based on volunteer time from those with very little time to give. For example, the new tutorial classes for school children take place in the homes of the craft teachers and executive members of the organisation, on their own time. I brought up this issue in a meeting with the teacher/monitors and executive committee. Although the women at first agreed with me that they were becoming overworked, they talked themselves into a different position: "we can do it so we should do it". It remains to be seen how far this volunteerist attitude will carry them. The lack of financial resources for the organisation to implement its many plans is the real limiting factor on this enthusiasm and vision. It may simply not be possible for SHARE to mobilise sufficient resources to take on all the activities they propose.

Membership

When I first visited SHARE, I met with the executive committee to discuss my impressions of the NGO. I commented that I was not sure that SHARE was reaching the poorest women in the villages, that the homes of the women I had visited seemed to indicate a reasonable level of income. The women responded with some surprise and told me that what I was seeing was their progress after years as craft workers, that their relative prosperity was due to SHARE. One woman I had stayed with later took me to visit the home she had lived in when she was first married as a young girl. The difference in living conditions was striking. Her family had clearly increased their standard of living over the years. When I carried out interviews, I visited the homes of many SHARE members and observed a range of living conditions. Some families had consumer goods like television sets and radios, while others had very little. Some lived in mud and thatch houses, others in cement houses.²⁶

²⁶The cement houses were often in government "quarters" - subsidised housing projects for SC communities.

SHARE breaks down its membership, for record keeping and reporting purposes only, into the following groups: SC (Scheduled Caste), MBC (Most Backward Caste), Minority, meaning Muslim, and a category for those who do not fit into any of these groups. In 1995, SC members made up 26 per cent of the total membership of 760, MBC members were 44 per cent, Minority or Muslim women made up 11 per cent and 17 per cent of members fell into the category "other". The remaining two per cent were physically handicapped women whose community was not recorded.²⁷ It is evident from these figures that SHARE reaches women from disadvantaged communities and is reaching out to women with different abilities. Many members are also women in great need due to their status as widows or deserted women, women who must support a family because of male alcoholism, women who must dedicate the income they earn through craft work to the immediate survival needs of themselves and their families.

On one of my visits to SHARE craft centres I met Renuka, a 12-year-old SHARE member who comes to the craft centre to work and to escape her alcoholic father. There are many SHARE members who are young enough to be in school, and child labour is a problem SHARE is just beginning to address. I discussed this issue with Rani, SHARE's elected secretary and one of the NGO leaders who was able to speak some English. Rani was married at 13 and started to work in one of the craft centres soon after. Her point of view is that there are many young girls who need the income from craft work. They often have adult responsibilities, like Renuka who must earn some money for food since her father's money is spent on alcohol. The counter argument is that if children are given the opportunity to earn, some parents who had been sending them to school might decide to pull them out again.²⁸ This issue is not yet resolved in SHARE, and the difficulty of

²⁷See membership table, Appendix B, for raw numbers.

²⁸This point was made by a local NGO activist in an informal discussion with SHARE leaders.

determining a cut-off point between child and adult complicates the discussion, as many of SHARE's leaders, like Rani, have been married and working for income from a very early age.

A portion of SHARE's membership is made up of very young women, often in their late teens, unmarried and living at home, who have come to the organisation for the training and employment in craft work. Trainees receive a monthly stipend and the craft work brings in some money for the family, so these young women are encouraged by their families to become members of SHARE. I often asked the young women working in the craft centres if they would continue the work once they were married. They would laugh and shake their heads, no, or say that it would be up to their husbands. For this segment of the membership, SHARE is not seen as their own organisation, but as a source of short-term employment before marriage (although their experience with the organisation will make it possible for them to return to the craft work if the need arises). These young members are not active in the organisation. Although they may attend large meetings, they do not take part in decision making or planning for the future of the NGO.

The active SHARE members, of every age and from every community, form a distinct group. They express a long term commitment to the organisation and many of them rely on the income for their survival needs. The women I interviewed, widowed women and deserted women who are the heads of their households, young women who must support their parents and brothers and sisters, women with disabilities, spoke of their own futures as tied to SHARE's development. Income, while still the primary reason for working in SHARE, is only one of the benefits they describe: confidence, knowledge, pride, contact with a wider world, companionship, all of these are important results of their membership. These members also take a long-term view of the organisation and have ideas and plans for the future. SHARE should expand its income

generating activities, they told me, it should reach more women, it should help the destitute, provide opportunities for adult education, make affordable credit available to the members.

IV. SHARE's impact: Through the eyes of the craft workers²⁹

I did not set out to study the precise economic impact of membership in SHARE, nor the economic viability of the organisation as a whole, rather I wanted to learn about the impact of the organisation on the lives of the producer members in more general terms, including both economic and social benefits as they are perceived and presented by the SHARE women. During the interviews, women were asked about how and why they became involved in SHARE, what changes they had seen as a result, both as individuals and in their communities, and what was most important about SHARE, in their view.³⁰ The objective of the interview process was to get the members' own perspectives about the impact of their work with the NGO. The criteria for evaluating the organisation's success thus come from the members themselves. Several key elements emerged as important indicators of the impact of SHARE in these women's lives. The four indicators of SHARE's success emphasised most strongly by the members interviewed were: economic security, increased physical mobility, companionship and support in times of trouble, and increased self-confidence.

The economic impact of the NGO is of primary concern to the craft workers. SHARE is first and foremost a means for women to earn a stable income to improve their economic status, and the women reported that they were earning more money, more

²⁹This section is based on the responses to in-depth interviews with eighteen SHARE members, reported in detail in Appendix D. See Section II, on research methods, above, for a discussion of the interview process.

³⁰The guidelines for the interviews are included in Appendix C.

regularly, through SHARE than they had been earning previously as field labourers or in other occupations. Many of these women are the sole support of their families. All are earning income necessary to the well-being, and often the survival, of their families.

"SHARE is important to us because we must earn money to survive" (Interview 7, Appendix D), said one woman. Another simply said, "Before working in SHARE, sometimes I only had one meal a day. I suffered hunger. Today, we eat three meals a day" (Interview 14, *ibid.*).

Several women stressed the fact that part of their earnings goes to pay for the education of their children or sisters and brothers, an important goal especially for those women who had not been able to complete their own schooling. "I want to educate my children. Because of SHARE I can say with confidence that I will be able to educate them" (Interview 11, Appendix D), one woman stated, proudly. When asked what they wanted for their children's future, many of the women explained that they hope their children might get jobs like teacher, nurse, or social worker if they are able to finish school. Another use of the earnings from SHARE is to pay for the marriage of a daughter or sister. Poogazandhi told of how she had earned enough money in SHARE to pay for her younger sister's marriage, and hoped to be able to pay for her own marriage also. Marriage costs can be a heavy burden on families, increasingly so as the practice of dowry marriage becomes accepted among the lower castes of Tamil Nadu (Kapadia, 1995).

The stable income women are able to earn through SHARE is an important reason to join and remain with the organisation, but the nature of the craft work, when compared to outdoor work, also came up in the interviews as a reason to work with SHARE. The women gave several reasons for preferring the craft work. First, craft work is easier than working all day in the fields, and some women had health problems that made field work

impossible. Second, the craft work can be done at home or in the village craft centre while taking care of children. Third, some women reported that they had encountered family resistance to "outside" work, usually meaning some form of outdoor work other than working as a field labourer, a seasonal occupation common to most lower caste women in the villages where SHARE works. For these women, SHARE provides an opportunity for stable, paid work without having to cross the boundaries set by gender norms. However, other women had instead encountered family and/or community resistance to joining SHARE, a departure from the accepted roles for lower caste women in the area. Although the work can be done at home, active membership in SHARE also entails going out to rallies and meetings, visiting other villages and interacting with strangers. The women I spoke to had overcome such resistance and remained with SHARE, but there were also women who had left or had not been able to join the organisation for this reason.

A second impact which many of the women I spoke to emphasised came as a result of those very activities that tended to take women out of their home communities. This was the increased mobility gained through working with SHARE, the ability to move beyond the traditional boundaries circumscribing women to spaces and activities centring on the household. One of the craft teachers described her experience, saying, "Before working in SHARE I couldn't come out of my house, I couldn't walk alone. Now I can go anywhere" (Interview 11, Appendix D). As noted above, some of the women faced family resistance when they joined SHARE, especially if they had to work outside their home villages (for example, Interviews 10 and 14, *ibid.*), but they persevered, with the result that they have pushed back the boundaries within which they can move about freely. They express this in terms of the confidence to go further afield. In the words of one woman, "Before, I was afraid of everything, even to go alone to town. Today that

fear has gone" (Interview 14, *ibid.*). It is ironic that one reason women choose to become craft workers is to work in their homes and in the women's craft centres, not "outside", yet the experience with SHARE actually makes it possible for many women to go further afield. Women still had to consult with husbands, in-laws, fathers and mothers about their movements, but their boundaries had expanded with their work in SHARE.

In addition to physical mobility, the expansion of spatial boundaries, women spoke of other new freedoms they had gained through SHARE. One example was the freedom to sit and work together, sometimes in a semi-public space, such as outside the craft production centre. This change has met with some community resistance, however. Gaining confidence, some of the women work with their legs stretched out comfortably, rather than sitting cross-legged with their legs and feet hidden. A SHARE centre was burnt down by young men who were angry at the women's lack of respect, demonstrated by their failure to assume a correct posture when men passed by. Undoubtedly the men were angered by other aspects of the women's changing behaviour as well. Although this incident illustrates the negative consequences which can accompany shifting gender boundaries, the women I spoke to were proud of their new freedoms and of their own strength and perseverance despite the occasional evidence of backlash.

A third area identified by the women is the impact of SHARE in terms of their access to companionship and support, intangible but important benefits of working with the organisation. "SHARE has brought me friendship and confidence. It is like family for me" (Interview 2, Appendix D) ... "In SHARE, we share our burdens and feel happy together" (Interview 3, *ibid.*) ... "I can forget my burdens, even my illness, and feel happy" (Interview 5, *ibid.*) ... "In SHARE women from all communities work together with friendship" (Interview 2, *ibid.*). When I visited the craft centres, I often found the women sitting together working, with small children sleeping or playing nearby, in

preference to working at home. They told me they preferred to come together for the companionship. They could discuss their problems. One woman told us:

When I first joined SHARE I was very shy. Then I listened to the others talking and sharing their problems. That is how I learned that everyone had problems and difficulties, not only my family. And I learned that we can win over any difficulty (Interview 14, *ibid.*).

SHARE also offers more direct support to members with difficulties. The elected leaders of SHARE take on a counselling role when a woman comes to them with a problem, and sometimes intervene on behalf of the member. Pushpa got help when she did not want to marry the man her father had chosen. The SHARE leaders convinced her father to drop the match. SHARE has also helped women in need with emergency loans, although the NGO is now organising women into village savings clubs to meet this need in the future.

Finally, the women spoke of confidence gained through working in SHARE. In Kempu's words: "I have confidence because of SHARE. I have developed my character and I can speak out; I am never afraid" (Interview 8, Appendix D). Chandra, a widow of the very low status *dhobi* caste, has spoken on the radio about the evils of the dowry system. Others have travelled to distant locations to attend meetings and training activities and to visit other producer organisations. Women from SHARE had hoped to attend the NGO Forum in Beijing in 1995, held in conjunction with the United Nations Conference on Women, but were unable to get funding. This sense of confidence is the key to the expansion of mobility discussed above - it is also at the root of the optimism of SHARE women. Their plans include ambitious projects like expanded and diversified income generating activities, the provision of social services in their home villages, and, as individuals, entering the political fray to contest seats in upcoming village level elections. The new reservation system for women in Indian government (33% of seats at all levels of government) has been publicised by SHARE, but some SHARE women say

they want to run outside the reserved seats and contest even the top spot in the village government.

Other important impacts of SHARE's work emerged from the interviews and discussions, although not so strongly as those four areas dealt with above. For instance, some women argued that SHARE has had an impact on inter-caste tensions in their villages, as women from all poor communities now work together. While women recounted stories of some caste problems encountered in the early days of the organisation, they claimed that these problems have been resolved. As mentioned above, the women proudly assert that "there is no caste in SHARE!" In addition, one woman of a "scheduled" caste community suggested that SHARE has had an impact on caste relations even outside the organisation: "Because some of us now can work in other jobs, like doing the craft work in SHARE, we do not have to work in their fields. Now the landlords must treat us better, because they are afraid no one will work in their fields" (Interview 12, Appendix D). This quotation illustrates the emergence of a hidden discourse around caste-based oppression into an overt form, although it is not linked to any collective action on this issue. The women of SHARE also articulate a female discourse of resistance when they discuss the high rates of alcoholism and family violence in their communities. "We are also poor and we also suffer - just like the men", more than one woman told me, "but we do not drink alcohol and we do not beat anyone up!" However, the resistance implied in this statement is not translated into overt action on the issues of male alcoholism and wife abuse.

SHARE's impact is also significant in terms of establishing links between the NGO and its members and other development organisations at the international level and in the South India region. SHARE markets its products through ATOs including OXFAM U.K. and SELFHELP Crafts, associated with the Mennonite Central

Committee, in the United States. The international links which result from these marketing relationships are important to the NGO. Because of the nature of ATOs, these relationships are deeper than most commercial producer-buyer links would be.

According to the International Federation for Alternative Trade (IFAT):

The majority of ATOs see trade as a development or cooperative activity in its own right, preferring to pay higher prices to producers over making profits. They provide consumers around the world with wholesome, fairly priced products from sustainable sources through just trading relationships. ATOs put fair trade into practice and campaign for more equitable terms of trade for producers. Telling the producers' stories is also an important part of their work (IFAT, 1996).

During my research at SHARE, a group from Mennonite Central Committee, U.S.A. came to visit, to see for themselves how the NGO works and what it has accomplished in the target communities. These types of visits give SHARE members a sense of connection to the distant countries where their products are sold, just as they provide a sense of connection to rural India to the ATO workers and volunteers who come to visit.

At a regional level, SHARE has also established links with other producer organisations and women's groups. SHARE's predecessor, the Edayansathu Women's Co-operative, was a founding member of the Federation of South India Producer Associations, or SIPA, and SHARE retains that status with the regional body. A member of SHARE's executive committee sits on the board of directors of SIPA and takes part in decision making for the federation. SHARE leaders take part in regional training activities organised by SIPA and SHARE members have visited other producer organisations to learn about their work. In the year before my visit to SHARE, the NGO took part in a three-way exchange programme with two other organisations working in rural development and income generation for women. From one NGO the SHARE visitors brought back the idea for the tutorial classes they are now running to help poor

children succeed in the very competitive school examination process. The opportunity to visit other grassroots organisations and NGOs is helpful to SHARE, and the regional links make it possible for organisations to work together on important issues. In 1987, women from the Edayansathu Co-operative joined a state-wide rally for "Women Development", and more recently women's day events at SHARE have been attended by women working with other NGOs and producer groups across the state.

The women I interviewed and those I spoke to informally all stressed the positive aspects of SHARE. When asked about problems and weaknesses of the organisation, they told me about problems they had encountered in the past and how those problems had been overcome, but did not speak critically about the organisation in its present form. In a focus group meeting with SHARE's craft teachers, one woman explained that they preferred to look at things in a positive light and that to criticise SHARE was only to criticise themselves. This sense of ownership of the NGO was reflected in the comments of most of the members I spoke to, part of the strong collective identity of SHARE women. Those who did not express ownership, who spoke of SHARE more as an employer than as their own organisation, still refrained from criticising the organisation.³¹ However, frank discussions with SHARE leaders and staff did reveal limitations to SHARE's strategy, limitations which also emerge from the subtexts of the interviews.

First, the direct economic impact of SHARE is limited. Members earned an average of about 25 Rupees per day in 1995, according to SHARE records. This is comparable to what women can earn working on construction crews (Ramakrishnan, 1996), although the craft workers may work shorter hours and certainly do less exhausting work in better physical conditions. Some SHARE members report earning

³¹This may be due, in part, to the presence of a SHARE staff person as my interpreter, and to a perception of my own connection with SHARE's leadership, as noted above.

about 1000 Rupees in one month, about 30 Rupees per day, but this always includes the labour of other family members who help with the craft work.

One factor limiting the incomes of SHARE members is the low return on handicrafts activity. The early craft groups organised by CHAD trained women in several activities, including palm leaf work, sisal fibre work and mat weaving. The mat weaving has since been abandoned because the product, sold in local markets, brought in very little money. Sisal fibre work is still done in a few craft centres, but it is the palm leaf work, marketed through alternative trading channels, that brings in the best income for the producer. However, even for palm leaf work the unit price cannot be high as the fair trade shops in the North, usually run by NGOs, must compete with commercial outlets. At the producer end of the spectrum, many NGOs and co-operatives in South India and world-wide are in competition for orders from the ATOs. Although in principle the ATOs are committed to provide fair wages, in reality this competition among producer groups can only depress prices and the incomes of individual producers. Thus, while the ATO networks do provide producer groups like SHARE with a better deal than they could otherwise get for handicrafts products, it may be only marginally better.

It may also be unsustainable. Some of the ATOs intend their support to producer organisations like SHARE to be phased out over time, as the local producers gain strength and become economically self-sufficient. While this may be possible in some cases, producers like SHARE may not be able to find commercial markets for the same products they now sell to ATOs. In addition, some ATOs that buy from SHARE are now reducing their orders due to poor economic conditions in their home countries.³² For

³²Information on the state of alternative trading networks is largely drawn from the discussion at a workshop, organised and facilitated by OXFAM India, for South Indian producer groups which market their products through OXFAM. The workshop was hosted by SHARE in April, 1996.

these reasons, SHARE is now exploring the possibilities for new income generating activities which would be oriented to the local market, but which would bring in a satisfactory return.

Limits to the incomes of the craft workers result in a situation where the organisation is able to grow horizontally, in membership, but not vertically, in sustained improvements to standard of living. And as membership grows, the NGO must expand its sales even to maintain current income levels. SHARE members want to see more orders for the palm leaf products they are already making, or new activities with better returns and more scope for growth. Some members hope their daughters will work in SHARE in the future. These women want to see the organisation find ways to ensure its income generating activities are sustainable and bring in a good income for craft workers.

Social impacts, such as increased mobility and decision making power for women, also have limitations imposed by the trade-offs women must make in order to achieve such gains. One way that SHARE women have found it possible to increase their mobility is by establishing a good reputation. A member discussing the benefits for women who "come out and work" in SHARE says: "Some young girls in SHARE told their families they were going to work, but they went to the cinema in town instead. We should not do these things; we must have a good character" (Interview 3, Appendix D). This need to maintain a "good character", an extra high standard of morality, is a trade-off SHARE women must make to change the boundaries of their physical and social mobility. Shanti has learned to do her work in a way that will not cause problems for her family. Following the advice of other SHARE members, she always goes home early when her husband is away. When he is at home, she can work a little later. "This way, no one can talk", she told us. "I have learned this understanding in SHARE" (Interview 14, Appendix D). Again, SHARE members find ways to curtail the rumours that

accompany their movement outside the household domain, but at the cost of accepting new limits, a new boundary to their range of mobility.

The limitations to the economic and social impact of SHARE are accompanied by some negative consequences associated with SHARE's role as an agent of change in the villages near Vellore. The stories of community resistance to the early craft groups, of women prevented from meeting in temples and forced out of rented meeting space, of the burning of one craft centre by young men who were offended by the craft workers' lack of respect, are evidence that the presence of SHARE has been a source of tension in the target villages. The women I spoke to represented all these incidents as resolved, commenting that "now we face no restrictions, no quarrels, for our work - the men no longer try to discourage us" (Interview 9, Appendix D). It seems unlikely, however, that all such problems lie behind SHARE. One young member reported that she still faces harassment for going outside her home village to work, and that other women in her village are not able to join SHARE because of the negative view of women who cross that boundary. SHARE operates on the principle, one that I share, that it is better to bring women out of their isolation, and to weather the ensuing period of tension. The positive impact outweighs the negative, but the negative impact cannot be altogether discounted.

The tension around SHARE's role in the community brings up the issue of who has been excluded from the organisation. Women may be excluded from participation in SHARE due to family disapproval of the way the organisation operates. This might take the form of verbal discouragement, the refusal of permission to join by a person in authority, a father, husband or mother-in-law, or the threat or reality of physical abuse. Many of the women interviewed spoke of convincing a husband or father to give permission, over objections that the women should not be going "outside" to earn money. Within SHARE, it can also be difficult for women to take on responsibilities like working

on the executive committee. One member of the current executive faces tension in her home about the amount of time she is expected to give to the organisation. Women's home responsibilities thus also may exclude them from full participation in SHARE.

In conclusion, in the eyes of the women members, SHARE's impact is a positive one. Women are able to earn a more stable income through craft work than in the fields. They report gains in terms of mobility, of companionship and solidarity and of increased self-confidence. However, these gains are limited by the low economic returns for craft work and by the insecurity inherent in SHARE's dependence on distant markets. The income generating activities that form the core of SHARE's operations may not be sustainable in the long run and cannot support an ever-increasing membership. The social impact of SHARE is limited by the trade-offs that must be made to achieve the gains. SHARE is determined to overcome these challenges and has shown itself to be a problem-solving organisation, but the structural nature of some of the obstacles facing the organisation demand different kinds of solutions than those available to a single NGO, however committed to the empowerment of women. Chapter Five takes up the analysis of SHARE's role in the struggle for emancipatory development, arguing that it can best be characterised as a "limited empowerment" organisation, and draws on the empirical example of SHARE to illustrate some of the weaknesses and limitations of the economic empowerment strategy as a whole.

Chapter 5

The Struggle for Emancipatory Development: "Limited Empowerment"

This chapter evaluates SHARE's role in the struggle for emancipatory development. Section I explores the organisation's transition from an outsider-initiated poverty alleviation organisation to a membership-based economic empowerment organisation, drawing on the theoretical framework elaborated in Chapter Two. The second section looks at the empowerment gains made by SHARE and relates this to the case for economic empowerment presented in Chapter Three. Section III turns to the critical view of economic empowerment and identifies some of the limitations of SHARE's strategy. Section IV describes SHARE as a "limited empowerment" organisation, drawing together the central argument of this paper, that economic organising is a valuable but limited strategy, contributing to the process of emancipatory development but not, as its advocates suggest, sufficient on its own to address the barriers to women's empowerment.

I. SHARE: A Transition From Poverty Alleviation to Empowerment

SHARE has made a transition away from the poverty alleviation strategy of the original handicrafts project implemented by CHAD (see Chapter Four, section III) to a strategy more consistent with the empowerment approach, outlined in Chapter Two (section II). Several characteristics of this approach, drawn from the various theorists quoted in Chapter Two, can be used to evaluate SHARE's transition to empowerment: the articulation of empowerment goals, the focus on practical gender needs as the means to reach strategic gender interests, an attempt to achieve participatory/democratic organisational structures, a reliance on the vision and resistance of oppressed peoples, and the formation of networks and alliances to work collectively towards emancipatory

development (Batliwala, 1994; Moser 1993; Parpart, 1995; Sen and Grown, 1987).¹ In addition, the systems of classification for voluntary organisations and women's organisations, put forward by Korten and by the DAWN authors respectively (Chapter Two, Section V), are applied to evaluate SHARE's potential as an increasingly autonomous women's organisation.

SHARE's predecessor, the handicrafts project implemented by CHAD, exemplifies the anti-poverty approach to women's development outlined in Moser's (1993) WID framework (Chapter Two, section II). While revealing a recognition of the need to address women's disadvantaged situation, the implementation of the crafts project shows that poverty, rather than gender subordination, was seen as the central problem and women's lack of access to employment was the causal factor identified by CHAD. In addition, the goal of the intervention was instrumental rather than emancipatory; women's economic advancement was seen as the key to promoting other development goals, especially the health-related goals which are central to CHAD's mandate, in the rural communities near Vellore. The intervention was aimed at addressing women's *material condition*, and that of their families, not women's *position* in their local communities. With the formation of the Edayansathu Women's Co-operative, this limited approach began to broaden to include an emphasis on women as leaders and managers of their own organisation, a move from a paternalistic to a more democratic structure. Despite this shift, the basic goals of the new co-operative remained the same as those of the earlier project: increased access to income for poor, rural women, in order to achieve poverty alleviation and improvements in the social conditions in the target villages.

¹The empowerment approach encompasses a wide diversity of women's organisations and women's movements and thus cannot be codified or reduced to a simple list of characteristics. The elements identified here are neither exhaustive nor definitive.

However, during the decade-long life span of the co-operative society, elected leaders began to take on more responsibility within the organisation. Consequently, it began to shift away from the instrumental poverty alleviation goals inherited from the CHAD handicrafts project and to replace them with more empowerment-oriented objectives. Today, SHARE has developed into an economic empowerment organisation which centres its activities around income generation for women, but articulates long term empowerment goals, summed up in the organisation's own phrase: "Women Development". This goal includes both women's practical needs, primarily income but also other needs such as child care, health services, and access to credit, as well as a range of social change objectives which address some of the strategic interests of the poor, lower caste and Muslim rural women who make up the General Body of the organisation - greater mobility, greater decision making power, more economic opportunities, more political representation, more respect, changes to the caste system. With the incorporation of these objectives, SHARE has become an empowerment organisation, but its vision remains a partial one in the context of the larger empowerment project.

SHARE's "Women Development" does not include factors such as changes in household responsibilities, freedom from gender violence (although there is some discussion of this issue, initiated by SHARE's co-ordinator), or changes to economic structures. It seems to connote a liberal approach, similar to the equity strand of WID (Moser, 1993), aimed at changing women's access to opportunities without making fundamental changes in gender ideologies or economic and political structures. The strategies the organisation employs to achieve this goal tend to fall into the category of education for change - rallies and speeches, public debates and workshops - strategies which aim to shift public opinion in order to create an enabling environment for women, changing gender boundaries but not addressing the underlying ideologies upon which

they are based. SHARE can thus be best termed a "limited empowerment" organisation, a point elaborated in section IV, below.

The transformation from an outside-initiated craft project to an autonomous women's organisation has been a gradual one and it is not yet complete, as SHARE still relies on the former manager of the co-operative, now the NGO's co-ordinator, to take an active role in both on-going management of the economic enterprise and goal setting for the NGO. However, it is a process well underway as leaders elected from among the craft workers are now empowered to take management and policy decisions for the organisation. The decision-making process includes consultation with an advisory committee, as well as with their co-ordinator and other staff members, but the women leaders express their own opinions and incorporate their own priorities into the organisation.

Nor is SHARE a fully democratic organisation, although the development of internal democracy is also well underway. At present, the elected executive all belong to the group of appointed teacher/monitors who manage SHARE's village production centres. These are some of the more educated women among SHARE's membership, some with eight to ten years of schooling, and they are also the members who have received the highest level of training within the organisation. SHARE has already made an effort to ensure some diversity of representation among the executive, making it a policy to include at least one member from the minority Muslim community. In addition, the current executive is discussing ways to increase the representativeness of its successor committee, in particular by including women who do not belong to the group of craft teachers. SHARE has also established a process for dialogue between the membership and the leadership with the craft teachers acting as liaisons, bringing information from the leadership to the members and reporting to the leaders concerns and issues which arise in their local centres.

As it becomes more democratic and more self-reliant, SHARE is also developing into a problem-solving organisation. One of the best examples of this is evident in the decision to form the NGO, SHARE, to replace the women's co-operative. This decision was taken in order to escape the extreme levels of government intervention in the co-operative sector, culminating in the enforced cessation of elections and the imposition of government managers on all co-operatives in the state. The decision to re-invent the women's organisation as an NGO, retaining many aspects of the co-operative structure but taking the opportunity to re-visit the organisation's vision and goals, indicates a high degree of creativity and energy. Since the formation of the NGO, SHARE has been able to find allies within the government, enabling the organisation to avoid the pressure to pay bribes while maintaining its decision-making autonomy. SHARE and its predecessors have also exhibited a problem-solving capacity as they have encountered community resistance to the activities of the women's organisation, most notably the burning of one of the craft centres, and the organisation has been able to deal with this resistance in a positive fashion, meeting with male community members to discuss their concerns, but continuing the work of the organisation.

From the above discussion, SHARE emerges as an increasingly autonomous, increasingly democratic, grassroots organisation which articulates empowerment goals, but approaches the empowerment process through a focus on practical needs, especially income. The empowerment approach is also characterised by a reliance on the vision and resistance of oppressed peoples (Parpart, 1995). In SHARE, the emergence of a collective identity of SHARE members, discussed in more detail in the following section of this chapter, is bringing out the particular vision, and elements of the discourse of resistance, of the women craft workers. While this resistance has yet to translate itself into collective action, the transition to group-overt resistance described by Agarwal (1994a), the potential for such a transition is present.

Finally, the criteria for SHARE's inclusion in the empowerment approach set out at the head of this section also include the formation of networks and alliances to work collectively towards overall empowerment (Sen and Grown, 1987). SHARE is part of an emerging network of grassroots producer groups in South India, and has begun to establish connections with organisations farther afield, like the ATOs through which it markets its products. The regional network, like SHARE itself, is beginning articulate empowerment goals (SIPA, 1993), and to take on a limited advocacy role, for instance, working to improve the situation for co-operatives in Tamil Nadu (Panchaksharam, 1995 and 1996). This is a promising beginning and establishes the potential for on-going grassroots-based organising at the regional level.

In Korten's terms, SHARE's transition from poverty alleviation to empowerment has been accompanied by a transition from a VO (voluntary organisation) project to an increasingly autonomous PO (people's organisation), representing the self-identified interests of its membership (1990). This type of democratic, grassroots organisation is the basis of the empowerment approach (Batliwala, 1994; Parpart, 1995). In DAWN's terminology, SHARE has evolved from an donor created organisation² to an issue-based grassroots women's organisation, without the middle-class, urban bias that Sen and Grown attribute to many of the explicitly feminist organisations in this category (1987). This type of organisation, argue Sen and Grown, has considerable empowerment potential, a potential demonstrated in SHARE's case by the achievement of a range of empowerment gains, discussed below.

SHARE's origins in the CHAD handicrafts project reflect what Korten has called second generation NGO strategies, or community development strategies, described in Chapter Two, above. Korten writes that: "Second generation strategies focus the

²Although the organisation did not owe its existence to any large donor agency, it came into being through the active influence of the local parent NGO, CHAD.

energies of the NGO on developing the capacities of the people to better meet their own needs through self-reliant local action" (1990: 118). The craft groups fit this mold, relying on skills training and village level organising to help women to "meet their own needs". However, in order to become fully self-reliant, to fully realise the potential of the community development approach, the income generation project had to be turned over to the craft workers. CHAD set out to do this through the formation of the Edayansathu Women's Co-operative, which later became SHARE.

The role of the parent NGO as a "mobiliser" fits Korten's description of second generation NGO strategies. CHAD successfully organised poor women in the target area and supported them in the formation of an increasingly autonomous grassroots women's organisation, promoting the second generation goals of sustainable, self-reliant local development. Some of the limitations which make SHARE a "limited empowerment" organisation, discussed below, are also predicted in Korten's model. He argues that the "empowerment-oriented organizing efforts of most NGOs are too limited and fragmented to make any consequential or lasting impact on these larger structures [national and international systems]" (1990: 120). SHARE has not made a transition to what Korten calls third generation strategies which "focus on creating a policy and institutional setting that facilitates, rather than constraining, just, sustainable and inclusive local development action" (ibid. 121). Korten's generational theory, while it contributes an important insight in terms of the limited potential of community development, is inadequate to fully analyse the case of SHARE, however, as it focuses on the initiating VO (CHAD) rather than on the resulting PO (SHARE) and pays inadequate attention to the need for on-going organising at the grassroots level. SHARE is more appropriately evaluated on the basis of the goals and predictions of the economic empowerment approach, a task taken up in the following sections of this chapter.

II. SHARE and the Case for Economic Empowerment

This section evaluates SHARE on the basis of the dual goals of the economic empowerment approach, discussed in detail in Chapter Three. The first goal is to meet women's practical needs through economic organising. The second goal, expected by the advocates of economic empowerment to emerge organically from economic organising activities, is a movement towards women's overall empowerment (Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala, 1996). They predict the emergence of women's collective action to confront local injustice and, eventually, to alter broader structures of oppression. SHARE has achieved the first goal, although there are some limitations to its economic strategy, discussed in section III, below. The second goal is more difficult to evaluate. SHARE has brought about some important empowerment gains, but the predicted shift to women's collective action to directly confront the structures of their oppression has not emerged.

The empowerment gains achieved by SHARE are similar to those described by the authors of the case studies collected by Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala (1996) to prove their thesis that economic empowerment is the most effective route to overall empowerment for women in South Asia. Economic security, increased physical mobility, group solidarity, with the attendant benefits of companionship and mutual support, and increased self-confidence are the four indicators of SHARE's success emphasised most strongly by the members interviewed (Appendix D). There is also some indication that the NGO is having an impact on the caste hierarchy within the villages where it works, as lower caste women now have a new economic opportunity open to them and may choose whether or not to work in the fields of the landowners.³ The strength of the women's

³Economic necessity still ensures that virtually all of the craft workers do some field work at harvest time.

organisation itself and its growing linkages in the region and internationally also indicates a potential for greater empowerment gains in the future.

The gains made by SHARE can be divided into two categories: process level gains, those that establish the basis for further empowerment, such as self-confidence and solidarity, and gains that represent a movement towards the final goals of empowerment, such as increased mobility for women, challenges to the existing gender norms which oppress women, and positive change to the caste structures which oppress lower caste women and men. Economic gains could be placed in both of these categories, as they represent the fulfilment of women's practical needs, a basic requirement for empowerment, and also result in some direct empowerment effects, improving women's security and independence within the household and community.

The mechanisms which have enabled SHARE women to make empowerment gains are threefold. First, the improvements in women's economic status and employment options have resulted in some direct gains for individual members. Second, the way SHARE is organised and the ways in which it carries out its activities require women to go beyond the boundaries of their home villages and to take on leadership and management roles at various levels in the organisation. These new roles are having an impact on women's position in their communities. Third, the women of SHARE have developed a strong collective identity which makes use of aspects of the dominant ideologies around gender to legitimate and promote these changes to women's position.

Improvements in women's economic status have led directly to some empowerment gains for SHARE women. However, as discussed in Chapter Four, section I, lower caste women in Tamil Nadu have as part of their gender role the responsibility to provide for their families (Mencher, 1988; Kapadia, 1995), and therefore most of the women who are now SHARE members worked for income before the formation of the

craft groups, generally as field labourers.⁴ The improvements in economic status which have come as a result of the craft work take the form of a more stable income and a modest increase in pay compared to field work. Craft work is also an important source of employment for women who are unable, or no longer able, to work in the fields due to ill health or disabilities, the case for a number of the women interviewed.

Women in the study area do generally have a measure of control over their own incomes, from craft work and from other sources, with the proviso that there is a cultural expectation that they will spend the money on their families. The impact of the cash income is thus not so dramatic as that described by some of the authors of the case studies in *Speaking Out* (Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala, 1996). Women did not report a significant change in their position within the household, although some women mentioned that their husbands now help them with some of their domestic chores, nor did they report a reduction in violence in the home.⁵ What several women did describe was the process of convincing their husbands to allow them to work in SHARE, and the resulting acceptance of their new role as members of a women's organisation, together with the required mobility outside the village, because of the economic benefits to the family. This shows that most women still need family permission, from father, husband, or in-laws, to join SHARE, but that once they have become members of the NGO the economic benefits ensure that they will not lose this permission. This is a limited empowerment gain but nonetheless a real one as women, through their increased earning power, are able to participate in "outside" activities as SHARE members.

⁴Muslim women in the study area face stricter norms around seclusion than do the lower caste Hindu women who make up the majority of the NGO's membership. For these women, access to employment may have a more marked impact.

⁵The study data do not indicate a negative impact from women's improved incomes, however, a possibility raised by some of the critics of the economic empowerment approach, as discussed in Chapter Three, above.

Another empowerment gain for women resulting from the income provided by the craft work is the safety net effect. Although women in lower caste communities in South India generally contribute a larger proportion of their earnings to the household than men do, men's contributions often total larger amounts, due to their higher incomes (Mencher, 1988). It is difficult for a family to survive on a single income from a woman field labourer, and women who are widowed or deserted, and their dependants, often face extreme hardship. Added to this is their low status in the study region, as throughout India. With SHARE as a source of employment, however, these women are able to earn a steady income which is sufficient to support themselves and their families. In addition, the self-respect and confidence which the SHARE women emphasise as an important impact of their membership in the NGO indicates that SHARE acts as an alternate source of status for women. Similarly, the alternative employment provided by SHARE has had some impact on the caste hierarchy in SHARE villages, making lower caste women less dependent on local landowners for their subsistence. The landowners, reported one woman, must now treat the lower caste women with more respect if they want them to work in the fields.

The above discussion focuses on the gains which are directly related to the stable incomes earned by the craft workers. Empowerment gains have also resulted, largely unplanned, from the way SHARE operates, that is, from their particular form of economic organising. The elected leaders of the organisation have taken on a public role uncommon for lower caste women in rural Tamil Nadu. They have developed skills as managers, as public speakers, as counsellors and advocates for women in need, and as decision makers. Although this group represents only a small proportion of SHARE's membership, often those with the best education, the benefits should spread outward over time. As noted above, SHARE's current leadership is examining ways to ensure a wider representation of the membership in the next executive, and there already exists a policy

to ensure that the executive committee includes at least one member from the minority Muslim community.

A second gain which has resulted from SHARE's activities as a women's organisation is increased mobility for the women members, an indicator of empowerment reported almost uniformly by the authors of the case studies collected by Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala (1996). This expansion of available space has been necessary for the NGO's work, as SHARE members take on responsibilities in town, travel to meetings in the state capital, and even attend trainings as far afield as New Delhi, in the north. This transition to greater mobility has come about almost by accident, as the women carry out the work of SHARE, but it is also perceived as one of the greatest benefits SHARE women have achieved. It is again a variable benefit, accruing disproportionately to the elected leaders, the craft teachers and monitors and to a few women who are particularly active in the organisation. These are the women whose activities have taken them the farthest afield. However, the majority of SHARE members have also begun to travel alone beyond their own villages to attend events and meetings or to visit other craft centres.

To bring about this expansion of mobility, the women working in SHARE have had to find ways to shift the cultural boundaries which prescribe and proscribe the physical spaces open to them. Like the women traders in Madras city described in Johanna Lessinger's study (1989), they have done so by re-defining these boundaries and by adopting a strict standard of morality in order to minimise conflict over this change. A SHARE leader whose husband is away must be home early, so as not to cause talk. Young SHARE members should not go to the cinema in town, as this would show that they are abusing their privileges. The boundaries to women's mobility have expanded, but only to a limited extent, and the price of maintaining them at their new level is "good behaviour". This is not to deny the importance of this gain to the SHARE women;

however, this increased mobility should not be seen as breaking out of the constraints of seclusion, only as a promising but limited redefinition of those constraints.

The third mechanism which has brought about empowerment gains for the craft workers has been the development of group solidarity, manifested in the emergence of a collective identity of "SHARE women". This sense of a common identity was one of the most striking findings arising from the field work. The same words and phrases came up again and again during interviews and informal discussions, often framed in the collective: "We can forget our troubles in SHARE...SHARE is like our own family...We must work hard to bring the organisation forward" (Appendix D). The members of SHARE have a strong sense of common purpose and an accompanying sense of strength in their collectivity, one result of which has been to move an existing discourse of gender and caste resistance into the open. Women discuss male alcoholism and violence, articulate their own experience of oppression and affirm women's strong role as family providers. They also discuss the impact of caste in their lives, and proudly state that "there is no caste in SHARE", a development which has taken some struggle within the group to make a change from the early days when inter-caste tensions did divide the organisation. SHARE members have also faced, and dealt with, tension in their communities around the ways in which the women's organisation has challenged gender norms. They say that no one criticises them openly today because their organisation has grown so strong, although the ways in which the women go out of their way to make their changing roles acceptable in their communities is also a factor, discussed below.

Part of the collective identity of SHARE women draws on aspects of dominant ideologies around gender, and thus defuses the tensions around their non-conforming activities. SHARE women present themselves as sacrificing mothers who put aside considerations of modesty in order to work for the benefit of their families. Through this representation, the women are able to gain sanction, rather than censure, for their

activities. SHARE's empowerment goal, "women development", incorporates normative concepts, such as the often repeated phrase: "women should come out of the house and work". Women are seen to have an obligation to take on the uplift of themselves and their families, an aspect of the existing gender role of lower caste women in the study area.⁶ SHARE women have thus redefined their roles and boundaries by using elements of dominant gender ideologies, a form of resistance, but it is the existence of a strong collectivity that has made this re-interpretation of ideology possible.

The solidarity among SHARE women also brings them benefits in terms of companionship and mutual support in times of crisis. This is one of the four areas of impact most emphasised by the women interviewed for the case study. The women spoke of the importance of sitting together to work and to discuss their problems, and of the resulting understanding that many of their problems were common to all. Group support for women in need happens informally, within their village production centres, but has also taken on institutional forms, as SHARE leaders act as counsellors and advocates for women experiencing family problems, and the organisation extends emergency loans to members in need, a function soon to be passed on to the village savings and loan groups which SHARE is organising.

SHARE is now beginning to shift its attention outward from the purely economic activities of the previous craft co-operative, but this shift is taking two diverging directions. The first is revealed in the plans outlined in the previous chapter to extend the NGO's activities into the provision of services within the communities where the organisation is working - to become a welfare provider. This trend, discussed further in the following section, reflects the limitations which constrain the economic organising approach, as well as the limited analysis so far developed within SHARE. The second

⁶Also an aspect of the Gandhian ideology which influences the Indian NGO movement (Hancock, 1995).

direction is towards advocacy on gender issues. This is evidenced by the rallies and events which SHARE organises, such as the recent motivational rallies to inform and mobilise women to take part in the local political process, attended SHARE members and by women and men beyond the NGO's membership base. It is also in evidence as SHARE's leaders discuss the possibility of advocacy around well-publicised rape cases which are a focus for women's movement activity in India (Kumar, 1993). SHARE does not take on direct political action, however, limiting its approach to education and motivation for change, and the organisation is not ready to take on issues closer to home, such as gender violence in their own communities.⁷

SHARE fits the case of the advocates of the economic empowerment strategy quite well in one sense, in that it is similar to the other examples brought forward to prove their thesis that economic organising is the best way to bring about women's empowerment. It has been able to meet women's practical need for employment and income, albeit through a strategy of home-and-workshop-based craft work which may tend to reinforce rather than challenge norms around gender segregation. And it has brought about other empowerment gains in terms of women's mobility, confidence and self-respect, and group solidarity which provides rural women in the study area with a new support system. Some of these gains are direct empowerment gains, others are process gains which may result in further empowerment in the future. However, the predicted shift to women's collective action has not emerged with SHARE so far. The organisation is beginning to take on issues beyond the economic activities on which it is founded, but the tendency is to try to become a service provider, rather than an advocate for change. The analysis of SHARE, while it reveals some important benefits of the economic organising strategy, does not support the case made by the advocates of

⁷SHARE's leaders do try to help individual women who come to them with family problems, through a counselling process.

economic empowerment that this strategy will bring about the overall empowerment of poor women in South Asia.

III. SHARE and the Critical Perspective on Economic Empowerment

The weaknesses of SHARE's approach to women's empowerment derive from some of the same limitations which apply to the economic empowerment strategy as a whole, addressed in Chapter Three, section III. They are imposed by a number of factors, many of them interlinked: 1) the inherent limitations to the handicrafts production strategy which is the centrepiece of SHARE's activities, with implications for the stability and sustainability of the organisation; 2) an emphasis on income and employment which results in inadequate attention to the broader causes of women's disadvantaged status; 3) the limited ability of a small-scale, resource poor NGO to take on issues at the structural level; 4) the tendency of SHARE's role as a source of stable income for rural women, and its projected role as a local welfare provider, to reduce the pressure on local, state, and national governments to address unemployment and provide social services in the rural areas; 5) the uneven and sometimes ambiguous progress on empowerment achieved by SHARE, with progress in some areas counter-balanced by trade-offs in others; and 6) the elusiveness of the transition from economic empowerment to overall empowerment.

It is one of SHARE's stated goals to encourage women to take on non-traditional occupations, such as those experimented by another local NGO which has trained women as welders and masons. However, as SHARE is looking for ways to diversify its income generating activities, it is mainly handicrafts activities that are being suggested and tried out. The reasons for the popularity of handicrafts for women's income generation projects have been discussed earlier in this paper, with the two key factors being ease of entry for individuals and organisations and the influence of gender norms which result in women's preferences for home-based, or women's-workshop-based, work. The

drawbacks to this strategy are the marginal economic gains made by the producers and the tendency to reinforce rather than to challenge the barriers which constrain women's economic opportunities overall.

Both of these drawbacks can be seen in the case of SHARE, where a growing membership results in the horizontal growth of the organisation, without a corresponding vertical growth in terms of improvements to women's incomes. SHARE has already dropped one craft activity, oriented to the local market, because of inadequate returns to labour. The international alternative trade networks with which SHARE has established marketing linkages for the palm leaf products are able to give the organisation a slightly better deal than commercial buyers or local markets, but this connection will not be able to absorb unlimited expansion from SHARE, placing limits on both the organisation's membership and its ability to provide fair wages to the producers in the long term. In addition, the sustainability of the alternative trade connections is questionable, as discussed in the previous chapter. From this perspective, the choice of handicrafts, particularly handicrafts for the export market, is less than satisfactory.

Weaving palm leaf baskets, SHARE's main income earning activity, is not a traditional activity for women in the study area. However, it is an activity which fits the established gender norms regarding women's seclusion as it can be carried out within the home and within the home village. The craft workers do move outside their home villages to attend training events and meetings, resulting in an expansion in mobility as discussed in the preceding section of this chapter, but they continue to express a preference for home-based work. It is possible that SHARE is providing an opportunity for upward mobility among lower caste women, allowing them to reduce their work outside the home in the fields and thus partially conform to the seclusion norms of higher caste communities. The gains made by SHARE workers in terms of mobility are thus somewhat ambiguous given this possible tendency for women to move into a more

restrictive social category through exchanging their field work for craft work. So far, the overall tendency has been towards increased mobility, but it is not possible to predict whether this progress will be sustained, due to the complexity of social pressures involved.

Another drawback to economic empowerment strategies highlighted by the critics is the overemphasis on income and employment which results in inadequate attention to the broader causes of women's disadvantaged status, both ideological and structural. In SHARE, this can be seen in the preoccupation with diversification and strengthening of the economic enterprise. And, while the leadership of the organisation is beginning to discuss ways to address other problems within their communities, the proposed solutions also tend to address symptoms, not root causes. Increased incomes, emergency credit, aid to destitute families, adequate child care, and tutoring for children of poor families are all needed in the study area but they address neither the problem of unequal distribution of resources, internationally and regionally, nor the ideologies of caste and gender which affect the women who work in SHARE. For example, lower caste women's position in the study area is being eroded by factors like the spread of dowry marriages, previously limited to upper caste communities (Kapadia, 1995), a development which increased economic opportunities are unlikely to prevent, and which the craft work may in fact reinforce if it is acting as a path to upward mobility within the caste hierarchy.

A third limitation emphasised by the critics of economic empowerment strategies is the limited ability of a small-scale, resource poor NGO to take on issues at the structural level, one reason for the focus on achievable economic gains. This point is made by Korten (1990) in his discussion of the community development generation of NGO strategies, quoted above. SHARE's response to this limitation has been to turn inward, rather than outward, tacitly acknowledging their inability as a single small-scale

women's organisation to bring about policy level changes.⁸ For example, the desire of the membership to address the inadequate provision of social services by the government, i.e. poor quality education for children of the poor, is met by SHARE leaders taking on the role of volunteer educators. SHARE's projected role as a service provider organisation is also part of this process.

On gender issues, ideological rather than structural in nature, such as dowry marriage, male alcoholism, and wife abuse, the women of SHARE express their disapproval of the status quo. While this indicates the beginning of a positive transition from covert to overt gender resistance, the women have not come together to take action on such issues. Collective action to address issues which concern women at the local level, predicted by the advocates of economic empowerment, has not yet emerged in the SHARE example.

The criticism of the economic organising strategy on the basis that it will tend to reduce the pressure on governments to address unemployment and underemployment and to provide needed social services is not one that is within the scope of the present study to examine empirically. However, SHARE's role as a source of income to over 850 poor women and their families is not insignificant. The gender norms described in the preceding chapter which place the responsibility for family well-being in the hands of the women, together with SHARE's projected role as a local welfare provider, support the critics' position, given the tendency for Third World governments to rely increasingly on women's gendered family responsibilities to offset the neglect of social services prescribed by the international financial institutions (Rakowski, 1995; Moser, 1993; Young, 1993). This is not to suggest that women's organisations should not be

⁸SHARE is linked into a broader network of South Indian NGOs but this network is similarly small and resource poor when confronted with the political and economic structures which oppress poor women and men in the region. The strengthening connections between grassroots organisations through the formation of federations like SIPA is a promising trend, however.

addressing practical needs for income and for social services that are not available in their communities. Rather, it is to emphasise that these can only be elements in a broader strategy of empowerment which would address women's strategic interests.

The uneven and sometimes ambiguous progress on empowerment achieved by SHARE, with progress in some areas counter-balanced by trade-offs in others, has been discussed previously with reference to the gains in women's mobility. There are other gains offset by compromises and trade-offs. Attention to such trade-offs provides a more realistic picture of the constraints and limitations which confront women's organisations than the one painted by the advocates of economic empowerment. In SHARE, economic gains have been achieved at the cost of reinforcing to some extent gender norms around female seclusion. Gains in mobility have been achieved at the cost of conforming to a strict standard of morality, both as individuals and as an organisation. Community resistance has also been overcome by an emphasis on the morality of the women-only worksites and home-based work, family resistance by stressing the woman's role as a "sacrificing mother" who must take up any opportunity to provide for her children. These are aspects of the dominant gender ideology which have been brought to bear in order to make it possible for SHARE to carry out its work, the process of gender resistance based on the re-definition of ideologies, as discussed in Chapter Two. It is a positive process, but one which sets certain limitations on the process of empowerment, reforming rather than rejecting the oppressive ideologies around gender.

Finally, the example of SHARE illustrates the critics' argument challenging the prediction, made by the advocates of economic empowerment, of a transition from economic empowerment to overall empowerment. The data from SHARE show, instead, some important empowerment gains, offset by trade-offs, and limited by the narrow focus of the economic organising strategy. This is the same picture which emerges from a close reading of the cases presented in *Speaking Out* (Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala, 1996). While

some examples of economic organising show broader empowerment gains than SHARE, still a young organisation in its new form as a women's NGO, this is not sufficient evidence to prove the case that economic empowerment should be adopted as the lead strategy for women's empowerment in South Asia. Rather, the cases, including SHARE, serve to emphasise some of the limitations, as well as the strengths of this strategy.

IV. Limited Empowerment

From the above discussion of SHARE's case, in the context of the debate over approaches to women's empowerment, it seems appropriate to term SHARE a "limited empowerment" organisation. Through economic organising, SHARE has accomplished a shift from poverty alleviation to economic empowerment and achieved a range of important empowerment gains for the women members of the organisation, but the limitations to the approach taken by SHARE, detailed in the previous section, have prevented the organisation from making a transition to a full empowerment process.

While the women of SHARE have begun to publicly articulate their resistance to caste and gender oppression (in SHARE meetings and events, in radio interviews, and in discussions with outsiders), this has not resulted in the collective action to address these problems, the group-overt resistance which Agarwal (1994a) argues is necessary to bring about lasting change. It may contribute to a developing a potential for such action in the future; however, SHARE's present tendency to turn inward and look for solutions based on local self-reliance reduces the likelihood of such a shift. Likewise, the regional network of NGOs and other POs to which SHARE belongs creates a potential for future action to address structural issues, but this potential is so far constrained by the undeveloped nature of the group consciousness required to take on such a concerted effort.

SHARE's situation is unique, shaped by its particular history and circumstances, but it shares many features with the economic empowerment cases presented in the collection, *Speaking Out* (Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala, 1996). The empowerment gains of increased economic security, mobility, group solidarity, and confidence are also reported by the authors of those case studies. From this evidence they argue that the economic empowerment approach is the best approach to work towards the full empowerment of poor women in South Asia. However, as is evident in the case of SHARE, this approach has some significant drawbacks and limitations. Thus, the evidence suggests that economic organising, even with the explicit articulation of empowerment goals, is not an adequate strategy for women's empowerment in the South Asian context, or, by extrapolation, elsewhere in the world. It is a promising approach to addressing the immediate concerns of poor women, while making some important empowerment gains, and can therefore be considered an element in the struggle for emancipatory development, but it is neither the only nor the best approach. Economic empowerment should be complemented by other approaches which emphasise deepening the analysis of poor women and men about their oppression, and transforming existing individual-covert forms of resistance into group-overt forms. This requires a process which shares with economic empowerment the emphasis on group formation and grounding organisation in practical needs, but which also sets out to find ways to challenge the structures of oppression more directly. This more complex approach to empowerment should also incorporate political action at all levels of society if it is to bring about the radical vision of emancipatory development.

V. Summing Up

Theorists who adopt the empowerment approach to women's development emphasise the promise of grassroots women's organisations in the struggle for

emancipatory development. SHARE's case indicates some limitations, both to the economic empowerment approach which is the focus of this paper and to the empowerment approach in general, as the real life context which surrounds SHARE tends to constrain the potential of this grassroots organisation. SHARE's vision of "Women Development" - encompassing greater mobility, greater decision making power, more economic opportunities, more political representation, more respect, changes to the caste system - does not translate into action on all these issues. The organisation is instead moving towards a role as a local service provider, addressing the symptoms, but not the causes, of caste and gender oppression. And its goal of "women development" is restricted to a liberal view of the need to expand women's opportunities in the economic and political arenas, rather than addressing structural and ideological sources of oppression. Factors which act to prevent the emergence of a more radical approach include the strength of the local ideologies which construct gender, SHARE's strategy of making use of aspects of these dominant ideologies to legitimate its activities, and the small size and lack of resources which characterise both the organisation itself and the local networks to which it belongs.

Despite these limitations, SHARE also demonstrates the potential of grassroots women's organising around economic activities. It has had a positive impact on the economic and social status of the more than 850 women who work in the organisation, according to the assessment of some of the women members themselves (see Appendix D, Interview Data). These members also describe the role of SHARE in strengthening their self-respect, their confidence, and their group consciousness, as they begin to articulate a collective vision for the future and to express their resistance to aspects of caste and gender oppression. SHARE's connection to a regional network of grassroots producer groups and to the international NGO community, through its alternative trading links, is also a promising feature of the organisation. Sen and Grown (1987) see many

types of grassroots women's organisations, coming together in broadly based networks and alliances, as central to the achievement of their alternative vision of development. SHARE has the potential to become part of this process, in time, if its membership and leadership maintain the commitment articulated by one member: "[t]o remove women's slavery, to build women's solidarity!" (Appendix D, Interview 8).

Chapter 6

Conclusions

This paper has argued that women's economic organising at the grassroots level can contribute to emancipatory development, a development process premised on empowerment rather than modernisation, but that this economic empowerment approach has some significant limitations and should be seen as only one element in a broader empowerment strategy. In the platform document of the DAWN project, Gita Sen and Caren Grown argue that the income generation approach to women's empowerment is inadequate and that there is a need for "long-term systematic strategies aimed at challenging prevailing structures and building accountability of governments to people for their decisions" (1987: 82). These long-term strategies are likewise inadequate if they neglect the immediate needs of poor women and men. Bringing together these two types of strategies, economic empowerment and strategies for systemic change, provides a more holistic and promising approach to the empowerment project.

Economic empowerment is one of four different approaches to women's empowerment in South Asia outlined in Chapter Two. The integrated development and economic empowerment approaches focus on women's practical needs, while the consciousness raising approach shifts the focus to strategic interests. Political action, the fourth approach, is often organised around women's practical needs, but it has the potential, when integrated with an analysis developed through consciousness raising, or when it operationalises women's hidden resistance to gender subordination, to address strategic interests more directly than any of the other three approaches. There is thus a need for some synthesis of these four approaches to develop a more comprehensive empowerment model. The major flaw in the case made by the advocates of the economic

empowerment approach, presented in Chapter Three, is their contention that this approach can alone bring about women's overall empowerment.

Economic organising has served as a means to bring about empowerment gains for the members of SHARE, a small-scale women's producer organisation operating in rural Tamil Nadu, South India. In fact, it is through economic organising that SHARE has emerged as a membership-based empowerment organisation, growing beyond its original form as a poverty alleviation organisation initiated from outside. SHARE now articulates women's empowerment goals, including increased mobility, decision making power, and political representation. The key to this transition has been the transfer of power from outside the organisation to an internally elected leadership. As SHARE develops its autonomy and its democratic structure its potential as a local empowerment organisation will be further strengthened. However, SHARE operates under a complex set of constraints which set limits to this potential.

The impact of SHARE, as described by the women craft workers, includes four major elements. The first is the economic impact, which takes the form of a slightly increased and more stable income for most SHARE members, previously field labourers. This is the primary reason for women to become involved with the NGO, and it results in empowerment gains as women are able to expand the range of choices open to them and their families, often putting the income to work to educate their children or to have more say in the arrangement of their own marriages. The income also acts as a safety net for women who are widowed or deserted by their husbands and for women who are ill or disabled and cannot do field work. Second, the women stressed the importance of the increased mobility which they have gained through their work in SHARE. Membership in the women's organisation has brought women out of their home villages to attend meetings and events, and, for the women who take on leadership roles within the organisation, to carry out responsibilities in town or further afield. This is a somewhat

ambiguous gain, however, since the home-based nature of the craft work also creates a tendency to limit women's mobility, and is perhaps encouraging upward mobility within the caste hierarchy, to the craft workers' future detriment. Companionship and mutual support is the third area of impact which the SHARE members described. Working together in the craft production centres, the women say that they can share their troubles and find ways to help one another. This happens informally, at the village level, and also more formally through the counselling role of SHARE's leadership. Finally, the SHARE women report increased self-confidence and self-respect as an impact of their membership in the NGO. Beyond these four principal areas of impact, SHARE also appears to be having an impact on caste hierarchies within the study area, and it has established linkages with other social change organisations at the local, regional, national and international levels, linkages which create a potential for SHARE to address issues which are beyond the scope of a small organisation acting in isolation.

SHARE's empowerment gains have been achieved through the interaction of three mechanisms: the direct impact for individual women and their families of increased economic security; the impact of organising which has brought women outside their home villages and placed village women in positions of authority and leadership within the organisation; and the development of group solidarity, together with a collective identity as SHARE women, an identity which draws on aspects of dominant caste and gender ideologies to legitimate the ways in which SHARE's activities challenge those same ideologies. The advocates of the economic organising approach to women's empowerment suggest that group solidarity will result in collective action to address women's oppression, a transition from individual-covert to group-overt forms of resistance. Such resistance has not emerged in the SHARE example.

Some of the limitations and drawbacks to SHARE's approach are inherent in the very mechanisms which have enabled the organisation to achieve its empowerment goals.

The economic impact of the craft work is limited by the marginal nature of this activity and the dependence on outside markets with a low potential for expansion. The process of redefining gender ideologies in order to achieve and consolidate empowerment gains, especially in terms of women's mobility, sets its own limitations as the newly defined boundaries continue to constrain women's economic activities and the underlying ideological rationale for women's seclusion is not challenged. Making use of the current norm of women's responsibility for family maintenance in order to legitimate new roles for the women members of SHARE reinforces this gender role, tending to increase, rather than decrease, women's burden of work. Similarly, it can be argued that women's organisations like SHARE may take the pressure off local and national governments to provide adequate social services in the rural areas, as such organisations are finding ways to fill this gap. Finally, the tensions caused by the ways in which the organisation does challenge local gender norms also serve to limit the extent to which SHARE women can change their situation, as they make compromises to defuse tensions and resolve conflict.

It is perhaps due to the limitations and constraints described above that SHARE has developed a liberal approach to women's development, emphasising the need for economic independence and acting as advocate for change around certain factors which constrain women's economic activities, changing the boundaries imposed by the local ideologies of gender without attempting to make fundamental changes to those ideologies or to the economic and political structures which adversely affect the poor, rural women who make up the organisation's membership. SHARE is thus a "limited empowerment" organisation.

SHARE's experience illuminates both the potential and the drawbacks of an economic organising strategy for women's empowerment. It supports the central argument of this paper, that economic empowerment is itself a limited strategy, well

suited to meeting the practical needs of poor women in the short term, but inadequate to the larger task of emancipatory development.

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Appendix A: Map **South India**

**Source: Microsoft Encarta 97 World Atlas
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Appendix B: SHARE Documentation

B.1 Important Events (source: SHARE pamphlet, 1995)

- 1974 First Craft Centre started
- 1978 Formation of CODES
- 1980 Women's Craft Co-operative born
- 1985 Co-operative leadership from community
- 1986 Training/Production control by community
- 1987 Women's Rally for Women Development
- 1988 Craft Co-operative becomes Multi-purpose Co-operative
- 1989 Craft Women take responsibility for quality control and local marketing
- 1991 Formation of SHARE as an independent organisation
- 1993 State level Women's workshop
- 1994 Own building constructed with community participation
- 1995 Beginning direct exports

STILL A LONG WAY TO GO...

B.2 Supporting Agencies* (source: SHARE pamphlet, 1995)

Community Health and Development (CHAD), Vellore
 Christian Medical College, Vellore
 Edayansathu Women's Co-operative, Vellore
 Federation of South India Producer Associations (SIPA), Madras
 Development Commissioner Handicrafts, GOI
 District Rural Development Agencies Collectorate, GOI
 Indian Bank, Virupakshipuram
 Corporation Bank, Munjurpet

* This is not a list of funding agencies. SHARE does receive some funding from the two GOI agencies, and it receives subsidised credit from the two banks, under a GOI programme. The other organisations listed are local partners.

B.3 Membership (source: SHARE records, 1991-1996)

	SC/ST	MBC	Minority *	Physically Handicapped	Other	TOTAL
1991-92	40	67	21	11	99	238
1992-93	112	266	75	14	204	671
1993-94	168	310	83	16	129	706
1994-95	197	332	87	16	128	760
1996						865

* Minority members are largely Muslims, living in several of the villages where SHARE works.

Notes:

1. Average income per day in 1995: Rs. 25 (approx. one Canadian dollar)
2. SHARE is currently working in: 31 villages (October, 1996 data)

B.4 SHARE Organogram (source: SHARE poster, 1995)

Appendix C: Interview Guidelines

1. Life History

- tell us about yourself; what is your story?
- age, family, education, special events

2. Experience in SHARE

- how and why did you become involved in SHARE?
- how you felt at first, expectations, fears, difficulties
- how family/husband/friends/community reacted
- training, participation in activities and events, achievements
- how do you participate now?
- are you involved in making decisions?

3. What changes have you experienced as a member of SHARE?

- for yourself
- for your family
- in your community
- in SHARE

4. What is most important about SHARE?

5. What is SHARE's purpose? Is it being achieved? How?

6. What are your plans for the future? Your hopes?

7. What should SHARE do in the future? How could it improve?

8. What other things would you like to tell us?

Appendix D: Interview Data

Interviews with SHARE¹ women: April-May, 1996

In writing out these interviews, I have attempted to give some contextual material - where we were, what else was going on - as well as the words of the women interviewed. As I said in my discussion of methods, I worked with an interpreter who translated my questions and then translated the answers back to me as I took notes. There are surely some mistakes here arising from the translation process: changes in emphasis, omissions or factual errors. Also, the interpreter's biases as well as my own will have overlaid the original meanings to some extent. However, I do feel that these stories are substantially correct in both tone and content.

The words in quotation marks are the interpreter's words, as she translated the women's comments to me. Some phrases came up again and again as we proceeded with the interviews. "There were community problems." "Women should come out of the house." These standard phrases carried a wealth of significance for the women speaking, including the interpreter, yet they could convey only a part of that meaning to me, despite the interpreter's attempts to explain and clarify them. I have reported what I understood from the interviews as faithfully as possible, having made some corrections by re-checking with the interpreter later, but without much commentary or interpretation of my own.

All of the women whose stories appear below gave their time generously, leaving other work until we were done. They welcomed us into their homes and offered, even

¹I have referred to the organisation as SHARE throughout, for simplicity, even when the women were talking about one of SHARE's predecessors. See the case study presented in Chapter Four for a history of the organisation.

insisted upon giving, their hospitality in the form of refreshments and mats to sit on while we talked.

1. Pushpa

We spoke to Pushpa in the entranceway of her house in Edayansathu village. She had been working, making trays for an OXFAM order. The palm leaf raw materials and a few finished baskets were put carefully in a corner of the room while we talked. Pushpa said she felt shy but happy to talk to us about her work and her experience with SHARE. After the interview, Pushpa insisted that we share some coffee. She showed us the kitchen vessels she has received as incentives² from SHARE.

Pushpa is 24 years old. Her mother died several years ago, and she lives with her father and two younger sisters. They rent the house for 75 Rupees per month (about three Canadian dollars). The landlord wanted to raise the rent, but Pushpa convinced him not to because she could not afford more. She also has to pay electricity and water taxes. Pushpa works to support the whole family - her father is an alcoholic and does not contribute any money to the family. One of her sisters is in secondary school, the other is a domestic worker. Before joining in SHARE, Pushpa worked as a construction worker³ and before that as a cook.

One of the leaders of SHARE approached Pushpa and convinced her to join. She likes the work very much, she told us. She can earn 700 to 800 Rupees per month with help from one of her sisters. "I depend on SHARE," she says. "I need this work to support my family. And SHARE has brought me friendship and confidence. It is like family for me." The most important thing about working in SHARE? "I am able to pay

²SHARE is no longer a co-operative due to problems with government intervention in the co-operative sector. The organisation is not permitted to pay cash dividends, but it can and does offer annual "incentives" in the form of stainless steel kitchen vessels or other useful items.

³Women work on construction crews throughout India, carrying heavy loads of earth and bricks to and from the site. Wages are low, about 20 rupees per day, less than one Canadian dollar, and working conditions are often bad (Ramakrishnan, 1996).

for my sister's education," she says with pride. "If I face any problems, I can turn to SHARE." Pushpa told a story to illustrate the support she receives from SHARE. Her father arranged a marriage with a man who could not support himself. She did not want to marry him, so she went to talk to the leaders of SHARE. They spoke to her father and convinced him that it was not a good marriage. Pushpa wants to get married, but she plans to find a man who will allow her to continue to support her sisters. "I want my sisters to be educated and to find good jobs," she says.

2. Chandra

We visited Chandra in her tiny, single-room mud house in Munjurpet village, a house she shares with her two grown sons. Household vessels of clay and stainless steel were neatly stacked along one wall. Chandra was at work making streamers from palm leaf. She invited us in, spread a mat for us to sit and spoke with confidence and pride about her experiences with SHARE. She also showed us the new house, almost finished, that they are building with government support. They hope it will be finished after the election results come out.

Chandra is a widow and wears no ornaments. She belongs to the *dhobi*⁴ caste, classified as a "most backward community". She has been a craft worker for ten years. Previously, she worked as a coolie⁵ to support herself and her family, but the wages were too low, she says, and the work was seasonal - sometimes there was no money at all. "With SHARE," she explained, "I earn a monthly income, so I can plan and budget for our expenses." When her husband died, Chandra received some money through a SHARE scheme to help widows.

⁴A very low status caste with the traditional occupation of washing clothes.

⁵A coolie, a term in common use in the study area in both Tamil and English, is a field labourer, man or woman, although women are paid lower wages than men.

What is important about SHARE? Chandra told us that SHARE gives support to the poor, who have no other means of development. Because of her membership in SHARE, she has been able to visit other projects in other places. She travelled to Pulicat, north of Madras, to visit a women's craft co-operative there. She has also learned to speak out about women's issues - she spoke on the radio about the problem of the dowry system. "We should not support the dowry system," she insisted, but when we asked "What about your sons?" she said, "They must decide for themselves."

Some changes have come about since SHARE came to Munjurpet. Chandra says there used to be conflict between two low caste communities, but now the problems have been solved because of the communication and friendly relations among women working together in the craft centre. "In SHARE women from all communities work together with friendship."

3. Valliammal

We arrived at Valliammal's house as she was preparing a meal. She invited us in to talk with her, spreading mats for us to sit. Before we came into the house, she showed us the bathroom enclosure she had just made from woven palm leaves on a bamboo frame. She sent a neighbour to bring refreshments, chilled rose milk in plastic packets. Several neighbours gathered to listen to the interview.

Valliammal is a widow with two children, a daughter, age 13, and a son, age 19. She must work to support her family. Both her children work in the fields as coolies. The family used to have some land, but after her husband's death, his family kept the land.⁶ Valliammal then found work in a brickyard, but people talked about her going out to work. Her husband's brothers told her not to work outside because of this talk, she

⁶Women rarely inherit land in Tamil Nadu. However, Valliammal expressed a sense of injustice that the land had gone back to her husband's family, indicating some customary rights to the land of a deceased spouse.

said, but they did not offer her any support. Although she felt badly about the rumours and bad talk, she still needed to work. She heard about SHARE from Chandra, a SHARE member living nearby. Chandra told her that with SHARE she could have a peaceful life and earn money for her family. Valliammal came to work with SHARE. This time there were no problems because the work was in the craft centre or at home, not outside. She says she has found pride and confidence in her work with SHARE.

Valliammal told us that the Co-ordinator of SHARE, Mr. Murugesan, is like a father to the members, someone they can depend on for help and support. "In SHARE," she said, "we share our burdens and feel happy together." She has learned craft skills, but she has learned more than that. "I have also learned that women should be able to come out and work, and women can participate in the elections and in the *Panchayat*.⁷ But our character must be good. Some young girls in SHARE told their families they were going to work, but they went to the cinema in town instead. We should not do these things; we must have a good character."

The most important benefits of working in SHARE? Valliammal feels that the income is the most important thing. Also, members in need can borrow money from SHARE without paying heavy interest and they can get low cost health treatment at the CHAD hospital. In the future, Valliammal would like to see more orders - more work for everyone. Training in new skills should also be a priority. She is eager to learn handloom weaving. She told us with pride about how the SHARE women came together to construct their own office building and training centre. "We could build another office," she said. What about your own future? "My son will go to Malaysia to find work - we have family there. My daughter can work in SHARE."

⁷The Panchayat is the village government, which now has a new reservation system to bring in female representatives. SHARE has been working to publicise this new opportunity among its members.

4. Meenakshi

Meenakshi lives in a small cement house on the side of a dusty hill. She lives with her mother, one brother, her younger sister and her sister's husband and three sons. When we arrived, she had just returned from town with a new suitcase to protect and store her clothes. She bought it with her earnings from SHARE. We spoke sitting in the shade of a lean-to made of palm fronds at the side of the house - the cement building was too hot in the 40° weather. Meenakshi's mother and her sister, Sushila, participated eagerly in our discussion. Sushila's husband, partially paralysed from an accident, was lying in the shade behind us. Sushila's two sons were playing nearby. One boy ran down the hill to buy us orange drinks, sweet and sticky, in plastic bags.

As we talked, Meenakshi often had to stop to catch her breath. She suffers from chronic asthma. She is not married because her asthma prevents her from doing hard work. Her health problems have become severe since a doctor gave her the wrong medicine. Now she must have an injection, costing 22 Rupees, every 21 days. She struggles with this problem, but she is still committed to work hard for herself and her family.

It was Sushila who first began craft work with SHARE, fifteen years ago at the age of 11. After Sushila married she dropped her membership in SHARE, then Meenakshi became a member. Meenakshi has been working in SHARE for 12 years, since she was 18. When she was young she used to work in her father's fields. Now the fields have no water, so the family cannot grow food. Meenakshi joined SHARE because the craft work was easier than field work and because her illness prevented her from doing heavy work. Her father supported her decision to join.

Since her father's death, Meenakshi said, "We have had to work very hard to have enough to eat." She and Sushila both make craft products, and their brother works in a brickyard. Sushila's husband worked with the Railway until his accident. Although he

worked there for some time, he received no pension or compensation after his accident, because he was classed as a temporary employee.

Meenakshi never misses the SHARE meetings. She can't speak in the large meetings because of her disability, but she joins the discussion in the community level meetings. She tells the others they must all work hard to improve the quality of their products. Sushila said, "We have confidence in SHARE. With SHARE we can overcome money problems and manage for ourselves. My husband cannot work, so we have to earn the money for the family." Meenakshi added, "Yes, we have to improve ourselves - we cannot expect help from others. With SHARE we have some independence."

Meenakshi told us she plans to work hard until her death to improve herself and help her family. Women should come out to work and earn an income, she told us. Women can build houses, can make decisions, can support a family. Her own determination and hard work is proof of this. Today, Meenakshi sometimes works in the small hut out in her father's dry field, where she grows some flowers to sell (there is enough water for this activity). She can do the craft work there and tend the flower plot at the same time.

What should SHARE do in the future? "We need new designs and new products. We must have more orders. We should also start to do cane work ⁸ - we could get training in this work."

5. Saraswathi

We spoke to Saraswathi on the *pyol* ⁹ in front of her house, within a courtyard enclosed by the houses of her husband's family, small mud houses with no electricity.

⁸Rattan baskets and furniture.

⁹The *pyol* is the space in front of the house under the overhang of the roof, usually a platform of mud or cement.

She offered us coconut water and spread mats for us to sit. Her five-year-old son was playing nearby. His older sister, waiting for results of her high school exams, came to listen to our interview. Some other family members were sitting in the courtyard, enjoying the spectacle.

Saraswathi and her husband must support themselves, the children and Saraswathi's severely handicapped sister-in-law. Saraswathi's husband is a coolie, but the field work is not steady and they have money problems. Saraswathi also used to work as a coolie, but she had a major operation a few years ago and now cannot do heavy work. She joined SHARE only 18 months ago. She had heard about the organisation but she was too shy to approach. Then a visitor conducting a survey came to her house and told her more about SHARE, and convinced her to approach them. She first spoke to Mrs. Rani, the secretary, but she was told they were not accepting new members at that time. Saraswathi persevered, offering to pay for the raw materials herself if they would accept her into the training programme. She was told that SHARE would not take any money, and that, seeing her strong interest, they would find her a place in an upcoming training.

Saraswathi's daughter, age 18, is also being trained by SHARE in sisal fibre work. She dreams of studying and finding employment, but the family's economic situation makes it seem impossible at this time. Although there was some possibility of a scholarship a few years ago, she had to give it up due to her mother's illness. Saraswathi wishes she could help her daughter to study, but she does not have the money.

When Saraswathi first wanted to join SHARE, her husband objected, saying that she should not work because of her health. She convinced him of their need for another income. "This is easy work," she told us, "I am very happy to be working in SHARE. I can forget my burdens, even my illness, and feel happy." She attends the SHARE meetings and rallies, although she does not speak up yet. She recalled that the General Body meeting discussed the need for more land and more buildings for SHARE's work

and the need to reach out to more women. Her young son goes to the SHARE *balwadi*¹⁰, one of SHARE's community programmes, but it is too far for her to attend the parents' meetings there.

"SHARE gives support to the poor so they can survive," she told us, speaking quietly. "I have learned that women should earn an income, not waste their time at home. I am also learning more confidence." She thinks that the training sessions for craft work should be extended, so the women can learn more skills.

6. Rahamath Bee

We arrived at Rahamath Bee's house after dark. She was preparing dinner over an outdoor mud stove. She invited us inside to sit and talk, and sent someone for the village soft drinks known as "Colour" - bright, chemical green in heavy recycled glass bottles. The house is her mother's, she told us, but some of her cousins want Rahamath Bee to leave, so her place there is not secure. She has been ill and is finding it difficult to work and carry out her household responsibilities. Because of some problem in the community, she has to walk a long distance to fetch drinking water. Rahamath Bee is a Muslim, living in a Muslim enclave of her village. Her first language, like many Muslims in Tamil Nadu, is Urdu, but she speaks Tamil fluently.

Rahamath Bee has been working in SHARE for 13 years. Her husband has deserted her. She now lives with her mother and her 22-year-old son, who will get married soon. When her husband first left her, Rahamath Bee was afraid to go out and work, but she needed money to raise her son. First she worked in her brother's shoe company, but she didn't like the work, so she decided to join SHARE. She worked hard and always attended the meetings. She was elected president of the co-operative society¹¹ and she served in this position for three years. "While I was president, we started the

¹⁰Day-care centre.

¹¹Edayansathu Women's Industrial Co-operative Society, a predecessor of SHARE.

bonus programme and arranged the first design competition. But, after three years, I had enough of the hard work as an executive member."

"SHARE needs a bigger vehicle to transport the materials and products. We need more of our own buildings for craft centres - we should not have to rent buildings." She is ready, if her health permits, to help build more buildings. "We have faced many problems in SHARE, but we have overcome them and we are coming up. SHARE must continue to develop."

7. Poogazandhi

Poogazandhi was eagerly awaiting us when we arrived at her home. She had been busy with her craft work, but as soon as we arrived she came out to talk to us on the *pyol* of her large mud house. The family have a milk cow, and they served us fresh, hot milk. A calf was tethered under the overhang of the thatch roof, nearby. Poogazandhi explained that it was a disappointment, a male calf rather than another cow for milk. Many friends, family and neighbours joined us, curious about the strangers. Poogazandhi introduced us to all her relatives. The family belong to a "scheduled caste" community, once called untouchables.

Poogazandhi is 22 years old and she has been doing craft work for six years. She lives with her mother, two sisters and two brothers. The house once belonged to Poogazandhi's grandmother, and she has inherited a one eighth share. So far, the other relatives with claims on the house allow her family to live there. Poogazandhi's father worked as a coolie, but spent his money on alcohol. He died from a snakebite some time ago. Her mother used to work in the fields also, but she has been ill and cannot work. Poogazandhi is the eldest child and takes responsibility for the family. She earned

enough money through her craft work to pay for the marriage (a love marriage¹²) of one of her sisters, who now lives nearby with her husband and baby daughter. Poogazandhi continues to help them with money and to support her mother and her younger sister and brothers with her SHARE earnings.

Poogazandhi is very proud of her work in SHARE and the incentives she has earned. She keeps them carefully wrapped in plastic for her future home. Poogazandhi wants to earn enough money to pay for her own marriage. She wants to marry someone from the same area so she can continue to work in SHARE. She told us she would stay with her husband if he is a good man, and treats her well, but with her SHARE earnings she has security - she can support herself if necessary.

"SHARE is important because we must earn money to survive. Also, we can borrow money from SHARE without heavy interest." Poogazandhi attends all the SHARE meetings. She says she used to be too shy to speak out, but now she can do it. She took part in a public debate on women's development at the March 8 Women's Day rally, arguing that family support was the key to women's development. "Women can be better than men," she says. "Daughters can also support their parents."

What about the future? "We need more orders," she explains. "We depend on SHARE. I am the only one earning money in our house. I have to earn enough so we can eat."

8. Kempu

Kempu invited us into her house in the government "quarters"¹³ of Pennathur village where she lives with her husband and three children. She has been working in SHARE for 12 years. Her husband has a job as a postal worker, but he used to work as a

¹²Most marriages are arranged by the families. Love marriages are still very much looked down upon in the study area and both women and men who choose such marriages are sometimes cut off from their families.

¹³Housing projects for Scheduled Caste families.

coolie. When her children were young, they needed more money. Although her husband objected to her going out to work, Kempu was able to convince him. The craft centre was nearby and her sister was already working there. Kempu first received training in mat weaving, an activity SHARE has since dropped.¹⁴ She also learned to make sisal fibre products, then palm leaf baskets. She prefers the palm leaf work, since it brings in a bit more money than the other activities. She can now earn up to 1000 Rupees per month. The family no longer has to worry about having enough money for food. They can educate the children without asking others for help. Kempu's daughter has finished school and will go on for further studies.

Kempu had the opportunity to become a craft teacher in SHARE, because of her skills and hard work, but her husband would not allow it. Since then, she has helped him to pay off some debts with her earnings. He now supports her in her work and wants her to become a craft teacher.

Kempu attends all the SHARE meetings and activities. In 1994, she attended a four day workshop on women's development, organised by OXFAM India. She has also travelled to visit the women's craft co-operative in Pulicat. "That organisation is not as developed as SHARE," she observed. "In SHARE we co-operate with each other, we discuss things together and decide what to do - then we do it!" She told us how SHARE members came together to build their own office. "We depend on SHARE, so we must work and sacrifice ourselves for SHARE's development."

"I have confidence because of SHARE. I have developed my character and I can speak out; I am never afraid." She feels a strong love for SHARE and for the NGO's Co-ordinator, Mr. Murugesan. "He is our mother, he is our treasury." What about you and the other SHARE members? "We are also developing as treasuries through him," she

¹⁴The mats can be sold in the local market, unlike the palm leaf crafts which are mostly for export, but they do not bring in a good return.

replied. "What is our aim? To remove women's slavery, to build women's solidarity!" In the future, Kempu thinks SHARE should take up more income earning activities: a canteen, production of sweets, a project to distribute milch cows to the neediest women. "Everything must be of very high quality." SHARE is now setting up savings groups in each of the villages where it is working. Kempu is the President of a small group of women who will start to save up as a group for future needs and emergencies.

9. Babiyammal

We arrived at Babiyammal's house on Sunday morning. Some children were watching the television, but she switched it off so we could talk. She offered us coffee and showed us a book on married life, including family planning, that she had received through SHARE. Her son and daughter-in-law had read it, although she had not. She is a widow and lives with her son, a mason, and his wife.

Before joining SHARE, Babiyammal used to work as a coolie, but she wanted better opportunities for herself and her family. She joined the village mother's group, a health group organised by CHAD. That group of women formed a craft centre, with encouragement from Christine Matthews of CHAD. This was one of the early groups that came together to form SHARE.

This early craft group faced many difficulties. Some men in the village resisted this new role for women and tried to prevent the women from meeting. They first met in the temple, but after one year the men no longer allowed them to meet there. Then they met in a rented building but soon, due to community pressure, the landlord refused to rent to them. The women decided they must have their own centre. They bought land and constructed a building. "Then," says Babiyammal, "the men couldn't say anything."

She attends all the meetings. "I am illiterate,"¹⁵ she says, "I can't speak in the meeting but I still participate." She takes an active role in running her local centre in the village and is not afraid to ask for support from outsiders. "We had problems in the rainy season; we couldn't move the raw materials or the finished products. So, when one visitor asked what we needed for our work, I immediately said that we needed a vehicle. Now we have our own van." She also convinced one young SHARE member to become the monitor for their village centre. "I told her - you have some education, you should be a monitor and a leader in SHARE. I could not do it myself because I have no education."

"In the early days we struggled so much. Now we are coming up - we have our own building. That's a big improvement." She says she has seen some changes for her own family, with the earnings from SHARE, but: "I see big changes in some families where the women working in SHARE have a little education. They are really coming up. They can become craft teachers as well as doing the craft work at home." In the community, she sees a change as well. "Now we face no restrictions, no quarrels, for our work. The men no longer try to discourage us. Fifty families in this village have developed because of SHARE." What about the future? "We need a *balwadi* in this village so the women can work. And we need more study centres for the school children."

10. Gowri

Gowri's house is near the main road to Vellore. She came out to talk with us on the *pyol*. Her mother-in-law also sat with us, and Gowri's sister-in-law, a new bride in a bright sari, came out to greet us. The house was whitewashed mud with wooden posts to

¹⁵The women I spoke to seemed to use "illiterate" to signify more than their level of reading ability. Rather, it was a shorthand way of saying that they spent few (perhaps two or three) years in school and felt disadvantaged by their low level of education.

hold up the thatched roof of the *pyol*. A *kolam*, an intricate rice flour design made by a woman of the household each morning, decorated the space in front of the door.

Gowri's parents have died. She lives with her husband, who does construction work, and their three children. Her husband's mother and his brother with his new wife also share the house. Gowri has been working in SHARE for nine years. She knew about the craft groups before, but did not join until she was approached by another member, one of the craft teachers. Gowri was 17 when she joined, already four years married with one child. Before working in SHARE she used to work in the fields, but when her first child was born she wanted to work near home so she could take care of the baby. At first her husband did not want her to join. She convinced him. The community also caused some problems, but she persevered.

Gowri attends all the SHARE meetings, but she doesn't speak out - she is too shy, she says. We asked what she had learned in the meetings. "Women must develop. We should not live in slavery; we should come out and work." In the village level meetings she does take part in the discussions about production targets, raw materials and other day-to-day matters. Her children attend a government *balwadi* so she is free to work.

What is the most important thing about SHARE? "We have confidence in our Coordinator, Mr. Murugesan. He helps us to come forward." What has she learned from her experiences? "I am an illiterate person, but I have learned confidence. I have learned how to plan my life. I want my children to be educated and to be literate people. I will continue to support my family." For SHARE's future, Gowri suggests that the organisation should offer adult literacy classes, "so we can read the numbers on the buses and the destinations." But she feels too shy to make this suggestion in a meeting. "Maybe it cannot be done."

11. Prema

When Prema spoke to us at the SHARE office, she was very worried about her father, who was ill. He died the next day.

Prema is the oldest of five children, with two younger brothers and two younger sisters. None of them was able to finish school because the family could not afford to pay for their education, but Prema was able to study up to the eighth grade. Her father worked in the fields, as a coolie. Prema married in 1988. Her husband is a construction worker. They have two children, a son in grade two and a daughter, still in day-care.

Prema came to work with SHARE in 1981. First, she was a member of a rural women's health club organised by CHAD. At that time, she worked in the fields, but she needed some way to earn more money to help her family. She heard about the new income generation project, which was to become SHARE. She was afraid to join, thinking: "What will the others say? I am uneducated." But she did join the craft group and was trained in palm leaf work. "I learned the work very fast," she remembers. "In the first month of the three month training, I had learned everything."

When she first joined SHARE, there was no craft group in her own village. She had to go to Pennathur village to work. People talked, criticising her for going out of her village, but she kept on going. She tried to convince another family to let their daughter join, but they refused. Later, when a craft centre started in Prema's village, the same girl was allowed to join. Today, Prema told us, the community "can't say anything in front of us." They don't criticise SHARE because it has become strong. Prema hears praise today from the same people who used to criticise her. "She is working to help her family and children," they say.

Prema is now a craft teacher because of her skills and dedication. She teaches her skills to new members. She also works in the SHARE office. "Every morning, I feed the

cows, do my work at home, then come to SHARE. I work late at night if it is necessary. I will do whatever is needed by SHARE," she said with quiet pride.

"Before working in SHARE I couldn't come out of my house, I couldn't walk alone. Now I can go anywhere. I have confidence because of this work - without it I would have no life." What about the future? "I want to educate my children. Because of SHARE I can say with confidence that I will be able to educate them." SHARE should also continue to develop, Prema told us. More work, more orders, are needed for better development.

12. Vasantha

We spoke to Vasantha in a shady place outside her house in the government quarters of Cholavaram village. Vasantha's close friend, Malliga, joined us, and Poornima, the craft teacher and monitor for the village centre was also there. Our visit was short because we had to catch the only bus returning to the SHARE office. Both Vasantha and Malliga told us we needed more time - "You have asked very big questions, but we have no time to give full answers," they told us.

Vasantha is 35 years old. She is an only child and herself has only one daughter. She had a baby boy who died of an infectious disease. Vasantha and Malliga joined SHARE together six years ago. Vasantha's husband used to work in the fields, but now he is a vegetable seller. She feels lucky that he is supportive and doesn't have bad habits. "So many men are drinking and smoking," she said. Before coming to work in SHARE, Vasantha also used to do field work. She earned three Rupees a day (a little more than ten cents), but now she can earn more money for her family.

Vasantha attends all the SHARE meetings and functions. She does not speak out in the meeting because she is too shy. She also attends health care information and training sessions, sponsored by CHAD. In a recent session she learned to make oral rehydration solution, but she has not used it because she has no small children now.

There used to be community problems in her village. Higher community people (Mudaliyars, Vanniyars) treated Scheduled Caste members like Vasantha and Malliga very badly. "They wouldn't even come near us or touch us," Vasantha said. These people were the owners of the fields where the coolies worked. "We worked in the fields where they got their food - there was no untouchability about those food products!" Now the problems have decreased. Vasantha explained it like this: "Because some of us now can work in other jobs, like doing the craft work in SHARE, we do not have to work in their fields. Now the landlords must treat us better, because they are afraid no one will work in their fields."

What is the most important benefit from SHARE? "I have some small savings, some security." Vasantha also says that she has learned confidence so she can speak to strangers. She feels happy that her husband helps with her work - he continues the craft work when she is sick - and she feels lucky to have such a good man. "We work hard. We depend on SHARE. SHARE's development is also our development." Vasantha wants to improve her skills and learn to make new products.

13. Malliga

We spoke to Malliga at the home of her friend, Vasantha. We did not have time for a full interview. Malliga wanted more time to tell us her story. She is the second wife of a much older man. Malliga's mother, who herself had suffered as a step-child, wanted Malliga to marry this man and take good care of the children of his first wife. While we were talking, Malliga's husband came to tell her to come and make dinner, not to waste her time talking. He is deaf and we could not explain our project to him.

Malliga has been working in SHARE for five years, along with her friend, Vasantha. She has four children, two step-children and two born since her marriage. Her husband cannot do heavy work, so Malliga used to work in the fields to earn money for the family. They have no land of their own. "We were very poor," she told us, "there

was no money to educate the children." With her earnings from SHARE, she has been able to continue to send the children to school. The oldest boy has finished school now. The others are in grade 10, grade 8 and grade 7.

In SHARE, Malliga has found inspiration and confidence. She is proud that the products they make are known in foreign lands. "This gives me a good feeling." She says that the members must work hard and co-operate to develop SHARE. "My family is growing up. I want my daughters to also work in SHARE. But we need more job opportunities - more work. We are illiterate people, but our children have studied. They should teach others to read and write."

14. Shanti

Shanti lives with her mother-in-law. Her husband works away and comes home only occasionally. She is 25 and has studied up to the tenth grade, although she comes from a very poor family. She started working with SHARE at the age of 15, before she got married. When she married there were rumours in the community. "Why is this newly married woman going outside?" Shanti continued her work despite this talk. "Thousands of people may talk," she said, "but if my husband and my mother-in-law don't object, why should I listen to these other people?" When she first married, her husband did raise some objections to her work, but she convinced him that they needed the money. She also motivated him to go out and find work himself. She used to quarrel with her mother-in-law, "but I forgot all my problems in the craft centre. Now my family agrees - we need my income. My husband's income is not enough. With my earnings I also support my husband's younger brother."

Shanti attends all the SHARE meetings and functions. She attended a design training in Madras, and she has won some prizes in SHARE for her designs. She has learned to speak out in the meetings, giving the welcome and the vote of thanks at the

General Body Meeting. She works as a craft teacher and a monitor, responsible for two SHARE craft centres.

"When I first joined SHARE I was very shy. Then I listened to the others talking and sharing their problems. That is how I learned that everyone had problems and difficulties, not only my family. And I learned that we can win over any difficulty." Shanti confronts difficulties and challenges head on. Her sister-in-law wanted to get a family planning operation. Shanti convinced her father to allow it, although he objected at first. She has also convinced her family to go to the hospital ¹⁶ with their health problems, instead of a *pujari*.¹⁷

"Before working in SHARE, sometimes I only had one meal a day. I suffered hunger. Today, we eat three meals a day. Before, I was afraid of everything, even to go alone to town. Today that fear has gone." But, Shanti has learned to do her work in a way that will not cause problems for her family. Following the advice of other SHARE members, she always goes home early when her husband is away. When he is at home, she can work a little later. "This way, no one can talk," she told us. "I have learned this understanding in SHARE."

"We have unity and co-operation in SHARE. I don't mind spending long hours working for SHARE - I don't mind working late at any task." What should SHARE do in the future? "We should have more activities for earning income, like typing, tailoring, making paper. We should give school prizes to boys as well as girls - at least three prizes to help more families. We should reach out to those most in need, like physically handicapped women and widows or deserted women, to help them and their children."

¹⁶SHARE members get low cost treatment at the CHAD hospital, run by the Christian Medical College in Vellore.

¹⁷A *pujari* is a traditional healer.

15. Anandhi

Anandhi, 24, lives with her parents, her older sister and her brother, his wife and their three children. She had another older sister, who married but committed suicide after no children were born in eight years of marriage. The next sister is sterile and cannot get married. Anandhi's father is sick and runs a small shop beside the house. All the other family members work in the fields as coolies. Anandhi cannot do field work because of hay fever. She and her sister both approached SHARE five years ago, but they were told that only one family member could join. Anandhi became a member, but her sister and other family members help with the craft work.

When Anandhi first joined SHARE, she was one of only two members in her village, so she had to go to the centre in a nearby village. There are still few members in her home village and she still goes to the neighbouring village to work. Some people criticise her for going outside the village. She tells them, "you must also join SHARE - if we have ten members we can start a centre here and I will not have to go outside." When she goes to SHARE meetings and functions, Anandhi always brings some women from her village alone - sometimes ten or twelve others go with her.

"In SHARE, we can face our problems. We must be brave and come out to work and earn money. Before there was only seasonal work. We had no security, few clothes and little food. With SHARE earnings, we have some confidence. We can buy food and even buy new clothes and pay in installments." Anandhi also pays for the education of her brother's children. She herself studied up to grade eight.

Anandhi tells a story of one problem she has taken to SHARE for help and advice. She fell in love with a boy of a different caste¹⁸, but his family demanded a huge dowry, much more than she could pay. Now he and his family will not communicate with her.

¹⁸Anandhi is from a Scheduled Caste community.

SHARE has tried to help her, to mediate between the two families, but there is no response from the boy's family. Anandhi will have trouble getting married because of this situation. "If my parents can arrange a marriage, I will marry. But with the skills I have learned in SHARE, I can support myself. With SHARE, I can live."

What about the future? "I will work with SHARE until my death," she said with emphasis, "even if I get married I will continue to work." She wants to see a craft centre in her own village. "We are all working as coolies in this village, the women need some other employment."

16. Mupdathi

We arrived at Mupdathi's house as she was cooking the midday meal. The house was cement, painted bright green, with a thatch roof over a ridge pole. Some of the palm leaf materials for Mupdathi's work were stacked in the kitchen and a few finished baskets were nearby. As we talked, Mupdathi kept jumping up to finish the cooking. Neighbours and children crowded in the doorway to see us.

Mupdathi comes from a distant part of south Tamil Nadu. Her husband works in a restaurant in Vellore. She joined SHARE soon after arriving in her husband's village, when she saw a neighbour making palm leaf products and heard about the organisation. The neighbour taught her the craft work. "Even the first time, I didn't waste any materials," she said with pride. "I made my first garland from two palm leaves." The craft teacher in the village invited Mupdathi to join SHARE when she saw how well Mupdathi had learned the work. "Before coming to SHARE, I didn't have any work," she told us. "I am very happy with this work. With my earnings, I am able to visit my mother in the south. I can do anything. I am independent."

Mupdathi goes to all the SHARE meetings and events. Recently she attended the Panchayat Raj awareness programme. "Before, I didn't understand about Panchayat Raj. Now I know anyone can contest the elections. I could even be President of this village!

Ladies should contest - we are more honest than men. If I were President I would help anyone who approached me with a problem." She also takes part in discussions and decision making in SHARE. Once she argued that the piece rate for the products should be increased, and it was increased later on. "SHARE should increase the rate again and give us more raw materials." How is the rate set? "How can I say? I don't know what price they are selling our products for finally." She mentions the high cost of transportation. "SHARE needs more of our own vehicles for transportation."

What is most important about SHARE? "Women can come out. We can work and earn some money. I need to earn money, and this is the only work I know. We must work hard and not waste our time. Sir (Mr. Murugesan) is so smart and good. He helps us to have this work. He is our God. We give back our hard work, like the construction work for the SHARE office."

17. Logamani

Logamani lives with her husband and two sons in a small cement house with electricity near one of the SHARE craft centres. We were only able to spend a short time at her house. When we arrived, the first thing we saw was Logamani's husband sitting outside making streamers from palm leaf. We talked to Logamani in the house while her husband continued to work outside. At the end of the interview, he joined us to talk about SHARE.

Logamani married at 15 and moved from her native village, nearby, to her husband's village. She started the craft work five years ago, when she was 20. At first her husband didn't want her to work but she convinced him by telling him they could get many advantages through SHARE. She told him that work in the home was better than work in the fields. Today, he supports her decision and does some of the craft work himself. SHARE has honoured the couple for their co-operation.

With earnings from SHARE, Logamani will be able to educate her sons. Her oldest son wants to continue his studies in high school and she is proud to be able to support him. She likes the work in SHARE. "Working in the house, we have no problems," she said. "With help from SHARE, poor and illiterate people can also develop."

Logamani attends all the SHARE events. In the Panchayat Raj awareness programme, she learned about village government and how women can participate in the elections, as voters and as candidates. She told us that she learned "that you must handle power with care - you should not tie your cow to a power pole! This was the example they gave in the meeting."

Logamani and her husband are hoping for a housing loan from SHARE, to build a bigger house for their family. Logamani's husband told us that they have been able to save a little money from the SHARE earnings. "We are in a good position because of SHARE. We are feeling so happy," he said with a big smile. Many people in the community have benefited from SHARE, they told us. Many now have some savings, not just enough for each day.

18. Navamani

Navamani is 24 and unmarried, the eldest of four sisters. She has been working in SHARE for six years. Before that, she worked as a coolie. When she first came to SHARE she had two months of training in her village centre. Now she is taking part in a longer training programme, sponsored by GTZ/SHF, Germany. Navamani and her sisters stay with her mother and grandmother. Her three older brothers have left home and don't help to support the family. She and one other sister both work in SHARE, earning income for the family to live on. Everyone in the family helps with the craft work, except Navamani's mother, who has a mental illness.

Navamani's mother's illness places a heavy burden on the family. "People say that it is because of having four unmarried daughters that she has these problems. We have to face a lot of bad talk." They spent 1000 Rupees on a local treatment, but it has not done any good. When they took her to the mental hospital, she cried and would not enter, so they brought her home. "My grandmother takes care of her," Navamani told us. "Someone must stay with her all the time. I can't stay in the house, it's so awful. I'm glad to come out to the training each day."

Navamani has also seen some problems for SHARE. One craft centre was burned down because the men in that village said the women were showing disrespect working with their legs stretched out. When the men passed by, the women did not change to a modest posture, but continued their work. The SHARE members did not know who had burned the centre, but they talked to the young men in the village and they rented another building to work in. "There have been no more problems like that," said Navamani.

Before working in SHARE, Navamani could not go out of her village. Now she has been to distant towns, like Ooty where she visited RDO, another development organisation. She and the other SHARE members who visited Ooty were very impressed by the tutorial classes for poor children organised by RDO. When they returned home they lost no time in proposing a similar activity for SHARE. Within months it was underway in many of the villages.

What about the future? "I need to save some money so I can arrange for my sisters to get married. I cannot think of my own marriage. Someone must earn money to take care of my mother and grandmother. I am the eldest sister and I must do it." Navamani received some inspiration from a visitor from Madras, who came to speak at a SHARE event. She told him about her problems and how her brothers would not help the family. He said "you are the greatest strength of your family. You must work hard and

take care of the others." Now, Navamani told us, "I think that I have no brothers - I do things myself. I can stand on my own legs."

Navamani says that women's development is the most important task of SHARE. "I tell others to join and get advantages. I have brought 15 new members into SHARE." She attends all the meetings. At the General Body Meeting, they discuss the budget, make reports and distribute bonuses and incentives, she tells us. They also discuss important issues for women. Navamani often acts in skits to open these discussions. She took part in one skit to show that men must stop their bad habits (alcohol, tobacco, paan). She and others worked with a doctor to get the message across. At the Panchayat Raj awareness meeting, she also was part of a skit about the importance of voting and how to select a candidate.

What should SHARE do in the future? Navamani has borrowed some money from SHARE to help her mother. She is paying it back in installments. This is a great benefit. SHARE should have a formal loan scheme for members in need. They should also have more income generating activities. Navamani is eager to learn handloom weaving, carpet-making, any new skill. She is confident that they can find markets for these products. "We cannot sell carpets in the village, but people in the city will buy them." Finally, SHARE should provide more training and guidance to the members.