

**CHALLENGES OF WOMEN VOLUNTEERS AND ACTIVISTS IN WOMEN'S NGOs  
IN INDIA:  
A FEMINIST STANDPOINT ANALYSIS**

**By**

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Department of Sociology of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
July, 2005**

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I sincerely thank social activists, journalists, professors from Indian universities, and especially women working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at Kolkata (India). This project would not have been possible without their support and cooperation.

Many thanks to all my mentors, educators and well-wishers in India, UK and the US, for your constant encouragement and inspiration to reach higher grounds and walk that extra mile.....and I have miles to go before I sleep, I promise.

Thanks Debika (my Mom and best-friend) for ‘believing’ in me, this life is for you.

**Love behold,  
As I walk this planet  
With Gypsy’s soul.....**

Dedicated to the memory of Princess Elsa Gypsy “the ahimsa-queen” (1990 - 2003)  
Ma Ananda Niraali

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“My hope is that when so many women who are distressed, get relief from our support, they stand on their own feet. If I can protest, I can change. If the protesting voices are finished, then all the nationalist forces and perpetrators will get the empty field to do what they like. At least I can protest, if we can sustain the protesting tendency by one booklet, one leaflet, one street corner, one article in the newspaper, then still there is some protesting voice; and then the government or perpetrator will know it’s not all their field (no free reign). If there is a protesting tendency, channel, organization or forum, then in future whoever wants to join, they will join, otherwise there is no where to go. Actually...the membership has gone down. Again we see all of a sudden some young women are joining this organization, even if not many but there are some. There is no money here, they have to give time and money, but people are still coming.”

– *Social Activist and Volunteer in an NGO at Kolkata [Int. # 12].*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. Introduction.....	01
Non Governmental Organizations.....	03
Rationale for Study .....	05
Data Collection Methods.....	08
Background and Overview.....	10
Purpose of Study.....	11
II. Theoretical Framework.....	15
Feminist Standpoint Theory .....	15
Standpoint Epistemology .....	17
Feminist Standpoint Claims .....	19
III. Literature Review.....	23
Women and NGOs – Critical Review.....	23
Prospects for Women Volunteers in Women’s Organizations.....	27
Conceptual and Philosophical Distinctions – Volunteers and Activists / Feminists/Non-Feminists.....	29
Structure of Women’s Organizations.....	32
Studying Women from the Developing World.....	34
Indian Women’s Movement - Role of Middle & Upper Class Women at NGOs.....	36
Feminist Spaces in India and the United States.....	42
Feminist Liberalism.....	44
Indian Women’s Movement’s vs. Western Feminism.....	46
Contemporary Indian Women’s Movement.....	51
Indian Women’s Movement and Women’s Organizations .....	55
The Setting: Women’s NGOs at Kolkata.....	59
IV. Methodology .....	63
The Researcher and the Researched – the ‘Outsiders within’.....	63
Methodological Approaches to Feminist Research.....	66
The Third World Feminist Standpoint.....	69
Data Collection.....	73
Interpretive Method.....	77
V. Analysis of Data and Interpretation.....	80
Five Emergent Themes.....	80

Theme One – NGO Work as Career .....	84
Theme Two – Domestic Obligations.....	100
Theme Three – Challenges and Obstacles.....	107
VI. Work Satisfaction and Concepts of Feminism.....	138
Theme Four – Motivations and Satisfaction.....	139
Theme Five – Conception of Feminism.....	152
VII. Discussion and Conclusion.....	176
Summary of Purpose .....	177
Researcher’s Standpoint.....	178
Review and Discussion of Emerging Narrative Themes.....	180
Strengths and Limitations.....	196
Future Projects.....	199
Bibliography .....	200
<i>Appendix 1</i>	
India – A Background.....	212
<i>Appendix 2</i>	
Kolkata – Profile.....	213
<i>Appendix 3</i>	
The Report on Status of Women.....	218
<i>Appendix 4</i>	
IRB Approval.....	221
<i>Appendix 5</i>	
Informed Consent Form.....	222
<i>Appendix 6</i>	
Proposed Questions.....	224
<i>Appendix 7</i>	
Participants Profiles.....	225
<i>Appendix 8</i>	
Theme One – NGO as a Career.....	227
<i>Appendix 9</i>	
Theme Two – Domestic Obligations.....	229
<i>Appendix 10</i>	
Theme Three – Social Challenges and Obstacles .....	231
<i>Appendix 11</i>	
Theme Four – Motivation and Satisfaction.....	233
<i>Appendix 12</i>	
Theme Five – Conception of Feminism.....	235
<i>Appendix 13</i>	
Map of India and Map of West Bengal (Kolkata).....	237
Abstract	
Vita	

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

This dissertation analyzes how urban middle and upper class women working in non-governmental organizations in India construct a feminist praxis in terms of their everyday lived experiences as volunteers and activists. I will use Feminist Standpoint Analysis (Hartsock 1983; Smith 1987;Aptheker 1989;Harding 1991; Collins 1991; Naples 2003) as a theoretical framework to examine the personal, social, cultural and organizational challenges that women face in their personal and professional lives as part-time or full-time volunteers (paid or non-paid) in women's organizations. This study is situated in the context of post-colonial understanding of feminism and the spread of the women's movement as a global phenomenon. Studying in the American academy and self-identified as a postcolonial woman from South Asia and a Third World Feminist, I as the 'outsider within' (Collins 1991) locate the impact and dynamics of Indian women's active participation in women's developmental [sic] work, who in turn are also 'outsiders' within the framework of mainstream sociological research and civil society literature. Interestingly, the Indian women's movement is sufficiently broad based that it encompasses several local as well as global characteristics of the feminist social movement. Consequently, the divisions that are deep in India are not unique to it and

therefore as an instrumental case study<sup>1</sup> (Stake 1995), studying India can provide us with instructive material (Calman 1992) for comparative exploratory research projects with other civil societies in South Asia as well as developed nations such as the United States. Thus, the current research is designed to begin filling the gaps in literature in this field of study.

Further, a major motivation to undertake this study springs from one of the basic tenets of postmodernism: the collapse of the material and ideological borders between the local and the global. This disintegration is manifested not only by processes of globalization but also by subjective travel, international political activity, discursive strategies, and the spread of social movements that project the agency of peoples of the world (Sivamohan 1999). Using the literature discussed in this dissertation, I conceptualize feminism or transnational feminism as a globally informing condition in operation today. Although it is often layered with opposing views and cultural contradictions (western vs. non-western), it is driven by narratives of change and speculation of women's role as active agents in global civil society. This predicament, which is shared by many, is the problematic of feminism; and it is this predicament that renders it controversial and at the same time viable as the site for praxis, theory and mediator for social change and gender equality. Questions about the personal, social, cultural and organizational challenges of women, gender role-expectations and definition, perception and implication of feminism in the Third World context can enhance the scope for working out strategies of discontent that would constructively add to feminist research scholarship and practice.

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<sup>1</sup> A case study that is instrumental for a general understanding of a broader phenomenon rather than the particular case being studied itself (Stake 1995).



Moreover, it would be prudent to gauge the impact of feminism, as we know it, on the lives of ordinary women (outside the academia) across global boundaries and thereby, study the likely transformations/ interpretations that the international women's movement has undergone over time, particularly in terms of developing a feminist consciousness among Third World women who are involved in women's developmental projects. To address this subject more explicitly, this study analyzes the responses of urban middle and upper class women volunteers and activists in light of the women's movement in India, as 'outsiders' within mainstream international Sociology. It raises several questions about educated, urban women's choices in building careers as volunteers and activists in the gender empowerment and developmental sector. I ask, *can engaging in feminist activities (other than theoretical research work) and related community service and developmental projects be a viable career choice for women?* And more specifically, I ask *what are the motivations or challenges that impact their decision to develop a career as volunteers and activists in non-governmental organizations?*

### ***Non Governmental Organizations***

One way to explore this subject would be by gathering testimonies from women who are engaged in the development and empowerment of oppressed women in their communities. An ideal sector to locate such women would be in the non-governmental organizations (commonly referred to as NGOs) involved in empowerment programs, developmental projects and awareness campaigns related to women's social problems. The term "NGO" was first used by the United Nations in 1949 (Fernando and Heston 1997:10). In substantive terms, NGOs are generically defined in opposition to the state

and for-profit organizations<sup>2</sup> (ibid. 1997). They primarily rely on solidarity between members of civil society; and this solidarity is nurtured by NGOs through decentralized internal management sustained by voluntary local participation (Sanyal 1997). Thus, voluntarism, legitimized by tradition and indigenous values and leadership, is often said to be an inherent characteristic of communities with whom NGOs work, as the incorporation of voluntarism into NGO programs helps make the programs sustainable (Fernando and Heston 1997). However, I would like to point out that although there is a vast body of literature available on NGOs and development, I use relevant portions of the gamut of information only so far as it helps in understanding the lived experiences of the women volunteers and activists in India who are the focus of this study.

Having said this, there are many committed NGOs in India working for the advancement of the women's movement and women's rights, in addition to government appointed agencies. While NGOs propose to raise women's awareness and empower them, I address problematic aspects of the personal, social, cultural and organizational challenges that women volunteers and activists experience, both as volunteers (involved in women's development) and as educated urban Indian working women at a time of major social transition in women's roles and political & economic transformations in the global arena, which still remains by and large male-dominated and inegalitarian.

Another critical issue that this study looks into revolves around the conception of feminism among women volunteers and activists in a non-western setting. Although the word 'feminism' evokes Western stereotypes for many Indians (Kishwar 1990), according to Tharu and Lalita (1993), Indian women have resisted patriarchal oppression

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<sup>2</sup> The distinction between for-profit and non-profit continues to become blurred. Critics of the market oriented economies in developing countries argue, in their drive toward financial self-sufficiency, NGOs too function as for-profit organizations when required (Fernando and Heston 1997).

for over 2000 years. Anderson and Zinsser (1988) also argue that the coalescence of isolated resistance into a movement in India in the nineteenth century emerged at about the same time as in the United States (Donovan 1985) and Europe. Given the validity of these assumptions, my study seeks to answer fundamental questions such as what does the concept of 'feminism' mean to these women. Are they consciously feminist (or not); or do they simply adhere to the feminist ideology without being aware of it? What factors affect the image of a 'feminist' in their minds? Are there patterned differences in the way women who are formally trained in gender issues or educated in the field of liberal arts and Sociology particularly see feminism than those who are not? Further, to what degree has feminism impacted urban, educated, middle and upper class women who are in the business of women's empowerment and development in a non-western setting? How successful have they been in developing the feminist critical perspective? What is the relevance and meaning of feminism in their personal and professional lives? Do they have a feminist consciousness?

As a social scientist engaged in the field that I study, I also attempt to offer the possibility of greater understanding of Third World women's activism and the complex conceptual links and distinctions between activist and volunteer, feminist and nonfeminist as contentious concepts in the post colonial context. These are some of the underlying auxiliary themes and questions that this study investigates.

### ***Rational for Study***

Utilizing a feminist standpoint perspective grounded in understanding the voices of marginalized groups, feminist standpoint perspectives mandate that research positions white women and women of color at the center of theorizing (Harris 2002). It is

my observation that there have been numerous grassroots studies on rural and lower class women in the developing countries; and although there is a substantial body of literature dealing with women's issues in India, such as debates surrounding legislation that effects women, controversial acts such as *sati* and dowry-death, women's poverty and health issues (Narayan 1997 ;Shiva 1994;Mehra 1997; Gopalan 1997; Seth 2001; Rai 2002), there have been few ethnographic studies on women's lives which explore the challenges of urban middle and upper class women volunteers and activists in specific non-governmental organizational settings. Moreover, I have found sufficient research literature on women volunteers and activists in Europe and the United States (see Rothschild 1979; Daniels 1985; Metzendorf and Cnaan 1992; Markham and Bonjean 1995, 1996; Plemper 1996; Donner 1997; Caputo 1997) but very scarce case studies are available on women volunteers and activists from urban Indian civil society.

Surely then, this exploratory study becomes more relevant given the relative lack of research in this area. Because urban Indian women have been historically excluded from the field of Third World developmental studies, their personal, social, cultural and organizational experiences and frames of feminist discourse regarding the challenges they face as volunteers and activists in women's NGOs have been overlooked in international sociological scholarship. Moreover, studying women volunteers and activists in the non-profit sector of modern Indian civil society have been generally ignored within the field of social inequality research.

However, it is beyond the scope of this study to generalize the dynamics of women volunteers and activists in its entirety for an area as vast and diverse as India. Instead I explore the day-to-day lived experiences that create challenges (and

motivations) for middle and upper class women volunteers and activists at women's NGOs in the city of Kolkata<sup>3</sup> (formally Calcutta), a city on India's east coast which had been the capital of British India during the 200-year-colonial era (see Appendix 2 for more details).

The urban environment of Kolkata presents both challenges and opportunities for women volunteers and activists working in NGOs. Through my data collection, I begin to understand the 'dailiness of women's lives' in the 'patterns women create and the meanings women invent in each day and over time (Aptheker 1989:39). Through studying their day-to-day lives (Sen and Grown 1987) I make visible the patterns of meaning interwoven in these women's actions and beliefs, "intelligible *in their own words* (14, italics my own)". Next, I analyze their responses to the concept of feminism and if they self-identify themselves as "feminists". Although feminism (as a Western ideology) is a fairly recent concept and the word feminism evokes Western stereotypes for many Indians (Kishwar 1990), India has a vibrant and diversified women's movement in place. More importantly then, gathering data from women working in NGOs at Kolkata also provides a way to gain some insight to the way middle and upper class urban Indian women view a career in gender empowerment, social developmental work and feminist activism, while also analyzing the ways they construct the image of a 'feminist' based both on their own and the Indian mass' perceptions of feminism (or a feminist).

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<sup>3</sup> Kolkata is also a city that has had the reputation of being politically tempestuous (Ray 2000) and passionate about the Marxist ideology, while being the hotbed for many political and social movements.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

I use data collected from a combination of participant observation and in-depth field interviews and research conducted between December 2003 and May 2005. A snowball sample of twenty one women volunteers and activists (paid and non-paid) from fourteen NGOs in Kolkata were interviewed with open ended semi-structured questions as part of this instrumental ethnographic case study. I have used their views, reflections, narratives and discourses to explore links between their everyday life experiences and broad-based social structural processes at work in Indian civil society (Campbell 1998). This group included an array of women from different walks of life who worked full time or part time in the NGO sector, from regular trained NGO professionals, founders of NGOs, members of boards of trustees, prominent activists from the Indian women's movement, writers, journalists, homemakers, researchers, educators, scholars involved in writing about the women's movement and women's issues, political activists to social development consultants.

Although, there is not a huge body of literature available on this group of women, I have worked with some available sources to gain information on contemporary issues affecting women's lives in India from NGO literature and the discourses therein. Scholars and activists produce discourse in the form of reports, academic papers and organizational literature; other relevant literature (in both English and Bengali, when required) on the Indian women's movement, urban women volunteers and activists, Feminist Standpoint Theory and method have also been reviewed by me for this exploratory project. Moreover to make this study more resourceful, I met with activists / members of various other women's social action groups, and sociologists from local

universities in Kolkata for their general perspectives and insights on urban women's role in gender empowerment and the developmental sector, and understanding of feminism in the Indian context.

However, it must be kept in mind that while the theoretical concerns in this research emerge in Indian sociological work to some extent, the basic framework is derived from the U.S. feminist literature. The Feminist Standpoint theory has guided me as the "outsider within" (Collins 1991) in exploring how urban middle and upper class working women in Third World NGOs within civil society deal with their day-to-day lives and construct their own understanding of feminist theory and activism, while keeping in mind that I have the 'experience of Knowledge' (hooks 1994) in the area that I study. Moreover, I noted that feminist researchers informed by Standpoint theoretical frameworks have employed reflective practice to counter the reproduction of inequalities in ethnographic investigation (Naples 2003). The findings in this study have built on the multiple dimensions of Feminist Standpoint theory and add to the comparative feminist and womanist scholarship by addressing problematic issues relating to Third World urban women, transnational feminism, womanism and the construction and interpretation of the image of a 'feminist' from the standpoint of South Asian women activists and volunteers in the Indian civil society.

With this in mind, the everyday lived experience of women is one place I start. In future research, I hope to draw comparisons with the lived experience of women in other developing countries as well as in the developed world so as to better understand the growth as well as impediments of contemporary feminism and feminist activities in global civil society. The findings of this research provide important insights into the

challenges faced by urban women volunteers and activists at NGOs in India, and may be potentially influential in offering operational solutions to some of these challenges and providing directions to future research in the area of women's activism in the Third World women's development and empowerment sector. Needless to say, this study will also be valuable for comparative research on transnational feminism, womanism, national case studies or ethnographic case studies on women volunteers and activists conducted in other countries, including the United States.

### ***Background and Overview***

In a groundbreaking article, feminist scholars Joan Acker, Kate Barry and Johanna Esseveld pointed out that the goal of sociology of women must be emancipatory or directed toward an interest of women rather than only about women (Acker et al. 1991). Most feminist scholars (see Reinharz 1992; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2004; Naples 2003; Hesse-Biber and Yaiser 2004 etc.) would agree that their work cannot be that of the detached, objective researcher of the traditional academy. Using the above premises suggested by these feminist scholars, I have identified five epistemological and methodological commitments or approaches as proposed by Fine (1993) to guide my research based on Standpoint Feminism : Women's Problematic, Women's Knowledge, Feminist Synaltics, Methodological Integrity and Revolutionary Pragmatism (I discuss these commitments on page 65). Coinciding with these commitments, I have worked within this framework even when gathering data from women engaged in women's development and gender empowerment in Kolkata.



This combination of studying feminist theory and performing community based research that is relevant to women is designed to illuminate, but also bridge, the perceived gap between feminist theory and the material and social conditions of women. In the Feminist Scholarship Development (FSD) Newsletter, Demaske (2003) contends that a disconnect still exists between theory and activism; and it continues to be fodder for debate. He adds that it is often said that the distinction between theory and activism is a false dichotomy, and there are strong conceptual and practical arguments that can be made in support of this position. But because of the political economy of the institution that we work in, the theory and activism split tends to be very real (ibid., 2003). Hence, taking a feminist praxis approach is a way to bridge my academic research with the lived experience of the Third World women I study.<sup>4</sup> By using feminist scholarship, theory and research developed in the West, to study the lives of women volunteers and activists in a non-western setting is one way I have been able to connect the gap between theory and practice<sup>5</sup>, feminist and womanist, outsider and insider, Western and world cultures, volunteers and activists just to name a few areas of scholarship.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Coinciding with the above discussion, this dissertation looks into the ways urban Indian women volunteers and activists negotiate their understanding of feminist theory

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<sup>4</sup> Western feminist scholars inside of academia continue to strive to overcome the institutional constraints tied to funding, tenure, and promotion, while also working toward creating research that will be meaningful to the real lives of women throughout the world. The quandary then for many feminist scholars remains trying to find a balance between the two worlds of academia and activism (Damaske, 2003). Different scholars have developed their own solutions to this dilemma, especially with the growth of transnational feminisms in the context of globalization.

<sup>5</sup> As mentioned earlier, workers in the field of development took exception to characterizing development as an “industry,” even as research (Weisgrau 1997) in this area shows that professional careers can be made from development work, particularly in the NGO sector. To resolve this dilemma, many NGO representatives characterize their work as a “calling,” giving it a quasi-religious sanction that justifies their academic interests (Ford 2001).

and activism (or feminist praxis), given the constraints of power relations, structural hierarchies within organizations, socio-economic class, employment status, age-group, family support, social network and educational opportunities. It is pertinent to this research to consider why women from middle and upper classes in urban India with higher educational backgrounds and more social opportunities choose to work as volunteers at NGOs in the non-profit sector<sup>6</sup>. A study of personal preferences, educational backgrounds, income aspirations, career goals, domestic obligations, social challenges, familial and cultural gender role expectations, organizational set up and public image of the NGOs may help shed light on the motivations based on which women make their choices. In a related vein, I have also analyzed women's own perceptions of the social status and professional prestige of women volunteers and activists in NGOs.

Following this investigation, I next discuss the concept of being a 'feminist' among women volunteers and activists in the NGOs from the civil society of a non-western setting. Research seems to suggest that there is a stigma attached to the term 'feminist' in many of the developing nations (Mohanty 1991; Ray 2000). Assuming that is true, possible reasons that lead to such negative conceptions of the term has been explored. In the age of transnational feminisms, the way these women define feminism and construct and interpret the image of a feminist, based on their appeal (or repulsion) to feminist ideas, helps me analyze the discourse of feminism in the postcolonial urban Indian context.

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<sup>6</sup> Baldock's (1990) theory of volunteer work within the welfare state can be used in special reference to the role of women volunteers as members of a sex segregated (paid, underpaid and unpaid) labor force.

Through this exploratory project, I argue that factors such as the socio-economic class, age-group, organizational set-up, employment status, family support, domestic obligations, social networking and educational levels among Indian women do impact their decisions to work as volunteers and activists in the non-profit sector. The women volunteers and activists in NGOs in Kolkata, who I see as ‘outsiders within’ mainstream international sociology and civil society literature, are the main source of my data. Based on their everyday lived experiences and in light of the women’s movement in India, this dissertation analyzes the above factors that affect urban Indian women’s career choices as women volunteers and activists in NGOs.

The other important discussion in this dissertation will be framed on analyzing the data gathered on the discourse of ‘feminism’ as constructed by women in Indian NGOs. Therefore, I focused on Indian women’s conception of feminism (exposure to feminist theory) and the image of a feminist. Summing up then, the research will address two broad questions:

- Can volunteerism and activism at women’s NGOs be a viable career choice for middle and upper class women in the urban Indian civil society?
- Do middle and upper class women volunteers and activists in Indian women’s NGOs identify themselves as ‘feminists’? Why or why not.

Based on my personal observations and interactions with urban women working in NGOs at Kolkata in the nineties, I had hypothesized that they deal with various personal, social, cultural and organizational challenges in order to pursue their career choices in the non-profit sector. As regards the second research question, I had suspected that there was a

considerable level of confusion with the concept of feminism among these women, even though much of their work, in fact, resembled feminist activism. I was enthusiastic to under take this study to find out from these women's own standpoint as to how they might construct a feminist praxis in the face of their everyday lived experiences as volunteers and activists in NGOs at Kolkata, and as educated urban Indian working women in the non-profit sector.

Subsequently, I believe that while adding to feminist research literature, global feminist scholarship and social inequality studies, this study will also benefit social activists, community service leaders, policy-makers, gender advocates, community based researchers and volunteers in the developmental and NGO sectors in civil societies around the world.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the theoretical framework that guides this research, followed by review of literature in Chapter III. After discussion relevant literature in Chapter IV I will go on to discuss the methodology that I have used to collect my data, which I analyze in Chapter V. The sixth chapter will explore the conception of feminism as held by urban and educated NGO volunteers and activists in the Indian civil society. Finally, I will conclude this dissertation with a discussion on my findings in Chapter VII, with a look at possible future research.

## Chapter II

### Theoretical Framework

#### *Feminist Standpoint Theory*

Next, I will outline my theoretical framework, Feminist Standpoint Theory, and its relevance to an exploratory study such as mine. Standpoint Feminism is concerned with revealing a set of views that help uncover alternative meanings, processes and outcomes. Since my study is on Third World women, an understudied group, it requires a special theory and method that will do justice to their lived experiences.<sup>7</sup>

Putnam (1990) describes this approach as a reliance on woman's life experiences and work to reframe social issues, knowledge and relationships (:3). Wood (1992) views standpoint feminism as a method to "understand how particular cultural practices and social relations invite and discourage certain kinds of experiences and interpretive inclinations" (:358). Therefore, Standpoint feminism privileges the specific accounts of women, who have had unique experiences and perspectives that help to position a view of broader discourses, practices, processes and social institutions. In keeping with the aim of my research, Feminist standpoint research investigates how women understand themselves in relationship to others within specific contexts, settings and themes.

Drawing upon Simmel's assertion that strangers "see patterns that may be more difficult for those immersed in the situation to see" (Collins 1991:36), Collins counter argues that "personal and cultural biographies are significant sources of knowledge" for "outsiders within" the academy (:53). As I mentioned in Chapter I, as a postcolonial

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<sup>7</sup> In Chapter IV I will discuss five commitments that guide my methodological approaches for this research.

Indian woman and a Third World feminist, I consider myself an ‘outsider within’ the academy with the knowledge of experience (hooks 1994), drawing from my personal experiences and cultural background as per Collins’ explanation. In addition, I also consider the participants of this research - middle and upper class urban women volunteers in the NGOs in the non-profit developmental sector in India as ‘outsiders within’ mainstream developmental studies and social inequality studies.

On reviewing literature on the different approaches to Standpoint epistemology, I identified a number of powerful connecting links with this ethnographic research. They include the significance of experience for the development of feminist theory and the connection between Standpoint theory and feminist political goals of the women’s movement (Naples 2003). The feminist theoretical commitment to explicate the intersections of gender, race-ethnicity, class, and other social structural aspects of social life without privileging one dimension or adopting an additive formulation has influenced the development of diverse feminist standpoint theories exemplified by several theorists. Significantly, this theory developed in context of Black feminist, Third World and postcolonial feminist challenges to the so-called dual systems of patriarchy and capitalism approach that was associated with socialist feminist theory. Broadly defined, feminist standpoint epistemology includes Nancy Hartsock’s (1983) “feminist historical materialist” perspective, Donna Haraway’s (1988) analysis of “situated knowledges,” Patricia Hill Collin’s (1990) “black feminist thought,” Chela Sandoval’s (1991, 2000) explication of Third World feminists’ “differential oppositional consciousness,” and Dorothy Smith’s (1987, 1990a, 1990b) “everyday world” sociology for women (Naples

2003:19). In the following sections, I will further discuss the epistemology and claims of the Feminist Theoretical Standpoint.

### ***Standpoint Epistemology***

Standpoint epistemologies are most convincing to thinkers who are accustomed to investigating relationships between patterns of thought and historical conditions that make such patterns reasonable (Harding 1991). Standpoints refer to a specific societal position, particularly in relation to power. Collins (1991) contends that the conscious recognition of one's standpoint opens possibilities for a conceptual stance, one in which all groups are acknowledged as possessing varying amounts of "penalty and privilege" (:72) as related to dominant group structures. In this exploratory study, the groups I focus on are urban and educated women volunteers and activists in NGOs, belonging to the middle and upper classes of Indian civil society. I study this group of women as related to their socially embedded position in the larger male-dominated group structure.

Standpoint theory is rooted in Marxist analysis of a unified woman's standpoint through working class conditions (Hartsock 1983). Feminist standpoint theory explores the daily life experiences of persons in subordinate positions (Smith 1987). According to Harding (1991), feminist standpoint focuses on the perspective of the woman; however, it endorses the incorporation of a variety of standpoints of women across multiple contexts. Therefore, feminist standpoints could take on the perspective of a variety of different perspectives as they relate to culture, ethnicity, nationality, gender and class. I will now briefly discuss eight epistemological claims of feminist research that form the basis of my Feminist Standpoint theoretical approach for this project.

### ***Feminist Standpoint Claims***

Feminist standpoint theories focus on gender differences, on differences between women's and men's societal situations which give a scientific advantage to those who can make use of the difference (Harding 1991). Feminist researchers have, therefore, claimed several "grounds" for feminist research based upon the many differences in the situations of men and women that have been claimed as valuable sources. Harding (1991) identifies eight epistemological claims that undergird the thinking in feminist research which is briefly discussed below. Although this will not be explicitly bridged to my research, these are guidelines which underpin my research implicitly.

The first claim is that women's different lives have been erroneously devalued and neglected as starting points for scientific research and as generators of evidence for or against knowledge claims. Human lives are not homogenous in any gender-stratified society; consequently they lead lives through different processes and patterns. Feminist standpoint epistemology views women's lives as grounds to criticize the dominant races, classes and cultures. This can decrease the partialities and distortions in the picture of social life provided by the natural and social sciences (Harding 1991).

The second claim is that women are outsiders to the social order. Collins (1986) supports the claim that many times women are considered "strangers" or "outsiders" because of their place within the social order. Because men are the dominant group members, their ways of thinking and acting pervade the ideology and conceptual schemes of social institutions. Feminist standpoint epistemology, teaches women to see the dysfunctionality of the social order of women. It helps people to see male supremacy



and the dominant forms of gender expectations and social relations as the bizarre beliefs and practices of a social order.

The third claim purports that women's oppression, exploitation and domination are grounds for transvaluing women's difference because members of oppressed groups have fewer interests in ignorance about social order and fewer reasons to invest in maintaining or justifying the status quo than do dominant groups.

The fourth claim is that knowledge emerges from the ideal of the progress through the struggles that women wage against their oppressors (Harding 1991). In other words, the women's perspective is from the other side of the "battle of the sexes" that women and men engage in on a daily basis. Feminist thinkers support that understanding comes from hidden aspects of social relations between genders and institutions that support these dynamics only through struggles to change them (Harding 1987, 1991). The need for struggle emphasizes the fact that a feminist standpoint is not something that anyone can have simply by claiming it. It is an achievement<sup>8</sup>.

The fifth claim to feminist epistemology is that women's perspective is from everyday life. This claim is the basis for starting research from the lives of women rather than from members of the dominant group. According to Smith (1987), women have been assigned the kinds of work that men in the ruling groups do not want to do, and "women's work" relieves these men of the need to take care of their bodies or of the local places where they exist, freeing them to immerse themselves in the world of abstract concepts. Harding (1991) argues that the more successful women perform "women's work", the more invisible it becomes to men. That is why men see "women's work" not

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<sup>8</sup> Here, I must point out that Harding (1991) states that a standpoint differs in this respect from a perspective, which anyone can have simply by "opening one's eyes" (:72).

as real human activity. More importantly for this research, Feminist standpoint theorists contend that women's activities mediate the divisions and separations in contemporary Western and world cultures, between nature and culture (Collins 1991:53).

The sixth epistemological claim is that women's standpoint comes from mediating ideological dualisms: nature vs. culture. Starting research from women's activities in these gender divisions of labor creates understanding in how and why social and cultural phenomena have taken the forms in which they appear in the lives of women.

The seventh claim is that women and specially women researchers are "outsiders" within. Some theorists argue that women, and especially women researchers, are "outsiders within". Again directly pertinent to my research, Third World feminists and Black feminist scholars may be two of the general distinct groups of marginalized intellectuals whose standpoints have impacted and enriched the sociological discourse surrounding the intersection of race, gender and class in America (Allen 1996, 1999; Collins 1986, 1991). Feminist standpoint theory views women as "strangers" or "outsiders" whose experiences might provide insight that is invisible to "natives" by adding to the understanding of nature and social life in general (Collins 1991:53). Collins (1997) summarizes the advantages of the outsider status as identified by sociological theorists. She believes that the stranger brings to her research just the combination of nearness and remoteness, concern and indifference.

The eighth claim supports that standpoint theories will provide a greater adequacy of research by examining women's lives as a starting point. Harding (1991) states that by examining the conflict between nature and social systems will enable feminist researchers of providing empirically and theoretically better accounts than can be generated from the

perspective of the dominant ideology, which cannot see the conflicts and contradictions of nature and social life. Thus, Feminist standpoint epistemology has emerged in response to a need to better understand women's experiences from a variety of social positions that include race, gender, class, global and local realities.

In the next chapter, I will discuss literature that is relevant for our understanding of the challenges and motivations of women volunteers and activists at NGOs in Kolkata, based on their own standpoints, which will provide us greater adequacy of research and feminist goals by examining women's lives as a starting point.

## CHAPTER III

### **Literature Review**

In this chapter I review relevant literature used in investigating and grounding this research. I start with a critical review on the relationship between women and NGOs, and then discuss prospects for woman volunteers and activists in women's organizations in the non-profit sector. After considering the plausible reasons and related dilemmas behind women's choices to serve as paid or non-paid volunteers, I discuss some of the conceptual distinctions between discursive labels and terminologies that are associated with women working in the NGOs. I also look at recent literature on the structure of women's organizations in the U.S. I then briefly talk about why it is important to study women in the developing world, following it up with a discussion on the role of upper and middle class women in the Indian Women's Movement. In the remainder of this chapter, I compare the approaches toward feminism in the United States and in India, leading to a discussion on the Indian women's movement in relation to Western Feminism. Finally, I move on to discuss the contemporary Indian women's movement and focus on women's organizations at Kolkata which is the setting for this project [for additional information on India and Kolkata, see appendices 1 and 2].

#### ***Women and NGOs – Critical Review***

Discussions of civil society have been proliferating over the past decade. The private pursuit of public purpose is a unique feature of civil society, and the non-profit sector remains crucial in addressing problems facing modern, industrializing

communities (Markham and Bonjean, 1995). Especially in recent work, scholars have emphasized the importance of the development of “civil society” to ensure the success of modernization and democratization in the context of globalization (Hawkesworth 2001:228). The cultivation of civil society is said to be beneficial because it encourages citizens to organize as alternate power centers outside the state to promote their interests in terms of a voluntary sector of organizations and interests groups across divisions of race, class, ethnicity, nationalities and gender. Under democratic consolidation, NGOs staffed by well-educated professionals (which include lawyers, journalists, university professors and the likes) and funded by international agencies, become primary vehicle for women’s development and women’s interaction with governmental institutions and the social environment. NGOs have been extremely important in keeping women’s issues on the political agenda and in providing essential services for women in democratizing nations (ibid., 2001).

Women’s NGOs can act as independent social service agencies, interest and self-help groups designed to pressure the government to change laws or implement existing laws for the development and empowerment of women; thereby, creating a parallel power structure in the public sphere (Plemper 1996). In the present study, I look at NGOs run by women for women in Indian civil society at Kolkata. Although exception was taken by some development workers to characterizing development as an industry, Weisgrau (1997:16) notes that there are institutionalized NGOs and professional careers to be made from development work. Plemper (1996) asserts that it has been generally observed that participation of women in community activism or volunteer work, especially through NGOs, far outnumber participation of men. There are, of course,

several reasons that can be put forth to understand this gender dynamic in the NGO sector, albeit with several inherent dichotomies. To start with, engaging in social developmental work and community activism through NGOs has had several positive implications for women. One of the most significant implications relates to career building; giving time as paid or non-paid volunteers has become a means of gaining work experience and professional skills for women interested in career building (ibid. 1996).

However, in addressing these implications, other related concerns arise - the variables of social class standing, gender-role-expectations, domestic obligations, education level, employment status, power relations and member selectivity (Caputo 1997; Rai 2002, Kendall 2002) to organizations run by women for women further complicates the dynamics which affect feminist theory and praxis. I gathered from previous research that society sees women's social work and volunteerism as a 'traditional' role for women – usually substituting for paid work, serving as training for reentry into the labor force (Metzendorf 1992). This creates ambivalence in the volunteers' awareness of negative stereotypes about sociability work and highlights the lack of significance generally accorded to this form of invisible labor that women perform (Daniels 1985); thereby, often rendering it invisible and leading to its devaluation.

Moreover, often there are social, cultural and structural limitations that are in place to limit women's involvement in paid work. Significantly, in cultures where men and women have separate spheres and women are ideally not supposed to join the labor force but instead become caring mothers and housewives (see Rai 2002; Plemper 1996;

Calman 1992), women's empowerment and a career based on activism can, indeed, be a difficult proposition.

Then there are problems with the structure and member selectivity of the NGOs. NGOs are involved in community service programs, developmental projects and campaigns related to women's social problems. Nonetheless, critics are suspicious, skeptical, and sometimes outright hostile to NGOs because, from their perspective, the social processes that these organizations generate are reactionary in content, elitist in terms of the interest they represent, and insensitive to the real interests of the poor and dispossessed (Fernando and Heston 1997). Further, by claiming a universal interest, these organizations function as a mask for the interest of the dominant classes and are nothing more than another manifestation of the ideology of the ruling class (ibid. 1997).

It is true that many of the upper class women have found a life-time occupation in volunteering and activism for women's development and empowerment, but there are some associated problems. Reviews on literature on women's volunteerism suggest several typologies based on roles played by individual workers. Two main typologies as suggested by Metzendorf and Cnaan (1992) are service volunteers and policy volunteers. Based on these categories, the nature of power relations within and without the organization can perpetuate social inequality and gender oppression. Moreover, privilege advantages of elite women can also lead them to exert social control over those in other classes, whom they help with their volunteer efforts or who serve in staff positions in the non-profit organizations (Kendall 2002). From this, I make certain core assumptions as to the dilemmas and challenges of women engaged in feminist activism and professions related to women's development at NGOs in the civil society.

In a related vein, although in feminist organizations managers are expected to form a non-hierarchical, community-like environment in which volunteers and paid staff are equal (Epstein et al 1988), there are those who believe that even feminist organizations are oligarchic by nature (Michel 1962). Traditionally, volunteering for community service or philanthropy has been the privileged position of only middle and upper class women volunteers (Kendall 2002) which, in turn, typically serve to continue to disadvantage subsequent generations of working-class volunteers and activists. To maintain social contacts and to gain prestige without abrogating social, religious and community norms, upper-class (usually married) women have been known to turn to philanthropic and volunteer organizations, especially in social services, welfare and healthcare (Plempner, 1996).

However, many sympathetic observers have pointed out that, despite the good intentions of the donor-driven NGOs, their activities follow an unpredictable ebb and flow, since the conditions necessary for them to execute their agendas according to the objectives of their organizations are often lacking, and changing them is beyond their control (Fernando and Heston 1997). Having critically reviewed the relationship between women and NGOs, I will now discuss the personal and professional prospects for women in NGOs.

### ***Prospects for Women Volunteers in Women's Organizations***

Organized community-based volunteerism in the United States had its origins in the provision of unpaid services to the needy by middle and upper-class women (Lubove 1975). McCarthy (1989:7) noted that 'under the banner of religion and the ideology of the Republican Motherhood and the cult of domesticity, women broadened their range of



maternal responsibilities beyond the home to encompass the needs of dependents and the dispossessed.” With compulsory education, children spent much less time at home, and women were encouraged to fill their time by serving the collective good (Bolger 1975).

The literature that deals with societal expectations of women volunteer views the issue from three distinct perspectives. The first perspective sees women as spouses of husbands who are the actual breadwinners. They are therefore always available to do unpaid tasks. According to Jenner (1983), women structure their career decisions so they will have flexibility for life organized around a future husband and children. Further, this perspective suggests that women are not expected to pursue a career or secure financial independence but instead are expected to invest in their families and freely contribute their services to the community, as was the custom in previous centuries (Karl 1984). Schram and Dunsing (1981) also found that the more educated a woman is and the more negative her husband’s attitude toward her employment, the more likely it is that she will volunteer. Clearly then, women find self-actualization through volunteerism and activism. This is, however, a personal perspective of volunteerism and not a societal perspective (Metzendorf and Cnaan, 1992).

Interestingly, Whaples and Bordelon (1983) found that about two-thirds of the volunteers who served also held full-time jobs. Thus, they worked as supplemental volunteers only (Metzendorf and Cnaan, 1992). But feminists view the use of women as unpaid workers as a form of exploitation (ibid. 1992), which is the second perspective. They consider this as exploitation because the women are not compensated with elevated status, enhanced job security or monetary reward for their services (Leghorn and Parker 1981). Christiansen-Ruffman (1990) observed that in a capitalist society, where value is

often defined in monetary terms, women's unpaid work helps perpetuate women's poverty and the low evaluation of women's work<sup>9</sup> (Kaplan 1985). Therefore, on reviewing the literature on the institution of women volunteers, their roles and ways in which feminist organizations can manage the workers, there appears to be a paradoxical use of non-paid workers, which needs to be looked into in future research

Finally, the last perspective as presented by Mueller (1978) sees volunteerism as a means of facilitating reentry to the job market because it provides a way to maintain or develop human capital and skills that can be transferred to paid employment (Janey et al 1991). Likewise, volunteering can also unintentionally lead to employment, when women are offered jobs in the organizations where they volunteered (Loeser 1978). Alternately, their scope and prospects for finding better jobs in the market also increase, as a result of their hands on experience in a professional setting.

### ***Conceptual and Philosophical Distinctions – Volunteers and Activists / Feminists and Non-feminists***

Another critical issue that deserves attention revolves around conceptual definitions of labels such as 'volunteers', 'activists, and 'feminists' 'non-feminists'. In our discussions, it is prudent to keep in mind that volunteers may or may not be activists. In particular, Eliasoph's (1998) differentiation between activist and volunteer groups is striking<sup>10</sup>. Activists are presented as more cynical than volunteers but also more accepting of the belief that conversation about important matters is an important aspect of

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<sup>9</sup> Kaplan (1985) argued that because women are presumed to have a natural affinity, volunteer work often get overlooked. Perceptions of volunteer work as something other than activism take away from the fact that many women volunteer as a way to become involved in public life and to effect change in their communities.

<sup>10</sup> This point is especially salient in light of research such as that by Eliasoph (1998) on the efforts made by many Americans to avoid politics. Eliasoph argued that civic etiquette, which discourages imaginative and open-minded conversation in public, has caused politics to evaporate from the public realm in an effort to appear unpretentious and inclusive.

what they do and of social change. Volunteers, on the other hand, are said to be more focused on action and emphasize doing over talking. Another difference cited by Eliasoph concerns the production of knowledge: Activists are more likely to understand themselves as knowledge producers, volunteers as knowledge consumers. Moreover, Blackstone (2004) has pointed out that gender is central to conceptual distinctions between activists and volunteers. Mainstream conceptions of being political are oftentimes incongruent with mainstream ideals of women as compassionate yet unfrontational; therefore, women's apathy seems incongruent with the stereotypical images of them as caretakers and nurturers<sup>11</sup>. Thus, activism and voluntarism need not be synonymous and the relationships between the two remains obscure at best (Caputo, 1997).

In addressing the above relationship, other related concerns may also be raised. For instance, Blackstone (2004) has argued that the question of whether we can or should ascribe the label "activists" to those who chose not to identify themselves that way is reminiscent of feminist debates about whether to ascribe the label "feminist" to those who do not identify as such. Through their research on working class women's activism, Bookman and Morgen (1988), Naples (1998), and Pardo (1995) demonstrated that much of the activism conducted by self-proclaimed non-feminists in fact resembles feminist activism. Pardo suggested that those who do not define themselves as feminists but who employ "implicitly feminist practices" (1995:357) might best be described as "border feminists".

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<sup>11</sup> Avoiding politics is about gender because women in particular have been historically been relegated to the realm of the private and non-political (Blackstone 2004).

Interestingly, Bordt (1997) in her research on organizational structure had found that women's non-profit organizations in New York differ in terms of philosophies that inform them about whether they consider themselves a feminist organization or not. She noted that the concept of feminism takes on different meanings for those who adopt this philosophy. The range of definitions included "working for women's equality," "believing women and men are different but equal," "the empowerment of all women and the end of oppression on the basis of sex, race, class, sexual orientation," "total liberation for all." and a "woman-identified focus on all issues affecting all inhabitants of this planet and the planet itself." (:18-19).

There were also important distinctions among organizations that do not adopt a feminist philosophy; some suggested that feminism is too narrow a concept or too exclusionary for their goals, which include a wider target population than women (for example, people of color, lesbians and gays and so on). When asked what alternative philosophies guide their organization, only a few specified their orientation: humanistic, human rights, self-help and the likes (Bordt 1997: 19). She also noted, however, that individual members may consider themselves feminists. Likewise, for the present study, I am concerned with the individual's response to feminism, and not necessarily the organization's official position regarding feminism.

Going back to Bordt's (1997) findings, there was another type of women's organization where, apparently, feminism has never come up for discussion. She suggested that these organizations assume a social service orientation and see themselves as apolitical, therefore eliminating the possibility of discussing other philosophies or politics at all. Further, she also adds that it is conceivable that because feminism has

historically been viewed as white, middle class movement for women, when women of color come together feminism is not among the range of philosophies with which the group members identify, debate over, and overtly accept or reject.

From the above discussion, I construe that it is possible that different women's NGOs will have different ideologies and philosophies that they adhere to; and the various women working with them are also likely to have different conceptions about feminism and end up constructing the image of a feminist accordingly. Coming back to the topic of NGO structures, I will now review literature on the structure of women's organizations.

### ***Structure of Women's Organizations***

Literature on the management of feminist organizations in general and women volunteers and activists in particular, differs from that concerning other organizations (Srinivasan and Davis 1991). They are examples of alternative organizations that are driven by commitment to ideology and an egalitarian structure (Milofsky and Elion 1988). In feminist organizations managers are expected to form a nonhierarchical, community-like environment in which volunteers, activists and paid staff are equal. Proponents of feminist organizations argue that these organizations are highly democratic in their daily operations (Srinivasan and Davis 1991). Moreover, the relationships among members should be personal, friendly and of value in themselves (Epstein 1988). Finally, staff and volunteers should be recruited on the basis of personal contacts and commitment to the organization's mission, rather than professional experience or educational qualifications, so as to establish a homogenous organization (Milofsky and Elion 1988).

However, recent research on women's organizations suggests that there has been a change in thinking about organizational structure. First, social histories of the contemporary women's movement have documented how organizational form has been replaced by organizational strategy as a defining factor among women's movement organization (Feree and Hess 1994). Second, theoretical discussions of feminist organizations encourage women to be more discriminating among organizational structures, rather than uncritically assuming that collectivist structures are the only ones consistent with feminist ideology. For example, Mansbridge (1984) argues that feminists should not take the position that there is only one "form of freedom." Rather, the structures women adopt for their organizations should depend on the context. Martin (1990) encourages us to move away from using organizational structure as the way of defining what constitutes a feminist organization, arguing that excessive attention has been given to organizational structure (particularly the dichotomy between bureaucracy and collectives) to the exclusion of other defining factors such as feminist values, goals, outcomes, and practices (Bordt 1997).

Moreover, based on empirical studies of women's organizations, it is clear that some women have taken a more moderate position of adopting hybrid organizational forms, which blend aspects of both bureaucracy and collectives. For instance, Gottfried and Weiss (1994) find evidence of what they call a "compound feminist organization" in their case study of Purdue University's Council on the Status of Women. One of the political advantages of such a hybrid form is its ability to accommodate its membership diversity. Based on research on three feminist organizations, Iannello (1992) uncovered the use of "modified consensus," structural invention that allows for decisions to be made

without a reliance on hierarchy or pure consensus and adding to unique structural innovations which are practically more effective and useful.

Despite these suggestive findings from the U.S feminist literature, there is not much documented on the structures of women's NGOs in Kolkata. Therefore, through my study, I would like to begin to filling the gaps in knowledge by examining the challenges and dynamics related to organizational structure that the Third World volunteers and activists encounter in their everyday lives in India.

### ***Studying Women from the Developing World***

Within the academy in India, a dynamic relationship continues between the women's movement and the production of knowledge. Women's studies centers exist in most universities in India, and women's studies journals are also flourishing. These scholars are part of the emerging networks working on a variety of women's status issues internationally. Despite this, literature on Indian women's activism has been overlooked or relegated to the margins in the West. This is due particularly to the tendency, especially in the United States, to view women in India as victims rather than agents of change, or to consider women's issues in India as related to development, even when gender interests are involved (Purkayastha and Subramaniam 2004). Moreover, Western theorists of movements focus largely on those in the United States and Europe, creating generalizations about movement's politics - particularly movement politics in democratic states - with a glance at the developing world, including India - the world's largest democracy. Similarly, although scholars of India may read the broad comparative politics literature, scholarship on India tends to be ghettoized and read mostly by those who are students of South Asia per se. Furthermore, when it comes to studying women, there is a

large body of literature about woman's movement in the West, particularly in the United States and Great Britain. But with regard to women in the developing world, books on the historical development far outnumber any on women's collective action or the special problems that gender poses to political organization (Calman 1992). I personally believe that for those whose interest is in studying women as agents of change in developing areas, the Indian case has much to teach.

At the same time, scholars of women in developing areas have grown rightly wary of over generalizing about the problems and prospects of woman in areas as vast and as distinct as the nations of Asia, Latin America, the middle-east and Africa. However, while it is necessary to be precise about the differences among woman in developing areas, it is useful to note and explore their commonalities. Only in this way can the distinct experience of one group of women illuminate pitfalls and promises for another. Commonalities among women in developing areas exist in the conditions of most of day-to-day life (Sen and Grown 1987). While not all women in the developing world are poor, most of them are; and in the last several decades, with the growing impact of capitalist production and despite economic development schemes during the United Nations Decade for the Advancement of Women that aimed to include woman, women's relative access to economic resources, remunerative work, and income has declined (Jaquette 1982).

In virtually all states in the developing world, women have less access, also to public resources, such as education and health care, in part because scarce resources first go to men and boys and only later to girls and women. In a report published in the 1980s by the government of India (with assistance from the UNICEF), it said that in cultures



that idolize sons and dread the birth of daughters, to be born a female comes perilously close to being born less than human. Not surprisingly, women enjoy less-than-equal rights in law (either civil or religious law or both), whether because the law is written so as to limit their rights or because the law is adjudicated and implemented in such a way as to have this effect. They hold less political power and in terms of influence. They are subject to violence by men (of their own families, or often, by unrelated men who hold economic power over them, like the police) that goes largely unpunished by the state (Calman 1992). Significantly, these disturbing social attitudes and cultural conditions apply to women from all strata and classes of Indian society, even though there are relative differences in the degree of discrimination, oppression and deprivation. Therefore, it is important to remember that the urban, educated, middle and upper class women we are studying for this research are themselves an oppressed group, in the larger patriarchal social system, in spite of their concerted efforts to bring about gender equality.

Having discussed the above, while NGOs propose to raise women's awareness and empower them, I address some problematic aspects of the role of middle and upper class women, both as volunteers and activists involved in oppressed women's development and as women from upper and middle classes of the urban Indian civil society working in the non-profit sector.

### ***Indian Women's Movement – Role of Middle & Upper Class Women at NGOs***

The deep social and cultural divisions in India are not unique, therefore, studying middle and upper class educated urban women in the Indian civil society can provide us with instructive material from which to compare the contribution of other groups of

women to the international women's movement and civil societies in non-Western settings. Despite the paucity of previous research, the post-colonial civil society at Kolkata provides an interesting case for our current investigation. As a city made internationally famous by Nobel laureate Mother Teresa, it is a region characterized by growing divide between the rich and the poor, high levels of poverty, illiteracy and gender inequality (Murthy, 1998). These conditions are compounded further by the impact of globalization, conflict between modern and traditional gender norms based on class, education, age, Indian family value-systems, social and religious mores and conflicting political ideologies. What's more, these problems make the organization of women more urgent if they are to achieve equality, but also make it that much more difficult.

As noted earlier, there are many committed NGOs in India working for the advancement of the women's movement and women's rights. The activities of these women's groups are characteristic of the convergence between 'feminist' and 'developmentalist' perspective that has recently been taking place in Indian development programs (Unnithan and Srivastava 1997:157).

Although increasing numbers of governmental and non-governmental institutions are attempting to introduce modernization and developmental programs to intervene women's lives, the policies, procedures and practices of these institutions often reflect and perpetuate existing unequal hierarchies in their organizational set up. Despite heightened concern about gender inequalities and the espousal of gender training by both governmental and non-governmental institutions in the 1990s, research indicates that

developmental programs vary widely in terms of their vision and goals as well as their understanding of gender as an operational objective (Mukhopadhyay and Appel 1998).

As in other countries in developing areas, the population of India is not all poor. Indeed, the divide between those of middle-class standing and above, with their access to most of the consumer goods the world economy has to offer, and the majority who are desperately poor is becoming deeper and more painful. Like in other cultures, although many women, especially from the lower classes continue to work to support their families and themselves, the majority of women in India are housewives and mothers (Plempner 1996). Many women from upper middle and upper classes work as unpaid volunteers or with very minimal pays because they have the financial means to delegate housework and childcare to their paid servants (ibid.1996).

Significantly, women of different classes experience different problems and therefore, have different opportunities and political agendas. While this is true, organized attempts to introduce social reforms on behalf of women are, of course, not unique to India. However, research indicates that in India's women's movement, educated women have been both a vital "conscience constituency," concerned with the future of poor women and a group acting in its own self-interest (Calman 1992:73). Additionally, what may be thought of as "international feminism" – both normative ideology and the influence of feminist ideas on economic development practices sponsored by government, the United Nations and a range of NGOs – has provided a range of resources (ibid. 1992:73) to further strengthen the women's movement.

In the cities, as educated, politically experienced women activists set about organizing poor women, they quickly recognized that the task of personal and family

empowerment were necessary to women's political participation. Since a feeling of anger and crisis is not enough to create a movement, resources that allow for organization are also necessary, and they are available within India. Most important, are the educated, politically skilled and economically privileged Indian women who have been the leaders of the women's movement. Women's organizations, already in existence which became more politicized when confronted with new issues, and a free and activist press, with representation from feminist journalists, are the other most critical domestic resources. Also important is an aspect of Indian political culture that could be brought to the fore from the time of the nationalist movement, women's participation in politics has been accepted in principle (Calman 1992).

As I will discuss later in this dissertation (see *Indian Women's Movement and Women's Organizations*), both rights and empowerment groups of the women's movement thus have plenty of domestic factors that promoted their organization. But concern for women is also generated by an ideological transformation taking place worldwide that directly influence India. Western feminist scholarship and theory is well-known to many of the educated Indian women who became activists. In addition, the feminist impact on the United Nations that resulted in International Women's Year and the United Nations Decade for Women have also had strong reverberations in India. It was in response to United Nations call for country studies of women's condition that the Indian government created the Indian Committee on the Status of Women to write *Towards Equality* (Calman 1992) [for more details on status of Indian women and *Towards Equality*, please see appendix 3].

International feminist influence has continued to aid empowerment groups and women's NGOs in particular. Since the mid 1970s, feminist critics of existing development practices are becoming increasingly powerful and gaining adherence in international agencies. Western funding and development agencies are putting more women officers in the field (Calman 1992:185). Having said this, it must be pointed out that the emergence of NGOs as the premier woman's organizations under democratic consolidation raises important concerns (Caldeira 1998). Because NGOs are dependent upon external funding, granting agencies have the power to set priorities for NGO activity. Hawkesworth (2001) has argued that no matter how beneficial these priorities may be for women, priorities set by international agencies disempower local women who no longer set their own agendas. Sabine Lang (1999) has noted that although feminist NGOs may have been created out of participatory social movements, several factors mitigate their ability to maintain social movements. At the most minimal level, because NGOs are dependent upon soft money, they must develop the fixed organizational structures, professional staff, and fiscal accountability necessary to be entrusted with major grants by funding agencies. They cannot afford the fluidity of a mass-based voluntary movement. Their agendas must be narrowly focused and presented in terms of realizable goals and objectives in order to demonstrate their efficacy. In some circumstances, the competition among NGOs for funds could hinder strategic coalition building, placing NGOs in the uncomfortable position of being financially dependent upon institutions and organizations that pure political principles would lead them to confront. In addition, the professionalization of NGO staff necessary to attend the respectability not only to receive funds from international agencies, but also to establish a

reputation as an authoritative voice on women's needs and interest replicates inequalities and privileges among women rather than eroding them (Hawkesworth 2001).

Nevertheless, the urban Indian population, in many ways, is similar to other developing nations at a time of globalization, where social and religious mores still limit the activities of women in education, politics and the economy. In India, it is the particular effects of Hinduism and Indian-based Islam that must be the focus of analysis, rather than those of Christianity, Judaism and Islam as practiced and adjudicated in other parts of the world (ibid. 1992). Still, the fact of having underlying patriarchal socio-religious traditions that relegate women of all classes to a secondary status is common to most developing countries and must be with specificity in each instance, taken into account in understanding the status of women and the limits of and possibilities for change. I would like to point out though, the reason I periodically discuss literature on NGOs in civil societies is really to provide a background to the setting in which the women I study are situated as 'outsiders within'. Although I view people as active agents in their own lives and as such constructors of their social worlds, I do not see that activity as isolated, instead I locate individual experience in society and history, embedded within a set of social relations and structures (Acker et. Al 1983). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the NGO structures and the viewpoints of the women who work for them are not the same.

In this study my primary focus is analyzing the everyday lived experiences of the women in terms of confronting social, cultural and organizational challenges that they face as volunteers and activists in the civil society at NGOs in Kolkata.

### *Feminist Spaces in India and the United States*

Comparative studies on the women's movement in India and Canada (Basu and Vats 1995) have focused on the common experience of patriarchy dominant in both cultures. Although, there are vast dissimilarities between Canada and India, women in both countries have lived and grown up in male-dominated societies under colonial control; also, their traditional roles have been outlined as being subservient to men (ibid. 1995). Consequently, many scholars have used the concept of feminist space to investigate comparative and contrasting values between two or more dissimilar countries (Lal 1997).

Although the word feminism evokes Western stereotypes for many Indians (Kishwar 1990), Indian women are credited with having resisted patriarchal oppression for more than 2,000 years (Tharu and Lalita 1993). The coalescence of isolated resistance into a movement in India in the nineteenth century emerged at about the same time as in the United States (Donovan 1985) and Europe (Anderson and Zinsser 1988). In brief, common concerns across the continents as well as differences are evident in the work of many feminist scholars (Sundararajan 1993) involved with international women's movement.

The work of these feminist scholars testifies to the diversity of feminist theories and women's movement across the globe. But at the same time, they break into silences in predecessor theories, especially those which do not specify women's and men's relative positions in society and they reveal distortions in what has been said (Jagger 1983:21). They agree on one point however: that gender, the socially constructed definitions of what it means to be a woman and man, is a fundamental category of any

analysis of social life. But then again, for classical Marxist feminists in the United States as in India, gender is subsumed under class analysis. They raise new questions and provide new epistemological insights, some crossing disciplinary boundaries, others remaining within them (Kachuck 2003).

As I stated earlier, while the theoretical concerns in this research emerge in Indian work to some extent, the basic framework is derived from U.S. feminist literature. Significantly, the practice of categorizing theories as a method of inquiry into feminist projects is more common in the West than in India. In the United States, this is attributable to the larger number of academics expected to engage in theorizing while also doing research and women's studies courses. The numerous courses, more than 16,000 at college and graduate levels, stimulate publications, which in turn encourage theoretical writings (Kachuck 2003).

In India, however, crystallizing issues and activism has been more urgent. Thus, a book-length discussion of women describes issues with no reference to theoretical perspectives (Desai and Krishnaraj 1990). However, the need for theorizing to comprehend and guide activist work often comes at the conclusion of a major review of issues usually published a year later (Gandhi and Shah 1991). Similarly, it may be of interest to note that U.S. feminist academics also see a gap between their work and the real needs of global women (Messer-Davidow 1991). Thus, critical encounters of Indian and American thought promise to enrich both (Kachuck 2003). A discussion of the most salient of these ideas follows:



### ***Feminist Liberalism***

Feminist liberalism, the most prominent feminist strand in the United States and prevalent in India, asserts a rational man's natural right to prove all truths, including the 'Eternal Beings' (Jagger 1983:40-42). Feminist liberals appropriate this assertion for women. The power of the natural rights argument can be seen in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's rejection of sacred texts in the nineteenth century struggle for women's rights in the United States. However, the concepts' abstract quality and natural origin makes it ambiguous permitting selective application, although it is commonly asserted as a cultural norm (Kachuck 2003). In most cultures, conceptually, "woman" is excluded primarily by denying her the rationality that marks the "man" as the highest animal (Peterson and Runyan 1993:34). Concretely, women have historically been excluded from political power. In this century, women have largely won the battle for vote, though definitions of rights continue to limit women's access to public power by various means. Most obvious are the continued effects of the dichotomy of public-private spheres that separates men's productive and political activities from women's reproductive and personal activities (ibid. 1993).

In India, the rights argument encounters more varied norms. Consistent with their national constitution, Indian feminists claim women's rights as individuals to, for example, education (Chanana 1988), pay equity (Gandhi and Shah 1991), and land control (Agarwal 1994). But the legitimacy of personal authority goes against the conception of individuals with family and kinship networks, where they have to consider others' expectation and meet responsibilities towards them (Karlekar 1988). Within those networks, rights have been in association with status positions, generally privileging men

over women, some men over other men, and some women over other women. Outside the networks similar understandings regulate relationships between, for instance landowner and landless laborer, and higher and lower caste members. The relationships can seem part of the natural social order, of traditions that are beyond questioning (Agarwal 1994: 58-59). Given this array of understandings, women's natural rights can be more difficult to claim here. Meanwhile, the link of the Western concept of abstract rights with colonial subjugation makes claims to rights suspect (Tharu 1995). Tharu's requirement that claimants scrutinize their own subject position seems appropriate in both India and the United States, since each has its own versions of hierarchies (ibid. 1995).

The liberal feminists' solution is to improve women's access to the public realm. They demand state protection of women's rights as individuals to determine their lives, thereby becoming the equals of men. The U.S. liberals assume, as their Indian counterparts do, that women choose between careers and full-time family lives for personal reasons (Singh 1990). Moreover, this assumption disregards myriad social and cultural pressures and over generalizes the choice of middle-class women with income from a spouse or another source. Nevertheless, the demand for economic equality with men resonates across class (Gandhi and Shah 1991).

The basic political program in the United States is outlined by the National Organization for Women (NOW), the country's largest feminist organization (Friedan 1976: 124-30). It demands equality for women and men in all phases of society, emphasizing opportunities for jobs, particularly for better-paying positions; and education; child-care centers and sharing of income production and housework in marriage. NOW's work does not, of course, constitute all feminist efforts in the United

States. Diverse women there organize on behalf of women and also to benefit both women and men. Despite the diversity NOW has become identified as 'the U.S feminist movement'. In contrast, the Indian women's movement is conceptualized as comprising diverse campaigns (Kumar 1993), where there are some organizations that are more conspicuous than others.

In the United States, however, the cumulative effect of women's public visibility and the economic advance of a relative few have unleashed a backlash. University professors discover female defects and the media inflates women's, especially feminists', deficiencies (Faludi 1991). The religious and political right denounces feminists for destroying family values (Eisenstein 1982), making them seem like women's enemies. In India, too, similar reactions towards the feminist ideology and a certain amount of stigma with the terminology of a 'feminist' seem to exist (Mohanty 1991; Ray 2000).

### ***Indian Women's Movement vs. Western Feminism***

With regard to women's movements, Omvedt (1978) argues that there are two types of women's movements - the first seeks equality for women within the confines of conventional societal structures. The objective is to eradicate the most visible forms of oppression without directly challenging the traditional basis of society. The second type of movement focuses on women's liberty by directly questioning the sex segregation base of society. Sanghera (1997) contends that the former was more indicative of the Indian women's movement since women sought equality through an emphasis on complementarities. In other words, they sought equality by emphasizing the notion that women complimented men and they needed a forum in which to voice their concerns. Indian women sought to improve their position without challenging the patriarchal fabric

of Indian society. This entailed an emphasis on their role as women and subsequently, as wives and mothers. However, Western feminist movements differ due to their tendency to directly challenge the patriarchal matrix of society. Building on this premise, Kumar (1993) remarks: “One of the points of definition which pre-independence (Indian) feminists used was that Western feminists were pitted against men, whereas Indian feminists were not. This was explained on the grounds that while the suffragettes had had to struggle for the vote, ‘our men’ (i.e. the Indian National Congress) supported the demand for female suffrage. In other words, Indian feminists were not anti-male because our men were better than Western men” (:195). What’s more, from a historical perspective, Shridevi (1967) argued that there was no real feminist movement in India comparable to those occurring in the West. In countries like England and America, the very thought of emancipation of women horrified men who started imagining of “licentious women running amuck in a society of sober men, divorcing husbands, breaking up homes, neglecting children, and sinning in the open street.” As for women’s suffrage, it was prophesized to be the beginning of anarchy. Men were afraid their wives would grab political power, turn all the man-made laws of the country upside down and reduce man to a state of dependence on woman. The fact that in all the countries that agitated for women’s suffrage the female population is greater than male aggravated this fear and turned it into panic” (1967:57).

While the agitation for women’s rights in the West was a slow and gradual process, the Indian women’s movement was quite sudden. In addition, with prominent male figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Ram Mohan Roy and Jawaharlal Nehru advocating the emancipation of women, Indian men did not fear this development as

much. But, women's movements in various countries of the Third World have also been closely aligned with the anti-colonial movement and it has not been uncommon for the women's question to be rendered subservient to the greater, more pronounced discourse of nationalism.

The Indian feminist movement also diverges from the equivalent movements in the West, with respect to the notion of sexual difference. While some feminist struggles in the West emphasized equality with man in all spheres, there was a tendency among Indian men and women to dwell on the idea of separate roles for males and females. Kumar (1993) conveyed that in the early years of movements for women's rights...it was more or less taken for granted that the difference between the sexes was such that their roles, functions, aims and desires were different. And hence, not only had they to be differently reared but differently treated in general. Over time this difference was itself adduced as a major reason for reforming women's conditions. While early 19<sup>th</sup> century reformers argued that it was precisely this difference that made women socially useful (women as mothers), and hence proper care for their conditions of being was socially necessary (1993:2).

As enlightened women emerged at the forefront they also demanded further rights, access to education, liberty etc., and they also based their arguments on these issues of differences between men and women. According to Chaudhuri (1993:146) "two themes emerge here, both of which are emphasized through the history of the women's movement; one relating to the naturally non-antagonistic relationship of the sexes in India as compared to the west and the other relating to the need for women representatives in various forums to put forward their views." While women had to contend with much

opposition in their endeavor for emancipation, Indian feminists argue they had little opposition from their men folk in their own crusade for rights. In fact, it is argued that women's emancipation was a requisite for the social reform and nationalist enterprises. Consequently, women were permitted to fight alongside their male counterparts as both parties struggled for the same goal (Ali 1991:42-43). "So the feminist movement in India could not in any sense be said to be a rebellion or a revolt against man, it was rather an attempt to regain lost ground. It was neither actuated by any spirit of competition, nor marked with violence; it was on the other hand, a movement of calm assertion" (Singh 1968:167).

Further, Shridevi (1967:142) contends that the Indian women's cause has been assisted by a number of factors such as reforms, nationalism, and education. She argues that the Indian feminist movement was also assisted by the formation of autonomous women's organizations such as the All India Women's Congress (A.I.W.C.) "under whose auspices it had worked for the establishment of schools and colleges on the one hand and for women's franchise and the codification and rectification of the ancient Hindu Law for better privileges to women on the other (:143).

A point of contention for Third World movements is the use of the term 'feminism'. As I stated earlier, western feminism has been challenged for its imperialistic bias "and of short-sightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism, classism, and homophobia (Mohanty 1991:7)." While women in the West had to primarily contend with suffrage demands, women of oppressed nations concerned themselves with the freedom of their country amongst other things. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Indian women's movement

emerged at a time when the nationalist movement was also gathering momentum<sup>12</sup>.

However, building on this argument Forbes (1994: xxiii) contends that although Indian women may not be defined as feminist in the western sense, they still expressed a “concern with women’s well-being and women’s rights” and this “causes us to doubt the utility of trying to apply western standards in other cultures”. Feminist writer bell hooks (2000) wrote that most women in the U.S do not even know or use the terms colonialism or neocolonialism. Therefore, she suggested “sustained protest and resistance on the part of black women / women of color and our radical white sisters” is needed to break the wall of miscommunication and denial (:46).

On a more general note, however, Lerner (1993:274) asserts that feminist consciousness is present if a number of conditions are met. Firstly, women need to be cognizant of the fact that they constitute an oppressed group. Secondly, they need to comprehend that this repression is the result of social factors than a natural order of things. Thirdly, women need to recognize the commonality of their situation and move towards mobilization. Fourthly, they must independently develop a mandate of objectives and strategies for improvement, and finally, they need to cultivate an “alternate vision of the future”. If these conditions are met with, then feminist consciousness can be deemed to exist. Significantly, since these five components were present in the case of Indian women and their movement, it can be regarded as a feminist movement according to Lerner’s definition.

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<sup>12</sup> Although this may be true, an interesting comparison can be made here with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States that gave momentum to the second wave of the American women’s movement to become active after a long period of abeyance (Rosen 2000).

In conclusion, I concur with Sanghera (1997) in asserting that despite problems with the term ‘feminism’, women of the Third World have consistently been engaged in activities seeking to improve their position within their societies.

### ***Contemporary Indian Women’s Movement***

Organized attempts to introduce social reforms on behalf of women are, of course, not unique to India. In the twentieth century there have been cycles of social reform movements which some academics, employing an analogy with the feminist movements of the West, have identified as “waves.” Similarly, the contemporary Indian women’s movement which is referred to as the “third wave,” constituted a proliferation of small, autonomous women’s organizations since the 1970s (Gandhi and Shah 1991:21). The roots of this phase of the women’s movement lie in the mass struggles and agitations of middle class and working class women in the 1960s – 1970s (Kumar 1990). The third wave of the movement seeks to “understand the oppressive, hierarchical relationship between men and women and societal systems in order to introduce changes and a new society” in which women are liberated from oppression (Gandhi and Shah 1991:21). Incidentally, in this current phase of the Indian women’s movement, some new issues have been raised, some of which parallel those of Western feminism, such as the assertion of women’s rights over their own bodies.

The Emergency (declaration of a state of emergency by the then ruling Congress - I government of India under Mrs.Indira Gandhi) in the 1970s, proved a watershed in the history of the Indian women's movement, as it did for so many other struggles. One reason was the production of the first Status of Indian Women Report by the Government, in response to the International Year of Women declared by the United



Nations in 1975. I learnt that the Indian women's movement has benefited from the high profile of the international women's movement, for this had influenced international institutions to look at gender issues. In India, Karat (1997) says that we were fortunate that the Status of Indian Women Report, which was recommended for all U.N. member-countries, was brought out by a committee of expert women. The outcome was a seminal document, giving an across-the-board stock-taking of the ways in which women had benefited and lost out after Indian Independence from the British in 1947 [please see Appendix 3 for more on the Status of Indian Women Report].

The struggle against the Emergency saw the emergence of many new women's groups, which rejected the politics of earlier women's organizations and looked instead to ideas generated by feminist groups in the West. Sen (1990) argues that these women's groups were structurally closer to the feminist movement in the West and received some amount of international visibility. Issues of gender gained significance in academic discourse and among younger women in universities in the 1970s. Even in Delhi's less-than-radical colleges, agitations against 'Miss Fresher' contests, for example, took place. If the Emergency ensured that these tendencies could not fructify, these groups sprung up as part of the movement for democracy and later emerged as autonomous groups (Karat 1997).

Now there were three tendencies in the Indian women's movement - the bourgeois liberals, the Left, and the autonomous groups. Soon a fourth one emerged - non-governmental organizations (NGOs) committed to providing women services and facilities and rejecting mass politics as a means to bring about gains for women. In the initial phase, the new tendencies completely ignored and denigrated the traditions of the

Indian women's movement, and their politics was mainly built around gender politics. The central part of the critique of the older women's organizations was that the role of women in the family, and the personal space of women, had been completely ignored. In the course of development of the women's movement not enough attention had been given to the role of a woman in an unequal and oppressive family situation, which became the focus of a vibrant debate (Karat 1997).

From one angle, the fundamental question was how a homogeneous sisterhood could be assumed, given stark inequalities and exploitation based on class and caste. What about the role of the state, the judiciary or the communalists? Although there was suspicion and hostility among the different tendencies, the need for joint struggles and wider mobilizations was paramount if women's rights and security were to be protected. The first big joint struggles centered on anti-rape and anti-dowry issues, but slowly their scope enlarged to include the macro-policies of the government from a gender viewpoint. The development of women's studies and research centers also played a role in this (Purkayastha and Subramaniam 2004). Although contests and differences remain between the different trends, one of the potential strengths of the contemporary women's movement in India is the conscious attempt to work together on areas of common concern through cooperatives and NGO networks addressing women's social problems (ibid. 1997).

While the rapidly changing political and economic scenario of the 1990s introduced an element of urgency and confusion, the woman's movement has not shown signs of flagging. Over the last five years, women's groups across the spectrum have engaged with new issues and have come to understand that the burden of structural

adjustment lies on Indian women themselves. Women have not only been affected by changes at the workplace but also at home. In Beijing (International World Women's Conference 1995) the contribution of the Indian delegation on this issue was noted and commented on by people from around the world. Karat (1997) opines that recent controversies about reservation for women in Parliament and in State legislatures, though vital to strengthen Indian democracy by giving them due representation and to recognize their enormous contribution to society, will not by itself bring about these broad structural objectives. She contends that in the years to come, the women's movement will have to build on its history to face the new challenges that have emerged in a transformed world.

In any case, although these are difficult subjects to analyze specifically given the scope of this study, it should therefore, suffice to mention that the new understandings of Indian women's lives incorporate new tropes such as "empowerment", "globalism", "modernization" and "individual rights". The issues arising from the current Indian women's movement are complex, and this is reflected in the fragmented and diffuse organization of today's Indian women's movement (Gandhi and Shah 1991:22-23). However, Indian women have also organized along lines unknown in the West. One example is SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association), a labor union founded for women workers who come from a spectrum of trades, which is most likely the first example of the unionization on the basis of gender (Rose 1993). The other is the CHIPKO (a Hindi word meaning 'hug') movement, which developed an eco-feminist account of women's caring, associating their tendency to preserve life with their use of natural products (Shiva 1988). This particular campaign offers a model of women's

activism in response to threats against their life-sustaining work, ecological concerns and women's subsistence economy (Kachuck 2003). The existence of such organizations has come to be a matter of national and international interest in the last few decades. To an extent it would seem that these organizations counter popular stereotypes of the Indian women's image as powerless victims totally dominated by the men in their society (Ford 2001), as I mentioned earlier. It is, therefore, germane that we gather testimonies from the women who work in the empowerment sector in order to understand the realities of the urban Indian civil society, especially for volunteers and activists who devote their time and energy in to making these developmental projects successful.

### ***Indian Women's Movement and Women's Organizations***

All said and done, the structure of the women's movement in India still remains highly decentralized. It is composed of unaccountable organizations in both cities and rural areas; it claims participants who are wealthy, who are middle-class, who are poor; who are communist, socialist, or resolutely non-ideological; who are members of parties or who hold political parties in contempt as elitist, opportunist or corrupt (Calman 1992). Social movement politics became an alternative to electoral party politics. The growth in the number of and size of non-party organizations seeking rights and empowerment for the powerless developed from the belief that existing state structures – bureaucracy, parliamentary bodies at state and national levels, national and state executives, the Planning Commission and opposition political parties – could create neither meaningful economic development nor more political power for the poor and those who, like women, exercised less political influence than their numbers would seem warrant. This discontent with government and with opposition political parties, led social movement activists

away from institutional politics as they searched for other ways to empower the powerless (Calman 1992).

Although the movement organizations are many and the web of communications that connects them informal, Calman (1992) points out two major ideological and organizational tendencies within the movement: One, which is largely urban-based, focuses on issues of rights and equality; the other, with both urban and rural components, emphasizes empowerment and liberation. The two wings of the movement share a desire to transform the consciousness of women and men, first to understand that women in contemporary India occupy an inferior position relative to men economically, socially and politically, and then to realize that this position is unjust, unacceptable and alterable.

The advocates of the rights wing see women's concerns as issues of human rights within the secular democracy that India's constitution proclaims. Their demand is for equality within the law; they see themselves as modernizers and social democrats seeking basic human rights rather than as feminists pressing a radical social agenda (Calman 1992). The rhetoric of rights groups refrains from positing a conflict between women and men; it does not even present itself as a challenge to gender roles, fearing that such an attack would mark the movement overly influenced by the West, and as attacking the family (which, in India, enjoys a place on high social pedestal). They are determined to be in the mainstream of an attempt to modernize India without sacrificing essential Indian culture or values except insofar as those values violate women's rights as human beings and as equal citizens (Calman 1992).

The diversity of the roots of different movement organizations has led to differences in their structures, modes of operation, and particularly in their degree of

cooperation with political parties and electoral politics. Some of the groups that operate within this wing of the movement were born from opposition political parties and generally act in concert with the politics of those parties. Other groups within the rights wing of the movement include venerable independent social service agencies. These have a long history of action on behalf of women and, influenced by the broad feminist stirrings that have taken place since the 1975 Emergency, are now becoming increasingly radicalized (Calman 1992). The latter, autonomous groups are generally small, with a strong emphasis on internal participatory democracy. They provide informal counseling and some material support (including temporary housing) to women faced with a variety of problems, particularly domestic violence, but also health and employment concerns. Both in their emphasis and in their efforts to raise consciousness and to empower individual women through personal support, they share much with the empowerment wing of the women's movement. In addition, they also engage in agitation political activity (sometimes in cooperation with party-affiliated organizations) designed to pressure the government to change laws or implement existing laws.

The rights wing of the movement is largely urban. Its leaders, and the participants in the collectively-operating autonomous organizations, are generally middle-class or upper class, highly educated, and mostly Hindu women although there is also representation from other religious minority communities (viz., Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Jews and others). The leaders often have prior experience working within political system, either as members of opposition parties or as intellectual leaders who have contributed to government-sponsored or international NGO-sponsored studies or forums. Significantly, this is, more or less, the profile that fits the participants of this

present study. Organizations spanning the ideological spectrum have formed coalitions to build public opinion and bring pressure to bear on parliament and government bureaucracies to act around common issues such as dowry and dowry deaths, inheritance, police brutality on women and other matters upon which the government can act by taking practical and policy measures (Calman 1992).

On the other hand, the empowerment wing comprises of the other organizational and ideological segment of the movement which aims at the personal and community empowerment of poor women in both urban and rural areas. Here, there is a notion of rights, but the goal is economic and social rights – the right to a livelihood and to determine one's own future. These require both political empowerment at local level and access to the tools of economic well-being. The search is for empowerment from below, not the conferring of rights or economic development from above. There is also a self-conscious attempt to create organizational forms in which women become empowered psychologically and socially. Participating in decision making and in the implementation of decisions, raising consciousness about the situation of women, creating mutual interdependence and group solidarity, developing skills, self-confidence and assertiveness are all seen as integral to the process of empowerment (Calman 1992).

Again, like the participants of this research study, leaders of these groups are mainly educated, middle-class city and town dwellers with extensive prior experience in politics similar to those of the rights wing leaders. Their leadership has been the most vital resource in the establishment of empowerment groups; poor and illiterate women do engage in spontaneous protest, but cannot sustain an organization without the help of educated activists (ibid. 1992).

Although the emphases of these two groups are different but they are not mutually exclusive; often a single organization will engage in both types of activities simultaneously. Women's organizations in common with trade unions, socialist parties and the nationalist movement have at times mobilized women and brought them out on to streets (Sen 1990). However, it is the quest for empowerment that most marks the movement activity as distinct from politics-as-usual within the electoral system. It is here that the women's movement can be seen to be part of a broader set of Indian non-party movements that eschew electoral politics and focus instead on empowering the grass roots by articulating the interests and increasing the bargaining power of the less powerful (Calman 1992).

***The Setting: Women's NGOs at Kolkata***

Kolkata, the setting of this research, has three types of women's organizations according to Raka Ray (2000:58), who characterizes them as politically affiliated, or autonomous from state and national politics. The autonomous organizations are what might be called "social work" agencies and are headed by highly respected elite women who publicly eschew politics, while the politically affiliated organizations are the women's wings of political parties. However, Ray (2000:58) mentions another type which she characterizes as "subordinate" within the political field of Kolkata. This label grows out of her analysis of Kolkata's political culture in which state politics is dominated by the Communist Party of India – Marxist, commonly referred to as CPI (M), which is the hegemonic institution in the political field. According to Ray (2000), the autonomous women's organizations which have arisen from the second and third waves of the Indian women's movement are in a subordinate position, unable to compete with



the politically affiliated organizations, since they do not have the hegemonic CPI (M) party on their side.

Not surprisingly then, it appears that class is a major aspect of activism due to Kolkata's longstanding communist political culture, which "has for years been more open to the borrowed ideologies of class struggle than the borrowed ideologies of feminist struggle"(Ray 2000:69). This helps explain why Kolkata NGO's are more concerned with issues of employment rather than with issues of violence against women and family related issues (:24). Coinciding with these facts, the current movement is so fragmented that there is no unified attitude towards the patriarchal structure of society or any agenda to deal with it (Ford 2001).

In Kolkata, although efforts of some branches of the women's movement are focused through NGOs, yet the leadership of NGOs remains dominated by middle or upper class women, a situation which is frequently criticized (Gandhi and Shah 1990:283). Nonetheless, it is important to attend to class differences which may affect women's choices in building a career as a volunteer or activist with women's NGOs at Kolkata. On a more speculative note, Fernandes (1997) claims that a sense of ambiguity surrounds the attitudes held towards working women in Kolkata, not only this but also women's own opinion about working outside the home. At the same time Bannerji et al (n.d.:39-40) claim that most middleclass households aspire to follow middleclass norms in which it is a mark of status if women do not work outside the home. Therefore, although women's organizations in Kolkata may have the potential to facilitate change through their support of women's resistance to societal attitudes, the consequences of these changes are quite likely to be complicated (Ford 2001).

The need for radical change in the Indian society is asserted by most women's groups, yet there is a paradox confronting women's activism. Those who espouse causes akin to Western feminism or who propose radical solutions to women's issues may find themselves accused of trouble-making and derogatorily labeled as 'feminists' (Ray 2000: 77,97). Women working in politically affiliated groups may be unable to address the underlying sources of the problems women face, and may be distanced from women at the grassroots level, due to their positions (:91-92). Other organizations that are purposefully autonomous from government and NGO funding (especially Western) can be criticized for merely doing charity and social work (:58). Perhaps as a result of these challenges, some autonomous women's groups in Kolkata focus on divergent areas, from healthcare to consciousness raising (Ford 2001). Interestingly, Ray (2000:78, 97) points out the existence of a few rare autonomous groups who do not hesitate to use explicitly feminist approaches, although feminism is a contentious stance which is associated with both imperialism and decadence in Kolkata. While Kolkata has a history of women's organizations involved in social welfare projects, the Indian women's movement and NGOs associated with women's issues have undergone great changes (Gandhi and Shah 1991), though not without retaining some continuity. Yet in important ways, the Indian women's movement has addressed shortcomings of their predecessors, responded to critiques of earlier positions, embraced new issues and incorporated new structures such as network of groups, collective and cooperative models (ibid. 1991). It is from these NGOs that I have selected the participants of my study. In summary, this study offers a new set of lenses for viewing women's standpoints and identifying the social, cultural and organizational challenges that are faced by women working in NGOs at Kolkata as

everyday lived experiences and understand in their own words what feminism means to them.

## CHAPTER III

### **Methodology**

This chapter discusses the methodology used to collect and analyze my data. My study is similar to ethnography but informed by a feminist standpoint. Methodological approaches to the theoretical frameworks of women's standpoints are seen as critical to how ethnographic scholars conduct feminist research. Since feminist ethnographies attempt to avoid the objectification of the subject, the masculine hierarchical ordering of the research to "the other," I use Marlene Fine's (1993) five feminist epistemological and methodological commitments to inform my research: Women's problematic, Women's knowledge, Feminist Synaltics, Methodological integrity and Revolutionary pragmatism. Fine (1993) uses these commitments to illustrate the positional view towards the feminist researchers' responsibility to and in the acquisition of knowledge through research and theory building as a collaborative process rather than something imposed from without.

#### ***The Researcher and the Researched – the 'Outsiders Within'***

Understanding the processes that result in inequalities is a necessary step toward changing women's position. My understanding comes from a theoretical perspective which has its roots in feminism, Marxism and critical theory (Acker et al. 1983). For us in the field of Sociology, a radical redefining has meant understanding gender as central in constructing all social relations and taking individual women's lives as a problematic (Hartsock 1979). What are to be explained is what actually happens in women's everyday world and how these events are experienced. Although we view people as active agents

in their own lives and as such constructors of their social worlds, we do not see that activity as isolated, instead we locate individual experience in society and history, embedded within a set of social relations which produce both the possibilities and limitations of that experience. What is at issue is not just everyday experience but the relations which underlie it and the connections between the two (Acker et al. 1983).

Studying Third World women then requires a special theory and method that will do justice to their lived experiences in the context of their social environment and immediate reality. In my assessment, it is impossible to separate the structure and thematic content of thought from the historical and material conditions shaping the lives of the producers, in this case Third World urban women (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Having read Patricia Hill Collins' (1991) article "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought", I was encouraged to place greater trust in the creative potential of my own personal and cultural biography and to generate a distinctive standpoint on existing sociological paradigms. According to Collins (1991), regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects. But then again, Black women are not the only outsiders within Sociology. As an extreme case of outsiders moving into a community that historically excluded them, Black women's experiences highlight the tension experienced by any group of less powerful outsiders encountering the paradigmatic thought of a more powerful insider community. In this sense, a variety of individuals can learn from Black women's experiences as outsiders within (Collins, 1991).

Clearly then, feminist standpoints could take on the perspective of a variety of different perspectives as they relate to culture, ethnicity, nationality, gender and class, which is why I believe it is apt for this research topic, where I as a researcher, justify my position of the outsider within. Again, as a marginal intellectual, I draw upon key themes as an ‘outsider within’ (Collins 1991) to generate a distinctive standpoint on existing sociological paradigms and hope to enrich contemporary sociological discourse on Third World women as powerful human subjects. Coinciding with these goals, as an implicit extension to my own stand I believe that the group of urban Third World women I study have themselves remained ‘outsiders within’ mainstream sociological studies both in India and the West. Therefore, it is my hope that by studying the phenomenological experiences of these highly educated middle and upper class women volunteers working in the non-profit developmental sector, a different picture of women in post colonial Indian civil society will emerge, adding to existing feminist scholarship and comparative research on social inequality.

On the other hand I, just as Black women who undergo Sociology’s lengthy socialization process and who immerse themselves in the cultural pattern of Sociology’s group life, certainly have acquired the insider skills of thinking and acting according to a Sociological worldview. Nevertheless, my experienced realities, both prior to contact and after initiation, may provide special perspectives and insights available to that category of outsiders who have been systematically frustrated by the social system (Merton 1972). Therefore, as explained above, my outsider allegiances militate against my choosing full insider status<sup>13</sup>. Instead, I conduct the present study with the hope of revealing a set of

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<sup>13</sup> As Merton observes, “White male insiderism in American sociology during the past generations has largely been of the tacit or de facto.....variety. It has simply taken the patterned expectations about the

alternative situations and meanings that could fill in the gaps of knowledge between the insider and the outsider.

The fact that Standpoint theory developed in context of Black feminist, Third World and postcolonial feminist challenges to the so-called dual systems of patriarchy and capitalism approach that was associated with socialist feminist theory, enhances the framework of this research. Putnam (1990) describes this approach as a reliance on woman's life experiences and work to reframe social issues, knowledge and relationships (:3). Thus, Standpoint Feminism is concerned with revealing a set of views that could uncover alternative meanings, processes and outcomes, which is the purpose of my research in terms of studying Third World women in the urban Indian civil society.

### ***Methodological Approaches to Standpoint Feminist Research***

Methodological approaches to the theoretical frameworks of women's standpoints are seen as critical to how ethnographic scholars conduct feminist research. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, this research uses Fine's (1993) five epistemological and methodological commitments (Women's problematic, Women's knowledge, Feminist Synaltics, Methodological integrity and Revolutionary pragmatism). Fine (1993) uses commitments to illustrate a positional view towards the feminist researchers' responsibility to and in the acquisition of knowledge through research and theory building. My standpoint is interwoven into the analysis of the data. Being a scholar in women's issues, guided by social scientific research methods, my standpoint contributes to the credibility of the interpretation of the data collected, which I will discuss in detail in the concluding chapter.

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appropriate...problems for investigation" (1972:12). In short, where traditional sociologists may see sociology as "normal" and define their role as furthering knowledge about a normal world with taken-for-granted assumptions, outsiders within are likely to see anomalies (Collins 1991).

### Women's Problematics:

Fine (1993) identifies the first implications for research is that it values women as important sources of information about their own lived experiences. Feminist research rejects positivistic notions of knowledge and values subject knowledge as important to the research process. Women's problematics are seen as the problems central to women's lives. Fine (1993) contends that by centering women's lives and experiences, women are taken off the margins and women and their problems are made central to the process of investigation. Research challenges the positivist research framework by considering women's experiences, meaning and perspectives as an appropriate and important information for evaluation. This allows certain practices, such as discrimination, harassment and inequities to be viewed as political, economic and social world problems. In doing this, research identifies ways in which women define and negotiate their identities within social institutions. In addition, by centering women's problematics it allows women the ability express to themselves as speaking subjects rather than silent subjects.

### Women's Knowledge:

Scholars in a variety of disciplines have argued theoretically and empirically that women come to understand the world in ways that are distinct from men's ways of knowing (Gilligan 1982; Keller 1985). One of the most often acknowledged way of knowing for women is through subjective knowledge. Subjective knowledge locates the place of truth within the individual, equating the scientific with the personal (Fine 1993). The shift from objectivist stance, which separates objective and subjective knowledge and relegates the subjective to the nonscientific, to a feminist position which recognizes



the “truthfulness” of personal knowledge has important implications for research (:130). First, feminist research values women as important sources of information about their own experiences, such as self-reported data generated through interviews, personal narratives, diaries and questionnaires as valid and important research data. Second, researchers and their personal experiences and knowledge become a fundamental and acknowledged part of the research. Harding (1987) says that feminist research locates the researcher in the same critical plane as the subject matter; “the beliefs and behavior of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of the research (:09), they are often written in the first person.

#### Feminist Synaltics:

Synaltics is described as a combination of analysis and synthesis. The term combines the two words to reflect the methodological process of feminist research through both analysis and synthesis. Consistent with women’s problematics on the relationship between the individual and politics, feminist synaltics examines the connection in the experience of women and breaks the artificial boundaries between organizational, personal and cultural reality. Smith (1987) states that synthesis style, used in feminist research, stems from the ways in which women come to understand the world around them. This method in conducting feminist research connects the experimental level of knowledge in everyday life with the micro- and macro-levels of analysis of everyday world practices.

#### Methodological Integrity:

Traditional research and practices that base knowledge in the context of gender stratification and patriarchal forms of knowledge have been viewed as a research practice

that devalues and silences women's ways of knowing (Marshall 1993; Buzzanell 1993). Feminist research rejects theories that view humans as reactive and methods that treat people solely as objects of study and that are not consistent with the grounded assumptions of feminist research. Due to the traditional practices of devaluing and silencing women, research has suggested methodology be changed to a more feminist, holistic, person-focused and constructivist type (Lykes & Stewart 1986; Wittig 1985).

#### Revolutionary Pragmatism:

Smith (1987) first noted that feminist research forced the academy to acknowledge the need for change, but Fine (1993) went a step further by asserting that feminist research must be revolutionary. Feminist methodology that informs Third World women's research either directly or indirectly judges the status quo and argues for change; it is pragmatic in the philosophical and linguistic sense of the term, in the sense that it builds on existing theories and methodologies but also seeks to change them.

With these principles in mind, I preface my discussion of data collection with a brief discussion of my own biography as I introduce myself as the researcher within the context of the Feminist Standpoint Theory.

#### ***The Third World Feminist Standpoint***

In taking up this research as an active Third World feminist,<sup>14</sup> I did so with the idea of combining both my interests in studying feminism<sup>15</sup> in the U.S academy and the lives of Third World urban women. As alluded to in the introduction to this research, I

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<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that many Third-World feminists have to confront the attitude that our criticisms of our culture are merely one more incarnation of a colonized consciousness, the views of "privileged native women in whiteface", seeking to attack their "non-western culture" on the basis of "western" values (Narayan 1997: 3).

<sup>15</sup> Western feminism has been challenged for its imperialistic bias "and of short-sightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism, classism, and homophobia (Mohanty 1991:7)."

*self-identify* myself as a postcolonial woman from South Asia studying in the American academy. Though calling myself a Third World feminist is subject to qualification and mediation, as Narayan (1997) has pointed out, it is no more so than calling myself an Indian, a feminist, or a woman, for that matter, since all these identities are not simple givens but open to complex ways of being inhabited, and do not guarantee many specific experiences or concerns, even as they shape one's life in powerful ways.

Nevertheless, I wish to speak as a Third World feminist because I have lived almost a quarter-century of my life in Third World countries and having come of age politically in such context, "a significant part of my sensibilities and political horizons are indelibly shaped by Third World national realities" (Narayan 1997:4). I was born in India but my family moved to the middle-east when I was very young, only to return to India again when I was an undergraduate student. Merton (1972) noted that socialization into the life of a group is a lengthy process of being immersed in group-life, because only then can "one understand meaning of behavior, feeling and values .....and decipher the unwritten grammar of conduct and nuance of cultural idiom" (1972:15). Likewise, growing up in an upper middleclass Indian household, I have been privy to some of the structurally embedded oppressive social and cultural conditions that women from the middle and upper classes of urban India face in their lives, both as homemakers and professionals subservient to men.

Ironically, in spite of having greater access to education and relatively greater control over their own life chances when compared to women from the lower classes, educated women from the upper classes of urban Indian civil society have their own stories of gender-based oppression, discrimination and disquiet to share with the rest of

the world. This reality corroborates what feminist theorists have argued about upper class women – like those in other classes – remain subordinate to men when power is viewed solely in that context (Kendall 2002). Having said this, however, I have also witnessed some of the major changes in opportunities and life chances of these women in urban Indian society, which rapidly changed from a closed economy to a liberalized economy in the early nineties with the spread of globalization, successive national elections resulting in a series of unstable governments and a communally tumultuous backdrop in the early nineties.

During the same time, as an undergraduate student at a reputed liberal arts college under University of Calcutta, I have been a volunteer (unpaid) with two local women's NGOs. As I discussed earlier, contemporary branches of the Indian women's movement include NGOs and the activities of many women's groups are characteristic of the convergence between 'feminist' and 'developmentalist' perspective that has recently been taking place in Indian development programs (Unnithan and Srivastava 1997:157).

As a volunteer, I was able to participate in social activities and interact with the members, not only from the two I volunteered for, but also with women from other NGOs at awareness training workshops, panels on women and children abuse and other social forums organized by the British Council Division's Social Development and Health Unit at Kolkata.

Later, after completing my master's degree from the UK, I returned to India for more extensive involvement with some more women's NGOs in Kolkata. Again, I worked with them in various capacities, such as a Research Assistant, Family Counselor, Workshop Participant/ Panelist and the likes. In the course of my association with the

various NGOs, I had the opportunity of developing a working relationship with a network of highly educated urban women working in the non-profit sector, while also building some lasting friendships in the process. Having spent time with them and often discussing their personal and professional everyday lives and their familiarity with the Indian Women's Movement gave me a general sense of the social and cultural processes of gender inequality at work in the male-dominated urban Indian civil society, where gender discrimination is an everyday reality. I have also witnessed these women struggle, compromise and negotiate their new role as 'working-women' in a world of globalization with the larger prescribed and more traditional, gender role stereotypes of ideal Indian womanhood - mothers and homemakers - that are especially popular in the upper classes of the Indian society, and engaging in paid work is considered dishonorable (beneath family status) and an aberration at best.

Significantly, these interactions paved the way to building my primary social network in the NGO sector in India. For this exploratory research, however, I met more women activists and volunteers in NGOs through referrals from my ex-colleagues and by word of mouth. The close exposure with these women had given me the impetus to envisage the present research. I decided that one promising direction for research would be to allow these women's lived experiences to be the starting point to derive theory and practical implications.

As I mentioned earlier, although there have been numerous studies on rural and lower class Indian women at the grassroots level, there have been few ethnographic studies on women's lives which explore the challenges of urban volunteers and activists in specific non-governmental organizational settings. Because urban Indian women have

been historically excluded from the field of mainstream sociological studies, these women's social, cultural and organizational experiences and frames of discourse regarding the challenges they face as volunteers and activists at Third World women's NGOs, as well as, simply being working women in the modern Indian civil society have been overlooked within the field of social inequality studies. It is, therefore, also my intent to bring to light their lives, which are comparable to the lives of many marginalized and oppressed groups within the Indian context, as well as, globally. Precisely for that reason, I embark on my research as an instrumental case study for enhancing out understanding of broad social inequalities related to women and activism in transnational feminist and womanist studies.

In the next section, I discuss the method I used to gather my data based on the guidelines of Standpoint theory; I ground my methodology for data collection and analyzing the data in all of the above commitments of feminist research.

### ***Data Collection***

As discussed earlier, contemporary branches of the Indian women's movement include NGOs. During the few years that I had spent in India as a university student, I had the opportunity to work with two women's organizations in Kolkata. As a volunteer, I was able to participate in social activities and interact with the members, not only from the two I volunteered for, but also with women from other NGOs at awareness training workshops, panel discussions and other social forums organized by the British Council Division's Social Development and Health Unit at Kolkata. Significantly, this paved the way to building my primary social network in the NGO sector in India. For my present

study I met more women activists and volunteers in NGOs through referrals from my ex-colleagues and by word of mouth.

Regrettably there is not a huge body of literature available on this particular group of women (middle and upper class urban Indian women volunteers and activists working in NGOs), so I have had to work with the few sources available in print in order to gain information on contemporary issues affecting women's lives in India from NGO literature and the discourses therein. Scholars and activists produce discourse in the form of reports, academic papers and organizational literature; other relevant literature (in both English and Bengali, when required) on the Indian women's movement, urban women volunteers and activists, Feminist Standpoint Theory and method have also been reviewed by me for this project. In addition, I met with activists / members of various other women's social action groups, and Sociologists from local universities in Kolkata for their perspectives and insights on urban women's role in the developmental sector and understanding feminism in the Indian context.

However, I would like to remind the reader again that while the theoretical concerns in this research emerge in Indian sociological work to some extent, the basic framework is derived from U.S. feminist literature. But like most researchers, feminists utilize diverse methods and multiple tools to gain access into the world around them and may in fact use multiple methods within the same study (Reinharz 1992; Tolman and Szalacha 1999). In many ways, my approach is solidly grounded in a tradition of qualitative sociological inquiry and in relatively conventional methods of conducting interviews. But I believe that standpoint feminist research gives us distinctive ways of extending the methods of qualitative tradition (Devault 2004).

As I have mentioned, my own methodology incorporates reviewing NGO literature, some field work including attending lectures and workshops at local NGOs at Kolkata. I also referred to other ethnographies on Indian women and social science research. Literature and articles (in both English and Bengali) on the Indian women's movement and gender training helped me conceptualize the construction of feminist praxis in terms of the everyday lived experiences of urban women volunteers and activists. Although feminist researchers informed by Standpoint theoretical frameworks have employed reflective practice to counter the reproduction of inequalities in ethnographic investigation (Naples 2003), it is important to note that my participation with these NGO women was more complex than can be conveyed by simply stating the number of days or hours that I spent with them. I formed relationships with these women that cannot be easily qualified as mere researcher-participant working relationships, since some women also invited me to their workshops and fundraisers on several occasions after the interviews were completed. While research that necessitates forming relationships with participants poses certain challenges for both social scientific inquiry and for the relationships themselves, once the interviews were completed my methodological strategy had enabled me to make important contributions to the participants in terms of clarifying some stereotypes about Western feminists, the causes for which they work and the social scientific study of the challenges they face as urban women working in the developmental sector in India.

I use data collected from a combination of participant observation and in-depth field interviews and research conducted between December 2003 and May 2005. A snowball sample of twenty one women volunteers and activists (paid and non-paid) from



fourteen NGOs in Kolkata were interviewed with open ended questions as part of this ethnographic study. I have used their views, reflections, narratives and discourses to explore links between their everyday life experiences and broad-based social structural processes (Campbell 1998). This group included an array of women between the ages of 25 – 70 years, mostly married with children, self-identified as belonging to the middle, upper middle or upper classes, from different walks of life who worked full time or part time in the NGO sector. They included regular NGO professionals, founders of NGOs, members of the board of trustees, prominent activists from the Indian women's movement, writers, journalists, homemakers, researchers, and educators, scholars involved in writing about the women's movement and women's issues, political activists as well as social development consultants. Out of the twenty one women, thirteen were married, five were single, two were widowed and one divorced. All women had university education in India, while only three of them studied in England. All women had a Masters degree in the field of liberal arts, excepting one who had a PhD and two others with Bachelors degrees. (Please Participants' Profiles in Appendix 7 for more details).

The interviews were in English or Bengali (or bilingual) and typically lasted 45-60 minutes. Once the interviews were tape-recorded, the data was translated to English wherever needed, and then transcribed.

My analysis is based on data from these months of participant observation and drawn from field notes that I maintained while engaged in the research. I maintained these notes by keeping hand written notes as appropriate during meetings, events and interviews. Immediately following my contacts, I would transcribe my written notes and

also include additional information about my observations that I recalled but was unable to write out in my hand written notes. In addition, the typed notes include reflections on and analyses of the observations that I recorded.

### ***Interpretive Method***

I use a qualitative methodology to understand and interpret the everyday life experiences of the twenty one women that I have interviewed. Qualitative methods are useful for understanding human phenomena and meaning that people give to events; they are not intended to prove or test a theory. Therefore, qualitative methodology is grounded in a phenomenological framework (Harris 2002). The selection of this framework is largely rooted in a phenomenology's key assumptions that researchers cannot make claims of objectivity and must situate themselves actively in the life world they seek to explain. Van Manen (1990) explains that a good phenomenological description is an adequate elucidation of some aspect of the life world – it resonates with our sense of lived life. However, the researcher's location within the context does not guarantee an immediate understanding of the participant's lived experience. Interpretive methods are well suited to the task of feminist research because of their ability to produce intersubjective rather than reductive examination of women's everyday life experiences. Moreover, the basic assumption of phenomenology is that the researcher is a part of the world that is being described (ibid. 1990). It allows feminist scholars to be both participant and co-commentator on the phenomenon on which they are reflecting (Orbe 1998).

Twenty one middle and upper class, educated, urban women volunteers and activists at NGOs in Kolkata were interviewed for this study. The in-depth interview is

vital in providing a technique by which both the commonalities and dissimilarities of women's experiences can be heard and interpreted. Interviews were designed to solicit deep responses and interactions, allowing participants to place their lived experiences in their own words (Orbe 1998). Guided by literature review of women volunteers and activists around the world, I semi-structured these interviewed to ensure that certain topics relevant to the research aims of this study were covered, however, I allowed flexibility for the interviewee to focus on issues of particular importance to their own lived experiences. Thus, the goal of each interview was to maintain a conversational tone and quality to the interview (please turn to Appendix 5 to see the proposed questions that the interviews were centered on for this study).

Clearly then, feminist standpoints could take on a variety of different perspectives as they relate to culture, ethnicity, nationality, gender and class, which is why I believe it is apt for this research topic, where I as a researcher, justify my position of the 'outsider within'. Again, as a marginal intellectual, I draw upon key themes as an 'outsider within' (Collins 1991) and having the 'knowledge of experience' (hooks 1994), to generate distinctive standpoint on existing sociological paradigms and hope to enrich contemporary sociological discourse on Third World women as powerful human subjects.

Coinciding with these goals, as an implicit extension to my own stand I believe that the group of urban Third World women I study, have themselves remained 'outsiders within' mainstream sociological studies and civil society literature, both in India and the West. Therefore, it is my hope that by studying the phenomenological experiences of these highly educated middle and upper class women volunteers working in the non-profit

developmental sector, a different picture of women in post colonial Indian civil society will emerge, adding to existing feminist and womanist scholarship, and comparative research on social inequality.

Thus I place my self with my subject, as Harding (1987) has said that feminist research locates the researcher in the same critical plane as the subject matter; “the beliefs and behavior of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of the research (:09), they are often written in the first person. Accordingly, I would like to acknowledge that my reading and interpretations of the meanings and inner texts of the data I gathered for this research have been informed by my personal experiences as an Indian woman volunteer at NGOs in Kolkata and as a sociologist in the U.S. academy. Likewise, it is possible that my personal assumptions and biases may have informed the design of this study at least to some extent<sup>16</sup>.

In the next chapter I present a thematic analysis of the personal, social, cultural and organizational challenges of educated, urban, middle and upper class women volunteers and activists was conducted. The goal of phenomenological reduction to themes is to assess which elements of the description are fundamental in increasing our understanding of the every lived experience of the participants (Orbe 1998).

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<sup>16</sup> Harding (1987) says that feminist research locates the researcher in the same critical plane as the subject matter; “the beliefs and behavior of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of the research (:09), they are often written in the first person.

## CHAPTER IV

### **Analysis of Data and Interpretation**

The primary aim of this chapter is to discuss how I integrated theory into the data analysis in my study. In this chapter I also begin the thematic analysis of the data in order to answer the first research question: *Can volunteerism and activism at women's NGOs be a viable career choice for middle and upper class women in the urban Indian civil society?* In the next chapter, I address the second research question: *Do middle and upper class women volunteers and activists in Indian women's NGOs identify themselves as 'feminists'? Why or why not.*

Based on the literature review, observations and lived experiences with women at NGOs in Kolkata, I noted some issues which repeatedly came up in our daily conversations which related to their personal and professional challenges. Not surprisingly, I found similar themes emerging when I interviewed them for this project, some being more salient than the others. I was able to decipher five broad themes from the interviews, although there are several sub-themes under each broad theme, which as auxiliary themes add up to support the main themes. I will discuss each of these broad themes separately and define the sub-themes before discussing the women's standpoint on each of these themes.

#### *Five Emergent Themes*

The five main themes are:

1. NGO work as Career;

2. Domestic Obligations;
- 3 Social Challenges/Obstacles for Women;
4. Motivation and Satisfaction from NGO work and
5. Conception of Feminism.

In order to analyze each of these themes, I constructed conceptual definitions based on the conversations with my respondents and my personal understanding, consistent with feminist standpoint theory. Since they are not standardized definitions, they are best understood in the context of the present study only. Again, it must be kept in mind that I have consciously recognized and documented my personal experiences, assumptions and biases during the process of gathering, as well as, analyzing the data. In fact, I place myself in the same critical plane as the subject matter I am studying (Harding 1987). And in keeping with the feminist maxim ‘personal is political’, I try as best as I can to break the artificial boundaries between the organizational, personal and cultural realities of my subjects (Smith 1987), as also will be evident from the testimonies I collected from the women I study who themselves blur these boundaries during their interviews.

Lindlof (1995) proposes that the development of thematic coding must be done with one eye on the theory being used and one on the data being analyzed. Van Manen (1990) suggests asking the following questions for researchers to facilitate creating themes: what statement(s) or phrases seem particularly revealing about the experience being described? This attempt to find themes within the data is helpful in assisting the researcher to find meanings that may lay below the surface of traditional data collection

and analysis. In my data analysis of this phenomenological study, I bracket my relationship and understanding of the subject and allow it to define itself. After the subject was bracketed by its own categories and clusters, I then searched for structures that explicate the relationship with other clusters of themes which were influenced by my own literature review and lived experiences. Therefore, it must be kept in mind that my experience with working for NGOs in Kolkata provided another context for thematic generation and explication, in addition to the fact that I am trained in social scientific research and scholarship related to women and social inequality.

Another primary aim of this chapter is to provide space for the voices of the women interviewed for this study to be heard, another important tenet of feminist standpoint theory. Throughout this chapter, I will discuss thought provoking quotes and selected biographies of women volunteers and activists in Kolkata's NGOs, which are sometimes shocking or disturbing. My analysis involves assessment, categorizations and interpretations of the data using qualitative / thematic analysis. However, my intent is not to create fixed categories or arrive at rigid conclusions about the women interviewed for this study, but to develop a group of information rich cases to describe the participants' experiences in enough detail and depth that readers can "connect to that" experience, learn how it is constituted, and deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects centered around the experiences of volunteers and activists at NGOs in Kolkata (Siedman 1991 : 14).

I analyzed 155 pages of typed transcriptions from which I will use thick descriptions to describe the emerging themes. Some of the thick descriptions have been edited only to ensure the anonymity of the participants and names of NGOs. The

interpretation of the themes which emerged from the interview data is primarily reflected through the voices of the twenty one women that I have interviewed for this study (please refer to Appendix 7 where I describe the profiles of the participants).<sup>17</sup>

*Theme One – NGO Work as a Career*

To start with, here are the loose definitions of the sub-themes of the first theme that I have coded from the transcriptions (see Figure 1.0 on the next page)

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<sup>17</sup> Incidentally, I would like to point out that although this project is my endeavor to stimulate discussion about women's lives in another culture, I would appeal to the reader to remain culturally sensitive. Moreover, I am in no way assuming that there is only one (superior) right way to gender equality regardless of culture. Instead, I would request that we take care to acknowledge the wide range of women's experiences within any given culture. Personally, I want to support international women's movements for equality while respecting the rights of women within particular countries to initiate their own movements in ways that work for them. Given the enormity of the task of studying all female volunteers from India (which is a very transient and pluralistic society) and the fact that information is still difficult to obtain, my aim is to give the reader some over all sense of the variety of challenges affecting middle and upper class women volunteers and activists at women's NGOs in Kolkata.



**Figure 1.0 Theme One - NGO work as Career**

<b>1. NGO WORK AS CAREER</b>
<b>1.1 STRUCTURE OF NGO</b>
<b>1.1.1 Formal</b> – Strict hierarchy among members, fixed working hours
<b>1.1.2 Informal</b> – Non-hierarchical, community-like environment, relationship between members is personal and friendly, open-door policy, flexi-timings
<b>1.1.3 Semi Formal</b> – A hybrid between the formal and informal structures, rotational job responsibilities, and new responsibilities designated to members with new projects, mix between bureaucracies & collectives.
<b>1.2 PAY</b>
<b>1.2.1 Paid</b> – Monthly salary
<b>1.2.2 Voluntary</b> – No salary
<b>1.2.3 Honorarium</b> – Token amount paid in lieu of regular salary / sometimes travel reimbursements.
<b>1.3 OPPORTUNITY AND GROWTH</b>
<b>1.3.1 Training / Workshops / Skills</b> – Able to participate in various seminars, workshops, and training sessions to acquire professional skills.
<b>1.3.2 Promotion</b> – Chances for promotion favorable
<b>1.3.3 Other Job Offers</b> – Open to possible career growth by finding better jobs in the market.
<b>1.4 SOURCE OF JOB</b>
<b>1.4.1 Social Network</b> – Recruited by personal contacts and commitment to the organizations’ mission, rather than for professional experience or educational qualifications
<b>1.4.2 Newspaper Advertisement</b> – Responded to official job opening as advertised in the newspaper.
<b>1.4.3 Forced Application</b> – Applied for a position when there was no official vacancy announcement.
<b>1.5 PREFERENCE</b>
<b>1.5.1 Wanted Another Career</b> – Working with NGO as a second career choice or as a compromise due to lack of other job opportunities.
<b>1.5.2 Wanted NGO Job / Women’s Empowerment</b> – Goal was to work for social welfare toward helping the oppressed groups in society or for women’s development and empowerment in particular.

## *Discussion of the Interviews*

***“I am a feminist and I am really deeply into women’s problems in India, specifically West Bengal, which is increasing everyday – molestation, sexual harassment, rape etc. My whole life has been geared to working for women’s lives and problems.” (3) Int. # 02.***

My interviews began with questions related to the research setting and how these women came to be affiliated with a NGO. Given the constraints imposed by gender in a traditional society, women are often left with difficult choices about fulfilling domestic obligations and investing in a professional career. Plemper (1996) asserts that it has been generally observed that participation of women in community activism or volunteer work, especially through NGOs, far outnumber participation of men. Nevertheless, Weisgrau (1997) noted that there are institutionalized NGOs and professional careers to be made from development work. Based on my frequent interactions with women volunteers and activists in NGOs since the 1990s, it was my impression that the structure of an organization must have an impact on these women’s career choices. According to Jenner (1983), women structure their career decisions so they will have flexibility for life organized around their family. As per my assessment, women’s NGOs were more likely to be empathetic to this dichotomy and hence, more accommodating towards women’s needs.

Also, recent studies in the U.S have indicated that some women’s NGOs have taken more moderate positions of adopting hybrid organizational forms, which blend aspects of both bureaucracy and collectives (Bordt 1997). From having read literature from India, I knew that the Indian women’s movement had incorporated new structures such as network of groups, collectives and cooperative models (Gandhi and Shah 1991).

Moreover, there was also a self-conscious attempt in India to create organizational forms in which women become empowered psychologically and socially. Participating in decision making and in the implementation of decisions, raising consciousness about the situation of women, creating mutual interdependence and group solidarity, developing skills, self-confidence and assertiveness were all seen as integral to the process of empowerment (Calman 1992). With this in mind, I went about asking the women volunteers and activists in Kolkata some questions on the organizational structure of their NGOs.

### Organizational Structure

When asked about the structure of their organizations, many of the women responded they were either semi-formal or what Gottfried and Weiss (1994) have referred to as ‘compound feminist organization’. A 60-year-old founder of an NGO had this to say about the structure of the NGO that she represented:

**“No, I would say it is not hierarchical, while it has a clear structure it is not a very formal rigid structure. We are again looking at women professionals in this organization, and this organization wants to facilitate the participation of women professionals who need flexi-time and hours, and a flexi-approach generally to the contribution that they are making. The constraints that the women professionals face once they are into a family situation are being addressed through our organization.” (4) Int. # 01.**

Other women said their NGOs were not deliberately ‘formally’ structured, although from their interviews, I gathered that over time the internal structure of the NGOs became more hierarchical or vertical rather than egalitarian or horizontal. This led me to ask how these women would reconcile their egalitarian ethics with an increasingly hierarchical organizational setting? In hierarchical organizations authority resides in the job, not in its occupant’s personal qualities (Padavic and Reskin 2002). This type of

organizational structure facilitates and streamlines the workflow. In the NGOs I studied, many of them were formed with loosely defined job duties and an implied understanding that everyone would do whatever was needed without clearly defined jobs or tasks. Some even mentioned that their positions were rotational so their roles were not always fixed, which prevented them from having rigid hierarchies. Moreover, as Epstein (1988) had indicated, I found that there seemed to be personal and friendly relationships among these women regardless of their positions within the organizations.

**“We try not to have hierarchies, but of course there is; one girl works under me, she is my junior. Dr.XYZ who is the director of this research project is senior to me though she is a close friend.” (2) Int. # 02.**

**“There is some hierarchy here. ....So it is not too much stifling but structured, it has to be in such a big organization.” (3) Int. # 10.**

**“Not so formal like the corporates (corporations), but its like other NGOs; we have a governing body, it’s a society basically (cooperative), we have a secretary or Director. I don’t feel there is much of a hierarchy.” Int. # 11.**

**“It is not a very structured organization because our roles shift. I may be a project manager in one of the projects, I may be a field manager in another project.” (1) Int. # 13.**

Although the majority of women I interviewed described the structure of their organizations as semi-formal, eight described their organizational set up as formal. One justification for a more formal and less egalitarian structure was that it was forced on them from outside, not something from within. One woman mentioned the NGO’s obligation to international donors for their funding, which would be impossible to apply for unless there was a formal structure in place, where members are accountable for their assignments. A 40-year-old founder of NGO, explained:

**“Initially it was informal and flexible but now it’s becoming a bit formal. Presently, we are getting a lot more projects, and if we are not formal then I cannot assign**

**accountability, otherwise it will become confusing; then there would be chances of shouldering off responsibility to others.” (2) Int. # 09.**

Another woman added that being a formally structured organization was not a choice as much as it was a requirement by international funding agencies. Just as Hawkesworth (2001) has explained in her research on women’s NGOs in developing countries, Indian NGOs in Kolkata seem to undergo the same pressures about their organizational form and agenda-setting priorities when it comes to appealing the donor agencies. A 50-year-old founder of an NGO told me in a very matter of fact tone that:

**“We have to have a formal structure because we have to, because when you get funds from international organization we have to be formally structured, you have to give reports as a registered organization to auditors and annual general meetings.”**

**(2) Int. # 14.**

Nevertheless, there were those who were quick to point out that even though they had adopted a more formal, hierarchical structure, theirs was not a typical bureaucracy. An NGO professional who was over 30 yrs. said she valued the importance of having a formal structure but at the same time she believed that formalization does not necessarily lead to bureaucratization.

**“We have a very formal structure....but not much bureaucracy.” (2) Int. # 16.**

Among the women interviewed, those who believed that their organizations did have an informal structure cited two reasons for there informal structure and autonomous status. The following quotation confirms the fact that not depending on donor agencies for funding allows more flexibility in terms of NGO structures:

**“[NGO] is totally non-governmental and non-funded We are all really volunteers, we are not donor driven.” Int. # 17.**

On a slightly different note however, a 56-year-old founding member of an NGO spoke about structural hierarchy in relation to the sense of commitment of its individual members, which had nothing to do with pressures from any outside agencies. She said:

**“No hierarchy or formal written structure. But not everyone is in the same position I must say. But I think a type of hierarchy comes from the commitment of the individual, how much time you are spending with the organization and how much crucial decisions you are making, how much risk you are taking, how efficiently you are working and sincerely you are working. So there is this commitment hierarchy but not by nomenclature only because everybody is not working equally, you are taking decisions and implementing them everybody is depending on you. Though there is no written rule that the meeting will not start without this quorum but still people wait for you. We meet on Fridays and whoever is coming on that day, make the decisions.” (2) Int. # 12.**

#### Unpaid vs. paid Work

Another issue which often surfaced in our conversations was about unpaid volunteer work in the NGOs. I assumed this point would, therefore, factor in their decisions on career choices. I asked them if they were paid or unpaid members of the NGOs. Given that Western feminists view the use of women as unpaid workers as a form of exploitation (Metzendorf and Cnaan, 1992) arguing that the women are not compensated with elevated status, enhanced job security or monetary reward for their services (Leghorn and Parker 1981). Christiansen-Ruffman (1990) observed that in a capitalist society, where value is often defined in monetary terms, women’s unpaid work helps perpetuate women’s poverty and the low evaluation of women’s work. Therefore, on reviewing the literature on the institution of women volunteers, their roles and ways in which feminist organizations can manage the workers, there appears to be a paradoxical use of non-paid workers, which needs to be looked into even in the Indian context.

Nearly, half of the women said that they were paid members of the NGOs and received a monthly salary, but the others were mostly volunteers with a couple of

exceptions where the women received nominal honorariums. More importantly, I noted that these women volunteers and activists who received no pay or an honorarium, were from the affluent upper classes of the Indian society and therefore did not depend on monetary income. When I asked a sixty year old founding member and board of trustee about how she supports herself financially, she promptly answered that she did not need any money or remuneration from the NGO because of her family's higher economic class standing.

**“..... was looking after house and home, children and then social work which I took on as a job although it was totally voluntary, it still is totally voluntary (1).....Trustees cannot earn any money, it's mentioned in our trust-deed (documents). We can only be reimbursed our actual traveling costs, only if there is surplus money available.” (11) Int. # 01.**

In some sense, she valued her family life more than her need for a job and she did not seem to consider her NGO activities as part of her professional career; and she repeated often that her work was entirely voluntary<sup>18</sup>. Although she did emphasize, during the course of the interview, the importance of professionalism in the NGO sector and how proactively she encourages other women to be highly professional in their attitude toward their developmental work.<sup>19</sup>

Whaples and Bordelon (1983) found that about two-thirds of volunteers also held other full-time jobs, really working only as supplemental volunteers (Metzendorf and

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<sup>18</sup> Fernandes (1997) claims that a sense of ambiguity surrounds the attitudes held towards working women in Kolkata, not only this but also women's own opinion about working outside the home. At the same time Bannerji et al (n.d.:39-40) claim that most middleclass households aspire to follow middleclass norms in which it is a mark of status if women do not work outside the home.

<sup>19</sup> Incidentally, she had been trained as a business management professional; hence her attitude toward her work was informed by mainstream business management processes and principles. Thus, I have to admit that sometimes, some of my respondents gave me contradictory comments (sometime differing opinions) about their stand on certain issues in the course of the same interview.

Cnaan, 1992). This was the case with nine of the twenty one women I interviewed. For example, a 38-year old married Coordinator told me:

**“I work part time with [NGO], but I also work for several other organizations. I have one more NGO which we have just floated.” (1) Int. # 11.**

The literature on NGOs suggests that women volunteers find means of gaining work experience and professional skills for career growth (Plemper 1996; Metzendorf 1992; Mueller 1978). Some women thought of the volunteer labor in the NGO as an intermediate step toward paid employment. Seven of the respondents thought that their NGO involvement provided them with platforms from which to build better careers in the near future; they were indeed pleased with the exposure they got when jointly working with other NGOs or attending training seminars and the likes.

**“There are opportunities galore - you are being sent to attend workshops and to network- so opportunities for your own growth and expansion is there (2)....at the moment I feel I am getting a lot and I am able to contribute.”(4) Int. # 18.**

This led me to ask the women if they thought it was possible for them to get promotions in their organizations. By asking this, I wanted to find out if these women had the scope to rise in hierarchy within their own organizations or if they thought that they were stuck in the same position and role without any chances of professional growth. A sixty year old volunteer, wife of an attorney said:

**“I was in the committee of UWAC for ten years; thereafter I became the Secretary in 1996, then Vice President and finally the President.” (1) Int. # 06.**

From this response (and others), based on studying typologies prescribed by Metzendorf and Cnaan (1992) my impression was that some NGOs did allow for growth and promotion at policy-volunteer levels, while those who were in the service-volunteer levels did not see much growth in terms of vertical hierarchy (increase in position as well



as salary) although some of these women's positions were rotational, but only horizontally.

**“.....We have a more or less structure when it comes to the Director, the Editor, the Manager, the Project Managers don't shift, but the field managers and field coordinators shift (shuffle).” (1) Int. # 13.**

**“Now I am the coordinator. It is a rotational position, we are in decision-making positions also, then (again) we coordinators also work as a team of five along with the administrative in charge.” (1) Int. # 11.**

However, having interviewed more women, I had to consider some other possibilities as well. For instance, the following quotes suggests that women with more job experience, too, had chances of growth even if they were not in the policy-volunteer level. Two of the younger NGO professionals mentioned:

**“I may be a project manager in one of the projects, I may be a field manager in another project, it depends on what kind of projects we have handled and experienced in, and what kind of handling capacity we have with that particular project.” (1) Int. # 13.**

**“I am now in a policy decision-making level as an Executive Committee member but earlier I have had the experience to work with the community when I started.” (3) Int. # 16.**

As I discussed earlier, some women take up NGO work as a means of gaining work experience and professional skills for career building or for reentry into the labor force (Mueller 1978; Metzendorf 1992; Plemper 1996). I noted that career prospects of many volunteers and activists got better job offers once they started working with the women's NGOs. Most women I interviewed had been offered better jobs by other NGOs or international NGOs, while those who did not have any existing job offers were open to better career prospects, even though they asserted that they believed in the cause (mission of the NGO) more than anything else. For example, one woman stated:

**“I haven’t been working for money all my life, (as I mentioned) the first eight years of this work I was just working as a volunteer for two reasons – a) I wanted to get experience and b) it was because I felt very strongly about the cause, to be able to do something for society, something for these women. I did get a lot of learning experience”. (4) Int. # 04.**

Another woman noted:

**“After getting experience in this field, I want to be in bigger NGOs or INGOs or organizations that are working on specific welfare fields.” (4) Int. # 19.**

**“In the next five years, my goal is to work for a very big NGO, in a better position.” (4) Int. # 20.**

**“I am a very ambitious girl, so I would like to reach the top of my career as soon as I can. I would like to put in a lot of effort toward it. I always wanted to be the Creative Director of a company which is in communications, either in the social sector or.....Yes, I would be open to offers from other organizations.” (5) Int. # 13.**

**“Yes. I am not such unrealistic or romantic person that if somebody offers me a good salary for the work that I am doing or the work that I am good at, I will not do it. I am idealistic but I am not that impractical.” (6) Int. # 02.**

Interestingly, it is mostly the younger women in the research group who were more concerned about their career growth and professional development with the NGO sector. Women above 55 years of age were more selective about their career choices and many of them would reject other job offers. I also noted that most of these older women identified as belonging to the upper class (and not middle class as the other younger women) and seemed to evaluate their NGO profession strictly based on the mission of the NGO or commitment toward the ‘cause’ rather than building a career. This would seem to indicate a shift in NGO workers from the older generation who pursued such work after they had raised their children and the younger generation who viewed NGOs as a beginning or intermediary step toward a career that might or might not include motherhood.

**“Yes, I am open to other jobs offers, I like new challenges. But I will do it only if it is related to any women’s development or social development work.” (4) Int. # 14.**

**“I could be running an advertising agency if I wanted to because people do consider me to be a successful person (in that field) but I have refused those offers. That’s not the kind of person I want to be. Not necessarily this organization, but any organization working for this kind of causes, I would be open to it.” (9) Int. # 03.**

**“I was offered a job by UNICEF verbally, to take over Lucknow’s water sanitation project. But I did not want to get straight-jackets in a tunnel where I have only short-term tunnel vision, where I cannot broaden my perspective, so I said “No” to them.” (11) Int. # 01.**

One interview that stood out as to why a woman would /should not take up other job offers (for career enhancement) was cited by an international research fellow who is also a renowned women’s rights activist in Kolkata. This 56-year-old mother of one, made me realize the complicated choices women volunteers at NGOs have to make in order to keep a balance between the principles they hold dear and the ground realities of developmental work in Third World countries. She talked to me about the financial hardships she is undergoing as a result of incurring high medical expenses for a family member (who is terminally ill), yet she was not particularly looking to earn a better living than what she earned as a research fellow. She chose to remain a voluntary (unpaid) middle class founding member of her NGO, as long as she was able to work on her own terms and protect her principles and sense of work ethics. She was critical about other NGO workers who are overtly interested in administrative work rather than spending time in the field, she said :

**“I will not be probably open to possibilities of working with international organizations because I am a person who likes to think globally but work locally. I have not visited any foreign country even though I am working in this field for the last twenty or twenty-five years because I don’t like to travel. Actually I have some reservation to this trend or attitude that you do some work in an area and you get some huge money and travel worldwide, most NGO heads are doing this. From my heart I don’t like this. I know traveling is the best way of learning but it is one thing**

**to travel one time but another thing if it becomes habitual. If you are always in other countries, how are you going to help your organizations here? Another thing is that if I take such projects, then the maximum time is spent on administrative work like managing the program, schedule and all that. But what I really want to do is to be with women, suffering people. Many people have said to me that I should start an NGO; I don't want to do it because my quality time will go into running the office. I want to do more field work. People (volunteers and activists) here sometimes..... they don't want to go beyond Kolkata (into the rural areas), but then they are ready to go outside the country. You should learn from your own country (first), and then you can go abroad. When there is a violation in the city, you are not here to respond but you are in the Geneva meeting! You are (should be) accountable to your own people here. But all this traveling abroad and (attending) training, seminars and workshops, I think this is a process of appropriation, which I am personally scared of. Everyone is organizing and attending these trainings but no one is willing to go to the rural areas to work where they are really needed.”**  
**Int. # 12.**

#### Pre-existing Social Networks

Another occurrence that I had noticed was the fact that many women knew each other prior to being colleagues in the NGOs. As we noted from extant literature, in feminist organizations, staff and volunteers are usually recruited on the basis of personal contacts and commitment to the organization's mission, rather than professional experience or educational qualifications (Milofsky and Elion 1988). Although a few of my subjects responded to newspaper advertisements that announced job openings in the NGOs, I gathered, overwhelmingly, that most of these women get their jobs in the NGOs through social networks or personal contacts - from friends, classmates, colleagues, family or through NGO networking - women get entry into the world of social developmental work in the non-profit sector in Kolkata. Some typical responses were:

**“I came through a source, my friend who works here was also my classmate in Sociology; she recommended me.” (3) Int. # 13.**

**“The Joint-Secretary out here wanted somebody and I was at a loose end, so they requested me to come and help. (3).... We were colleagues in a different women's organization.” (4) Int. # 03.**

**“Through social network, people know me and came to know that I am quite free as my children have grown up.” (4) Int. # 11.**

**“I got my job through my husband’s aunt, she is Ms. XYZ who is the director of [NGO]” (3) Int. # 17.**

**“I have known them and worked with them for a long time (not through any job application but through social network...for being a good worker your colleague will give you recognition.” (3) Int. # 06.**

I interviewed women who founded NGOs, so they did not find this job but instead got others to work with them on projects that transpired from previous assignments. A 40-year-old government employee, who is also the founding member of an NGO, had this to say:

**“I have been there from the inception. [NGO] is my brainchild actually. I worked with WHO for an AIDs research project, they wanted me to go to this very disturbed, crime-prone area, a criminal den and brothel area in 1991. There was no else who wanted to go there, but I wanted to go there and see this situation, then I got involved with the children. [NGO] is an extension of that research work.” (1) Int. # 09.**

I was curious to find out if these highly educated, urban middle and upper class women really wanted to build a career with the non profit sector. Having spoken to them, I had a certain amount of confusion as to whether being a volunteer or activist at NGOs was their primary goal. Significantly, I found that more than half the women I interviewed wanted another career but they ended up in the non-profit sector mainly due to lack of opportunities in other fields. Some of them were quite frank in admitting that the NGO job was not their initial career preference, in fact, many of them had specializations and trainings in completely different professional fields:

**“....my education back in England gave me a clear management perspective, because I did want to be on the board of multinationals because that is what Chartered Institute of Secretary equips you for.”(1) Int. # 01.**

**“I had the option of going into the Indian Administrative Services, but I missed it.” (2) Int. # 04.**

**“I would have been a good teacher as well, but teacher’s qualification - I do not have, lawyer’s qualification - I do not have; so that’s why this is my only alternative.” (3) Int. # 05.**

**“I got a job with a newspaper, but I did not like the job, so then I got a job in a school as a Geography teacher, which was also very boring for me to teach the same subject everyday. Then I took a competitive (national) examination for a job in the bank. I took that opportunity to work in a bank; I worked for six months but I was posted (assigned) in a village (branch office). Then, I saw an advertisement in the newspaper that there is a position opening here.” (2) Int. # 16.**

Being a volunteer or activist at an NGO is probably not the first career choice for many of these women, however, social and cultural pressures about gender roles, oppressive family values and domestic obligations often limit the options left open to women in India, regardless of their socio-economic status and high educational qualifications. Two women from the upper classes, the first a doctorate in Philosophy and the second with a Masters degree in Modern History, both wives of attorneys and in their late fifties said -

**“I was very keen to study law but my father did not permit it and said a woman should not study law and all that (2).....Initially, my subject was Philosophy - honors subject- in my graduate studies, so I had planned to study more in the academic life and to be a professor of Philosophy. So I did my MA and PhD with considerable problems, because I had my elder daughter while doing my MA. After that, I had tremendous pressure (from husband’s family) to give up my studies and I could not attend college. But anyway, my younger daughter was born after my MA and then I had to give up my studies for three years, and after that I did my PhD. I also got a job in College Service Commission in Midnapore (a city near Kolkata). But there was pressure from my family not to take up the job because then I would have to leave my family (behind). Also, I knew one thing very well, if I left the family I would have to leave my daughters also..... My in-laws are very powerful (people), my father-in-law was a judge in the Kolkata High Court, so I knew if I left the family I would have to leave my daughters also. I was certainly not prepared to do that, so I sacrificed my career. ” (2) Int. # 10.**

**“Initially I wanted to join the (Indian) Administrative Services but my father persuaded me to become a teacher because there I can interact with students and younger girls.” (2)**

**Int. # 06.**

Nevertheless, almost half of the women in my group wanted an NGO job and many of them especially in the field of women's empowerment. The following quotes affirm that indeed their primary goal was to join the non-profit sector and they are well-qualified for their professions, three younger women between the ages of 25 – 30 years said:

**“Yes, I have always wanted to be successful worker in the field of social sector as well as something creative, so this is the right place I have found where I can work in the social sector which is directly linked with my subject Sociology”. (2) Int. # 13.**

**“For me it was a conscious decision to be involved in this field .....As I was studying my Masters, I became aware of women's issues particularly. I took up my dissertation on women's issues and my interest group was in the NGO field”. (2) Int. #18.**

**“I wanted to be in a welfare related organization, either an NGO or INGO.....My dissertation was on problems of working women in the suburbs.” (2) Int. # 19.**

There were others who wanted to work with women's NGOs because they had concerns about social welfare in general, as a result of their life experiences and personal reflections:

**“My family was displaced from East Pakistan (Bangladesh). My mother came to this country in 1947; I was brought up in that situation. There are very shocking stories from that time because my father fought for the Independence movement against the British; they always told me that they didn't fight or sacrifice for this type of a (compromised) independence where there is the (infamous) partition of India (into Pakistan and Bangladesh), there is unemployment, homelessness and all this suffering of poor and distressed people. So I dreamt and thought that I must do something (worthwhile) in this society... I dreamt that I would bring about some revolutionary change in this social system and end all discriminations – gender, economic and cultural; and then this country would be a very lovely (ideal) place to live with peace and dignity for all men, women and children from all strata of life.” (3) Int. # 12.**

**“But there was something that I wanted to do for society from my childhood.” (2) Int. # 11.**

**“I found a job with the blind, where I made a network of friends and colleagues. I decided to continue my work in this area; in the process of this search I found my present job (1)..... I feel this is where I should work.” (2) Int. # 21.**

I also discovered that women over fifty years of age were more likely to be concerned with women’s welfare and were personally connected to the cause of gender empowerment. They said:

**“I am a feminist and I am really deeply into women’s problems in India, specifically West Bengal, which is increasing everyday – molestation, sexual harassment, rape etc. My whole life has been geared to working for women’s lives and problems.” (3) Int. # 02.**

**“We founded this in 1983. ...In the early eighties, there were a lot of wife burnings or dowry deaths and other types of violence (against women).” (2) Int. # 07.**

**“I like new challenges. But I will do it only if it is related to any women’s development or social development work (4)..... my vision was that I would be a teacher in the rural areas so I can teach children who are deprived and who do not have any scope (for education); I wanted to establish a school in the village.....I have (already) established some schools.” (2) Int. # 14.**

Now, I will move on to the second broader theme – Domestic Obligations – and discuss the women’s lived experiences in their own words, after defining the sub-themes; please see Figure 2.0.



**Figure 2.0 Theme Two – Domestic Obligations**

<b>2. DOMESTIC OBLIGATIONS</b>
<b>2.1 CARE TAKING</b>
<b>2.1.1 Family’s Welfare</b> – Women’s responsibilities toward family (immediate and extended) members and related demands of domestic and household chores; looking after the needs of all members of the family (including parents, siblings, younger members and the elderly); sometimes oppressive family values.
<b>2.1.2 Husband’s Welfare</b> – Wife’s responsibilities towards husband’s personal well being and ensuring the conditions in the household that does not hamper his professional growth.
<b>2.1.3 Children’s Welfare</b> – Mother bringing up her children and ensuring their well-being and healthy development as a priority, over all other concerns in life.
<b>2.1.4 In-laws’ Welfare</b> – Wife’s responsibilities toward her husband’s family, mother-in-law, father-in-law, husband’s siblings etc.
<b>2.2 SACRIFICE</b>
<b>2.2.1 Education</b> - Women not pursuing an educational career due to domestic pressures such as looking after siblings, early arranged marriages, husband’s welfare and children’s welfare as per societal expectations based on gender division of labor.
<b>2.2.2 Career</b> - Women giving up their own professional career aspirations in order to attend to the needs of others in the family by conforming to the traditional role of women as homemakers and mothers.

*Discussion of the Interviews*

***“At times, working moms go through a general guilt complex because they cannot give full-time to their children, and another strain even at work for their dual role.” (4) Int. # 21.***

Pursing careers and work outside the home is incongruent with traditional sex roles and women who work often experience anxiety and guilt (Burke and Mckeen 1988): this may affect their career choices. Consistent with their national constitution, Indian feminists claim women’s rights as individuals to, for example, education (Chanana 1988), pay equity (Gandhi and Shah 1991), and land control (Agarwal 1994). But the legitimacy of personal authority goes against familial obligations, especially in traditional society with strong family and kinship networks, where they individual concerns are

secondary to what is considered a priority for the family (Karlekar 1988). Further, as I mentioned earlier, literature that deals with societal expectations of women volunteers views women as spouses of husbands who are the actual breadwinners. According to Jenner (1983), women structure their career decisions so they will have flexibility for life organized around a future husband and children. Further, this perspective suggests that women are not expected to pursue a career or secure financial independence but instead are expected to invest in their families and freely contribute their services to the community, as was the custom in previous centuries and traditional society (Karl 1984).

Often, there are social, cultural and traditional limitations that are in place to limit women's involvement in paid work in India. Understandably, in cultures where men and women have separate spheres and women are ideally not supposed to join the labor force but instead become caring mothers and housewives (see Rai 2002; Plemper 1996; Calman 1992), women's empowerment and a career based on activism can, indeed, be a difficult proposition.

Domestic obligation was one of the most poignant themes that emerged from the interviews. From the interviews, as well as just spending time with these middle and upper class women from Kolkata, I came to define domestic obligations to include family welfare, husband's, in-laws and children's welfare; and fulfilling the needs of family members (members from both immediate and extended family) to be one of the main responsibilities of these women, regardless of how active they are as volunteers and activists. It seemed that it was also quite expected of them to leave their educational and professional careers in order to fulfill their domestic obligations, as per societal expectations.

For example, an upper class 60-year-old mother of two, who was also the president of an NGO (although regretful in tone), seemed proud of her strong commitment to her domestic obligations, but nevertheless was somewhat regretful about sacrificing her desires for her family:

**“I used to feel very frustrated that I couldn’t go out and work because I was very tied up with my household work, not household chores as such (she has housemaids) but family affairs (2)”...That way since I am looking after the household and everybody’s needs, and then I am doing this social work, my family is giving me full support (as a result of my looking after them).” (3) Int. # 6.**

Another 60-year-old Chairperson of an NGO from an upper class Indian family described her sentiments quite similarly:

**“I went to England to do my CIS (Chartered Institute of Secretary), my intermediate and just before my final exams I had to come back because I am an only child and my mother had a heart attack, my Mom stayed (lived) here (in India)... after I came back from England....the children came (were born) one after the other, so I wasn’t able to sit for (take) the final exams, ..... Beyond this I did not do any studies for some years, it was looking after house and home, children (1).....my spirituality, and my faith in the powers that be, I found that my children somehow were fine and I could fit in all my duties and my (NGO) work in an amazing way. Sometimes my Mommy would come and stay with us, then I made my father-in-law come and stay with me from 1979, he was with us for sixteen years.” (12) Int. # 1.**

However, the younger women who were from the middle classes as they seemed to want to continue to work as volunteers and activists in spite of subscribing to the general societal expectations of motherhood and care taker. A 27-year-old married woman explained:

**“I would love to have a baby in the next three to three and a half years. But I am in a dilemma considering my mother’s health, I don’t know if I can give enough time to my baby. I think the pregnancy period is very crucial if I could actually handle that, because I have to rush to the doctor for my mother, I don’t know if I can handle that physically...I would not like to have a baby just for the sake of having it; I would like to give the entire thing to the baby, as a proper human being should have. If I take the responsibility of bringing a child to this world, then I should take**

**that responsibility. As far as career growth is concerned I really look forward to working...” (6) Int. # 17.**

Although it is rare for a woman to be the breadwinner of a household and to remain unmarried in her late thirties in India, I met a single woman activist from a middle class family who described her domestic obligations as her “duty and responsibility”; so much so that she spent her entire income toward her mother’s welfare:

**“After two of my older sisters got (arranged) married, I think my mother was more relaxed (relieved that she did not have to worry about their marriages anymore), and though I am the youngest in my family I took over all the family responsibilities when I completed my Masters. I realized I have to do something for my family; my stand or objective was to support my mother because she struggled so much to bring us up. I think this is my duty and responsibility. I have no one else in this world; now I am living with my mother” (1)...whatever money I get is to fulfill taking care of my mother.” (3) Int. # 16.**

Schram and Dunsing (1981) found that the more educated a woman is and the more negative her husband’s attitude toward her employment, the more likely it is that she not seek paid employment but rather work as a volunteer. This could be a plausible reason that impacted the decisions of some women in my study. Although they did not explicitly point it out, I noted indirect references to such a possibility. Nevertheless, it was clear that women find self-actualization through volunteerism and activism (Metzendorf and Cnaan 1992). From the women I interviewed, an upper class President of an NGO who had a master’s degree and some experience in teaching at university level, told me that she wanted to give priority to her husband’s work and welfare at all times, this was also socially expected of her:

**“I have to think of my family first, my husband being a lawyer he has got no time for himself, all the time he is working and studying law. He is totally dependent on me, so I cannot think of leaving him at this old age (6)... although my mother-in-law wanted me to be in the house so that I can look after the house. She told me only when I look after the family, my husband will have total free time to go through his papers and studies.” (8).” Int. # 6.**

Again in another instance, another upper middle class Program Coordinator described her role in enhancing her husband's career, which she also considered as her own career:

**“I basically didn't do anything in the first ten years of my married life (1)...after that for about 5-6 yrs I was a housewife, in between I taught in a school for sometime.... But my husband left his job and started a consultancy firm, which we started together. From then on I worked with my husband for fifteen years, we did that till he passed away in 1997; I did everything from looking after the administration, keeping accounts etc (2).” Int. # 2.**

Like in other cultures, although many women, especially from the lower classes continue to work to support their families and themselves, the majority of women in India are housewives and mothers (Plempner 1996). Motherhood is considered the most important role for a woman in India. Significantly, women are ideally not supposed to join the labor force but instead become caring mothers and housewives (see Rai 2002;Plempner 1996; Calman1992).

Historically, McCarthy (1989:7) had noted that ‘under the banner of religion and the ideology of the Republican Motherhood and the cult of domesticity, women broadened their range of maternal responsibilities beyond the home to encompass the needs of dependents and the dispossessed.’ in the U.S. In the Indian context, Sanghera (1997) had pointed out that Indian women sought equality through an emphasis on complementarities. In other words, they sought equality by emphasizing the notion that women complimented men and they needed a forum in which to voice their concerns. Importantly, Indian women sought to improve their position without challenging the patriarchal fabric of Indian society. This entailed an emphasis on their role as women and

subsequently, as wives and mothers; no other role could surpass these two roles as the most ideal for women, as per the prescribed norms and gender roles.

Likewise, I noticed that women in NGOs at Kolkata have quite habitually sacrificed their education and career in order to raise their children. Although, I could sense some amount of frustration about having to readily give up their career goals and aspirations, many of them did not seem to vehemently protest or demand a change in their expected roles. For instance, one upper class mother of two adult sons (and also in the board of trustees at an NGO), admitted she sacrificed her career for her children:

**“...I gave up a professional career in a multinational company, which I had planned for myself, but this was a voluntary decision when I got married and had children.” (6) Int. # 1.**

Other women were not given any chance, but were told by their families to quit working and get married:

**“I did think that I must at least graduate (BA) or get an MA degree, which I didn’t. After graduating (BA), my father proposed that I should get married, I agreed to an arranged marriage....after that for about 5-6 yrs I was a housewife (2).” Int. # 2.**

However, there were notably a few responses to this question which had an inherent tone of dissent from the general societal expectations of women’s role, especially when it came to the question of opportunities for their children. One quote that confirms this frustration comes from a mother of two daughters, who felt deprived of opportunities in her own life chances in terms of having a career:

**“When my daughters were small (little), they kept me going. First of all I had to see that they grow up as good individuals. Secondly, I had to see that what happened to me (lack of opportunity) does not happen to them; I wanted them to become career women. That has happened. But now that they have left me I can’t find any other meaning to my life, so this work means everything to me.”(3) Int. # 10.**

Having discussed the domestic obligations confronted by these middle and upper class women volunteers and activists, I will proceed to define and then analyze the third broad theme - Social Challenges / Obstacles for Women, please see Figure 3.0 on the next page.

**Figure 3.0 Theme Three – Social Challenges / Obstacles for Women**

<b>3. Social Challenges / Obstacles for Women</b>
<b>3.1 GENDER DISCRIMINATION</b>
<b>3.1.1 Biology- Based</b> – Women’s primary role described in terms of natural sexual differences / biological determinism (Wilson 1978) with sole emphasis on the act of child bearing and nurturing / care-taking.
<b>3.1.2 Separate Spheres &amp; Chores</b> – Demarcation of territories and assignment of work based on traditional gender division of labor; relegation of chores to the public sphere for men and the domestic sphere for women
<b>3.1.3 Gender Role Stereotypes</b> – Expected roles played by men and women in society based on social stereotypes, thereby perpetuating gender inequality, differential and unequal opportunities impacting women’s career choices.
<b>3.1.4 Work &amp; Family Conflict</b> – Dual role played by women as professional careerists as well as homemaker; conflict of roles and double burden of responsibilities (alluded to as the “Double Shift” or “Second Shift” by Hochschild and Machung (1990).
<b>3.2 CHALLENGES OF INDIAN WOMEN</b>
<b>3.2.1 Violence</b> - Physical, mental, verbal abuse inflicted on women as special targets in sex-stratified societies.
<b>3.2.2 Domestic Violence</b> - Physical and psychological abuse on women in their family (paternal family and husband’s family); in this study, psychological abuse towards daughters due to son-preference in patriarchal societies, dowry-related harassment and abuse by husband & in-laws and subsequent torture leading to the death of the bride (in extreme cases).
<b>3.2.3 Education</b> – Lack of educational opportunities for women compared to men; family’s hesitate to invest in girls’ education because it is rendered not useful in her ultimate role has a homemaker and mother, who is not expected /allowed to work outside the home or earn a living.
<b>3.2.4 Lack of Economic Independence</b> – Due to lack of education and vocational training, women become economically handicapped; also, the tradition of only males being breadwinners and women homemakers cause hindrance in women’s career choices and life chances.
<b>3.2.5 Globalization Vs Tradition</b> – Changes in women’s public role and economic opportunities as a result of global economic reorganizations – the resulting role transition and conflict with traditional gender roles; adapting to pressures of westernization and consumerism.
<b>3.2.6 Other</b> – Social Challenges of women other than those mentioned above; example: female infanticide.
<b>3.3 IMAGE OF NGOs (continued....)</b>



<b>3.3.1 Favorable</b> - Seen as contributing toward betterment of society, valuable role in development.
<b>3.3.2 Unfavorable</b> – Seen as inefficient; public lacking awareness about NGO work, concept and role.

*Discussion of the Interviews*

***“The gender discrimination even today is a great problem. And they (women) don’t have access to any information (for their rights or protection).” (5) Int. # 9***

From the above quote, we can deduce that one of the most major social problems of the Indian society relating to women is gender discrimination; which is all pervasive. Significantly, discriminatory social attitudes and cultural conditions apply to women from all strata and classes of Indian society, even though there are relative differences in the degree of discrimination, oppression and deprivation.

The Indian feminist movement also diverges from the equivalent movements in the West, with respect to the notion of sexual difference. While some feminist struggles in the West emphasized equality with man in all spheres, there was a tendency in the Indian men and women to dwell on the idea of separate roles for males and females. Kumar (1993) conveyed that in the early years of movements for women’s rights...it was more or less taken for granted that the difference between the sexes was such that their roles, functions, aims and desires were different. And hence, not only had they to be differently reared but differently treated in general. The relationships can seem part of the natural social order, of traditions that are beyond questioning (Agarwal 1994: 58-59). Over time this difference was itself adduced as a major reason for reforming women’s conditions. While early 19<sup>th</sup> century reformers argued that it was precisely this difference that made women socially useful (women as mothers), and hence proper care for their conditions of being was socially necessary (Kumar 1993:2).

As enlightened women emerged at the forefront they also demanded further rights, access to education, liberty etc., and they also based their arguments on these issues of differences between men and women. According to Chaudhuri (1993:146) “two themes emerge here, both of which are emphasized through the history of the women’s movement; one relating to the naturally non-antagonistic relationship of the sexes in India as compared to the West and the other relating to the need for women representatives in various forums to put forward their views.”

Despite heightened concern about gender inequalities and the espousal of gender training by both governmental and non-governmental institutions in the 1990s, research indicates that developmental programs vary widely in terms of their vision and goals as well as their understanding of gender as an operational objective (Mukhopadhyay and Appel 1998). Likewise, I noticed that there were often references made to the biological differences (Wilson 1978) between the sexes in our conversations about gender roles, rights and duties of men and women in India. Although increasing numbers of NGOs are attempting to introduce modernization and developmental programs to intervene women’s lives, the underlying ideologies upheld by some members of these institutions often (intentionally or unintentionally) reflect and perpetuate existing gender role stereotypes. Also, it is increasingly the case that women participate in paid work as well as continue with their household work, including care-taking and nurturing, which is stereotyped as female activities and socialization during childhood reinforces this acceptance by most women as ‘their work’ (Burn 2000:101).

The following quote from the founder of an NGO highlights the unquestioning belief and idealism in women’s roles as nurturers and care takers which is a common

notion among some of the volunteers and activists whom I interviewed. This 60-year-old woman also referred to past traditions that glorified separate gender roles in society, and regretted the fact that society no longer seems to uphold the value of women's gentleness.

**“Women’s challenge is not losing the femininity because I think that women are strong as women. In no way do I say a woman should become masculine in any way (15).....Women find their strength through promotion of love, the gift of love is more with women than with men (15).....I think women in India are great givers of love, but not enough is given back to them. But it is more than that, I am talking about the community level, wider level, where the nurturing and caring without self interest..... It is cultural but also physical...you know our biological role of childbearing where you know even a female tigress will take care of the cubs, a built-in factor, and the tiger won’t. The naughtiest set of girls that I have brought up (over the years) have become the gentlest, sweetest and softest mothers. So women have it in them in a larger share because they go through this birth process ....girls also bring out the protective instinct in males (16).....society doesn’t value it or approve it and in fact its not socially correct to express love. It doesn’t have to be sexual love....these relations were better before, today it’s been boiled down into something negative.” (17) Int. # 1.**

However, with regard to separate spheres and chores for men and women, there is definitely a shift taking place from the traditional notions and boundaries consigned to men and women. Most women in the group saw the traditional demarcation of social boundaries as inherently unjust and challenged the assignment of private (domestic) spheres which are usually relegated to women. One 50-year-old divorcee who left her husband and her in-laws family because they would not approve of her having a professional career, and is now the founder of a woman’s NGO said:

**“I don’t really know why they are holding on to these values. They think that when a woman is married, she should only stay at home and do work at home. They say why a woman should be outside the house for the whole day!” (3) Int. # 14**

A twenty five plus years old Project Manager, with a master’s degree in Sociology from a middle class background, was thankful that she had the opportunity to pursue her education and career because her family had rejected the traditional sphere

allocations and norms for women. She pointed out, however, that this was rare, and not many women got the same opportunities as she did. She said:

**“Even if they (girls) are well educated, their parents do not expect the girls to be employed. The support I got from my family is rare; most women cannot imagine such familial support.” (3) Int. # 20.**

A single woman in her mid-thirties admitted that she had to withstand a lot of family pressure in order for her to break away from her gendered sphere and role, she stated:

**“...this is the first time in the history of my family, that a woman got a job outside the house. I got lots of resistance (opposition) from my family because this is the first time a woman got a job.”(1) Int. # 16.**

One 26-year-old Project Manager complained about facing difficulties in her work when trying to reach women due to their secluded physical domains (domestic spheres):

**“Like for women, we have done projects where we have got lots of hindrance. There is gender bias, community block for certain campaigns too.....when we work for sanitation in different projects, women were our major focus there. Since this is a place where men have the say and women don’t have the say, it is really difficult to actually get the women to hear about what we have to say. A very major point in our sanitation project is targeting women for shyness that it is easy for women to go out in the field. For women are not going to the fields the whole day because its daylight (they have no proper restrooms) or maybe wait until 10 or 11 at night, so that is a very pathetic part of this situation. For the reproductive child health campaign, women are the main targets. For the (awareness) campaign on anemia control for women, in this type of communities it is difficult to get the women to see the (street) plays in these types of communities; they are most of the time inside the house.” (3) Int.# 13.**

One woman mentioned facing discrimination at her previous work place in terms of spheres that is considered appropriate for females, she said:

**“.....if my colleagues are mostly males, then I have to endure some male domination; I have experienced this in my previous job where they would only**

**prefer the male staff to do outdoor jobs because they would say that women cannot do this.” (3) Int. # 20.**

While another woman spoke about opposition from her in-laws because they did not want her to leave the house (domestic sphere) for any public service; she said

**“Earlier I was associated with a group who did theater for social change, they (her in-laws) did not like that either. This is clashing with their value-system. However, if my ex-husband did the same job as I do that will be acceptable to them somehow, because he is a male.” (3) Int. # 14**

In a related vein, another woman mentioned the problem of being labeled a

“promiscuous” woman if she spent too much time outside of her domestic realm. She remarked:

**“This attitude does not apply to just working women but also towards housewives who are not allowed to go out of their houses. If they do go out often, then people think they are promiscuous. So they need both familial and societal support (to overcome this obstacle).” (3) Int. # 20.**

One thing that I found was particularly innovative was the discursive interpretations of spheres, gender roles stereotypes and empowerment. One founder of an NGO talked about choices of both men and women; she emphasized the need to expand the spheres for both. She said:

**“....a man is socialized to earn, to be in a job situation to have a (proper / ideal) status, and I think men are very unfortunate in many ways that they cannot do certain things, their parents think that’s very degenerate not to have a full-time job and earn a huge amount. The challenge is to allow men to be themselves, and not fit into the stereotype. That would bring more equality between men and women. Males have been put in a situation...there are expectation from them.....like I told my husband you don’t have to earn everything just because a family is there, you feel free to change your career or course mid-stream. He did exactly that, he changed his career in his thirties, and my son has done the same (15). With me, because I was a woman, I had that option as my husband was working.....poor guy! And poor me also, I was doing housework ...because I don’t like to be “just a housewife”. Mind you, I don’t like the word (phrase) “just a housewife” because (in reality) so much effort and work goes into being a housewife but in terms of prestige**

**its zero even today.... I think that's the challenge of the century...more flexibility between men and women.” (7) Int. # 1.**

On a more critical note on men, another woman talked about how her personal definition of empowerment differs from the conventional wisdom; she also anticipated resistance from the Indian male youth of this generation when it came to redefining gender spheres, she said:

**“I think even now for the mass people, I think women's development is quite acceptable rather than women's empowerment. To my understanding, development is about providing some basic level of needs like some education, some freedom of movement and training for some work but in a very regulated manner by others by an NGO or agency (or by some social organizations); but ultimately they have to get married (and uphold domesticity); as long as this is the case people are happy with it. But (women's) empowerment to me is actual control over the resources, so that they have (direct) access to them, so that they can be in decision-making positions, but if this is the case then people have reservations about it. But something that really worries me is the fact that the new generation is more conservative than our generation when emancipation was more radical. Young men seem to feel especially threatened (by gender equality). I don't know why, perhaps for the communal or religious sentiments that is spreading lately, but today's young men say that if you want to talk about equality on a policy level – that's fine, but do not tell us what to do within our families (in terms of gender equality), don't try to change the (traditional) family structure. Even upper middle class, young urbanized and educated men and so-called “crème of the society”, have reservations about women's rights too.” (4) Int. # 11.**

As in other countries in developing areas, the population of India is not all poor. Indeed, the divide between those of middle-class standing and above, with their access to most of the consumer goods the world economy has to offer, and those from the lower classes is widening. Thus, Kolkata is a region characterized by growing divide between the rich and the poor, high levels of poverty, illiteracy and gender inequality (Murthy 1998). These conditions are compounded further by the impact of globalization, conflict between modern and traditional gender norms.

A renowned women's activist addressed the issue of gender role stereotypes in contemporary India:

**“Well one is the consumer pressure of having to look beautiful and to possess a lot of goods. Women have to look good at the same time be traditional, men however don't carry that double yoke. So you have to be a good 'Indian' woman and at the same time you have to look alluring (laughs).” (7) Int. # 7.**

Confronting gender role stereotypes, thus, came up as another important theme in our conversations. Several women commented on different types of role discrimination, which they have learnt about from the oppressed women they serve during their field work, as well as from their personal life experiences:

**“.....it is a gender role crisis, which is creating a lot of stress among women.” (9) Int. # 4.**

**“First thing is that we women are taught that all the women are the weaker sex, so physically we are not well equipped.”(4) Int. # 6**

**“We have a sister (no male siblings). So I haven't faced any gender discrimination commonly faced by most girls, but that's perhaps because I did not have any brothers, this is on second thoughts after my work in this NGO where my understanding on gender inequality has increased.” (1) Int. # 21**

**“..... the general attitude – the society still goes with the stereotype that women have to take up this role, and from childhood everybody tries to mould us to those roles. That handicaps us for taking up an effective role in and outside the home. This is another great challenge.”(5) Int. # 10**

As I often noted, the women in my interview would tell me about a social problem that oppressed women in India face in their daily lives, but eventually they would end up relating the same social problem to their own lives (as personal problems) which they too have endured. I cite the case of a single woman in her mid-thirties who, when discussing the problem of gender role stereotypes, narrated to me the way she personally felt victimized after she had been socialized into these traditional gender role

expectations early in life, before she had the capacity to reflect critically on the implications of such beliefs in her own life, and under the pressures of getting married - which is considered the ultimate goal for a woman in India regardless of how well-educated or economically independent she may be. She explained:

**“When I worked in the bank, he (my fiancé) forced me to leave the job because he said since we were planning to get married, it is not feasible for me to stay there (away) while he was here (in Kolkata). As I told you earlier that I am from a very conservative family, I saw (learnt) from all my relatives and sisters that marriage is the ultimate goal for a woman and then to be a mother. I was not aware of any of my (social) rights, so I never asked any questions (did not object) because I thought at that time that he is the person with whom I will spend all of my life, so he will decide my future. So I accepted it. But later I found out that he is not the right person for me and the relationship broke up actually (1).....From here (having worked in this *NGO*) I came to know who I am and that I can live on my own (remain single), so I know myself (better). I know (now) that besides marriage (being the ultimate goal for women in India), there is also something else (like a career, self-identity etc.) (2).....we are still living with the same ideas (traditional) like it was fifty years ago. Even urban women believe that her husband is the ultimate decision-maker, what he decides is final. Even in my own organization, I see that the women who work here have to go home at 5pm; she cannot stay back because her husband won't allow it. (If) I am in a decision making position and if I earn something for my family, then I should also have the right to say that there is some work left in the office, so I will come home a little late today. But I don't have a husband so I am not answerable to anybody, but I think most of the women are not in a position to say anything (assert themselves).” (6) Int. # 16.**

However, this is not to say that these gender role stereotypes are not changing at all. In fact, on the contrary they are evolving; women do have some new roles open to them. But ironically, most of these new roles models are unrealistic or have hidden agendas, as per the women I interviewed. As Tanaka (1995) points out marriage is more costly to a woman's career because only women are called upon to reconcile the competing demands of work and family responsibilities. One 25-year-old single Project Coordinator told me she is not giving in to the pressures of getting married because she



feels unprepared to fess up to the realities of married life for working women in India.

She said:

**“..... I feel balancing work and home is a challenge. At one point you think this is egalitarian society, but then.....I have seen girls get married to guys who are gender-sensitive yet it is on you (women’s onus) to balance both really. Work is one place where you want to do well professionally and you don’t want to compromise on anything. But again home front becomes an important issue, especially when you have a kid, and I mean I have seen my colleagues go through it. They have to always deal with it, no matter however supportive their husbands are.” (4) Int. # 18**

One 38-year-old mother and NGO Coordinator criticized the media for portraying conflicting images of ideal Indian womanhood, which according to her is causing unnecessary gender role-expectations and stress on urban Indian women. She said:

**“I was reading in the newspaper recently that a woman got divorced because her in-laws and husband wanted her to be like ‘Parvati’ - a woman character in one of the most popular soap operas on Indian T.V, which depicts ideal womanhood for Indian women. I saw that program and I found out that this woman’s character was that of a perfect housewife (very domesticated) with a sari (traditional Indian women’s attire), at the same time when her family needed her to help out with their family business (income), she was efficient even in that field (managing a company). So in this sense, the media is suggesting that Indian women have to be perfect at household chores as well as fulfill their responsibilities outside the home equally well, in other words be a “super-woman”. These role models are a major challenge.” (4), (5) Int. # 11.**

Understandably then, another related topic that was recurring in the interviews was the relatively recent phenomenon of work and family conflict. Opportunities for Indian women are increasing, especially with the spread of the women’s movement, yet, women remain an underprivileged group because ideological transformations towards accepting women’s new role in society have been slow in comparison. Therefore, most educated women are ‘caught between the crossfire of social mores and professional duties’ as was succinctly described by one of the women I interviewed. As a result, career

choices for women remain a subject of compromise or sacrifice, in a 'social milieu that is still very demanding' about the role of women. This situation is again called to attention in the following quote by a 26-year-old Project Manager:

**“One is that, still the platforms of voicing out what they (women) feel are not there in almost all the fields. Although we are doing much better in India than they were doing, many companies have CEOs as women, and in the management field especially women are doing very well, it is still difficult for women to make an adjustment between their career and their family life, because much more is expected out of the women than the men. If there is a social occasion, a man can go out and say that I have work but the women cannot. If she does it, that is going to create problems. Women who are careerists are not being able to marry; their marriage rate has gone down because they are not able to find the balance and that understanding is probably not there (from society).....I would like to address this issue provided there is a solution.....(but) the cultural values haven't changed.” (4) Int. # 13.**

Similarly, the above theme has been corroborated by several other women working in the NGO sector in Kolkata, as per the following quotes, it is clear the women's dual role, also referred to as 'second shift' by Hochschild and Machung (1990) is a point of contention among the women I interviewed:

**“I think that is the biggest challenge of this century where women have to define their roles as mothers and wives, on the other hand as women who are contributing; who are earning.....this status definition is going to be a huge role. I don't think that has happened worldwide in fact. We still have the glass ceiling and the glass wall.” (15) Int. # 1.**

**“I think the working women, especially upper-middle class ones, are caught in this crossfire between existing social mores and professional duties. It's very difficult to balance the two, because your family and your society is still very demanding about what the role of the women is; plus your work situation is also very demanding.” (9) Int. # 4**

**“First challenge is of course to fit in home life and work or career. For the majority of the women it is still a great problem, often you have to choose between the two.” (5) Int. # 10.**

**“The second problem is the problem of working women because they have two roles – one inside the home and other outside home. Inside the home they have to play the role of a mother, a daughter-in-law and wife and take care of the whole house, while**

**in the office they have to play the role of a good worker. So it is very difficult to balance both roles.”(4) Int. # 19.**

From the interviews and our conversations in general, I noticed that there is a deeply embedded feeling of guilt for women who take on less of the care giving and household chores, which in turn makes them feel as if they are forgoing their real responsibilities. Quite obviously then, as I read between the lines I got the sense that this guilt leaves the women in a confusing position to grapple with in terms of their career choices.

Moving on to other sub themes that I interpreted, violence against women was cited as a major challenge. Violence against women, in particular domestic violence, assumes distinctive forms in India. In the early 1980s, a spate of suspicious deaths of young married women in the middle and lower classes surfaced in the media. It became clear that these were young women who were either being murdered by their husbands or were being driven to commit suicide by their wretched married lives (Ray 2000). The standard form these deaths took was burning as a result of kerosene being poured over the woman’s body. These murders came to be dubbed “dowry deaths” or “bride burning” by the media (2000: 32) since they frequently occurred when the bride’s family was unable to meet the continuous dowry demands<sup>20</sup> made by the groom’s family after marriage. Needless to say, this became high on the agendas of the Indian women’s movements. Collectively, the women whom I interviewed had strong opinions on this subject:

**“Main issues are domestic violence against women, which is mainly related to dowry.” (6) Int. # 2.**

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<sup>20</sup> Dowry deaths have been a leading concern for Indian feminists; they have raised public awareness of the problem and in 1986 won their battle to strengthen the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961. Unfortunately, these activists must continue to fight for enforcement (Ray 2000).

**“.....violence against women, like bride burning for dowry, eve teasing and so on.”  
(4) Int. # 19.**

Adding to this problem in India is the fact that it is difficult for women to obtain a divorce and there is a great social stigma associated with divorce (Burn 2000).

Furthermore, there is no assistance available for women who want to leave abusive situations; therefore, they have no way to survive outside of marriage. Quite a few of the women I spoke with stressed the need for more shelters for women, as the following quotes will prove:

**“.....we need more safe shelters for these women; sometimes women who are tortured inside the family don't know where to go. They come out of the house and are on the street, they have to have some safe shelter until they get a job or something.” (5) Int. # 5**

**“That's why they become victims of violence – social violence or family violence. .... For both urban and rural women, it is the same. We need more and more working women's hostels or some sort of shelter easily accessible to these women.”  
(5) Int. # 5**

**“.....violence is everywhere, in the house, on the streets, in the workplace, day and night. So we are putting a self-curfew on us, we will be harassed mentally, physically, sexually, so there is always this fear that chases you, so you cannot go freely anywhere. It is hard to say if this has decreased or increased. In one way reporting has increased, women are coming out and reporting.” (5) Int. # 12.**

**“Denial of justice, from violence.....specially, the rights and protection of girl child or mini-women is a part of this problem. The women don't have the power to make decision and even the rights to their body; that anybody can touch them and they have to accept their touches. They cannot tell (complain) anybody because of stigma. Physical security is also related to mental.” (5) Int. # 9.**

Literature confirms that even upper class women face sexual and domestic violence. Triandis (1994) notes that wife beating occurs in approximately 84 percent of societies, that adult women are more likely to be the victims, that adult men are typically the perpetrators, and that wife beating occurs most frequently in those societies where the

husband has more economic and decision making power. In my study, some women addressed the problem of domestic violence as part of their own lives or part of the lives of their colleagues.

**“I have seen many women (in my NGO) give a lot of advice to (oppressed) girls that “you should be making your own decisions”, but when they themselves go back home they are beaten up by their own husbands. So first you have to practice it yourself.” (5) Int. # 17.**

**“..... physical insecurity - which even I experience when I have to return home very late at night from work. I would like to have a safe society where I can at least travel without worrying about my physical security. If you read the newspapers, you’ll notice lots of rape cases.”(3) Int. # 20.**

**“We are getting more and more of a worse environment with violence, rape than we ever heard before. I am over sixty and a woman like me is not supposed to walk alone at night and it’s ridiculous. In Delhi, you cannot walk (alone on the streets) after 8 or 9pm. Why? Because this caring for other humans has reduced. Forget sexes, it's a human thing.” (16) Int. # 1.**

Some women put forth suggestions and proactive solutions as to how to deal with violence against women:

**“If there is any physical molestation, we cannot cope with the situation. That’s why I met the Education Minister and Secretary at Calcutta, because I wanted that from school level they should teach techniques for self-defense instead of just Physical Education, and self-defense should be made compulsory from school level so that they are well equipped to protect themselves if there is a problem.....like learning Judo or Karate etc. That was my program for last year’s International Women’s Day....Now a days with these Television (programs) and movies, sex and violence is so prevalent, rather than romance and soft things. Unknowingly maybe it is affecting the younger minds. When we open the newspaper everyday, it is all about sex and violence related reports, so the girl child should know how to protect herself.”  
(4) Int.# 6.**

**“Violence is everywhere, in the house, on the streets, in the workplace, day and night. ...I tell them “why don’t you make paper bags and sell them to gain economic independence instead of suffering from domestic violence” or “why don’t you baby-sit for others and earn something by doing what you do at home, instead of getting beaten up at home”, and this type of advice works for them.” (5) Int. # 12.**

One of them even empathized with the violence that is inflicted on the oppressed women she works for:

**“But when I associated myself with the NGO work, visited the red-light area and met with women who are living in prostitution and heard about the violence (they go through) that reminds me of my own violence. I can relate to them and understand the pain, so I accepted the job from my heart; I fit myself in their position (shoes) in terms of the mental and physical violence.” (4) Int. # 16**

Finally, one case worker in her twenties, mentioned a different type of violence that was not usually included as part of the regular discourses on violence. Nonetheless, her comments were thought provoking as well as poignant

**“From childhood the discrimination faced by girls is a form of mental violence, you cannot see it, and it’s not tangible but nevertheless (it is) a form of violence – emotional violence. I have a much clearer perception on this subject.” (2) Int. # 21**

Carillo (1992) links domestic violence against women to women’s socioeconomic and psychological dependency on men, which makes it difficult for them to leave situations of violence or sexual harassment. This dependency is frequently economic and results from a multilayered system of sex discrimination. Given these facts, when asked about other challenges that Indian women face, I gathered from the interviews that economic dependence was a prominent theme. Further, I found that economic dependence was related to the lack of educational opportunities for women. The Indian government has expressed a strong commitment toward education for all; however, India still has one of the lowest female literacy rates in Asia (Seth 2001).

It is common knowledge that women lack educational opportunities because first preference is given to male children to be educated, since the girls’ ultimate goal will be only to get married off and look after the household where they will not have any use of formal education. Moreover, since there is a social and cultural preference for male

children, daughters are seen as a wasted investment, and likewise they will receive less attention and fewer resources than their brothers (Goodwin 1994). The women I interviewed pointed out that:

**“First and foremost, they (women) lack in education...either education or some sort of skill so that they can be independent is the most important – economic independence is not there for them. Secondly, even today we first find a family for the girls to get married into, but I think that a girl is a human being first, so must be well-equipped and well-educated so she can be self-reliant economically.”**

**(5) Int. # 6**

**“We (the women working in the NGOs) got a lot of education because of our family background, but other women do not have this opportunity because they are married off quite early in life after very little education, so they do not have any economic independence whether it is in rural or urban settings.”** (3) Int. # 20

While female labor force rates throughout India are low, they are lower still in urban areas. The recorded female labor force participation rate in Kolkata is 7.04% compared to 53.68% for males in 1991<sup>21</sup> (Ray 2000). Moreover, much of women’s labor remains unpaid and therefore not valued. Even with paid jobs, it is likely that women will work longer hours for lower pay and fewer benefits and security (Carillo 1992).

Nevertheless, the women I interviewed stressed the importance of economic independence which some of them blamed for gender inequality per se. For example, one 50-year-old NGO head said quite assertively that:

**“Economic independence is the first challenge. Because there is economic inequality, that’s why there is gender inequality. If there is economic equality, then women will feel more confident.”** (3) Int. # 14.

I noticed that a lot of these sub themes are inter-related. For instance, I found definite correlations with domestic violence, economic dependence, cultural practices and

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<sup>21</sup> Women in Kolkata were once employed in substantial numbers in manufacturing – particularly in jute and textiles - in early part of this century. Today there are few women left in Jute manufacture, once the largest employer of female labor (Standing 1991).

gender inequality. The following quote from a 51-year-old development consultant clearly proves these correlations:

**“From my experience, be it upper middle class or middle class or any segment for that matter, I find that the most important thing to be economically independent.....women whenever they go through a marital problem, they have to stay in a bad marriage just for the money and shelter. Most of them have no where else to go but back to the parental home where they are not welcome, because with Indian parents – their responsibility tends to be over once the daughter is married off, both emotionally and financially. If you (the women’s parents) cut the emotional chord by thinking “*okay my job is done!*” (because now she is married), and also financially because I have invested so much in the daughter’s marriage (wedding), so I will not invest in my daughter anymore.” (9) Int. # 4**

However, I noted a slightly stronger emphasis on the importance of economic empowerment than the relative opportunities for education. As is apparent from the following quotes, many women insinuated that some type of vocational training may come in handier for self-reliance than formal school education for oppressed women:

**“They need to be more and more economic independence, even if not very educated they should have at least some sort of skill to be self-reliant.” (5) Int. # 5**

**“When she is economically self-reliant she earns self-respect and she earns respect back from the family and society. They can have vocational training for this, not only have (academic) education. We are helping them do this through other organizations to provide non-formal educational classes or vocational training, since my organization specifically looks after educations (academic) needs only.” (5) Int. # 6.**

**“..... I would say the opportunity for earning a little extra income; it’s not economic independence but at least I would say some economic support..... Now very recently, the government in the Department of Central Pollution Control Board, they are trying to teach women to make paper bags to replace plastics. So get that (training) there so that they (the women) can have a little income; and the ladies are very interested and excited about it.” (6) Int. # 8.**

As I alluded earlier, I often found the women, perhaps quite subconsciously, relating the situation of oppressed women they help through their NGOs with their own situations in life. I would like to draw the attention of the reader to such indications,



however subtle, in the sudden change of the use of third person to first person pronouns in the following quote (as in many other quotes too).

**“The economic handicap is a problem. Women earn less and in the family property they have very little share, so they have very little powers to take any decisions about themselves. If we had more economic clout then we would have more power.”**  
(5) Int. # 10.

A final critical issue that deserved attention with the above theme revolves around the subject of cultural attitude toward women. A twenty five plus years old Case Worker put an interesting twist in the popular consensus about the need for education and economic independence for women’s empowerment. On a more exploratory note, she dismissed both these sub themes as the important resolutions for women’s empowerment. In the ultimate analysis, she said she was quite disillusioned with both of the above and instead suggested that a cultural and attitudinal change is required in terms of rights and treatment toward Indian women. I also think her quote tersely captures the general sense of personal uncertainty and social ambiguity that women in urban India are experiencing at a time of major socio-economic, political transformations and redefinitions of gender roles. She said very poignantly:

**“One thing that people think is that women now have got a lot of freedom.... but that (freedom) is my right (not a privilege), I *must* have my freedom! But in reality not much has changed in spite of women’s education and economic independence. At some point....it stops! For instance, one educated girl got married recently and was tortured (by her in-laws) to the point of committing suicide. So how does education or economic independence help her in the end? We have poor women as well as women from rich backgrounds who come to take shelter (at our NGO), so after all which formula really works? This is a pressing issue to me. In terms of rights and treatment, there has to be a cultural and attitudinal change (toward women).....it is required. I notice that if women face some trouble from their in-laws, then they return to their own parents. But their parents also treat them like a burden just like their in-laws did. Where will they go then? There is confusion in this situation. Sometimes I wonder if the previous generation was a better deal for women.”**  
(2) Int. # 21.

From the above discussion with her, this general sense of uncertainty about urban Indian women's new role and sphere became more clear and real to me; however, I was quickly reminded of the other end of the spectrum having recalled the gender role expectations of the other women in the NGO sector whom I had interviewed. I cite from the interview with a 60-year-old President of an NGO, who had complained to me about today's young women with no "proper values". She had said:

**"I want the girls to have proper values in life. The value-system is getting really.....(bad) they are not learning to respect the seniors and to hold responsibility. I find that young girls today desperate to show off physically..... being influenced by films (movies) and all these things. That is not bad if they want to show off their beauty, but if that is the only thing they are conscious of, then that is harmful for the society."**

**(5) Int. # 6.**

Interestingly, though it was generally the consensus among the volunteers and activists at the NGOs that liberation of India women was important to the functioning of the modern Indian nation within the global order, there seemed to be a tension evident in the discussions. Although many of them seemed ready to embrace change in women's roles, there were also many concerns with maintaining customs and traditions and conserving Indian womanhood.<sup>22</sup>

Coinciding with the above concerns, I traced Globalization Vs Tradition as another sub theme in the interviews. Although, not all women looked at such macro processes at work, yet they made allusions to the pressures of globalization and the economic restructuring that is effecting women's lives and livelihood. Though

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<sup>22</sup> To me, this notion of Indian womanhood is reminiscent of the declaration on resolving the unequal status of woman in a document released by the Indian National Congress' National Planning Committee after the independence from the British in 1947: "it is not our desire to belittle in any way these traditions, which have in the past contributed to the happiness and progress of the individual and have been means of raising the dignity and beauty of Indian womanhood and conserving the spiritual attributes of the Indian Nation." (WRPE 1947:32-3).

globalization is creating new opportunities for women – new paid jobs, for example, where none existed before – these are appearing in conjunction with deepening economic and social crises brought about by the logic of globalized capitalism (Rai 2002). A developmental consultant from an upper class background was herself critical about the upper classes' apathy towards NGO work, which she blamed on the recent trend in consumerism, which according to her is a kind of social crises. She commented:

**“For the upper middle class, priorities are very different. As you know we are going through this transition (globalization) in (urban) India, which is a strictly consumerist society; people are so caught up with their own materialistic needs and ethos, that they are not very responsive to where and what kind of work that is being done by the developmental sector.” (7) Int. # 4.**

A 56-year-old teacher at an NGO regretted the rise in cost, especially in the field of education which is affecting women's chances for getting an education in a society where only the males are privileged. She remarked:

**“As it is they (parents in India) don't spend much on girl children's education, moreover, now with liberalization and globalization many colleges have increased their fees even though they may be less compared to other countries, so particularly after finishing school, many (women) don't have money to go to college.” Int. # 10.**

A 27-year-old NGO Program Officer expressed her apprehension about the new, yet questionable, opportunities and ideas of freedom for women that are creating some amount of confusion and vulnerability among women with regard to their new roles and responsibilities. She opined:

**“Even though we say that Indian women today are very educated, very aware and they have a lot of freedom today, but I feel that somewhere they are in a more vulnerable situation. Suppose the girl gets to go to a nightclub or a disco and comes back really late at night and that's fine but somehow she has to know how do I protect herself (from social crimes against women like date rapes etc), they have no idea about that. That makes a girl very vulnerable. So there is opportunity (for freedom or choice) but they are not equipped to deal with it. The girl doesn't know how to deal with the situation, whom to choose or not to choose, so the decision**

**making ability does not exist, that has not been conditioned, it is very vague.” (5) Int. # 17.**

Similarly, another 38-year-old coordinator remarked about the social pressures created by the effects of capitalism on the global economy and its pressures on women as targets for selling consumer goods. She expressed her frustration over Indian women being caught up (and victimized) by consumer market philosophies. She explained the superficiality of women’s choices in contemporary India with a volatile political climate, with two explicit examples affecting women:

**“One is the pressure of communal (non-secular) sentiments. I don’t think we have to celebrate Valentine’s Day (a western custom popular in India since globalization) in order to establish our freedom, but when Shiv Sena (Hindu religious political party) is telling that these types of customs will take away from our own cultural traditions, then it is a misplaced fear, especially for Indian women (their choices are being taken away). Keeping this political climate in mind, the hoardings, media, television soaps send conflicting messages to young women..... Another thing is a challenge for the women’s movement; I support women’s right to choose what she wants to wear, I don’t think they have to wear a “*burqua*” (strict Islamic dress code for Muslim women). At the same time, I feel that though women should have the right to decide what they want to wear, they are being hijacked by capitalism (emerging trend as a result for liberalized economy and globalization). The advertisements portray women in jeans as well as in traditional Indian ladies garments, and pressure women as to what they should wear. Women can wear bikinis if they “want” to, but not because they “have” to due to media pressure of being modern or in vogue (effects of consumerism). To balance these choices are a challenge for Indian women. They have to dig deeper into the core of these apparent choices they face, and ask if they are really choices at all. I think these choices are being imposed indirectly by the market economy. The poor women also end up spending so much money on their clothes; sometimes I have noticed that people in semi-urban areas are buying color TVs or cell-phones when they don’t even have money to buy food! (4) Int. # 11**

Technology and globalization have resulted in a sharp increase in part-time work, as well as the informal sector of the labor market (Rai 2002). A 64-year-old activist/journalist, described to me the plight of women working in factories who are being forced to join the unorganized or informal sector. She explained:

**“it is the lack of job opportunities. You know because of globalization, the job market is shrinking for women because women are unskilled, not because there aren’t enough jobs. So women are moving out from the organized sector into the unorganized sector - urban women who worked in factories, doing menial jobs, assembling and that type of thing. I will give you one example then you will understand. When I was a member of Women’s Research Center, we once did a survey of five cotton textile mills to find out the number of women employed. We went to Garden Reach Kesoram Cotton Mills, we found that in 1954 there were more than five hundred women in one particular section and (as a result) it used to be called the “female mill” (*Maagi Kall* in Bengali) because women dominated that section. In 1961, the equal wages act was passed and then Maternity Benefit Act was passed. We found that women’s employment was shrinking, because as soon as the women retired, men were filling the vacancies. When new machinery was introduced the women were not given the training. It was the semi-skilled men who were converted into the skilled workers and given the jobs, which were originally for women. This is in the organized sector. So what do the women do to keep the home fire burning? They move into the unorganized sector.” (7) Int. # 7.**

In a related vein, she also seemed concerned about the general loss of respect and security that women in contemporary urban India were facing as a result of their changing roles and expanding spheres. Incidentally, she brought up an interesting, although disconcerting, fact by pointing out that men and women were now becoming competitors in the same market which can lead to unnecessary animosity and rivalry instead of cooperation and harmony. She said:

**“.....there is general lack of respect and (physical) security for women. Now more women are coming out (of the house) because one income is not enough with this cost of living.....you cannot put the hands of the clock behind. Women are trying to secure jobs, whatever is available, at least unmarried women are being economically independent and married women are trying to be financially more supportive. So what has happened is that they are on an equal par with men in the job market, theyre also competitors.... So now you can’t say to the men to protect women; we (women) are the bread earners, because we are also competing with men. So the sense of compassion for women is gone, now they’ve become rivals. So men think why treat them different.” (7) Int. # 7.**

Having discussed the major challenges and obstacles that were cited by the volunteers and activists in NGOs at Kolkata, I now briefly talk about a few other challenges which some women mentioned in their interviews. Though they are not

recurring themes in all the interviews, I think they are important testimonies nonetheless, especially for those interested in learning about the challenges of women in rural India (not urban only). Unfortunately, space does not permit me to do justice here to the impact of these obstacles that women endure; however, the following quotations will give us some idea about them. Consequently, women's health was a challenge that was mentioned by two women:

**“I would say the most pressing issue is health, very bad health at least in the areas that we work, semi-urban areas. General health is poor, there is a very high rate of maternal death at childbirth, even child mortality. But you will very surprised to hear, that when we started twenty years ago, the most demand that we had was primary education, now mostly all of them know how to read and write, so they want other things; mainly they want health clinics and some little extra occupation so that they can earn a little bit more (enhance their regular income, if any). 5” .**  
**“With health will go sanitation and environment, water supply etc. It really is important for women particularly because they are running the families and their household. 6”**

One woman mentioned about the problem of female infanticide, while another mentioned about the problem of child marriage in India:

**“Child marriage is still a problem here, they (young girls) have to accept bad (arrange) marriages.”**  
**(5) Int. # 9**

**“Women have been suffering for a long time. In modern India, when they are testing the fetus to check their sex (and terminate female fetus), then there is no chance for the women. If at birth, you are denied life because you are a girl, then beyond this there is no challenge (greater than female feticide).” (4) Int. # 15**

Other topics related to women's challenges in India referred to women's political power and legal rights, as is evident from the following quotes:

**“Thirdly, women are still not in decision-making positions politically; our population ratio is 1000 (men): 940 (women), but we are still fighting in the parliament for 33% reservation for seats for women. That has not yet passed. First of all, my question is why 33%, why not 50% and why all the women's political wings are accepting (content with) only 33%. After 56 years of Indian independence,**

**we still have very little access in the political situation. In our Panchayat system, there is a quota for women, and some women-pradhan (heads) but they are like puppets, the husband does everything but she is only signing the papers. So it is just superficial power. I have the position, then I should have the power, not my husband and the in-laws. Whatever they (in-laws) like, the woman has to abide.” (6) Int. # 16**

**“Actually one challenge is creating awareness related to legal rights of women with regard to their family life and marital life, because many of them have no knowledge about their legal rights on paternal property or husband’s property. For example, we mainly working in a Muslim area, where men often divorce their wives by just saying “Talaq” (divorce), so if they marry by registration then this cannot happen, there a legal proceeding is important. In Hindu women have other problems too in their marital rights.” (4) Int. # 19.**

Another factor that can impact career choices of women volunteers and activists is the image of the NGO as perceived by the masses. From the responses I gathered from the interviews, the image of NGOs seems both favorable and not favorable in Kolkata. More importantly, lack of awareness about the role of NGOs creates confusion in the mind of common people as to what purpose NGOs really serve in society.

It has been gathered from previous research that society sees women’s social work and volunteerism as a ‘traditional’ role for women – usually substituting for paid work (Metzendorf 1992). Many of the upper class women have found a life-time occupation in volunteering and activism for women’s development and empowerment, but there are some associated problems. This creates ambivalence in the volunteers’ awareness of negative stereotypes about sociability of work and highlights the lack of significance generally accorded to this form of invisible labor that women perform (Daniels 1985).

Ironically, some of the middle and upper class women I interviewed expressed their dismay at the reaction of the upper classes of society toward their work for women’s

development. One member of the Board of Trustees of an NGO said about the reaction of the upper classes:

**“....there are people, I am sorry to say particularly people of our class, who are not at all appreciative. There is a saying in Bengali “*Ghorer khye boner mosh taariya berracchu*” (proverb) meaning that you spend your money to tend to other people’s flocks. They wonder why we do it.” (4) Int. # 8.**

**“There is a saying (proverb) in Bengali “*Ghorer Kheye Boner Mosh tarano*” which means that you spend your money to tend to other people’s flocks These issues are other’s issues, this is not your concern - this is what they think. They think I have a big heart so I am helping others, they are respectful and think I am doing a very good thing for the others. But there are a few hostile people although I (personally) never faced any derogatory remarks. But in the academia, some enlightened groups say that “*Asholey meye raai to meye der shotru*” (in reality women are women’s enemies). Then they say sarcastically “*Kichu bolleyi to apanara hur-hur kore raastaye neme porben*” (if we say anything to you, then you women will immediately take to protesting in the streets). They say “*kichu to bouder sambande bola jaabena , aeyi jodi apanader boli ki bourao shashurider taarao aunek ottachar kore, sheta to aar bola jaabena*” (if we say that even the wives torture their mothers-in-law instead of vice versa, then you will not listen to us), and “*Shaami to noi, shob ashaami aamra*” (we are no longer husbands but to you we are just criminals), they are the so-called intelligent people who say all this..... but we don’t face any problems from the common man on the streets.” (4) Int.# 12.**

Moreover, critics are suspicious, skeptical, and sometimes outright hostile to NGOs because, from their perspective, the social processes that these organizations generate are reactionary in content, elitist in terms of the interest they represent, and insensitive to the real interests of the poor and dispossessed (Fernando and Heston 1997). As per the testimonies of some of women I interviewed, I detected that there seems to be some amount of ambiguity in the minds of the people as to developmental work and elite women’s traditional charity work. The following quotes express the frustrations the volunteers and activists endure as a result of this ambiguity:

**“Many of friends would say “Oh you are working for an NGO”, so they assume it is social work where you have nothing much to do because you come from well-to-do families and you are bored (you need to be occupied with something). Like in our**



**Mother's time, many women used to do charity work, you know. So there is no identifiable difference between charitable work and developmental work."**

**(8) Int. # 4.**

**"At a superficial level, there are two types of reactions that I have found – one is that they say that "Oh, she belongs to a higher economical background family, so she can afford to do this (type of) work, she just wastes away her time." (4) Int. # 5.**

Again, because NGOs are dependent upon soft money, they must develop the fixed organizational structures, professional staff, and fiscal accountability necessary to be entrusted with major grants by funding agencies. Their agendas must be narrowly focused and presented in terms of realizable goals and objectives in order to demonstrate their efficacy. In some circumstances, the competition among NGOs for funds hinder strategic coalition building, placing NGOs in the uncomfortable position of being financially dependent upon institutions and organizations that pure political principles would lead them to confront. The following quote addresses and validates the above concerns:

**"I mentioned the word "professional" several times because women's NGOs...and I have faced this \_\_\_\_\_ that because this whole perspective of women's NGOs being just do-gooders and wellfarists with no conception of what "development" is. These are the catchwords that catch us unawares and we get marginalized..... There is a great disquiet and sadness when I think about our evolution as an NGO. It is so competitive (between NGOs)...They are becoming so commercialized that they feel the need to put down any NGOs which is trying to do some work (in the same field). I didn't want competition....I don't want anybody's turf."(14) Int.# 1.**

It also came to my attention that there is a credibility and legitimacy issue that is liable for tarnishing the image of NGOs in Kolkata. A few women addressed the issue quite directly referring to past scandals with some NGOs, which still haunts its image:

**"It's a mixed reaction. Many people don't understand. Indian society at some point of time can be very callous. ....Again may be not all the people, but some are not even aware of it. And NGOs, I am sorry to say, have carved a very bad image for**

**themselves. Whenever they think of work done by an NGO, they think it is a scam, like getting money from a foreign donor agency and misusing it. That is the general image of an NGO that most people in this country have. I am not trying to be judgmental, but that's the image they have in their minds without going into much details.” (7) Int. # 4.**

**“I think there are two sides to it – one there is a general perception of NGO workers and NGOs; one set of people who believe that NGOs are there to make money from grants and they actually don't do anything (worthwhile). The other section will say that it's a low paying job.” (3) Int. # 18.**

Although exception was taken by some development workers to characterizing development as an industry, Weisgrau (1997:16) notes that there are institutionalized NGOs and professional careers to be made from development work. However, there is a related problem as mentioned by the woman in the above quote - the pay-scales in the non-profit sector are not known for being well-paying jobs; many people are led to think that they do not get appropriately compensated for the amount of time and effort they invest in developmental work. Moreover, many people tend to devalue the work that these women do because it does not generate much income for their families, hence it is not a career that is much sought after.

**“....it is somewhat appreciated but not completely....the monetary aspect of it. You know, let's face it in the present society around the world if you don't earn too much, then your work is not seen as important.” Int. # 10**

**“My friends in the NGO sector appreciate as well, but the general publics do not have a very comprehension of what is an NGO, I have to explain to them what it is that I exactly do. But there is a trend of general profession such becoming a doctor, engineer, lecturer or teaching in school is all that they are aware of. Only educated people are aware of the work women do in the NGO sector, but unfortunately not all are so well educated. They do not have an idea about the fact that you can earn or make a living by working in an NGO. I am the first in my family to work in the NGO sector, so even my educated family does not know much about my work. Another problem is the fact that some NGOs have had a bad reputation because they misused the funding they got from the community. Therefore, people have had a bad impression about NGO work as a result of this bad experience, which has added to this misconception.” (2) Int. # 20.**

Nevertheless, on a more positive note, the image of the NGOs in the Indian civil society is gradually changing, with the quickening pace of economic liberalization and India's increased openness to the world economy, there is a substantial increase in the amount of money available to NGOs from international bilateral and multilateral aid sources and, at the same time, less state regulation and intervention. This means that there now exists the possibility of resource-rich NGOs that can offer resistance to state establishments and excessive governmental supervision. The increasing presence of NGOs may also help create an alternative political culture, one that perhaps will offer more space for a diversity of interests and voices (Ray 2000). I quote from an interview where the response was favorable; here my respondent talked about the changing image and reputation of the NGOs among the masses:

**“Now it is very fashionable, everybody becomes a social worker since Mother Teresa has given a different image to social work, it wasn't there when I started. In fact, I was told not to talk about my social work at parties and things (laughs). People got bored.....NGOs have more recognition today than ever before, they are looked upon as those who will implement changes for the better, on the one hand.....When we started we were just seen as “do-gooders” although we were quite professional in our work but we were seen as welfarist women who have nothing better to do with a lot of time in hand, lazy rich men's wives – that sort of image. But that has changed. I think Indira Gandhi (in the 1970s) had a lot to do with it, being a woman Prime Minister of India for the first time. She also sent word all around to make a list of women's NGOs and they did a survey and made a report to help us. I know this certainly happened in West Bengal at least. We related to the government at various levels from time to time, and our (NGO) status has changed (for the better). ....NGOs are going up and up and the sky is the limit; some NGOs have huge constructions, buildings, visibility.....you name it....and the numbers are growing.” (13) Int. # 1.**

I gathered from another interview that not only are the masses relatively more appreciative of NGO work, but also women who work for the NGOs themselves are. One famous 65-year-old social worker from a renowned political family in Kolkata said she was pleased with the fact that even though they are able to pay only very low salaries to

the women who work for their NGO, the women have continued to work for them because they respect the cause behind the projects and also earn respectability from society.

**“Actually they (only) have a space to live in and quite a meager salary (from us), but they don’t want to go (leave us) because they feel they have become a part of the whole project and they also feel happy (about it). They get a particular respectability in their level of society, which is very nice to hear (in Bengali) “*Apnara okhane kaaj koren, apanara khub bhalo kaaj koren*”. (Translation: Oh, you work for that NGO; you are certainly doing good work for society).”**  
**(6) Int. # 65**

However, another 26-year-old Project Manager was more realistic in her response; she said the response of the people toward NGOs depended on the success of each project.

**“They have a lot of appreciation for this work..... In the field, the reaction differs from project to project. They were skeptical about the anemia control project, the reproductive child health project, for using contraceptive for HIV Aids. At first they are a little shaky and afraid but if we can break that and convince them more or less, that we have come really to throw light on certain things they don’t know through our awareness campaigns and community mobilization. We get a lot of positive feedback from the women; they come up on their own, they talk about their feelings and sentiments and what they want.” Int. # 13.**

I noted that there continues to be a serious urgency about awareness generation and building a positive image of the NGOs in Kolkata, regardless of how well-funded and proactive they are in the field of social development. Some NGO women were careful not to unintentionally erode the support base that they have created over the years.

This 40-year-old also talked about utilizing the media for awareness generation:

**“We have to mobilize the civil society. Today, we are organizing the mobile poster exhibition. For mass mobilization, we organize street theaters and hoardings. They don’t doubt our work (as mere hype), because we kept a low profile, initially I refused the press even, I didn’t take any press publicity (because) I think it will hamper the work. Now I use the media for campaigning for the issues, and not allow them to disclose the names etc. But if they (general people) know about (NGO), they**

**appreciate. After media publications, and TV programs (on this NGO) I used to get a lot many phone calls of appreciation.” (5) Int. # 9.**

Speaking of awareness generation, though the situation is rapidly changing - I learnt from these women that one of the main impediments is the general lack of knowledge and understanding of NGO work among the public. Worse, due to this lack of awareness, this career seems to remain suspect and open to speculation among people not in the developmental sector. Moreover, since the non-profit sector is not known for well-paying jobs, many people devalue or fail to recognize the work that these women do. The following quotes make this point clear, although the women I interviewed generally remained optimistic that the situation will change for the better:

**“They (people) think it’s all a very big joke! Three-fourth of men and women in the upper class in this country think that it’s a very big joke. But then for feminism the biggest capital is optimism (smiles).” (6) Int. # 7**

**“Most people in general are not aware of what an NGO is and what type of work they do in women’s development. Middle class people, they think we are doing useless work....may be because it doesn’t generate good income in these jobs.” (4) Int. # 14.**

**“Sometimes they (people) don’t know what an NGO, they are like “What’s that?” They are still not aware, so I have to explain to them the entire thing. But once I do, they say it’s really good work because I am doing good charity. But then I tell them that I am not doing any charity; I have to really break through these images (stereotypes). Sometimes they say its really very good work just for the heck of it, without really understanding our work. Sometimes they are really skeptical about the work because “Oh we visit the red-light areas” (taboo areas). Last year when I got married, they thought “oh good the *bahu* (new bride) works with an NGO, but (suspect) what kind of work does she really do in the red light areas?” They kept asking my mother-in-law if they are still going to allow me to work in the red-light areas as an NGO worker.” (4) Int. # 17.**

**“Many people ask me ‘what is an NGO?’; (when I tell them) non-governmental organization, they tell me that any private organization can also be non-governmental? (So they are confused about other private organizations and NGOs). I heard (faced) these types of questions, but now I think the NGO movement has been highlighted in the press, so people understand what is an NGO (better than**

**before). Now they ask what kind NGO are you working in, for whom do you work (projects)?” Int.# 11.**

In the next chapter I will discuss the fourth and fifth broader themes which deals with the women volunteers’ and activists’ motivations and satisfaction levels from their work. Please see Figure 4.0 and 5.0 for my definitions of the sub themes.

## CHAPTER VI

### **Work Satisfaction and Conceptions of Feminism**

The previous chapter analyzed and interpreted the emerging narrative themes of the everyday lived experiences of urban and educated women from middle and upper classes of the Indian civil society, based on their testimonies in *'their own words'*. These three emerging narrative themes were:

1. NGO work as Career;
2. Domestic Obligations;
- 3 Social Challenges/Obstacles for Women;

The two remaining themes, Motivation and Satisfaction from NGO work And their conception of feminism, remains to be discussed. All of these themes seem inherently interwoven and share the complexities of the challenges that women volunteers and activists face in their lived experiences at NGOs. The final chapter will offer analysis and discussion of the emerging themes and the aims and implications for this study.

**Figure 4.0 Theme Four – Motivation & Satisfaction from NGO Work**

<b>4. MOTIVATION AND SATISFACTION FROM NGO WORK</b>
<b>4.1 Reasons for Pursuing NGO Career</b> – Personal reasons (life experiences and cultural biographies) cited by participants.
<b>4.2 Women’s Issues</b> – Participants interest in women’s social problems and desire to contribute towards women’s empowerment and equality in India.
<b>4.3 Personality</b> – Personal inclinations, ethical and philosophical aspirations in relation to social welfare and women’s subordinate position in society.
<b>4.4 APPRECIATION FROM OTHERS</b>
<b>4.4.1 Family</b> - Reaction towards women volunteerism and activism with NGOs
<b>4.4.2 Friends</b> – Reaction from friends and colleagues for the participants’ work with NGOs
<b>4.4.3 Employers / Beneficiaries</b> – Reaction from employees at NGO and oppressed women who are helped by the participants.
<b>4.5 ELIMINATE WOMEN’S PROBLEMS?</b> Participants’ confessions and beliefs as to whether their work through the NGOs is really helping oppressed women and making a positive difference in their lives.

***Discussion of the Interviews***

***“I do feel that we here in India, particularly women in India who have had the good life, at least a life much better than the average woman, we have some responsibility to give something back to our society and I do feel that we should be doing something (about it).” (2) Int. # 8***

Plemper (1996) asserts that it has been generally observed that participation of women in community activism or volunteer work, especially through NGOs, far outnumber participation of men. It became necessary for me to find out from these women why they choose a career with women’s NGOs in the non-profit sector, in spite of the social, cultural and organizational challenges they face. I noticed that their responses regarding their drive to work in NGOs at Kolkata had mainly to do with their personal experiences and cultural biographies, their personalities and concern for women’s social



problems. From the following quotes, I demonstrate how their rich descriptions of life experiences act as a significant source of knowledge from “outsiders within” the academy (Collins 1991:53).

These quotes also reveal how women break the artificial boundaries between personal, social, political and cultural realities affecting their lives, which coincide with the epistemological and methodological commitments that guide feminist standpoint research.

To start with, I asked a well-known social activist about what motivated her to start an NGO against the oppression of women in West Bengal. She narrated to me the very compelling local history of the time and gripping political backdrop which prompted her to activism:

**“....we have our own women’s group called *[NGO]*, which is totally non-governmental and non-funded. We are all really volunteers, we are not donor driven....we founded this in 1983. It was an interesting thing (that happened) because in 1983, one leftist (communist) political minded group of women, not CPM (Communist Party- Marxist) or CPI (Communist Party of India) but you can say Naxalites<sup>23</sup>, they formed a women’s unit called “*Progotoshil Mahila Samiti*”(PMS) or Progressive Women’s Committee. At that time, there was a case of (women’s) torture in police custody. These women had been arrested in 1974 suspected to be Naxalites; for twenty seven days they were tortured under police custody violating all norms and put in jail. One of the women became crippled due to police torture. The police officer, who was responsible for this, was equally brew-eyed with the new communist government. You see these women were given amnesty (by the Communist government of West Bengal) once the Congress government fell from power at the center in 1977. They all came out, but she filed a case against this police officer, and we took up campaigning for her. But in our forum we had a very close CPM (Communist Party – Marxist) group, and they were not comfortable with this. They were all supporters of the major government partner CPM, they did not like our anti-government and anti-establishment tone.....In the early eighties,**

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<sup>23</sup> After Indian Independence, as the Congress government increasingly failed to deliver on its programs of social and economic developments, the Indian state faced it’s first major crisis in the late sixties, exemplified by the Naxalite upsurge (1967-72); and it was to have a tremendous impact on future of Bengal politics. The Naxalite analysis of the Indian economy claimed that it was still semi-feudal and semi-colonial. It was also a product of rank-and-file discontent within the CPI (M) state government, worldwide radicalization of youth, and the image of China as the revolutionary center of the world (Vanaik 1990:182).

there were a lot of wife burnings or dowry deaths and other types of violence (against women). Their office was situated in Chetla (a locality in Kolkata) and they were working with slum women. They had a good mobilization of slum women. In one of the lower-middle class houses one newly married wife died; it was a dowry death. This sparked off a lot of resentment; PMS had a public demonstration where they called for a boycott of the (slain woman's) husband's family grocery shop. It was very effective. Then they invited other small groups which were also non-funded, to join them for a show of strength (unity) and it turned out to be very successful. Then PMS send fillers to the groups who worked with them, to work on a more permanent nature (basis). So we formed this network called [NGO]..... Our campaigns were mainly against torture in police custody and another nasty tradition started by the (former) British government of putting stray (homeless Indian) women into jails for safe-custody. One girl was put in jail when she was eight years old and even when she was fifteen, she had been in jail without being produced even once in the court. And who else were jailed for safe custody? They were the rape victims; the rapists were roaming around free on bail, and the rape victims were in jail (laughs). One such rape victim somehow managed to get connected with a lawyer. When he came to know that she had been there for four years, he found out that her gang rape case had been dismissed because she could not show enough bruises on her body to the judge to show that she had tried to resist. The judge therefore had said it was a mutual intercourse. The four rapists were free and she was rotting in jail. She came from the outskirts of Burdwan (a city in West Bengal), and her father was too poor to pay greed (bribe the authorities in a corrupted system) money to find out her whereabouts. When this lawyer took up her case, the judge was naturally shocked to hear this and he ordered immediate release of that girl. She had gone to jail when she was fourteen (as a minor), but now that she was eighteen, you cannot keep a major (eighteen and above) in jail if she has not committed any crime. She told (announced) there were seventy-eight similar cases in the jail!! So we took up that campaign as well in a very big way. It was an effective campaign in the sense that it got all India attention. The government was forced to take notice, although they refused to meet with us. But after that campaign, the government was less callous, since they knew that people were keeping tabs. All these campaigns created problems with some groups who I am not naming, but they split up from us. Only those who wanted to stay back are still with us, including a lot of individuals (not groups necessarily). The other organization which I used to belong to is called "Women's Research Center"; they decided not to join the forum because the director thought that [NGO] was too activist-oriented. But I decided to continue to be part of the forum as an individual (regardless). I am no longer related with the Women's Research Center." (4) Int. # 7.

As we know from literature, the first big joint struggles centered on anti-rape and anti-dowry issues, but slowly their scope enlarged to include the macro-policies of the government from a gender viewpoint (Purkayastha and Subramaniam 2004). Another

testimony from one of the founder members of an NGO in Kolkata, seem to echo some of the same atrocities against women that led to the formation of the previous NGO we just discussed. She told me:

**“I am a founder member of this organization.....well, when [NGO] was formed, one of the founder members was a friend of ours, she came and asked me if I would like to be part of this organization and I said “yes I would”. They had a meeting and a huge seminar, from that seminar we came to know of a distressing rape case where a girl was dragged into a police–*thana* (department) by two policemen and raped.....the policemen were acquitted because they said this girl was a promiscuous person..... so she went on her own. There was a huge hue and cry (about this) and many women’s organizations took up this problem. [NGO] was their in that seminar (and) I too was there.” (4) Int. # 2.**

Two of the older social activists referred to their experiences during the time of the Indian Independence movement as their inspiration for social work and activism. The next two quotes describe their journey to the NGOs in the contemporary Indian civil society as per the following:

**“We were born at a time when so many things were happening, it was the end of the second world war, (historical but infamous) division and partition of Bengal (by the former British colonizers) and there were lots of work to be done (Indian nationalist movement), so we were closely associated with the AIWC (All India Women’s Congress); they knew our family and we used to work for them. For the social service (trait) which I got in myself, I am really grateful to those women with whom I got associated at that time in 1943-46. Those were the golden years for my life because we learnt a lot from the partition (of India) and the humiliation that the people faced. I always feel that while I have been here [NGO] I feel I am a totally different person from all the people. From 1958 to 1973, I was drifting from one business to another. But I was a member of NCWI (National Council of Women in India) and associated with social work, but I landed up here [NGO] most unfortunately I think. I am attached to the children but otherwise no (I wouldn’t have been here).” (3) Int. # 15.**

**“I was born in a very political family. My (famous) parents and others in the family were very active in the national struggle (Indian Independence), going in and out of jail. So my vision also more or less was to become an activist in their line. But by the time I had finished my studies and grown up, we had our Independence (from the British). So naturally our outside work..... outside family or my curriculum work became sort of (shifted)\_\_\_ from a political activist, I would say I turned a social**

**activist (instead). You see political activism has changed its color. I mean unless you are of course a political activist of a primary kind, that is you are into elections all the time and you become part of the government, everybody I am sure has some political leanings and some political fate, and being from a political family, I also have it. But I think in this case, both can go together because I am not really that type of a political activist. I quite comfortable with my social work, more comfortable I would say. Well of course, we may not be feeling it everyday but we do feel that with this little work that we are doing, we women of our class are definitely being useful to our society. And also there is a lot of satisfaction.” (3) Int. # 8.**

Other women mentioned personal traits that ultimately led them to consider the career of a volunteer and activist. These innate traits included social convictions and compassion, sense of ethics and justice that have shaped their altruistic personalities. The following quotes allude to some of the various types of traits that they talked about:

**“There is such a crying need I guess; the distress level is so high amongst women..... But I seem to interact with people in a more empathetic way than I ever imagined I would. May be its number of years or experience or whatever it is.....It was also a gut-level reaction to what was wrong with the system.....Compassionate of course. Also, in general I tend to almost instinctively stand up for the under-dog where ever. If it’s a women’s issue, it’s just simply that why it should be.” (4) Int. # 3.**

**“I want to live meaningfully, it’s a meaningful life otherwise it is of no use to live like others. I don’t like living like the others (regular people’s lifestyle). I am doing this for someone else..... If I am not there by the side of these girls, they won’t get justice, they are denied their basic rights. So whatever time I devote for them means a better living for someone, for someone’s survival, for someone’s protection, for someone’s development. That is my motivation..... it is very fulfilling that much I can (definitely) say because I’ve always been interested in women’s welfare, women’s empowerment, women’s emancipation....I always give preference to girl children, that is my [NGO] work; they are the brothel area children. We started with brothel area children, but now we have extended to other right-based programs, such as Rights of the Girl Child and their Violation, Issues like Child Sexual Abuse, and Child-Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation. There are boys too in child trafficking, so if you don’t deal with the boys too, then you cannot do justice to the issue.” (4) Int. # 9.**

**“See this was always in my mind that I will do something for society or for the community. Even in my student life I was involved in student politics. So it was there but not in such a structured way because at that time I was not matured**

**enough. But there was something that I wanted to do for society from my childhood.... Another thing is I am in this profession by choice; something has always driven me to this. I have a passion for this work.” (3) Int. # 11.**

**“This is my life.....it gives my life some meaning....Now I am happy that I am working with women’s issues. Yes, I am satisfied with my work. As you know, this type of work was not available in my time (youth) and people did not even think in the feminist way, it was totally like out of the planet in this part of the world. What I am doing is very important and I feel I am making a difference.” (3) Int. # 10.**

**“In this part (aspect) of the life there is no (conventional) success; I don’t see what I am getting out of doing this work by putting in my efforts for the human being. Whatever little time I have throughout the day I will spend for them, the most distressed human beings – these children and women - whatever age they may be.” (3) Int. # 15.**

**“The field is always so interesting; social sector work gives you some much dimension, and so much experience everyday. I am motivated to work here because I get experience and exposure, it’s the kind of work that I do, and it’s the kind of contribution I make everyday to society or to my work as a human being, even in little bits.” (3) Int. # 13.**

Another frequent reason, especially cited by the women in their twenties, was the fact that these women had an educational background in the liberal arts or social sciences and were familiar with the Indian women’s movement and / or women’s social problems:

**“First of all, I feel for the subject of violence against women. And working with women particularly you learn a lot, this is where my fight has become our fight; I had read about it but in this organization I realized how the women’s movement has actually taken off. And I have become part of the women’s movement..... As I was studying for my Masters, I became aware of women’s issues particularly. I took up a dissertation on women’s issues and my interest group was in the NGO field.....Working with [NGO] has been an eye-opener. It opened up doors for me because I went to a number of gender-training workshops, and my perceptions actually were clearer then. You had certain images and thoughts when you are studying theories, and I was introduced to theoretical concepts; a certain part of it is already there in you because in your life time you have done certain things when you read it then you find “feminism” and think this is probably what the women’s movement talks about. But working with [NGO], I got to identify a lot of things practically of what I studied before.” (3) Int. #18.**

**“My dissertation was on problems of working women in the suburbs, and the emphasis was on school teachers, who had at least one child at home...Actually, I wanted to be in a welfare related organization, either an NGO or INGO. My masters in Human Development helped me learn that what a human needs, being part of the third world country I know most people don’t get what they need, so I like to work for them, with financial support from any big organization. I have an interest in women’s development as a person; it’s a personal choice. I had interest in Psychology, so I did Human Development for my Bachelors and Masters.”**  
**(2) Int. # 19.**

Interestingly, I found that one of the activists made a direct link with Western (American) feminists; in fact, she had personal friends in the women’s movement in the U.S who inspired her to embark on a career of feminist scholarship in addition to activism:

**“Since I was interested in women’s work, I joined an association which I thought would give me scope to do this kind of volunteer work .....But it was true that I did meet a remarkable lady there - Barbara Good - she was at that time the program officer of the USIS (American Center) and she was at the helm of the feminist movement at the United States; she had worked with one of the units which worked for better conditions of working women in consular postings. There was a lot of discrimination against women, so she fought for them. She worked with Gloria Steinem and others. Barbara and I hit it (off) very well. It was at Barbara’s initiation that I went to a seminar in Hyderabad for Feminism in West Bengal and the United States for the average women. I did that paper in 1982. At that time, there were one or two women’s groups formed in Kolkata, so I met them. They said “Yes we will give you the information you want, but you must join us.”** (5) Int. # 7.

In a few instances, they related their motivation to specific personal life experiences / moments of epiphany, so to speak, which had left indelible marks in their psyche and led them to work in the NGOs as volunteers and activists.

**“I started thinking about all this.....I think ideas must come to your brain-level first. Questions came to my mind since my early childhood when I was admitted to school and my mother was denied the right to put her name in the school admission application as my guardian in the 1950s and 1960s. I started questioning as to why my mother is denied of that recognition, when she has done so many things for her children..... My hope is that when so many women who are distressed, get relief from our support, they stand on their own feet. If I can protest, I can change. If the protesting voices are finished, then all the nationalist (separatist) forces and**

**perpetrators will get the empty field to do what they like. At least I can protest, if we can sustain the protesting tendency by one booklet, one leaflet, one street corner, one article in the newspaper, then still there is some protesting voice; and then the government or perpetrator will know it's not all their field (no free reign). If there is a protesting tendency, channel, organization or forum, then in future whoever wants to join, they will join, otherwise there is no where to go. Actually, in [NGO], the membership has gone down. Again we see all of a sudden some young women are joining this organization, even if not many but there are some. There is no money here, they have to give time and money, but people are still coming.<sup>3</sup>**  
” Int. # 12.

**“My motivation was to do something.....but as a person I have expanded beyond my imagination – I could never think that doing this kind of volunteer work would be so emotionally fulfilling and satisfying. I think it was that which has made me improve as a human being. I learnt to relate with people better, till then I was a little snooty about women because (other) women were not intelligent and they were only interested in the kitchen, so I related much better with men. But I soon came out of that “honorary men syndrome” and I started relating with women much better and feeling comfortable with them, and realizing their plight as to why their horizons were limited. It gives your personality a different texture.” Int. # 7.**

**“I can relate to them and understand the pain (because of the trauma I personally endured from a broken relationship), so I accepted the job from my heart, I fit myself in their position (shoes) in terms of the mental and physical violence.....I always wanted some social change, because of the atmosphere I saw in my family..... and I did not like that my sisters were married off so early in life and got involved in family (household) life.” (4) Int. # 16.**

Another motivating factor I had assumed would have an effect on the career choices of these women would have to be the appreciation that they get from their families, friends, colleagues, employees and the women they help. Of course, from my past experiences and general interaction with NGO workers and beneficiaries, I did not think that these women volunteers got encouragement and appreciation from everyone they encountered. Nevertheless, I was curious to find out from them how they dealt with the subject of appreciation. Not surprisingly, I found from the interviews that although there was some support for their work, many did not receive any appreciation at all. Along with the problem of working women and the double shift, there was also a lack of

awareness regarding NGO work among the general public, or simply because these women were victims of being stereotyped as feminists with an anti-male agenda or rich women who have no other work to do. Then, there is the issue of low pay-scales (or no pay at all) in the non-profit sector – all of which add up to some unfavorable reactions and devaluation of the work that these women engage in.

**“About being appreciated, for me it’s a very tricky situation because I actually joined the NGO field against the wishes of everyone at home. So obviously no one is happy! The general feeling is ‘what are you doing (with your career)?’” (3) Int. # 18.**

**“Beneficiaries... they value me as a one on one person but I don’t think that we have been successful every time in terms of cutting through the red tape in the law and help them with their major hassles....There are people in Advertising (her previous profession) who have a healthy respect for this work (that I do) in one sense, but they don’t enter this (field) because there is no money in it. In any case, they’ve always thought of me as part of a lunatic trend! (6) Int. # 3.**

However, I did notice a trend towards more acceptance of this type of a career by the people who come in contact with the activists and volunteers, especially with increasing media exposure.

**“Beneficiaries..... some of the members (volunteers) who joined were in appreciation of the work that we had done for their cousin, or their friend. But there were some women who we helped to go back to their in-laws and repair the rift, those women were taken back to their families in the condition that they should not have anything to do with women’s groups (laughs), and they have not kept in touch with us. With regard to Friends...they are also appreciative..... But in the NGO sector unfortunately, there is a lot of ego problems, lot of pettiness and rivalry. In fact, it’s worse than the corporate sector. So there you know, there is bound to be some skirmish....Family thinks this kind of work does not bring in any kind of rewards – monetary or any kind. Initially, my in-laws were not at all approving but now.....when I was always being quoted in the newspapers and was being interviewed and all that, then they started saying “oh, we are so proud of our daughter-in-law!!” *Maane Amader Bau!!* (in Bengali). Then they were very appreciative but I have remained a very odd person in our whole “[family name]” set up. My husband is worried because I have very bad health, I was born with a congenital heart and at that time there was no surgery so I had to grow up with that handicap. So he is always worried that (with) all this women’s work and all this militancy (laughs).....that’s his only concern otherwise he does not put his spanner in my work.” (6) Int. # 7.**



**“There was not much support in the in-laws house, where you have to do all the work before you go out of the house. I had to create space fighting here, and I am beginning to challenge the power of the men in the family, which is a harassment for them and very odd for them. Also women in the family, like my sisters-in-law are also very annoyed because they think I am behaving like a male. First thing in the morning, I like to read the newspaper like the other male members in the family; this is very odd for them to see me do. But days after day and a long sustained fight (from my side)..... and when recognition came from the newspapers and my writings appeared in *Ananda Bazaar Patrika*, which is a prestigious newspaper, then one after another in *The Telegraph*, *The Statesman* and people were inviting me to speak on television, then the family has begun to feel proud and in this way have begun to accept me.” (4) Int. # 12.**

**“I live in a joint-family, I have support but sometimes I don’t know if they actually understand my work or not, because it is not so-called “mainstream” work, like a schoolteacher or other office work. But I try to talk to them, communicate about it, you know gender and these things, they don’t understand...(but) when I talk to a radio (about my work), they will tell (announce) that to everyone (proudly), but I don’t think they understand the entire work.” Int. # 11.**

As an ex-NGO volunteer myself, I typically needed to be able to convince myself that my work through the NGOs had been helpful to those it was serving. At the end of every project that I would undertake, I would ask myself if I have been effective and successful in achieving the end goal – helping a woman better her life in some way, generate awareness about her human rights, raise her feminist consciousness and make her more self-reliant. Depending on how well and sincerely I could justify my work to myself; I would be either motivated or demotivated with my NGO endeavors. Likewise, I needed to find out from the women I was studying if they felt convinced that they were indeed helping to eliminate women’s social problems through their work.

Significantly, all but one woman I interviewed thought they were contributing to women’s empowerment and development, either directly or indirectly. Although most admitted that more needs to be done, from their testimonies I inferred that at the very

least they did try to make a difference in the lives of the women they work with; and more often than not women find self-actualization and self-empowerment through volunteering and activism (Metzendorf and Cnaan 1992). The following quotes confirm their motivation to work in the NGOs at Kolkata, regardless of the negative stereotypes of women's invisible volunteer work (Kaplan 1985).

**“Yes, of course we are trying to make the downtrodden girls economically independent, and also through the adult literacy center, through camps on legal awareness etc. Most women don't know what their legal rights are and where they really stand in society. That way I think I have tried to make some progress and it has got very good response.” (5) Int. # 6.**

**“Yes, definitely. Ours is a unique organization because we have children, young adults as well as old aged women. So quite a few women have worked here, they can pick and choose their area or department; these women have gained experience and then they have moved on to better jobs; and they're telling us about it because we know we don't pay them well....Yes, definitely – we are giving these women some training for skills so they can be self-reliant, and they have provision for immediate shelter. We have found out that many women, even from upper classes, they do not know where to go or where to turn to or run when they are battered inside the family. This is not a case only for poor women; even upper class women face this. Moreover, they are afraid of family prestige issues, so even if they are battered, they just keep mum. They are not able to complain about the father-in-law or the mother-in-law or husband for the same issues.” (5) Int. # 5.**

**“I am trying to. What I am doing is empowering the children to say “No” to sexual abuse. I am providing education, mainstreaming them, leadership training, skill developments, I am making some campaign programs that will impact them and give them confidence.....When the (rescued) trafficked girl is sent to her home by the police, the court is not willing to hand her over to her parents because her parents are not equipped to support or feed her. We take care of her, give her shelter and open a rehabilitation center and vocational training unit in that specific village, and take care of her education and medical needs, then it is very visible that we are valuable to them..... Through all the works, my main objective is to give them confidence. We have many centers in three districts and rural blocks. We are doing campaigns for advocacy program with the districts level authority; we are doing the training programs with the ‘*panchayati*’ (people's representative groups). We tell them they are your children, you are voting for the government; so you have every right and responsibility to protect the children, so give priority to this agenda. Indirectly also we are doing many programs like hoarding, street theaters and sensitizing the people, who will again talk to others about it. We are working with**

local clubs and other CBOs (community based organizations), and networking with them.” (5) Int. # 9.

“They (the women) use this organization as a platform to further their particular lives.....they can make their resumes look better as opposed to not having any job at all; that’s the only thing that I can offer them(7). Well a one on one doesn’t help, so I spend more time with other organizations although I am not directly able to help, but I don’t think I have been able to help positively at least I haven’t. We are only in a position for intervention. While we are trying to help individual cases but we are also interacting with people who are involved with this to solve this on a macro scale, like changing legislation, passing bills etc.” (8) Int. # 3.

“Yes, indirectly. They are working at community level; some years ago they would not be able to come out of their homes. Their fathers come and check out our offices before their daughters come and work, even women with Masters degrees. How will then they be allowed to go for tour elsewhere when needed? I tell the fathers what’s wrong, don’t you have any confidence in your daughters? They say it’s so dangerous out there, may get raped etc. But through our organization, we go straight to them women, get them out of their houses, train them up, give them a different image.” (17) Int. # 1.

“Yes we try, at every occasion we try.” (7) Int. # 7.

“Yes we are. May be it’s only a drop in the ocean but at least we are happy and content that we are able to do it for at least a very small section of the society.” (6) Int. # 8.

“See we try, but the forces that be are much more powerful than us. But still in our training programs we talk about all these issues.” (5) Int. # 11.

“In our work, there is very little scope to address these issues. But in our campaign programs, we make the parents aware of safe-migrations. When we talk about safe-migration and trafficking, ultimately we have to address the issue of education and decision-making position. We are also working very closely with the *Panchayats* (self-government) at the village levels, they can monitor the movements of the young girls. We have scope to address the issues of education, women’s decision-making power, active and independent political representation and so on. So even if not directly, we indirectly have the scope and opportunity.” (6) Int. # 16.

“As of now, I am working in a sponsored project where mother and children’s community development is the focus....being a woman , as human being, myself, I am able to do something for society, I can be an example to them (other women); they can see that women too can get educated like myself and be productive in society. Now they are getting some support from their husbands as well as their communities. The people in their communities are realizing that even women are

**able to do something worthy for the upliftment of our society. Our social workers at the grassroots levels are trying to involve these women in our social programs.”**

**(3) Int. # 20.**

**“I talk/ counsel to the women who come here for support and shelter. When I hear of their predicaments, we act as the facilitator to show them various options and I think we are doing a good job. But the level of satisfaction depends on them, at least they do feel that they will get some support from us. I feel enthusiastic that I am at least able to provide them some support.” Int. # 21.**

Having analyzed the interviews pertaining to my first research question, now I move on to analyze the data on the fifth broad theme – “Conception of Feminism” – in order to answer the second research question.

**Figure 5.0 Theme Five – Conception of Feminism**

<b>5. Conception of Feminism</b>
<b>5.1 DEFINITION _ PERSONAL</b>
<b>5.1.1 Previous Knowledge / Personal Knowledge</b> – Participants’ personal definitions of feminism as a theory; participants’ familiarity with feminism.
<b>5.1.2 Formal Training</b> – Participant has taken courses at Universities which teaches feminism, participant has training from gender awareness workshops.
<b>5.1.3 Mass’ Definition</b> – Participants’ observations on how people of India (the general public / mass) perceive feminism and react to feminists.
<b>5.2 IMAGE OF A FEMINIST</b>
<b>5.2.1 Favorable</b> – Participants’ observations on feminism being a positive influence toward gender equality and feminists being respected by people.
<b>5.2.2 Unfavorable</b> - Participants’ observations and comments on why there is a negative image of feminists (and feminism) among Indian audiences.
<b>5.3 SELF – IDENTIFIED FEMINIST</b>
<b>5.3.1 Yes</b> – Participants’ self-identifying themselves as feminists based on their personal understanding of feminism.
<b>5.3.2 No</b> – Participants’ rejecting the notion of being a feminist; inability to identify / relate with feminists.
<b>5.3.3 Not sure</b> – Participants’ reluctant to identify with feminists completely but unable to decide.
<b>5.3.4 Other</b> – Participants’ choosing to self-identify (label) themselves as someone other than a feminist.

*Discussion of Interviews*

***“I don’t know if I am a firebrand feminist or not but at the workshops I have learnt that what I believe in is indeed feminism, .....I have always thought in these lines, so I am more or less a feminist.” (4) Int. # 12.***

As regards the second research question, I had suspected that there was a considerable level of confusion with the concept of feminism among these women, even though much of their work, in fact, resembles feminist activism. I wanted to study NGO volunteers and activists’ own standpoint as to how they understand feminism and construct a feminist praxis in their everyday lives as educated urban Indian working

women in the non-profit sector at Kolkata. Theme Five answers my question on the conception of Feminism. As I know from my literature review, concern for women was generated by an ideological transformation taking place worldwide that directly influenced India. Western feminist scholarship and theory was well-known to many of the educated Indian women who became activists. In addition, the feminist impact on the United Nations that resulted in International Women's Year and the United Nations Decade for Women also had strong reverberations in India (Karat 1997).

Although the word feminism evokes Western stereotypes for many Indians (Kishwar 1990), I noticed that some of them were quite confused and unclear about feminism in general and Western feminism in particular. For instance, I sensed a struggle and lack of clarity in the understanding of feminism and, a perhaps naive, predisposition to accept stereotypes about feminists in the U.S., when this thirty plus years old activist said:

**“To me I am a feminist if I can raise any question anytime and ask “why?” Why do we have child marriages, why is there sexual abuse by men, why is there gender discrimination, I can ask “Why?” I can challenge any discrimination or violence with regard to women or anybody ( 7). But I don't necessarily think it is only about freedom but it is also about being in decision-making positions and is able to challenge any situation by raising our voice. So with feminism - it's not a question of good or bad, since even I am confused about what it means. I heard in America some women burnt their undergarments, I cannot relate to that type of radical feminism. I don't know why they will burn their undergarments, what is the meaning of this, so I am confused. I don't read many books because I believe in learning from the field. I read only one book by a gender-expert, Kamala (feminist activists) in very simple language. But I still couldn't understand it.” (8) Int. # 16.**

Incidentally, seventeen of the twenty one women I interviewed said they did not have any formal training in the concept of feminism. Regardless, I found that many of them had some previous knowledge about the subject from their own reading.

**“No (formal training), because we did all the reading amongst ourselves. Feminism was no where in the curriculum (in our time), it is only much later that we know about this.” (9) Int. # 3**

**“No, I’ve had no formal training academically but I have read some books on feminism for my own work. But I can’t define it, so I introduce myself a women’s rights activist (instead).” (6). Int. # 12**

**“No, but personally I have read plenty. Reading is my hobby, so I enjoy reading. I admire people who are feminist, write feminist articles etc.” (7). Int. # 8**

**“I have had no academic training in feminism, but I have read books. I read books as a young girl and as a young woman; like Bimal Mitra’s (famous Bengali novelist) stories that stress women’s role interest me.” (5) Int. # 14**

Having read literature that informed me that issues of gender gained significance in academic discourse and among younger women in universities in the 1970s, I was curious to find out if these women had had some type of formal knowledge in feminist studies. However, to my revelation I found out that there were some who majored in Sociology ( and liberal arts studies) but were not taught feminist theory at any level. Significantly, the practice of categorizing theories as a method of inquiry into feminist projects is more common in the West than in India (Kachuk 2003).

**“No I haven’t studied feminism although I am a student of Sociology; we had feminist theory neither in Bachelors nor in Masters level. We knew such a theory existed but we did not study it in detail, only briefly. We studied Conflict theory and Structural theory from Western Sociologists and partly psychology and philosophy in our syllabus. We studied the Women’s Movement in India but it was studied under social historical movements from the time of Indian independence onwards but we didn’t use any formal framework to study it.” (5) Int. # 13.**

**“I do not know any formal definition .....I haven’t studied feminism in Sociology.” (4) Int. # 20.**

Nonetheless, there were some who actually did study feminism as part of their university curriculum. Three women mentioned:

**“In my college and here, I have been in touch with feminism and feminist theories, you could call me semi-qualified in this area.” (6). Int. # 5**

**“I studied Political Science, so I did study about feminism. But I must say that when I was studying about it I was convinced I am not a feminist. But after working here practically, I am convinced that I am.” (5) Int. # 18**

**“I have studied about feminist theory, so I know the meaning of the word in the true sense.” (4). Int. # 19**

In India, however, crystallizing issues and activism has been more urgent. Thus, a book-length discussion of women describes issues with no reference to theoretical perspectives (Desai and Krishnaraj 1990). The development of women's studies and research centers also played a role in this (Karat 1997). Moreover, there has been a heightened concern about gender inequalities and the espousal of gender training by both governmental and non-governmental institutions in the 1990s (Mukhopadhyay and Appel 1998).

Likewise, I met a few volunteers and activists who had actively been involved in field research or attended workshops that taught about feminism.

**“No, I have had no formal training in Feminism as such but I have attended a lot of women’s studies conferences where I have presented papers. One paper I presented on health-discrimination in the policies of the government that discriminated against women. That was at a women’s studies conference in New Delhi in 1985. In 1988, December, I went to another conference where I presented on the culture and tradition of malnutrition of women in India. I chose West Bengal. I did the spot (field) work myself – I went to the villages, where I had contact, I stayed with them and talked to the women, filled out the questionnaires and then prepared my paper.” (8) Int. # 7.**

**“I have not studied feminism at my university but we do a lot of gender workshop where we discuss feminism in detail.” (4) Int. # 21.**

**“After I starting the NGO work, I had formal training in feminism because I attended a month-long gender workshop organized by an NGO in Bangladesh.” (5) Int. # 11.**



Not surprisingly, I also met those who maintained that they know about feminism generally from their surrounding (friends, life, media etc.), in spite of no formal exposure or training in this area.

**“No formal training as such. But my friends.....like Malini Bhattacharya who was a parliamentarian, who was also a professor at Jadavpore University, we are always discussing how to improve this situation (for women).” (6). Int. # 6.**

**“I have had no formal education in Feminism or theory, but I know from my own life.” (6) int. # 10.**

As we know Bordt (1997) in her research on organizational structure had found that women’s non-profit organizations in New York differ in terms of philosophies that inform them about whether they consider themselves a feminist organization or not. She noted that the concept of feminism takes on different meanings for those who adopt this philosophy. The range of definitions included “working for women’s equality,” “believing women and men are different but equal,” “the empowerment of all women and the end of oppression on the basis of sex, race, class, sexual orientation,” “total liberation for all” and a “woman-identified focus on all issues affecting all inhabitants of this planet and the planet itself.” (:18-19). Here in Kolkata too, I found that different women espoused different definitions of feminism, based on their personal lived experiences and exposure to the theory. The testimonies of these NGO volunteers and activists testify to the diversity of feminist understanding of theory and the women’s movement across the globe:

**“For me, Feminism means relating better to other women and also understanding diverse views of women and men, in other words, seeing the other person’s point of view. If I find that I disagree, I try to understand why I disagree....you know being**

more tolerant (8). We feminists are human beings basically, and we want to be bridges of communication.” (9) Int. # 7.

“To me feminism is a balance of women with men, seeing them as equal in every aspect.” (4) #19.

“I try to take simplistic definitions for everything because it makes life easier and faster moving. I would say (feminism is about) women having all opportunities and options to develop whichever way they want to and not be stereotyped in any way, so if they don’t want to marry then fine, if they want to go about their lives just working, move to another country or place, that’s also fine. Women have opportunities but not restrictions, with regard to their personalities and just being allowed to develop. I can’t say all men have these opportunities, but I am saying women are given less and less and less,... percentage wise not even the basic.” (18) Int. # 1.

“Feminist to me is about a human being, it could be a man or a woman, a child or anybody who is very empathetic and actually try to relate to whatever is happening around you; to me feminism is not about only talking about high *fundas* (ideals) and high theoretical things but look at the immediate (real) things about you and at least try to relate.” Int. # 17

“I feel that women need to have a space for themselves. I myself have many times felt, even before I worked with this organization, as just a housewife I think we don’t have any individual space for ourselves in any household. We are either mothers, or wives or daughters’-in-law etc. But as an individual you do need your own space to do your own thing, which in Indian households.....even though my husband’s family was quiet forward looking, not really conservative but even then I felt the need of having my own space which they don’t allow (6). I don’t know what feminism is, I can’t think of it...feminism is a way of life....you have to feel as a woman you are a separate person, you need to come out of the age old thing about women staying at home, women as goddesses, especially in India. (We need to think) that I am a separate person, an individual not only a woman but an individual. That, to me is feminism.” (7) Int. # 2.

“I consider myself a feminist, to the best of my abilities; I am not a perfected form of the species (laughs).....And if you want to go to the finer classifications, then you may call me a socialist feminist.” (9) Int. # 3.

Incidentally, one of the fundamental questions of the Indian women’s movement was how a homogeneous sisterhood could be assumed, given stark inequalities and exploitation based on class and caste. Not surprisingly then, it appears that class is a major aspect of activism due to Kolkata’s longstanding communist political culture,

which “has for years been more open to the borrowed ideologies of class struggle than the borrowed ideologies of feminist struggle”(Ray 2000:69). This helps explain why Kolkata NGO’s are more concerned with issues of employment rather than with issues of violence against women and family related issues (:24).

**“There are so many theories in feminism, like radical and so on and there are so many feminist writers, I am very confused. One thing is that they attack patriarchy; they are against the institution of the family. There are groups here who are lesbian feminist; they challenge the basic concept of a family, so there is confusion about feminism (6). I cannot fit myself in any one of these feminist theories absolutely because I believe (more) in class exploitations. So we should encompass all these other issues together. I want to work with women’s issues but there are so many other important issues that should be solved like the class-issues.” (7) Int. # 12.**

**“It is a movement about restructuring the present power-structure in any field of work towards gender parity, were both men and women have equality, not just advancement of women but both men and women together. In our Indian context, it is a movement that could be related to equality in any power structure, not only in terms of gender relations, but with respect to class and caste structure too. That is feminism to me.” (5) Int. # 11.**

Sen (1990) argues that these Indian women’s groups were structurally closer to the feminist movement in the West and received some amount of international visibility. Though the term feminism seems to be controversial, Forbes (1994: xxiii) contended that although Indian women may not be defined as feminist in the western sense, they still expressed a “concern with women’s well-being and women’s rights.” Interestingly, Ray (2000) has pointed out the existence of a few rare autonomous groups who do not hesitate to use explicitly feminist approaches, although feminism is a contentious stance which is associated with both imperialism and decadence in Kolkata.

**“I am a hundred percent feminist. Why not ? Women are so oppressed; I feel every woman should be a feminist. I feel very strange why so many women are not..... I define it as the belief that women are equal to men and that they should get every opportunity, equal opportunity...the belief that present day women are not getting that opportunity, so work to do something to make a difference in their situation. That is feminism to me... I am so involved that if somebody is not a feminist then I**

**find it very difficult to develop a genuine friendship with her. I find them (non-feminists) very strange-thinking (strange-minded).”(6) Int. #10**

**“Now a days, when you see women like Indira Gandhi (first women Prime Minister of India) taking a top role in society, there is a mixture (of ideas). So now we have to think that these (inequality) are things of the past, and we should not suffer from the complex (because) nobody is actually putting us behind, keeping us in the house. It (should be) is our own desire to take responsibility. So basic thing is that we (women) should be preparing ourselves to take responsibility in any field. At least with whom (women) all I associate with, they all have respect for the feminist women.” (7) Int. # 6.**

While the rapidly changing political and economic scenario of the 1990s introduced an element of urgency and confusion, the woman’s movement has not shown signs of flagging. However, this is not to say that I found most women who feel confident that they are “feminists” as one may hastily conclude from the above quotations just discussed. In fact, as I proceeded taking more and more interviews, I found a general sense of confusion with feminism – from some understanding to complete misunderstanding – among the volunteers and activists. The following quotes exemplify the confusion that I noticed among the women:

**“Yes, I do consider myself a feminist. Why I am not very sure. I don’t know if I can answer that question ...I don’t know what feminism is, I can’t think of it...feminism is a way of life....” (7) Int. # 2.**

**“Yes, that way I am definitely a feminist. I would love to see women in their totality as a human being, and not taking up any challenge (but) and proving to society that she can be with equal footing and equal status.” (7) Int. # 6.**

**“I think they are very confused about it as of now about what really feminism is”. (10) Int. # 4.**

**“I don’t know whether I am a feminist or not but I want to work for the cause and rights of the women, because they are very much suppressed (oppressed). Actually, we are the second sex here; we are the second-class citizens – which I cannot tolerate. I want to eradicate that, change it.....I don’t know whether they (people**

in Kolkata) have that clarity or not. In Bengal the word feminism has the connotation that it means facilities for women only. But it's not that." (6) Int. # 9.

"You know I am very confused about the word feminism. I don't know what it really means, that's why I don't consider myself as a feminist (8). But of course I am in favor of women having same status with men. I believe in the right to voice my opinion in whatever situation, but I don't know what is feminism. And the people who say they are feminist, when they go home they do the opposite of what they say; they say something and do something (else)". Int. # 16.

"That's a bit tough for me say..... It (feminism) is about women's rights. Actually, both men and women are the same; no one is inferior to anybody. We want to live life getting all the facilities like the other sex. The women are not given their rights. But I am not a feminist in that way, but I am in favor of getting rights and proper justice in a gender-just society, nothing else. Feminism is a gender-just society." (6) Int. # 9.

"Ah.....(pause)..... I think I can say that (hesitant). Sometimes I really feel that women are neglected in some ways and men are getting more prominence, at that point of time we feel we have to do something about this. Yes, I think you can say that I am a feminist.....I would say that feminism doesn't mean superficial rights of women but I think it means equal rights of women, not more power but equal power, so that men and women can share platforms together with equal rights everywhere. But it doesn't mean there should be reservation in politics for women (quota for women's representation in the Indian parliament), they should be able to go there on their own right." (6) Int. # 5.

"Feminism, I feel, is about change and it's about an egalitarian system.....When you read a little bit of radical feminism you become confused as what they are talking about. But now that I am working here I realize what feminism is all about and I relate to that." (5) Int. # 18.

"I had some confusion about what really feminism is. But these workshops have helped me gain some clarity on the subject.....Feminism means, according to me, every human being and not just women, should enjoy his or her rights, especially the fundamental rights. I don't know if I am a firebrand feminist or not but at the workshops I have learnt that what I believe in is indeed feminism, for instance sharing household work, why should only a woman have to maintain the household even when she is a working woman. I have always thought in these lines, so I am more or less a feminist. So therefore feminism to me means that everyone should have the fundamental rights and will find some level of basic respect. I am not asking for any extra privileges for women; but all I say that I should get the same opportunities that men get (4) Int. # 21.

"Most of the time they believe that feminism is about being in a decision making position, then she is a feminist. In general, I haven't heard much about feminism in

**Kolkata, there are no workshops or anything, so the people are unaware. The general people think that women who claim to be feminists, they want freedom, freedom to go anywhere safely, do anything.” (7) Int. # 16.**

On the contrary, a couple of women thought that “feminism” creates inequality among men and women and there seemed to be a complete breakdown of understanding of the concept of feminism, as one can see from the following quotations:

**“I wouldn’t want to be called a feminist because I believe in equal rights.” (11) Int. #**

**“I have no idea what feminism is!.....Is feminism the opposite of masculine? Is it about men and women being opposites? I don’t like the word, I don’t like the word feminism and I don’t like this distinction (it makes). I have been working with women, men and children, without any sex discrimination. But mostly I found that the most oppressed are the girls or women, so I have been working for them but I am not associating myself with the word feminism..... because I care for the human beings (as a whole), why does it have to be about feminism?” (5) Int. # 15.**

In the United States, however, the cumulative effect of women’s public visibility and the economic advance of a relative few have unleashed a backlash. University professors discover female defects and the media inflates women’s, especially feminists’, deficiencies (Faludi 1991). The religious and political right denounces feminists for destroying family values (Eisenstein 1982), making them seem like women’s enemies. In India, too, similar reactions towards the feminist ideology and a certain amount of stigma with the terminology of a ‘feminist’ seem to exist (Mohanty 1991; Ray 2000).

**“I feel they think feminism means ultra-modern girls, burning their bras, not caring for the family, only looking after her own rights. That’s how people think about feminism.” (6) Int. # 5.**

**“Long time back in the days of the Vedanta (ancient India), women used to hold equal status because they could chant Vedic mantras and have the same respect for everything. But later on, the society changed and women were relegated to a corner and considered to be...just giving birth to children as their only role, and they had to only cook and clean and do household work. That was a concept that came with the Muslims when they attacked and invaded (India). The conservative male folk**

**thought women should be put behind. With men, even if they are educated, they have a mixed feeling; so many men that I have come across who would like to see women in the traditional role. In fact even the women have mixed feelings in our society.....I don't think they do understand the word (feminism)..... At times, it leaves a bad taste or bitterness in my mind that even if I persuade them so much to make them understand, they are biased about women, with a shallow mind which does not let them go deep down into the matter.” (7) Int. # 6.**

**“I think they are very confused about it as of now about what really feminism is. It is more socio-political and very contradictory from the religious point of view also. For example, the Hindu religion while giving a major status to women also does a lot of things that are anti-women .....Yes, basically what they think....they are not very clear about feminism, the use of this word feminism. Most people don't like the word “feminism”; people have asked me why do we have to talk about feminism (at all) when we are all human beings, what is the difference between men and women. They do not consider generally if the women are getting the same (treatment) as other human beings.” (5) Int. # 4.**

**“I would say it's not a definition, but a perception which differs from community to community, area to area..... I think at all levels the word “feminism” has taken on a “bra-burning” image and quite a lot of excesses. They think if we are feminist, then we are excessively picky about women's role when there's no need. I mean why women are doing all these things in a “male-dominated” society and there is no doubt about it that it is a male-dominated society.” (19) Int. # 1.**

However, Western feminist movements differ due to their tendency to directly challenge the patriarchal matrix of society. As I mentioned earlier, building on this premise, Kumar (1993) has remarked: “One of the points of definition which pre-independence (Indian) feminists used was that Western feminists were pitted against men, whereas Indian feminists were not. This was explained on the grounds that while the suffragettes had had to struggle for the vote, ‘our men’ (i.e. the Indian National Congress) supported the demand for female suffrage. In other words, Indian feminists were not anti-male because our men were better than Western men” (:195). In countries like England and America, the very thought of emancipation of women horrified men who started imagining “licentious women running amuck in a society of sober men,

divorcing husbands, breaking up homes, neglecting children, and sinning in the open street.” As for women’s suffrage, it was prophesized to be the beginning of anarchy. Men were afraid their wives would grab political power, turn all the man-made laws of the country upside down and reduce man to a state of dependence on woman. The fact that in all the countries that agitated for women’s suffrage the female population is greater than male, aggravated this fear and turned it into panic” (Shridevi (1967:57). Likewise, there is a tendency to label feminists as “anti-male” across the globe, including India:

**“The general public often has a negative mentality towards feminism; they think its matriarchy – about women’s power over men. So they feel very threatened fearing that the roles will be reversed. They also fear that feminism is a family breaking thing (device).” (6) Int. # 11.**

**“Oh they think you are anti-men!! That’s first reaction from people generally. I try to speak to them sometimes to change their minds; my friends ask why at all I try to change them because nothing is going to change. But I have to do my part and try because somewhere he or she is will go back and think about it. Even if they give a little thought to this discussion, then that’s a beginning.” (7) Int. # 17.**

**“The general perception is that so long you’ve had a patriarchal society, but now feminism means its all about women, and men don’t have a place – push them and women take over.” (5) Int. # 18**

**“They think feminism is something bad where too much emphasis is given on women’s issues and hating the male species but I don’t think so.” (5) Int. # 19.**

**“In India, people have got a very strange idea about feminism. I really do not know what they think, in Bengali it is called “*Naribad*”. Even some of my colleagues refuse to call themselves “*Naribad*” because they say if they say it then people will at once think they are strange women cutting and chopping off men’s heads. I don’t know why, but even the media is not portraying it correctly.” (6) Int. # 10.**

**“They think feminists are anti-male in Kolkata, and in rural areas also they isolate them. I know because I went to one seminar there, they accepted them but they said about some other women “*Didi, oder shaathe kaaj kora jabena karon ora feminists*” (we cannot work with them because they are femininsts). I said “*Ora feminist to ki holo?*” (so what’s wrong if they are feminists?), they said that cannot tolerate men. They consider feminists as mad people who think only about women, they are anti-male. They don’t allow men in their arena and all these things.” (6) Int. # 12**



The Indian feminist movement also diverges from the equivalent movements in the West, with respect to the notion of sexual difference. While some feminist struggles in the West emphasized equality with man in all spheres, there was a tendency in the Indian men and women to dwell on the idea of separate roles for males and females. Kumar (1993) conveyed that in the early years of movements for women's rights...it was more or less taken for granted that the difference between the sexes was such that their roles, functions, aims and desires were different. And hence, not only had they to be differently reared but differently treated in general. Over time this difference was itself adduced as a major reason for reforming women's conditions. Indian feminists claim women's rights as individuals to, for example, education (Chanana 1988), pay equity (Gandhi and Shah 1991), and land control (Agarwal 1994). But the legitimacy of personal authority goes against the conception of individuals with family and kinship networks, where they have to consider others' expectation and meet responsibilities towards them (Karlekar 1988). The relationships can seem part of the natural social order of traditions that are beyond questioning (Agarwal 1994: 58-59). The following quotes elucidate the conception of feminism and image of a feminist in a society which still holds on to the notion of traditional gender division of labor:

**“A feminist, at least according to my conception, would be a little more activist which I am not. I don't consider myself an activist. I am too entangled with the family, and also there are some family values and social values which I quite adhere to, so I don't want to break out of that.....well, I think particularly Western Feminism as we look at it, is more or less giving the woman total independence to develop her own identity and express her own identity. But I don't think in our society, we are (ready to) develop our own identity but not really to develop our own social identity (as women). We are mostly very traditional. I don't think a feminist would adhere to “*Sankranti*” (an traditional harvest festival) and make “*pitha*” (a Bengali desert). Would she? She would break out of those (traditions). According to me they are more activist type of people, I think. So I am not that kind of an activist.”(7) Int. # 8.**

**“Feminism indicates no gender bias. A female has to firstly know that she is a human being as a whole, and she will have to make her place in the society. But not having any grudge or malice for society, which is male-dominated. Ours is a male-dominated society is putting women behind. But because we are women, we don’t have fight back but (instead) discretely and quietly and nicely...because the hand that rules the cradle rules the world, that is a very important thing so we have to keep that in mind...by rearing up children in a nice way.” (6) Int. # 6.**

**“The general idea of feminism is a woman who would break all shackles and barriers. But I don’t think a feminist is that. I think a feminist is one who believes in a principle or idea to break the shackles to attain it – she is a feminist. See I have my own principles, my own ends but I don’t have that mentality to break everything to try to reach that. You see I will try to reach it in spite of a familial molding, social limitations, and cultural foundations.” (8) Int. # 8.**

**“Feminism means “*Naribadi*”. We think if women are oppressed we should be able to protest; women are neglected in our society. But I do not agree with that type of feminism. I believe that both male and females need each other to survive. It is true that this society is male-dominated but we can tackle this situation by cooperation. For example, I have never been personally tortured by any man in my life, so there is no need for confrontation..... but I think it means a woman should know herself truly about who she is and how much she can contribute to society. I think feminism means a woman should identify her potential for herself or for society. I hope to be in that position myself.” (4) Int. # 20.**

A point of contention that remains for Third World movements is the use of the term ‘feminism’. As I stated earlier, western feminism has been challenged for its imperialistic bias “and of short-sightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism, classism, and homophobia (Mohanty 1991:7).” For some, the image of a feminist is beyond repair, no matter what. I found a general aversion to the word, and some volunteers and activists wanted to distance themselves from it, even if they had a hunch that it really meant to empower women:

**“I have a personal idea about feminism, but I don’t have a very positive idea about it. It is definitely for the betterment of women, for bringing women into the forefront and for fighting out for the things that are not being given to women,**

**especially where they are facing problems. But still what I feel is that feminism is an intellectualism, it is a discipline which has a lot of intellectualism in it and it is being restricted to the discipline and it has a lot of superficiality in it till now. Just because someone here is talking about feminism, doesn't mean he or she really knows about feminism, they don't know the field, they don't know the reality. It is not just to be talked about by women (but also by others) but that's how it is stamped."**

**(5) Int. #13.**

**"... I have read the usual books. I have never believed in propagating the accepted feminist theory as it normally is.....(pause) but feminist yes, in the sense that I believe in women's emancipation and empowerment..... Feminism means empowerment, if a woman cannot take decisions of her own life then no matter how much the concept of feminism is thrown around it's a waste, you know.....To my mind, it (feminism) is superficial. For example, bra burning, scandal marching, I find that too symbolic (simplistic). And frankly speaking I am not an activist."**

**(10) Int. # 4.**

The above quote reminds us of what Blackstone (2004) had pointed out about gender being central to conceptual distinctions between activists and volunteers.

Mainstream conceptions of being political are oftentimes incongruent with mainstream ideals of women as compassionate yet unfrontational; therefore, women's apathy seems incongruent with the stereotypical images of them as caretakers and nurturers<sup>24</sup>.

Another difference cited by Eliasoph concerns the production of knowledge: Activists are more likely to understand themselves as knowledge producers, volunteers as knowledge consumers. Thus, activism and voluntarism need not be synonymous and the relationship between the two remains obscure at best (Caputo, 1997). Blackstone (2004) has also argued that the question of whether we can or should ascribe the label "activists" to those who chose not to identify themselves that way is reminiscent of feminist debates about whether to ascribe the label "feminist" to those who do not identify as such.

Similarly in India, the need for radical change in the Indian society is asserted by most women's groups, yet there is a paradox confronting women's activism. Those who

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<sup>24</sup> Avoiding politics is about gender because women in particular have been historically been relegated to the realm of the private and non-political (Blackstone 2004).

espouse causes akin to Western feminism or who propose radical solutions to women's issues may find themselves accused of trouble-making and derogatorily labeled as 'feminists' (Ray 2000: 77,97). When I asked the volunteers and activists in Kolkata what they think people regard as "feminists", they were very frank in admitting the negative image that people have construed about feminists:

**"Most people don't like the word "feminism". (5) Int. # 19.**

**"But there are still those who use the word feminist in a very derogatory sense, to mean (refer to) some cantankerous women and these sorts of things." (7) Int. # 10.**

**"But if I say I am a feminist in front of people, then most people will look at us strangely! But my colleagues won't react the same way although the mass has a different connotation for the word "feminist" – they think about feminist as bra-burners, cigarette smoking etc. They have no idea that feminists can also have other facets and qualities." (5) Int. # 21.**

**"They think feminism is women becoming impossibly independent and domineering and anti-family and being just a 'problem' ...that she just goes on about being a woman but she doesn't care for anything like social values, norms and standards. God knows how she behaves and what are her moral standards!! Everything is faster when you are a feminist, it's really very illusive (18)." Int. # 1.**

**"I feel they think feminism means ultra-modern girls, burning their bras, not caring for the family, only looking after her own rights. That's how people think about feminism." (6) Int. # 5.**

**"....the work I do they don't see it in any good light at all, because they see it as "feminist" quote unquote organizations are simply creating problems in the happy families, they are going and giving wrong ideas to these women. That is the attitude of the society, they don't like feminists." (5) Int. # 2.**

**"Feminism to them probably means somebody who is sort of militant and close-minded or whatever that I don't know. But the word feminism is a problematic and negative word for some reason in India." (7) Int. # 2.**

**"Sometimes (negative impression), but sometimes also from educated people. Some of them know and some of them not. I cannot say because I did not study feminism." (7) Int. # 9.**

**"When I say a woman's NGO, their reaction is not always positive. They say "Oh, so you are a feminist, so you want to smoke cigarettes, you are a bra-burner" and**

**these things. But sometimes people ask, “What do you do for women exactly?” But in general, they have a reservation about feminism or feminists. If I say I work for women but I am not a feminist, then they say its okay (it’s alright). But if I say “Well, I believe in feminism”, then it’s a problem (4). The general public often has a negative mentality towards feminism; they think its matriarchy – about women’s power over men.” (6) Int. # 11.**

**“Most people don’t have the opportunity to look into the deeper meanings, so this image of feminist is an arrogant and spoilt image.” (5) Int. # 21.**

In fact, one 51-year-old development consultant actually blamed the feminists themselves for their ‘tarnished’ image:

**“It is because women’s organization make such a hoo-haa about it. Everything is kind of fashionable here; it is fashionable for you to be termed a feminist or an activist. So that’s why the women’s NGO sector is getting this tarnished image... I am a feminist” and this and that....(12) Int. # 4.**

One more interesting phenomenon related to the issue of labeling is that I was repeatedly told by the women I interviewed that local and national celebrities who are involved in women’s empowerment programs in India, have been known to publicly distance themselves from the label of a ‘feminist’. These bigwigs, who include writers, actresses, film-directors and so on, are role models for women both nationally and internationally; they even have sufficient clout with the government and other NGOs in Kolkata. I have to admit I was surprised to hear about their aversion to being called a ‘feminist’, since one would imagine that they are more familiar with the concept of feminism than the lay mass without proper access to information. Nevertheless, as the following quote proves, some women are convinced that ‘feminism’ indeed fragments society, of course as per their understanding:

**“I will give you an example; two years ago “[NGO]” was organizing a poster exhibition – fort night for anti-violence in November and December. And this poster exhibition was being held at the USIS, and this very famous stage actress, Shaoli Mitra had come to inaugurate it. Some media person asked her “Are you a**

**feminist?” And she said “No, I am not”. You should have seen the shock and dismay on all the faces of all the people from “[NGO]”. But Shaoli Mitra has done a lot for the cause of women, I know that, because she herself does beautiful theater which portrays women’s problems. In that way, she is definitely propagating the cause of women, but she doesn’t want to be branded a “feminist” (11). .....you should do your work quietly. You don’t have to.....I am not against doing awareness generation programs or things like that to educate the masses, but do not do it in a way that compartmentalizes society, which alienates you from others. Your work should be perceived as benefiting women in a qualitative and quantitative, measurable change in the lives of the women (and nothing else) .....you should do your work quietly.” (12) Int. # 4.**

Some women mentioned the exiled feminist writer Taslima Nasreen (controversial Bengali writer known in the Indian sub-continent) from Bangladesh who has taken refuge in India, as a case in point. As they wanted to stay away from such branding and eventual controversy in the media, a couple of volunteers expressed their apprehensions:

**“Yes, very much so (negative), at least here...in eastern society. Like I would say, can I give an example of Taslima Nasreen (controversial but famous), she is branded as a feminist writer. Either you support her or you don’t support her.” (8) Int. # 8.**

**“I have no idea about feminism, and I don’t want to have any idea of what is a feminist. I don’t want to be known as Taslima Nasreen or Mahesweta Debi (Award-winning novelist on women’s issues). All I know is that in the Women’s Commission people have used this term for their own political purposes.” (5) Int. # 15.**

Another woman activist expressed her consternation at this state of affairs and showed her dismay by informing me that even intellectuals are still holding on to redundant stereotypes of feminists :

**“Anti-male, bra-burning which is something so antique but ....(people still hold on to that image) (9).....A lot of women, intellectuals, go all out to say “I am not really a feminist in that sense”, you know. In fact the last time when \_\_\_\_\_/[NGO] completed twenty years, we put out a competition asking “Why I am not a feminist?” and we gave out prizes (laughs) (6)....I am the one who suggested the topic for that competition “Why I am not a feminist?”. Yes, it bothers me because (famous women) people like Nabanita Deb Sen (writer), Aparna Sen (film director)**

say “*Ami kintu thik sherom feminist noi*” (translation: I am not exactly that type of a typical feminist ). I don’t understand why.” (9) Int. # 3.

I asked some of them who they think is responsible for creating this image of the feminist and their replies were pointed mainly toward the ‘media’ – both in India and abroad, although one of them was optimistic that things would change for the better soon.

**“You know the media has done a lot of damage. First the Western media (portraying feminists as) bra-burning, strident.... So it is pointless telling them (clarifying to the general people). Whenever an article is written in the newspaper about a woman-achiever, they (media) write about her as “this is no bra-burning festoon-waving feminist but she has guts to take her places and do things for women”. So you understand what kind of message they are giving, that we are kind of harried-out, anti-family and anti-men. And we have a lot of confusion even among women. In my previous house, my husband’s office was not very far (from home), so during lunch break he used to come home and then go back (to work). I would keep the food ready for him on the table as soon as he came and when he left I’d put it back. One of our ‘*mancha*’ (forum) members, she had come for some work and she saw it and told another forum member that “What is this! Ms.XYZ (participant) calls herself a feminist; (yet) I went to her house and found her serving (food to) her husband!” I don’t think they (these women) know what feminism really is, that’s what I feel....You know there are a lot of women (actors) in the theater....(famous) theater personalities like Shaoli Mitra, Usha Ganguly and others, you know, they all use the women’s platform but the first thing they say is “We are humanists, we are not feminists!” As if feminism is not a part of humanism!” (9) Int. # 7.**

**“I only know from the media and am also being biased with the interpretations of feminism.....How does the mass learn about feminism? They learn from lectures, newspapers, the media, so reading (studying) feminist theory is one thing and actually learning about feminism like this is..... because there are lots of interpretations involved ....It is very gender biased, although it is done for women it has a gender bias; men feel that a lot more hype is created out of smaller things.”(6) Int. # 13.**

Only one woman seemed to think that the attitude in the media is changing toward feminists:

**“But of course it is changing among young reporters, there are many people who put feminism in the right perspective, and who use the term with proper respect.” Int. # 10.**

Going back to Bordt's (1997) findings we may find some of the possible answers to this question; she mentioned that there was another type of women's organization in her study where, apparently, feminism has never come up for discussion. Bordt (1997) suggested that these organizations assume a social service orientation and see themselves as apolitical, therefore eliminating the possibility of discussing other philosophies or politics at all. Further, she also adds that it is conceivable that because feminism has historically been viewed as white, middle class movement for women, when women of color come together feminism is not among the range of philosophies with which the group members identify, debate over, and overtly accept or reject. The following quotes validate the above premise to some extent, in terms of feminism being a western theory; and make it applicable to the Indian context:

**“.....to the ordinary Indian public it is again misconstrued as a western concept. There is no Indian concept of feminism as I understand it, meaning what is pertinent to the problems (faced by) of the Indian women. We tend to fight concepts which are alien to us, not pertinent to the Indian situation.” (11) Int. # 4.**

**“.....Because the way it is being done is quite superficial. I don't have a problem with the feminist theory as such, but (I have a problem) with the way it is being put. Although I will not be able to give you any idea for or against it, let the theory be there (laughs) but I am talking about the way people are using it also (5).I don't want to talk about it because I don't know what this theory really is so I don't feel I am really eligible to talk about it. I have a viewpoint but I lack information about it. I only know from the media and am also being biased with the interpretations of feminism.” (6). Int. # 15.**

Blackstone (2004) has argued that the question of whether we can or should ascribe the label “activists” to those who chose not to identify themselves that way is reminiscent of feminist debates about whether to ascribe the label “feminist” to those who do not identify as such. Through their research on working class women's activism, Bookman and Morgen (1988), Naples (1998), and Pardo (1995) demonstrated that much



of the activism conducted by self-proclaimed non-feminists in fact resembles feminist activism. Pardo suggested that those who do not define themselves as feminists but who employ “implicitly feminist practices” (1995:357) might best be described as “border feminists”.

**“Yes.....(pause) I am comfortable with being called a feminist...(pause) definitely because of my long years of understanding women’s problems and caring and trying to address them. But I am not an extreme. If there are scales, it’s just a professional way of expressing something , where if you have masculinisms, where you have only males and feminisms where you have only females, I am somewhere on the borderline, where I care a lot for this huge mass of people who are deprived and who need help, but I also care for the mass who are more in power, but not all in power. I am always conscious that we are two wings of the bird. I see humanity as a whole, I don’t, I can’t segment, it’s difficult for me to see in segments, I see the whole perspective. ....I never do use the word feminist, but others use the word for me (to describe me). Feminist or activist, and that is my image. But I never saw myself as just that, but I care for the underdog if you see what I mean, so women appear to be the underdogs, to me women are in a very deprived situation, therefore, you might say ‘yes’ I am a feminist. At present I am a feminist but I may not always be (18). ” (19) Int. # 1.**

**“The word “feminism” is a bad word for them (laughs). So much so that even famous women who make sensitive films on women\_\_\_\_\_ (she would not like me to mention the name in the transcription), she too openly says that she is not a feminist! Many women, who do very good and sensitive work on women, will actually say that I am not a feminist. So the word feminist among Indian women is a very radical word. Its is a problematic word. I don’t know what they mean by feminism and why they have to say that I am not a feminist..... Feminism to them probably means somebody who is sort of militant and close-minded or whatever that I don’t know. But the word feminism is a problematic and negative word for some reason in India.” (7) Int. # 2.**

Clearly to me then, the above quotes qualify a few of the women I interviewed as “border feminists’. There were also important distinctions among organizations that do not adopt a feminist philosophy; some suggested that feminism is too narrow a concept or too exclusionary for their goals, which include a wider target population than women (for example, people of color, lesbians and gays and so on). When asked what alternative philosophies guide their organization, few specified their orientation: humanistic, human

rights, self-help and the likes (Bordt 1997: 19). Bordt also noted, however, that individual members may consider themselves feminists. Likewise, for the present study, I am concerned with the individual's response to feminism, and not necessarily the organization's official position regarding feminism. The participants in my study at NGOs in Kolkata also variously specified alternate philosophies to best describe themselves:

**“No, I introduce myself as women's rights activists because of this confusion with feminism.” (7) Int. # 12.**

**“I want to avoid clichés, but I could've have called myself a humanist also, in the sense that I believe in a just world. A feminist also believes in human rights.” (9) Int. # 3.**

I was still not completely clear about some of the reactions of my participants; so for the reader's discretion here is an excerpt from an interesting conversation that I had with one of the women I interviewed, this piece of the interview gives an idea as to the frustration and complexity of the topic of labeling and the question of being a feminist in the Indian civil society really is (my initials are AM):

*AM: By your own definition of a feminist, are you a feminist?*

**Ans. Yes, I would say that because I strongly believe in women's emancipation.**

*AM: If I were to describe you as a feminist, would it be a valid remark? Are you comfortable with such a description?*

**Ans. I wouldn't want to be called a feminist because I believe in equal rights, equal opportunities for both men and women. As you rightly said earlier, I think it's basically a human rights issue.**

*AM: You find it alright if I called you a human rights activist?*

**Ans. Yes, but not a feminist. This very image of branding is something I don't like.**

*AM: Well, being a human rights activist is also a type of branding then, wouldn't you say?*

**Ans. Yes.....(pause) but that is something that comes naturally, you care for human beings. You don't have flout it around (11) Int. # 4.**

Nevertheless, here are a few quotes from the ‘few’ women who self-identified themselves as ‘feminists’ as per their personal definitions:

**“By that (my) definition I am a feminist. I could be a feminist even by just being a housewife also (6)...I realize what feminism is all about and I relate to that.” (5) Int. # 17.**

**“Yes, and I am proud to be a feminist.” (9) Int. # 7.**

**Yes, of course (I am a feminist). And I would like my daughter to be one too.” (5) Int. # 14**

**“In the true sense of feminism, I think I am a feminist, but not in the sense common people perceive feminism to be (4) Int. # 19.**

Finally, I end this chapter with a short but poignant story about the “*sindoor-khela*” (popular festival and women’s ritual in Kolkata) which captures the spirit of Indian feminist equality, as narrated to me by a famous women’s rights activist, self-proclaimed feminist, journalist, writer and a phenomenal woman in Kolkata :

**“I will you give you a small example, which you might find relevant. You know we have this (tradition) “*Sindoor Khela*” on the last day of the Durga Puja (annual Hindu festival), all married women smear eachother with vermilion. You know I have given up wearing “*Sindoor*” (vermilion) for a long time; I don’t wear it (a married women’s customary symbol in India). Once a very crotchety woman asked me why (I don’t wear sindoor anymore), and I told her that I find the *Sindoor* being very divisive; it divides women - the unmarried girl dreams of wearing the *sindoor*, and the married women are very proud that she is putting (wearing) the *sindoor*, while the widowed women is mourning because she has lost the right to wear the *sindoor*! That’s why I just want to do away with this (custom), it’s nothing, (merely) an item of decoration. Now I had gone to Hazaribagh (a city near Kolkata) during the Pujas (Hindu festival), I always go to Hazaribagh. My two sisters-in-law were going to play the *Sindoor Khela* in the public pandals (festival tents). I was sitting out with their bags, suddenly one lady came and smeared my face (with vermilion). I said please don’t do it because I am not playing this (ritual / game), besides I have already had taken a bath. She said (in Hindi) “*Bahan, saal me ek roj.*”( Translation and meaning: *Why would you refuse it ....this game is just once a year event only*). So I did not stop her. Was I going to give her a lecture on feminism? So I went home that way (forgetfully with *Sindoor* on my face). There was a History professor who was visiting my house at Hazaribagh from Kolkata; I didn’t even go and look at myself in the mirror, when I heard he had come I rushed (to meet him). After he left**

**I went to change, and I found my face was smeared and thought “Oh my God”. You know what he did? He came back to Kolkata and told everyone that Ms.XYZ (participant) is doing feminism in Kolkata while participating in “*Sindoor Khela*” away from the city. Very petty!! So you know.....(pause), I could’ve lectured that woman about Feminism, but because I was a feminist I thought that may be she felt a bond (with this custom and myself). Also, I had to respect that bonding with an unknown woman. From the human point of view, I acted like a human being. Someone later wanted to crosscheck with me if I really had participated in the *Sindoor-Khela*. I said my face being smeared with vermilion, does not exactly mean that I participated in *Sindoor-Khela*, (in any case) what exactly did you want me to do – shove off that woman or act like a human being. We feminists are human beings basically, and we want to be bridges of communication.” ( 9) Int. # 7.**

The previous chapter and this chapter together have analyzed and interpreted the emerging narrative themes of the everyday lived experiences of urban and educated women from middle and upper classes of the Indian civil society, based on their testimonies in *‘their own words’*. The five emerging narrative themes that this chapter and the last chapter discussed are:

1. NGO work as Career;
2. Domestic Obligations;
- 3 Social Challenges/Obstacles for Women;
4. Motivation and Satisfaction from NGO work and
5. Conception of Feminism.

These themes seem inherently interwoven and share the complexities of the challenges that women volunteers and activists face in their lived experiences at NGOs. The next chapter will offer analysis and discussion of the emerging themes and the aims and implications for this study.

## CHAPTER VII

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study has uncovered some of the complex challenges and motivations which impact the career choices of middle and upper classes of women who become volunteers and activists at NGOs in Kolkata. Feminist Standpoint analysis supports the value of the collected voice of women as they interpret and express shared realities of their work in the non-profit sector of Indian civil society as “outsiders within”. The analysis of this study gives voice to women who reflect a diversity of personal, social, cultural and organizational challenges within NGOs in Kolkata. The women in this study were prompted to reflect on the social challenges they encounter and motivations they experience as volunteers and activists in terms of their lived experiences, while also discussing their understanding of feminism and construction of the image of a ‘feminist’ in the post colonial context.

This exploratory research supports feminist standpoint theorizing and is committed to raising consciousness, empowering women and stimulating resistance to patriarchal oppression and injustices in the gender-stratified Indian civil society. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I will discuss the purpose and significance of the study and provide the researcher’s standpoint. Then I will discuss the emerging themes followed by the methodological implications of how this study contributes to the discipline of Sociology. Finally, I will discuss the strengths and limitations of this exploratory study, with suggestions for future research.

### ***Summary of Purpose***

Harding (1991) states that women speaking from and about their views of reality can reveal aspects of the social order that are otherwise difficult to see. The primary aim of this study is to give voice to middle and upper class Indian women volunteers and activists who are outsiders within Indian civil society and have been historically excluded, overlooked and absent from mainstream international sociological research. This exploratory study seeks to understand how women in the NGOs in Kolkata interpret and express their challenges in a gender-stratified patriarchal civil society. The other goal of this study is to offer a comprehensive view on the conception of feminism among women activists and volunteers in a non-western, post colonial setting.

This study reveals the complex factors that limit or devalue the work that women do in NGOs, given the personal, social, cultural and organizational challenges they face, both as volunteers and activists working for oppressed women's development as well as urban educated Indian women belonging to the middle or upper classes and working in the non-profit sector of Indian civil society. In doing so, this study challenges the mainstream theories, assumptions and ideologies about Third World women as victims rather than agents of change in the field of women's development and empowerment or to consider women's issues in India as related to development, even when gender interests are involved (Purkayastha and Subramaniam 2004).

This research is significant because it offers awareness and alternative views to the challenges (and motivations) faced by middle and upper class women volunteers and activists in building a career in the non-profit sector of NGOs in Kolkata. In the process of analyzing the findings, this study also provides useful information about the

oppression and subordination of the middle and upper class of women in contemporary civil society in India. But more importantly, this study examines the various ways urban, educated Indian women construct a feminist praxis in terms of their everyday lived experiences as volunteers and activists.

By studying the testimonies of these women, the study is able to examine alternative processes of agency and change in order to define challenges and motivations of middle and upper classes of Third World women volunteers and activists, by offering a new set of lenses for viewing the gender-stratified Indian civil society that is by and largely documented by men.

Finally, this study offers current knowledge and research on the conception of feminism among women volunteers and activists in a non-western setting and how they construct the image of a feminist. It offers directions for research in transnational feminism, International Women's Movement, Womanism and Social Inequality Studies. In keeping with the methodological commitments of revolutionary pragmatism, this study also helps to develop a new image of Indian women as active agents of change, rather than just suffering victims in a globalized framework.

### ***Researcher's Standpoint***

The impetus for this research project came from my experience with two women's NGOs in Kolkata (India) in the 1990s. As a volunteer, my work brought me in contact with a group of urban, educated women volunteers and activists from the middle and upper classes of India. In the course of my interaction with them, I recognized the social and cultural obstacles they face as Indian women in a gender-stratified civil society and felt the need to give voice to women who have been silenced or overlooked by

mainstream patriarchal systems of knowledge production and understanding of global civil society, which in principle is known to be egalitarian.

I, as a post colonial South Asian woman from India, with the ‘knowledge of experience’ (hooks 1994) identify myself as a Third World Feminist and an ‘outsider within’ the U.S academy. However, my experiences both as a volunteer and student in India, as well as a research scholar in the U.S academy provide special perspectives and insights available to the category of outsiders who have been systematically frustrated by the social system (Merton 1972). Therefore, my outside allegiances militate against my choosing full insider status. Instead, I chose the feminist standpoint framework so that it allows me to reveal alternative situations and meanings that could fill in the gaps of knowledge between the insider and the outsider (by developing a new image of Indian women in civil society), while challenging the so-called dual system of patriarchy and capitalism approach as a post colonial feminist.

Through this exploratory research I hope to give ‘voice’ to a group of women overlooked by mainstream international sociological studies. Thus, by using feminist standpoint research, I privilege the specific accounts of women that help to position a view of broader discourses, practices, process and social institutions. Looking back, I recall that some of the women I interviewed were glad that I was trying to document and research their side of the story from their own standpoints. I would, therefore, be honored if I could help their voices be heard in the international community through my research. However, this is only one point to start and in no way does full justice to their lived experiences due to space and time constraints. Therefore, I hope to further build on this research in the near future.



### ***Review and Discussion of Emerging Narrative Themes***

The first emergent theme was “NGO work as Career” where the participants discussed issues related to the structure of NGOs, their recruitment processes, opportunities for growth and job preferences. Having spent time with the participants at NGOs in Kolkata and based on the literature review, I had anticipated that the organizational structure of NGOs would impact urban women’s career choices in the non-profit sector. For working women whose traditional roles continue to demand that they fulfill both domestic as well as professional responsibilities equally well, a flexible organizational structure would be more conducive to their life-styles. This theme supports what has been documented about the management of feminist organizations in general and women volunteers and activists in particular, which differs from that compared to other organizations (Srinivasan and Davis 1991). These women’s NGOs are examples of alternative organizations that are driven by commitment to ideology and an egalitarian structure (Milofsky and Elion 1988). In feminist organizations managers are expected to form a nonhierarchical, community-like environment in which volunteers, activists and paid staff are equal. Proponents of feminist organizations argue that these organizations are highly democratic in their daily operations (Srinivasan and Davis 1991). Recent research on women’s organizations suggests that there has been a change in thinking about organizational structure. First, social histories of the contemporary women’s movement have documented how organizational form has been replaced by organizational strategy as a defining factor among women’s movement organization (Feree and Hess 1994). Second, theoretical discussions of feminist organizations encourage women to be more discriminating among organizational structures, rather than

uncritically assuming that collectivist structures are the only ones consistent with feminist ideology.

The interview data offered me information on the structure of various women's NGOs that ultimately affect the personal and professional lives of the women volunteers and activists at NGOs in India. I found that most of the NGOs were semi-formal or similar to what Gottfried and Weiss (1994) referred to as 'compound feminist organizations'. Instead of having formalized rigid hierarchies, these flexible structures facilitated the participation of women professionals who needed a flexible approach in order to divide their time between work and family (which may be an otherwise difficult situation in professions available in the profit sectors).

However, another observation that I made was the increasing professionalization of NGOs as per the demands of their donors. Just as Hawkesworth (2001) has explained about the pressures of maintaining a formally structured organization form a requirement by international funding agencies, the NGOs in Kolkata were also coming under increasing pressures by the international donor agencies with regard to their organizational form.

Moreover, as per literature the relationships among members of a feminist organization should be personal, friendly and of value in themselves (Epstein 1988). My findings were consistent with literature on women in NGOs who have free access and open-door policies with their colleagues, regardless of hierarchical differences. Finally, feminist organizations recruit staff and volunteers on the basis of personal contacts and commitment to the organization's mission, rather than professional experience or educational qualifications, so as to establish a homogenous organization

(Milofsky and Elion 1988). This was also proved from the interviews, although most of them had high educational qualifications (at least a master's degree) they were hired mainly for their commitment to the organizations mission. The women I interviewed emphasized their social network as a valuable source for growth and opportunities, both professionally and personally. I found many women knew each other prior to being colleagues in the NGOs. Although many of the women were unpaid members of the NGOs, nearly half of them said that they were paid monthly, which is consistent with the views of Western feminists who perceive unpaid work as a form of exploitation against women. Meanwhile, I also noted that nine of the twenty one women I interviewed had other jobs to supplement their incomes. Also conspicuous was the fact that only those women who were from the affluent, elite classes worked without pay. This finding, therefore, corroborates literature that suggest that volunteers also hold other jobs in order to supplement their incomes. Moreover, I found that upper classes of women seemed to glorify unpaid work. Earlier I mentioned that Fernandes (1997) claimed that a sense of ambiguity surrounds the attitudes held towards working women in Kolkata, not only this but also women's own opinion about working outside the home. At the same time Bannerji et al (n.d.:39-40) claimed that most middleclass households aspire to follow middleclass norms in which it is a mark of status if women do not work outside the home. However, I noticed a general trend among younger volunteers and activists that they were more prone to seeking out jobs that advanced their careers more productively, while the older women were not as adventurous, indicating they were more or less settled in the field that they were working in and were not hopeful of being offered new opportunities mainly because of their age.

Most importantly, however, it came across from the interviews that socio-economic class factors had significant impact on their career choices and need for growth. Most of the younger volunteers and activists hailed from middle class backgrounds, and considered their NGO careers in more professional (as against altruistic only) terms than did the older women from the upper classes who saw their work as an extension of their role as mothers and nurturers. In U.S literature, McCarthy (1989:7) noted that ‘under the banner of religion and the ideology of the Republican Motherhood and the cult of domesticity, women broadened their range of maternal responsibilities beyond the home to encompass the needs of dependents and the dispossessed.’” With compulsory education, children spent much less time at home, and women were encouraged to fill their time by serving the collective good (Bolger 1975). Likewise, the upper class older women discussed in this study were all performing duties and responsibilities comparable to business and government professionals, but they were careful to describe their work within the context of their traditional roles as wives and mothers (many women interviewed described their volunteer work as an extension of their care giving role as mothers). In fact, many of them were widowed or had adult children away from home, indicating that their traditional roles as wives and mothers were no longer dominant and sought fulfillment and meaning through unpaid work in women’s NGOs.

In terms of career growth, as per literature, my findings confirm that their involvement with the NGOs provided them platforms from which to build better careers in the professional world by increasing their skills and gaining work experience. However, I noted that as per Metzendorf and Cnaan (1994) typologies, power relations

within the organizations may vary when the potential for promotion lies mainly with ‘policy-volunteers’ instead of those in service-volunteer level. Although I did find that age and having more job experience can change these dynamics.

Throughout the interviews I noticed that many of the women would describe their career choices in relation to their domestic obligations and familial responsibilities. Thus, domestic obligation emerged as the next broad theme that I explored. The participants responded to questions about their caretaking role - serving their families as a daughter, wife, mother and then as a daughter-in-law- as a major domestic obligation. This theme came across as priority for most of them. The concept of sacrifice came up every now and then, when it came to discussing reasons for their (usually abrupt) discontinuation of educational and professional careers. Karlekar (1988) had pointed out that the legitimacy of personal authority goes against the conception of individuals with family and kinship networks, where they have to consider others expectations and meet responsibilities towards them. This expectation was particularly anticipated of women in the family, whose main role in Indian society is to become self-sacrificing wives and mothers (Calman 1992).

From the interviews, it seemed quite clear that family is the most important priority in an Indian woman’s life, regardless of her socio-economic class or educational background. From my study, I realized that fulfilling the needs of the family (both immediate and extended) was the main social responsibility for women, regardless of how active they were as volunteers and activists at the women’s NGOs in Kolkata. Moreover, women experienced guilt when their professional involvement was

incongruent with their traditional gender roles as mothers and wives (Burke and Mckeen 1988).

However, I could not help but notice strains of frustration and regret among the women for making such life-altering sacrifices such as discontinuing their education and professional careers for the welfare of their families. This observation leads me to deduce that rigid gender role expectations and non-egalitarian family values oppressive to women still seem to permeate the psyche of the Indian populous regardless of the socio-economic class and framework of the civil or welfare society. The internalization of gender roles by these women supports that the understanding comes from the hidden aspects of social relations between genders and institutions. These dynamics, in turn, confirm that contemporary Indian women sought equality only with an emphasis on complementarities, without challenging the patriarchal fabric of Indian society which dictates their traditional gender roles and assigns separate spheres for men and women.

Nevertheless, I found that there were a few voices of dissent among this group of woman, who were critical of these gender roles assigned to women. Especially, when it came to talking about their daughters, most women seemed to object to such gender division of labor so that their daughters do not have to give up opportunities in their lives and sacrifice their educational and career goals. Moreover, I found that younger women in the group were more open to fulfilling their domestic and professional roles simultaneously rather than giving up one for the other, while older women accepted the significance of their traditional roles as appropriate for females merely complimenting the role of males in society.

One of the related themes that emerged was social challenges and obstacles for women that affect their career choices. The analysis of data of theme three seems to indicate that the Indian feminist movement diverges from the equivalent movements in the West, with respect to the notion of sexual differences (Kumar 1993). It is almost taken for granted that the difference between the sexes was such that their roles, functions, aims and desires were different. Not surprisingly then, many women in my research seemed to perpetuate existing gender role stereotypes based on biological differences between sexes (Wilson 1978).

I found several responses that corroborate the fact that there still exists the unquestioning beliefs and idealism in women's roles as nurturers and care-takers (as socialized from their childhood) in urban Indian civil society. An emphasis on traditional notions of femininity and masculinity was prominent in our conversations.

However, there does seem to be a noticeable shift taking place from the traditional notions of boundaries consigned to men and women. In fact, some of the women in my research were vocal about finding the concept of separate spheres as unjust and redundant. This implies that discursive voices are already present among them, which has the potential to challenge the existing boundaries of spheres or provide alternative strategies for expanding the spheres at the least.

Interestingly, I found that although these volunteers and activists would speak about the plight of the oppressed women that they are trying to help, yet very often they would relate the oppression to themselves and speak about the problems they face in their own lives. I found these parallels interesting in terms of studying social obstacles of Indian women from various classes and educational backgrounds, which were sometimes

overlapping across classes and seemed universally applicable to women in general. The women complained about facing discrimination based on separate spheres at their (previous) workplace, as well as by their in-laws at home who were against them being engaged in public service outside their homes. Taking the challenges to go out of their homes to do public service also means taking the risk of being labeled as ‘promiscuous’ by others. Nevertheless, these women were aware that challenging existing spheres of gender roles and the ensuing status-quo is not going to be easy since recently there has been a trend among Indian youth to return to traditions that uphold gender divisions of labor and separation of public and private spheres for men and women.

Additionally, I noticed that confronting gender role stereotypes is another related challenge that the women face. It was brought about several times during the interviews about the pressures of getting married, since marriage is still considered the ultimate goal for women in India, regardless of how well-educated or economically independent they may be.

With the changing political economy that shapes their everyday lives, there has been a feminization of the global labor force and increase in women’s employment in the low-paid service sector (Ward 1990). Nevertheless, women now have more job opportunities and with rising costs it is becoming almost imperative for them to seek employment outside their homes to make ends meet. However, there does not seem to be sufficient social infrastructure or cultural provisions in place to make women’s work any easier – therefore, Indian women are now having to play the dual role of both the breadwinner and the homemaker, which is what Hochschild and Machung (1990) have referred to as the second shift.



To add to these social challenges another sub-theme that came up frequently was that of 'violence' against women. The interview data offered several instances of violence against women. In India, domestic violence takes on distinctive forms which include dowry-deaths or bride-burning. Therefore, the need for shelters for women emerged as a recurrent theme. From the interviews, I also learnt that physical security or protection against rapes was a concern among the women volunteers and activists. Many of the quotes which I have analyzed referred to physical security as one of the major concerns for oppressed women in general and also for the volunteers and activists themselves.

The other emergent theme was the lack of opportunity for education for women. There was a tacit understanding among the women volunteers and activists that they were lucky to have had the opportunity to educate themselves (most women I interviewed had at least a master's degree).

Carillo (1992) links domestic violence against women to women's socio-economic and psychological dependency on men, which makes it difficult for them to leave situations of violence or sexual harassment. Again, this dependency is frequently economic which results from a multi-layered system of sex discrimination. Not surprisingly then, women in the NGOs cited lack of economic independence as one of the major challenges that Indian women face. Ironically, at least half of the women I interviewed were themselves non-paid members of the NGOs. And, out of those who did get paid, they had to supplement their incomes through other sources in order to make ends meet, which was otherwise not possible from their meager salaries at the NGOs. However, most upper class women did not seem to mind their non-paid positions, even

though research shows that their upper class status does not prevent them from domestic abuse (Triandis 1994).

In summary, I found a lot of the sub-themes are inter – related; there are obvious correlations with domestic violence, economic dependence, cultural practices and gender inequality. However, another related theme that was brought out by some women was attitudinal change from the cultural perspective in terms of women’s rights and treatment towards women. In a related vein, I also took note of the tensions between conflicting ideologies of globalization versus traditions. There was a tendency to hold on to notions of ideal Indian womanhood, while at the same time redefining gender roles in the context of the global economic restructuring, which has caused a general state of confusion about what is the appropriate role for women in society.

Some of the negative impacts of the social pressures created by globalization on women could also be traced in their conversations. Consumerism, increase in women’s participation in the informal or unorganized sector, rise in costs of living and in acquiring education were cited as examples for some of the challenges that women are facing in India, as marginalized groups. Most importantly, the new ideas of freedom seem to be creating some amount of confusion and vulnerability among women as to their roles and responsibilities. A sense of unhealthy competition and rivalry among men and women in terms of public and private sphere roles seems eminent to some of these women I spoke with.

However, since these women are themselves in the developmental sector of civil society, one is given to think that it is unlikely that they themselves will be directly affected by these challenges. But since they are outsiders within the system, they are too

victims of the same predicaments. Moreover, there are great chances that increasing professionalization of NGOs will render them vulnerable to losing their jobs to more trained NGO professionals who consider developmental work as their careers (Weisgrau 1997).

Although, provisions for women's health was considered an important area of concern by the some of the women in the NGOs, I found out that since their jobs are mostly unpaid, these volunteers and activists get no benefits for their own health (such as medical insurance, maternity benefits etc.). When it comes to such facilities, these volunteers and activists are pretty much on their own. Of course, the economic class factor again determines their needs. I would imagine most of the upper classes of women (and perhaps some women from the upper middle classes) have other sources (mainly familial support) to take care of their financial needs and health care. There were also brief references made to women's lack of representation in politics; other social evils which still need combating such as child marriages and female infanticide were also mentioned but not elaborated by them.

Finally, another sub-theme that emerged from the interviews was that of the image of the NGOs, its reputation in the minds of the public. This also included respect for their contribution to society as volunteers and activists. Although many upper class women find a life time occupation in volunteering and activism, literature says that there are negative stereotypes to this kind of invisible work that women perform. Some of the women admitted that NGO work is devalued and often misunderstood as mere charity work (not developmental work). Also, recent trends in competition among NGOs for procuring donor money and past scandals (by some NGOs) have tarnished the image of

NGOs according to the testimonies of some of the women I interviewed. Moreover, the low pay-scales in the non-profit sector have made working with NGOs not a very coveted career option. Moreover, there is a general lack of awareness about NGO work among the Indian public, although the scenario is changing with the increasing pace of economic liberalization and more resource rich NGOs in the picture. More and more people are becoming aware of and respectful towards the role of NGOs and the civil society. As per these women, the media is helping generate awareness and in building more positive image of the NGOs.

Other than cultural, social and organizational challenges that impact the decisions to work in the NGO sector, there are personal motivations that act as impetus for a career as volunteers and activists. The data from the interviews provide us with sub themes that cover various reasons that the women reflect as their motivation to work in the non-profit sector; the reasons include personal experiences, and cultural biographies of the participants, comments on their personal inclinations, ethical and philosophical aspirations which builds their personalities, their concerns for women's social problems and desire to contribute towards social welfare, women's empowerment and equality in India.

Another important sub theme that emerged from the interviews was the appreciation that the women receive for their work as volunteers and activists. Reactions from their families, friends, colleagues, employers and beneficiaries impact their decision to embark on a career in the field of development and empowerment of oppressed women. Moreover, I tried to find out from the women if they really were convinced that

they were effective in helping oppressed women by making a positive difference in their lives.

The interviews provide rich descriptions of life experiences which act as significant source of knowledge from ‘outsider within’ the mainstream sociological scholarship and civil society literature (Collins 1991:53). Their testimonies reveal how the women break the artificial boundaries between personal, social, political and cultural realities affecting their lives, which coincide with the methodological commitments that guide feminist standpoint research and analysis. Some of the activists narrated incidents from local history and politics that had prompted them to activism, which included incidents of gang rapes and dowry deaths during the 1980s (Karat 1997). Other older volunteers cited the Indian Independence movement against the British colonizers as their inspiration for working toward social welfare and development. While still others opined that it was their innate personality traits of compassion, social convictions, sense of justice and ethics that shaped their altruistic personalities.

Data from interviews by younger women volunteers and activists pointed to the fact that their education background in liberal arts or the social sciences led them to consider a career in social welfare and women’s rights, and thereby become a part of the women’s movement in India. Significantly, one of the twenty one women I interviewed made a direct reference to being influenced and inspired by U.S feminists; especially about one of them with whom she had a chance to work with in the 1970s – 1980s in organizing seminars on women’s issues.

Also, a few women testified that their motivation to work as volunteers and activists came directly from specific incidents and moments of epiphany that shaped their

lives. Such incidents included experiencing gender discrimination themselves or witnessing other women suffer from it.

As far as appreciation from others was concerned, although there seemed to be a general devaluation of women's volunteer work, I noticed a change toward more social acceptance for this type of work. The women I interviewed confirmed that they were being appreciated more now than before, especially with the help of media exposure of their developmental projects and awareness programs.

With regard to their own perceptions of their work – whether they believed if they were effective in improving the lives of the oppressed women that they were working for and raising their feminist consciousness while making them self-reliant – all but one woman believed in their work to be making a positive contribution to society. This was regardless of their knowledge of the negative stereotypes that existed about women's invisible work at NGOs. The women also confirmed that more often than not, they found self-actualization and self-empowerment through volunteerism and activism (Metzendorf and Cnaan 1992).

Conception of feminism was identified as the last broad theme to emerge from the data. In order to answer the second research question, I had asked these women about their conception of feminism and how they construct the image of a feminist. The sub themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data that I gathered from their responses to the following question: *“Have you ever had formal academic training on Feminist Theory? Have you ever had the opportunity to attend gender-training workshops? In your own words, how would you define feminism in one brief sentence or just as a concept? How do common people (men & women in Kolkata / India) react to the*

*concept in general? Does your definition of feminism differ from the idea of feminism people generally have? Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?"*

I was able to find out how the concept of feminism takes on different meanings for those who claim to understand the philosophy. In many ways, their testimonies brought to life the diversity of feminist understanding of theory and practice. It also helps us locate the distinctions between the women's movements across the globe. Although I was able to trace many influences from Western feminism, there were some characteristics that were exclusive to Indian feminism. For instance, 'class' seemed to be a more important variable than 'gender', when it came to combating inequality. This dynamic could be compared to Marxist Feminism (Hartsock 1983) in the West. Based on literature and my personal observation on this aspect of Indian feminism, among other obvious socio-economic, religious and political biases, one possible reason for this class-emphasis could be the lower importance that has been historically accorded to the female sex in certain cultures (Jamison 1996). Again as discussed in the literature review section, the Indian women's movement was also influenced by the nationalist struggle against the British colonizers (Kumar 1993). Feminism, therefore, takes on a different flavor due to these unique influences peculiar to the post colonial Indian condition.

More recently, the rapidly changing political and economic scenario since the 1990s has introduced more dimensions to the women's movement in India (Karat 1997). These new influences have added to some confusion with redefining gender roles while preserving ideals of Indian womanhood. The term 'feminism' generally evokes Western stereotypes of 'bra-burning', 'cigarette-smoking' 'anti-male' matriarchs among the common people. Although I found out that the women volunteers and activists whom I

interviewed had a relatively better understanding of the concept, yet I found overwhelmingly that most were unsure and confused with the concept of feminism. In fact, some had absolutely no understanding of the theory, with an inherent aversion to the term.

In India, feminists do not directly challenge the patriarchal matrix of society. Assuming feminism to be a Western concept where emancipated women ‘divorce their husbands’ ‘break-up homes’ and ‘neglect children’ (Kumar 1993:195), many Indians fear that feminists will undermine Indian family values. Moreover, I saw parallels of the backlash against feminism (Faludi 1991) in India, only in this case feminism is doubly suspect because it has an additional imperialistic bias and short-sightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle class white experiences (Mohanty 1991:7) .

Along with these differences, the Indian feminist movement diverges from Western feminism with the notion of sexual differences and ensuing gender division of labor. Besides, the legitimacy of personal authority of women goes against the conception of individuals with family and kinship networks, where they have to consider others expectations and meet responsibilities towards them as mothers and wives (Karlekar 1988).

Mainstream conceptions of being political are often times incongruent with mainstream ideals of women as being compassionate yet unfrontational (as also in some Western societies), women’s rebellion seems incongruent with the stereotypical images of them as caretakers and nurtures (Blackstone 2004). Similarly in India, the need for radical change in the Indian society is asserted by most women’s groups, yet there is a paradox confronting women’s activism.



From the interpretation of my data, I also found that women celebrities, who are active in women's empowerment in Kolkata, avoid being labeled as 'feminists'. This was an interesting revelation to me, since I had not anticipated women celebrities who have the status of being dedicated activists in the Indian media would actually disassociate themselves from the ideology of feminism, given their years of exposure and experience in feminist activism.

Nevertheless, twelve out of the twenty one of the women I interviewed for this study, considered themselves as 'feminists' by their own definitions, while four did not and five were not sure if they were feminists or not. This theme captures the observation that within civil society in India, feminism as a conceptual ideology is understood differently by different women. This situation points to the possibility of feminism being interpreted differently within local and global contexts.

Given the above findings and discussion, I propose that more research be done on transnational feminism and womanism, which may fill the gaps of knowledge and activism within the feminist framework.

### ***Strengths and Limitations of Study***

One of the main strengths of this study is the fact that it is one of the first ever done specifically on middle and upper class women volunteers and activists in Kolkata (India) and also that their standpoints have been the central focus. Feminist and womanist scholars have done a lot of theorizing around standpoint theory, but few have undertaken studies where they have applied the standpoint framework to study women from India. I feel confident in saying that, by centering the experiences of these women who have been historically overlooked from mainstream sociological scholarship and

civil society literature, I have provided an opportunity to define the ‘outsider within’ position of women volunteers and activists in the Indian civil society through their own subjective and personal knowledge. Needless to say, this study will benefit those interested in studying volunteerism and activism in the civil society in the Third World Nations. However, the greatest limitation was the lack of available literature on the group of women chosen for this study, their backgrounds and generalizable characteristics. Even if there were some literature available they were in languages other than English, therefore, they had to be translated as best as possible.

Although the women had self-identified themselves as belonging to either middle or upper middle or upper class, there was no quantifiable measure of their socio-economic status that was taken into consideration. So it is quite possible that these women actually belonged to varying backgrounds. On the other hand, I recognize this diversity as a strength because it adds to a richer data.

Also, I must caution the reader in the area of transferability because twenty one women may not represent the entire population of women volunteers and activists in the Third World countries (or for that matter even in India). However, this limitation is seen as a strength because this study was not designed to arrive at conclusions but to develop information-rich cases to describe the women’s experiences in enough detail and depth that readers can connect to that experience and learn how it is constituted, and deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects centered around the experiences of the women volunteers and activists, who are ‘outsiders within’ the Indian civil society, as well as outside of international sociological discourse.

Some of the interviews took place in Bengali , while a couple of others were bilingual, although I have tried my level best to translate them as accurately as possible to English, nevertheless, some meaning (tone) is always lost in translation. The final limitation then, is that it was not possible to recheck the typed transcriptions with the women in Kolkata, as this study was primarily conducted in the U.S although the data had been collected in India. However, I have used thick descriptions from the data to ensure that interpretations are consistent with the data.

Also, analyzing the verbal data that I gathered from educationist (informal discussions with professors from University of Calcutta and Jadavpore University) in Kolkata may have added to the richness of this study, however, I left them out of my primary data to keep the data source consistent and more or less homogenous.

Among other strengths, this study furthers feminist literature and theorizing by exploring the dynamics of gender in the Indian civil society among volunteers and activists; it raises questions about the lack of scholarship on urban women from South Asia and Third World feminism. Given the paucity of research, this study provides documentation and information on a much needed area of study. It reveals that stories of urban, educated, middle and upper class women volunteers and activists from the Third World are often absent from literature on civil society and social inequality studies. It examines the complex challenges these women face in a gender-stratified society and questions gender stereotypes which oppress women. This study also touches upon acts of resistance that can help women volunteers and activists around the world learn how women in male-dominated sectors attempt to overcome patriarchy. Importantly, it brings

to light the invisible work these women do and how they contribute to social development, which is usually unfairly devalued and undermined.

### ***Future Research Implications***

Directly from the above findings, I was able to gather how class factors in women's career choices. It would be pertinent to conduct research on how elite women make their career choices as against women from middle or lower middle classes. On a more related area of research, I would like to see how transnational feminism has impacted career choices of women in civil societies in other Third World nations, most likely those nations which are part of the Indian sub-continent. Building on the present data and findings, other possible future research would include comparative case studies of women volunteers and activists in NGOs in the U.S dealing with immigrant Indian women's social problems.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **India – A Background**

As of 1991, India has a population of some 850 million people. India's population is three and a third times that of the United States; it is 200 million greater than the continent of Africa's, and 75 million greater than that of the United States, Canada and Europe combined; India contains 27 percent of the entire Third World (Statistical Abstract of the United States 1990). In many respects, it constitutes a microcosm of the problems of developing states; some of these problems are at their most severe in India (Hardgrave and Kochanek 1986). The population is beset by ethnic and religious and divided by language. In Indian women - Hindu, Moslem, Sikh, Christian and Parsi – have many problems in common but common solutions remain hostage to inter-ethnic strife, even though some of them appear susceptible to legal remedies. The particulars are unique to India, but the fact of ethnic division is not (Calman 1992).

India is also afflicted by poverty more crushing than that experienced in most of the developing world. In 1985 the World Bank determined that 420 million Indians, 55 percent of the population were 'poor' (having an income less than \$30 a month), while 250 million, 33 percent of the population were 'extremely poor' (with an income of less than \$23 a month). This compares unfavorably with the figures for sub-Saharan Africa, in which 47 percent of the population were deemed 'poor' and 30 percent 'extremely poor' (Calman 1992).

Women in India, as elsewhere, are particularly poor. They are more likely to be malnourished, starting as a result of the relative deprivation of food and healthcare for girls as compared to boys (deprivation which persists into adulthood) and continuing with repeated pregnancies, the process of lactation and overwork at physically arduous tasks such as the collection of fuel and water (tasks that have been made more time-consuming in recent years by deforestation) (Bhate et al. 1987).

As elsewhere in the developing world, women are more likely to be illiterate. The 1981 census indicates that in India, overall, 24.8 percent of women are literate, compared to 46.9 percent of men. The situation is most dramatic in rural areas, where only 18 percent of women are literate; urban areas are significantly better with a 47.8 percent female literacy rate. India's female literacy rate compares unfavorably to other regions in the Third World (Calman 1992).

These problems make the organization of women urgent if they are to achieve equality, but also make it that much more difficult. Thus, the problems presented to women and to the organizing of women by poverty in India may be instructive for women elsewhere.

But as in other countries in developing areas, the population of India is not all poor. Indeed, the divide between those of middle-class standing and above, with their access to most of the consumer goods the world economy has to offer, and the majority who are desperately poor is becoming deeper and more painful. Women of different classes experience different problems and of course have different opportunities and political agendas. Greater wealth helps alleviate some problems but creates others. For example, the phenomenon of dowry death – in which a young bride is murdered by her husband and / or his family in a quest for greater dowry – is most common among upwardly mobile members of the lower-middle class (Calman 1992).

## **Appendix 2**

### **Kolkata – Profile**

Kolkata or Calcutta, city in eastern India and capital of West Bengal State, situated on the banks of the Hugli (Hooghly) River (a tributary of the Ganges River). Kolkata lies about 100 km (about 60 mi) north of the Bay of Bengal and about 70 km (about 45 mi) west of Bangladesh. It is the hub of India's second most populous metropolitan area (after Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay) and is the chief commercial, financial, and manufacturing center of eastern India.

Kolkata was founded as a trading post of the English East India Company in the late 1600s. It was then known as Calcutta, an Anglicized form of the name of a local village, Kalikata. It served as the capital of British India from 1773 through 1911. During the British era, administrative offices and a British-style university, the University of Calcutta, were established. Jute mills and other industries along the Hugli River also contributed to the city's growth and eventually gave rise to major urban development.

Kolkata is located only about 1° south of the tropic of Cancer, close to sea level in a formerly swampy area. It lies in a monsoon region, with most of its average annual rainfall of 1625 mm (64 in) falling from June through September. Though winters are mild, with an average January temperature of 19° C (67° F), the temperature sometimes dips to 10° C (50° F). From March through September, Kolkata is hot and humid, with an average July temperature of 29° C (85° F); in the months of May and June the temperature may rise as high as 38° C (100° F).

#### Kolkata and its Metropolitan Area

The city of Kolkata covers an area of 185 sq km (71 sq mi). It lies near the southern third of the metropolitan area, which is known as the Kolkata Metropolitan District (KMD). The KMD covers an area of 1246 sq km (481 sq mi) and is comprised of nearly 500 units of local government, including three municipal corporations and 29 municipalities. Roads and railways make up the main traffic arteries, and a bypass road has been built east of the city to facilitate through traffic. The Hugli River runs through the KMD. As during colonial times, industries are located on both banks of the Hugli and along railroad lines. Financial, administrative, and trade activities are concentrated in the city's Central Business District (CBD), which lies just east of the Hugli River, and its immediate surroundings. The center of the CBD covers an area that includes Kolkata's major landmark, the Maidān, which is a large park containing many fine drives, a golf course, a racecourse, cricket grounds, several soccer fields, and the historic new Fort William (completed in 1781) of the English East India Company. The residential settlements follow a linear pattern along highlands provided by Hugli River levees and on the intervening levees of old, dried up rivers. Between and beyond the levees to the east and west of the Hugli are the lowlands, which are prone to flooding during the rainy months; parts of the lowlands have been filled or drained for additional settlements. Low-income settlements are located in the lowlands. Such slums are found all over, but with a concentration at the fringes of the urban areas. Slum structures are characterized by

flimsy materials, lack of underground sewerage, unsanitary conditions, and tenements of one-room apartments.

Architectural monuments in Kolkata date mostly from colonial times. After an attack on the old Fort William (situated east of Dalhousie Square) in 1756 by Siraj-ud-Dawlah, the Muslim ruler of Bengal, a new, sturdier Fort William was built about 1.5 km (about 1 mi) south of the old site near the Hugli River in the Maidān. At the heart of the CBD lies BBD Bagh or the former Dalhousie Square. On the north side of the square is the Writers' Building (1880), which houses the state government ministries. To the west of the square is the General Post Office, which features a high reinforced concrete dome. Two blocks southwest of the square is the Gothic-style High Court (1872), with a 55-m (180-ft) high tower that is modeled after the Cloth Hall of Ieper, Belgium. The massive Victoria Memorial, completed in 1921, sits at the southern end of the Maidān; it is built in a Renaissance design with Indian influences. Dakshineswar Temple, built in the 19th century, is north of the city limits on the Hugli River; its design is influenced by the thatched bamboo huts of southern Bengal. A building of similar design located just north of Kolkata on the river is Belur Math, which houses a monastery and the headquarters of the Ramkrishna Mission. Parasnath Jain Temple (1867), Marble Palace (1835), and Nakhoda Mosque (1926) are other architectural landmarks in the Kolkata area.

Other places of interest in Kolkata are the fashionable Jawaharlal Nehru (formerly Chowringhee) Road, the city's main thoroughfare; the Raj Bhavan (1802; formerly called the Government House), the state governor's residence; the Indian Museum (1875), which contains noted displays on archaeology and natural history; and the Birla Industrial and Technological Museum. The Botanical Gardens (1786) in Hāora (or Howrah), Kolkata's twin city, features many tropical plants in addition to a famous banyan tree, the branches of which spread 381 m (1250 ft) in circumference.

### Economy

As the capital of British India and home to the fertile agricultural and mineral-rich land of eastern India, Kolkata was one of the first areas of India to develop industrially. The first jute and paper mills of India were started in the Kolkata area in the 1800s. By 1921 nearly 35 percent of India's industrial workers were located in Kolkata. However, Kolkata began to lose its industrial leadership after India gained its independence in 1947. One cause was the loss of Kolkata's raw jute supply when Bengal was divided into West Bengal and East Bengal, with East Bengal becoming part of Pakistan. Competition in jute manufacturing from East Bengal (later East Pakistan, now Bangladesh) further hurt Kolkata's jute industry. Competition and slow growth also hit other traditional manufacturing areas, such as heavy engineering, rubber, and paper.

Other factors that have hurt metropolitan Kolkata's industrialization include a 1977 ban imposed by the Indian government on new licenses of large-scale industrial units in the large metropolises; labor troubles since the end of 1960s; pro-union attitude of the state government; severe power shortages; limitations on raw materials; and shortage of capital. Moreover, a slow depletion of water volume in the Hugli River limited the size of ships at Kolkata's docks, causing Kolkata to lose its status as the premier port city of India. The water supply problem has been resolved to some extent by diverting water from the Ganges River to the Hugli, and by constructing a diversion canal and the Farakka barrage, which increased the depth of the channel, in 1976. A deep port

at Haldia, about 65 km (about 40 mi) south of the Kolkata, has also been established. Ships arriving at Kolkata from the Bay of Bengal travel only when the river is in high tide, escorted by specially trained Hugli pilots; additionally, the river channel is constantly dredged. Few new major industries came into the KMD in the 1970s and 1980s, but in the mid-1990s the state attracted some large-scale capital investments both from native and foreign sources because it relaxed its anti-capitalist stance.

Although Kolkata's poor economic factors have caused it to lose its designation as India's largest commercial and banking center, it is the headquarters of many native business firms, banks, and international corporations. One of India's largest companies, Birlas, is headquartered in Kolkata.

As the remaining agricultural land has been lost to urban development, the percentage of Kolkata's workers employed in various fields has changed. As of 1991, 58 percent of workers were employed in services, 40 percent in industry (including 4 percent in construction), and 2 percent in agriculture. The agricultural and industrial sectors experienced the greatest declines. The majority of people employed in the service sector are involved in trade and commerce, in jobs that generally offer little pay or security. Most of this group works in retail or small-scale trading establishments, often without a roof, either in a family business or employed by a small investor. Kolkata still continues to attract surplus labor from surrounding areas, increasing the population over and above the city's natural birthrate increase.

Public transportation, such as buses, trams, trains, and subways, are the principal means of transport in the Kolkata metropolitan area. Buses operate throughout the area, and trains have north-south lines with a few east-west connections. There are two major train terminals: Sealdah in the east central part of Kolkata and Hāora across the river from the Central Business District. Electric trams operate in Kolkata proper. The aging buses, trains, and tram cars suffer from overloading, creating uncomfortable rides. Subway construction started in 1972 and became operational with 7 km (4.3 mi) of line in 1984. By 1995 all of the subway's 16.4-km (10.2-mi) route from Dum Dum to Tolluguye was completed. The subway carries an estimated 25 percent of Kolkata's 7 million commuters. Cycle rickshaws are not allowed in the city of Kolkata, but they are common in the metropolitan area. Hand-pulled carts are used for short-distance cargo hauling. Private automobiles, extensively used in Kolkata and Hāora, are increasing in numbers and are owned by the wealthy. The streets of Kolkata remain congested with taxis, private automobiles, buses, slow-moving trams, and hand-pulled carts. Air pollution caused by automobiles, buses, and industrial emissions is severe. Kolkata's international airport at Dum Dum provides service for both national and international airlines.

### Population

According to the 1991 census, Kolkata had a population of 4,309,819, with an extremely high population density of 23,720 persons per sq km (61,970 persons per sq mi). The metropolitan area had a population of 11 million and a density of 8761 persons per sq km (22,661 persons per sq mi). The growth rate of the metropolitan area population was 18.7 percent between 1981 and 1991, down from the 1971 to 1981 growth rate of 23.9 percent. The population of the city of Kolkata grew more slowly than the metropolitan district. Since India's first census in 1872, Kolkata has generally been India's largest city, although in 1991 it lost that status to Mumbai. Of the total population

of Kolkata's metropolitan area in 1981, more than 30 percent lived in slums; many other Kolkata residents are so-called pavement dwellers (homeless). Mother Teresa, a Roman Catholic nun who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, founded the Missionaries of Charity in 1950 to help the poorest of the poor in Kolkata and all over the world.

### Education and Culture

Kolkata is the home of the University of Calcutta (founded in 1857) and Jadavpur University (1955). Rabindra Bharati University (1962), devoted to fine arts, is housed at the former residence of Bengali poet and Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore. Part of the Tagore residence is now a museum. Another Nobel laureate, Sir Chandrasekhara Venkata Raman, who received the Nobel Prize in physics in 1930 for his discovery of the Raman effect on light, worked and researched in Kolkata for a long period. Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, a highly regarded Bengali fiction writer of the early 20th century, lived in nearby Hāora. Ram Mohan Roy, sometimes called the father of modern India, began his social reform for abolition of suttee (burning to death of a wife with her deceased husband) in Kolkata. He also founded Brahma Samaj, a modern Hindu religious sect, in the city in 1828.

More than 70 percent of Kolkata's population were literate in 1991. The literacy rate is higher for men, who generally receive more education than women; for every three men only two women are literate. Several languages are spoken in Kolkata, including English. Bengali speakers constitute 60 percent of the city's population, and there are Hindi (23 percent), Urdu (11 percent), and Oriya (1.3 percent) speakers as well. After British India was partitioned into India and Muslim Pakistan in 1947, a large number of Muslim residents migrated from Kolkata to East Pakistan, while many Hindu refugees arrived in the city from East Pakistan. Today Hindus constitute 83 percent of the city's population while Muslims make up 14 percent; the rest of the population is comprised of small groups such as Christians, Jains, and Sikhs.

### History

Kolkata was founded in 1690 by British trader Job Charnock as a trading post of the English East India Company. It was then known by the British name of Calcutta. In the mid-17th century the Portuguese had a trading outpost in the area at Sutanuti, followed by the Dutch, who constructed a diversion canal at the bank of the Hugli River, near the present Central Business District. The old Fort William was built to protect the English post in 1696. The city became famous in 1756, in England particularly, when Siraj-ud-Dawlah, a Bengal ruler, captured the fort and, according to British historians, stifled to death 43 British residents in a small guardroom called the Black Hole of Calcutta. The city was recaptured by the British under Robert Clive in 1757. The English initially built an intricate transport network through the Hugli-Ganges water system, but it was the railroads, introduced in the 1850s, that successfully established connections with the hinterland and the rest of India. The city eventually had the largest concentration of trading establishments in India, and a Western-style business district evolved by the end of the 19th century. The colonial city maintained a strict division between the

crowded and ill-planned native quarters to the east and north of the Central Business District, and the spacious and well-planned quarters where the Europeans lived in the south and southeastern parts of the old city. After independence, the former European quarters were either turned into residences of the Indian rich or, as in the Park Street area, into commercial areas.

With the dominance of leftist political parties in the Bangla state government in the late 1960s, Kolkata's municipal government also came to be controlled by Communists. In January 2001 the spelling of the city's name officially changed to Kolkata.

Contributed By: Ashok K. Dutt

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### **Appendix 3**

#### **The Report on the Status of Women**

##### *Post-Independent Activity*

At the time of Independence in 1947 women had ‘already established themselves as equals in political life’ (Chitnis 1988:87). In addition, the Indian constitution granted women equal political rights. The constitution of India, asserts that women, untouchable castes, and those living in isolated regions, are to be offered assistance in living a life of equality due to their recognition as ‘weaker sections’ of society (:88). Other legal and political stipulations include equality in spheres such as divorce, employment and property rights. Despite these provisions, the position of women in contemporary India is still unsatisfactory especially when one considers that the ratio of males to females in 1000:933 (:89). This discrepancy stems partially from inadequate health care of the mother and child and the increase in clinics utilizing amniocentesis and thereby permitting the selection of males over females through abortion. In addition, illiteracy continues to flourish amongst women who still represent a minority within the Indian labor force, and further detrimental social customs such as dowry still prevail.

Chitnis (1988:89) contends that the position of the Indian woman has failed to improve significantly due to lack of knowledge of, and a failure to make full use of, her rights. Women face a paradoxical situation since on the one hand they encounter liberal laws, while on the other the inequalities still remain (Joshi and Liddle 1986:75).

The implementation of the laws to secure equality continues to be hindered by patriarchal family structures and by barriers of caste and class. The laws also require honest implementation by the male-dominated administrative machinery. And a majority of women are both illiterate and poor, unaware of their legal rights, and without the resources to fight for them through the courts (ibid 1986:75).

Although the constitution endorses equality, women are denied such justice in areas such as the family, workplace and society in general due to prevailing patriarchal nature of the sociocultural environment (Bald 1992:402). In fact, after independence and the partition of India, many groups such as the socialists, peasants, workers and feminists felt betrayed by the National Congress since it stalled considerably the fulfillment of all its preindependence assurances. In the case of women, Congress’ attention to the constitution was minimal and there was much opposition to the Hindu Code Bill. “Demands for a reformed, uniform and all-encompassing codification of Hindu personal laws had been first raised by feminists in the thirties” (Kumar 1993:97). However, this Bill was only implemented in the form of separate Acts in the 1950s.

In the Post-Independent period sharp divisions were evident amongst feminists since their one common adversary had now been conquered.

Political divisions became more important than they had been earlier, especially since feminists had neither openly sought nor identified the enemy in gender terms, due partly to the exigencies of colonialism, and partly to the complexities of a culture in which gender relations were not as clearly distinguished as in the West (Kumar 1993:97).

Women who had worked hard for the nationalist movement now occupied positions within the Congress government since “the Congress stood for an improvement in women’s condition, and if disillusionment was setting in, it was doing so gradually”

(Kumar 1993:97). The fifties and sixties were comparatively quiet in terms of feminist activity but this all changed in the 1970s when there was a resurgence in feminist activity due to other radical movements of that time, e.g. the anti-price agitation. Such rejuvenated feminist activity rallied around two crucial concerns – dowry and rape – both of which focused on a new factor – violence against women.

In conclusion, the work of Indian women can be categorized as a movement since it represents sustained collective action on part of a particular segment of the population to attain specific goals.

If we define the woman's movement as autonomous women's organizations with an analysis of women's subordination and a program for changing it, then the 'first wave' women's organizations in India must be seen as such a movement. As Geraldine Forbes (1994) points out, "Indian women wrote and spoke about women's condition, formed organizations to secure desired changes, and eventually had an impact on the institutions of their society" (Joshi and Liddle 1986:21).

While the focus of the struggle was the improvement of the position of women within the confines of the prevailing structures, the movement can be categorized as anti-patriarchal since it opposed the bestowal of privileges upon men (Agnew 1976:42). Agnew (1976) asserts that the Indian women's movement did not utilize the strategy of confrontation in the attainment of its goals. Instead, women utilized the assistance of reformers and politicians to improve their own position. They did not threaten sex roles or the prevailing social basis of society but instead sought to raise their own position within the confines of this traditional structure.

### *Towards Equality*

Not all the events that helped to promote new consciousness about women's problems, and thus, eventually, movement activity, were products of internal change or activity; many activities to enhance women's status in India have been prompted ideologically and materially, by international feminism (Calman 1992). In 1967 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. In response, the government of India constituted the Committee on the Status of Women (CSWI) which was released in May, 1975. The report which was called *Towards Equality*, created an effect similar to that experienced in the United States in 1961 with the creation of the President's Commission on the Status of Women. Just as in the U.S., the President's Commission had created climate of expectations that something must be done to help women achieve full equality in American society; so in India, *Towards Equality* sparked immediate demands for government action (Calman 1992). The data compiled on women's inferior position in religious and family life, in healthcare and in law, and with regard to economic, educational and political opportunity served as a jolt to the consciousness of many educated and politicized Indians, both women and men, and helped spark their activism in a new direction.

Since the government alone cannot alter cultural pattern and social structures that uphold women's inferior position in the family and the economy, the CSWI in addition to detailing actions that government should take, called specifically for movement activity. The report urges community organizations, particularly women's organizations to mobilize public opinion and strengthen social efforts against oppressive institutions like



polygamy and dowry, and to mount a campaign for the dissemination of information about the legal rights of women to increase their awareness. The uplift of women must be the joint task of an educated and committed government, and a social movement that would enlighten and inspire (Calman 1992).

*Towards Equality* constituted an important ideological first step in mobilizing educated activists. Today, movement activists frequently sight the report as a critical factor in raising their consciousness and motivating them to act.

The substantive portion of the report opens with a brutal fact about the recorded decline in the ratio of females to males in the population. In 1971, there were only 930 females for every 1000 males. In contrast, most other countries, both in the developed and less developed worlds, have a higher percentage of women than men in their population. These patterns suggest that the neglect of women in India is a persistent phenomenon, the CSWI deplored the lack of reliable information on the causes of these disparities but suggested amongst its hypotheses the marked preference for sons and consequent neglect of females means the general neglect of women at all ages and the adverse impact of frequent and excessive childbearing on the health of women. In 1985, a document produced by the Indian government to mark the close of the international decade of women made a more succinct analysis – the problem of overwork for underfed women. It indicated that this was a plausible for this particular problem of female mortality.

The CSWI report had also reported that despite the Child Marriage Restraint Act which designated fifteen years as the minimum legal age for marriage, the marriage of young girls was still common. It also found that family planning is practiced by only fifteen percent of couples in the reproductive age group and that the level of education and fertility are inversely related; this finding provided one argument for the need to educate women. The need was further apparent in the 1971 census, which recorded that while the urban female literacy rate is 42.3%, in rural India the female literacy rate was only 13.2%. Thus, the committee was quick to point out; the women in India who hold high positions in government and intellectual life constitute a small, elite group and do not reflect the position of the enormous majority (Calman 1992).

The Committee understood that social structures are critical determinants of women's status. Acknowledging that many structures of inequality such as casteism community, class and geographic setting create different problems for women of different spheres, it considered the impact of religion too. Religion is pertinent not only to the cultural valuation of women, but to their legal position. In India, religion is also law when pertaining to family life – marriage, divorce, inheritance, guardianship, and children – religious law is recognized by the state. Modern India continues the practice adopted by the British of letting Hindu law govern Hindu community and Muslim law the Muslim community; the state also recognizes Christian, Parsi and Jewish Law. Despite the constitutional guarantee in Article 14 of the aspects of every religious community's law – laws that are still recognized by the courts today – discriminate against women. Nor can government alone bring about the changes required to bring women fully into the economic development process, since opposition to increased participation by women in the economic life of the country derives in part from social mores which deem women's proper economic role to be strictly separate from men's (Calman 1992).

## Appendix 4

### Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Friday, July 16, 2004

IRB Application No AS054

Proposal Title: Challenges of Women Volunteers and Activists in Womens NGOs in India: A Feminist Standpoint Analysis

Reviewed and  
Processed as: Exempt

Approval Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

Protocol Expires: 7/15/2005

Principal  
Investigator(s):

Aditi Mitra  
700 W Scott Ave, #345  
Stillwater, OK 74075

Jean Van Delinder  
035 Classroom  
Stillwater, OK 74078

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The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact me in 415 Whitehurst (phone: 405-744-1676, colson@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Carol Olson, Chair  
Institutional Review Board

**Appendix 5**  
**Informed Consent**  
**Open-ended / Semi Structured Interviews**

A. AUTHORIZATION:

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name of respondent), hereby authorize or direct Aditi Mitra to perform the following interview or procedure.

B. DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH AND ASSOCIATED RISKS / BENEFITS:

The research project is entitled:

*Challenges of Women Volunteers and Activists in Women's NGOs in India: A Feminist Standpoint Analysis*

Aditi Mitra, through Oklahoma State University, is conducting this research. This research is a partial requirement for Ms.Mitra to complete a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Sociology at Oklahoma State University.

This research's purpose is to gain information on how women deal with issues related to community activism as volunteers at NGOs. This will expand the field of knowledge on feminist theory and practice at a global level and the related dichotomies, challenges and possible solutions.

This interview will take from 45 minutes to one and a half hours. How long the interview will actually take depends on you and how much information you wish to give and how long you want to talk. During the interview, you will be asked questions related to the above topic and you can answer them as best as you can. The interview will be audiotaped. If at any time you wish to terminate the interview, you may do so.

Upon reading this form, if there is any clarification that you need, please feel free to ask Ms.Mitra to explain or translate for you. You may answer the questions in English, Hindi or Bengali, i.e., whichever language you are most comfortable communicating in. You may also choose to be bilingual, if you wish.

There are no risks involved in participating in this research. By participating in this research, you may attain an increased awareness of the challenges you face as a woman working for a woman's NGO as a volunteer. Other possible benefits include a deeper understanding of feminist theory and practice in your own life / career.

Your participation in this research project will remain confidential. The audiotape recording of your responses and your signature on this form will be kept in a locked box. Ms.Mitra will prepare a separate list, in a different location, containing only the identifying code numbers of the interviews. Ms.Mitra will be the only person with access to these two secure locations. Upon completion of research, the list, which matches your name to the interview, will be destroyed.

For any questions or concerns, please contact either of the following:

Aditi Mitra or Dr.Jean Van Delinder at the Department of Sociology, Classroom Building 006, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, USA Tel:405-744-6105; Email for Ms. Mitra: [mitra@okstate.edu](mailto:mitra@okstate.edu) and Email for Dr.Van Delinder:

[jlvan@okstate.edu](mailto:jlvan@okstate.edu) / For information on subjects' rights, contact Dr.Carol Olson,

Oklahoma State University, 415 Whitehurst Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, USA,  
Tel:405-744-1676

C. VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

I understand that participation is voluntary and that I will not be penalized if I choose not to participate? YES \_\_\_\_\_ (initials). I also understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and end my participation in this project at any time without penalty after I notify Aditi Mitra at the above address? YES \_\_\_\_\_ (initials).

D CONSENT DOCUMENTATION FOR WRITTEN INFORMED CONSENT

I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily.

---

Name (typed or printed)

Signature

I certify that I have personally explained all elements of this form to the subject or her representative before requesting the subject or her representative to sign it.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Aditi Mitra, Doctoral Student, Oklahoma State University

## Appendix 6

### **Proposed Questions for the Interviews**

1. Tell me about yourself. Where are you from? What is your level of education? Are you married? Do you have children? How much time each week do you spend doing household chores and errands? What age-group do you belong to? In terms of your household income, which economic group would you fall under – lower class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, upper class?
  
2. How long have you worked here? Would you say that this organization has a fairly structured hierarchy / strict set-up? Or, do you feel that it is quite informal / flexible? What is the male-female ratio among the employees?
  
3. What type of work do you like to do, as a young student - what were your career goals? What type of work do you do here in this organization?
  
4. How much time are you able to spend each week working here? Do you have fixed hours of work or is it flexible?
  
5. Why do you work here (what motivates you to do this job)? Other than your monetary income, is there any other reason why you chose this work?
  
6. How did you get this job? Did you know someone that let you know about the position (social network) or did you respond to a newspaper advertisement?
  
7. How satisfied are you in terms of salary? Would you be able to take care of your family with this income? Do you feel your efforts are well appreciated in general (by society, by the women you help, your family, and your employers?) How satisfied are you with the work that you do?
  
8. If you could change one thing in your organization, what would it be (in terms of administration, welfare programs, salary structure, work ethics, office set-up, training programs etc.) Why would you want to change it?
  
9. According to you, what are two/three of the most pressing issues or challenges (obstacles) faced by women today? Do you think your work is helping women tackle these issues?
  
10. What are your future plans? How do you see yourself in the next five years? Are you open to look out for other job offers in a similar field?
  
11. Have you ever had formal academic training on Feminist Theory? Have you ever had the opportunity to attend gender-training workshops? In your own words, how would you define feminism in one brief sentence or just as a concept? How do common people (men & women in Kolkata / India) react to the concept in general? Does your definition of feminism differ from the idea of feminism people generally have? Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?

## **Appendix 7**

### Detailed Summary of NGO Women

Detailed Summary of NGO Women												
Interv #	Age	Marital Status	No. of Children	Family Set-up	Social Class	Highest Level of Education	Job Title	Projects	Salary	Approx. # of Yrs involved	Residence	Other Occupation
1	60	Married	2 adults Son/daughter	NA	Upper Middle	BA in English	Chairperson/ Founder	Women	Volunteer	32	Kolkata	NA
2	65	Widowed	3 adults 1daughter/ 2 sons	NA	Upper Middle	BA in Philosophy	Program Coordinator	Women	Volunteer	20+	Kolkata	NA
3	60	Widowed	1 adult daughter	NA	Upper Middle	MA in English	Coordinator	Women	Honorarium	25+	Kolkata	Another NGO
4	51	Married	1 adult Son	W/ husband	Upper Middle	PG Dip in Developmental Journalism	Consultant	Women	Paid	15+	Kolkata	Commonwealth Research Fellow
5	54	Married	2 adults Son/daughter	NA	Upper Middle	MA in English	Hon. General Secretary	Women	Volunteer	10+	Kolkata	NA
6	60	Married	2 adult sons	Joint	Upper	MA in Modern History	President	Women	Volunteer	10	Kolkata	NA
7	64	Married	NA	W/ husband	Upper Middle	MA in English	Founding Member/ Convener	Women	Volunteer	20+	Kolkata	Activist Journalism/ Writer
8	65+	Married	2 adults Son/daughter	Joint	Upper Middle	MA in Political Science	Board Member	Women & Children	Volunteer	25	Kolkata	NA
9	40+	Married	NA	NA	Upper Middle	MA in Sociology	Secretary	Women & Children	Volunteer	15	Kolkata	Central Gov. Service
10	56	Married	2 adult daughters	Joint	Upper	MA, B Ed, PhD in Philosophy	Teacher /Member	Rural/urban women	Honorarium Rs.600	9	Kolkata	Amateur Theater Actor/ Writer
11	38	Married	1 young daughter	Joint	Middle	MA in Bengali	Coordinator	Rural/urban women	Paid	10	Kolkata	Another NGO
12	56	Married	1 young daughter	Joint	Middle	MA in History	Founding Member	Rural/urban women	Volunteer	20+	Kolkata	International Research Fellow
13	26	Single	NA	W/ parents	Upper Middle	MA in Sociology	Project Manager	Rural/urban women	Paid	2	Kolkata	NA
14	50	Divorced	1 young daughter	NA	Middle	MA in Education	Secretary/ Founding Member	Rural/urban women	Volunteer	25+	Kolkata	State Gov. Service
15	69	Single	NA	Joint	Upper Middle	MA in English	Managing Committee	Women & Children	Volunteer	25+	Kolkata	NA
16	30+	Single	NA	W/ mother	Middle	MA in Geography	Executive Committee	Women	Paid	15+	Kolkata	NA
17	27	Married	NA	NA	Upper Middle	MA in Economics; Software Engg.	Program Officer	Women	Paid	4+	Kolkata	NA
18	25	Single	NA	W/ parents	Middle	MA in Political Science	Case Worker	Women	Paid	7	Kolkata	Another NGO
19	25	Single	NA	W/ parents	Middle	MA in Human Development	Project Coordinator	Women	Paid	1	West Bengal	NA
20	25+	Married	NA	W/ husband	Middle	MA in Sociology; B Ed.	Project Manager	Women & Children	Paid	2+	Howrah	NA
21	25+	Married	1 young daughter	NA	Middle	MA in Sociology	Case Worker	Women	Paid	4+	Kolkata	NA

## **Appendix 8**

Theme One – NGO Work as Career



Theme One	NGO work as Career			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
1																								
	1.1	<b>Structure of NGO</b>																						
		1.1.1	Formal			5		2	1,2			2					2	1	2			1		
		1.1.2	Informal							1,2					2									
		1.1.3	Semi-formal	4	2,3		3				3		3	1		1				2	1			1,3
	1.2	<b>Pay</b>																						
		1.2.1	Paid		3		2						1		2				3	2	2	2	2	3
		1.2.2	Voluntary	1,3,9				1	2	1	4	3			1,2		2	2						
		1.2.3	Honorarium			3							2											
	1.3	<b>Opportunity and Growth</b>																						
		1.3.1	Training/ Workshops/ Skills			6		3						2		3			3,7		2,3,4			4
		1.3.2	Promotion						1					1		1			3					
		1.3.3	Other Job Offers	9	6	9	10		6				1	1	1,6	5	4,5					2,4	4	4
	1.4	<b>Source of Job</b>																						
		1.4.1	Social Network	2	2,3,6	3,4	6	4	3	1,2	3	1	4	3	4	3	3	3		3				
		1.4.2	Newspaper Advertisement																2,4		3	3	2	
		1.4.3	Forced Application																					2
	1.5	<b>Preference</b>																						
		1.5.1	Wanted Another Career	1		2	2	3	2	1,3	2	3	2					1,3	2	2				
		1.5.2	Wanted NGO job/ Women's Empowerment		3,4					1,2				2	3	2	2				2	2	2	1,2

## **Appendix 9**

### Theme Two – Domestic Obligations

Domestic Obligations		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
<b>2.1</b>		<b>Care-taking</b>																					
	2.1.1	Family's Welfare	1 1 2	1 2	1		2	3,4	5									1,3	6				
	2.1.2	Husband's Welfare		2				8					1,6									1	
	2.1.3	Children's Welfare	1				2	2,6 ,8	5		3	1	6		3,4			6				4	4
	2.1.4	In-laws' Welfare	1 2				2	8															
<b>2.2</b>		<b>Sacrifice</b>																					
	2.2.1	Education	1	2																			
	2.2.2	Career			6	2			2	2,6 ,8			3										

## **Appendix 10**

Theme Three – Social Challenges/ Obstacles for Woman

Social Challenges / Obstacles for Women			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
<b>3.1</b>	<b>Gender Discrimination</b>																						
	3.1.1	Biology-based	15,16,17					7															
	3.1.2	Separate Spheres & Chores	7,8					7							3,4	3		1		4		3	
	3.1.3	Gender Role Stereotypes	15			9			7		5	5	4		3	3		1,2,6				3	1
	3.1.4	Work & family Conflict	15			9						5	4,5		4	3			5	4	4		4
<b>3.2</b>	<b>Challenges of Indian Women</b>																						
	3.2.1	Violence	16		8		5	4	7		5			5		4		4		4	4	3	2
	3.2.2	Domestic Violence		6	8		5							5					5	4	4		2
	3.2.3	Education					5	5		6	5		4			4		6				3	
	3.2.4	Lack of Economic Independence				9	5	5,6	7	6	5	5	4	5		4			5				3
	3.2.5	Globalization Vs Tradition				7			7				4			4			5				
	3.2.6	Other	15		8	9	5	5		5	5						4	6	5		4	3	2
<b>3.3</b>	<b>Image of NGOs</b>																						
	3.3.1	Favorable	13				4	4		6,7	5	5	3,4		4		4	5	4				
	3.3.2	Unfavorable	3,14	5	4,5,6	7,8	4		6	4				4,6		4			4	3	3	2	2

## **Appendix 11**

Theme Four – Motivation and Satisfaction from NGO Work

Motivation & Satisfaction from NGO Work			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
4.1	Reasons for Pursuing NGOs Career		7,1 1,4	4	2,6	4	2	3	1,2, 3,4	2,3	1,4	2,3	3	3	2,3	2,3	3	3	3	3	2,3	1	1,2
4.2	Women's Issues		5,9	3 , 6	2,4	2		6	5	2	1	3,4	3	2		5	3	4	3,6	2,3	2	3	1,2
4.3	Personality		5,6, 9	5	2		2		5,6		3,4		1,3	3		3	3	3	3,6		2		2
4.4	Appreciation from Others																						
	4.4.1	Family	12	5	6	7	4	3,4	6	4	4	4,5	3	4	3	3,4	3,4	4	4	3	3	2	2
	4.4.2	Friends			6	7	4	4	6	4	4	4,5	3	4	3	4	4			3		2	
	4.4.3	Employers / Beneficiaries	13	5	6	7	4	4	6	4	4,5	4,5	3	4	3,4	4	4	4,5	4	3	3	2	3
4.5	Scope for Improvisation																						
	4.5.1	NGO - related	14	5	5,6, 7	8	4,5	4	7	5	2,5	5	4	5	4	4	4	5	5	4	4	2	3
	4.5.2	Salary - related		4 , 5	3	4	3		8	5	2	5	2			4		3	2	2	2	2	4
4.6	Options																						
	4.6.1	Why this job?	10, 18	4	3,4, 6	7	3	3	3,4	3	3	4	3	3	3	2,3, 4,5	3	1,3, 4	3,6	2	2,3	1,2	1,2
	4.6.2	Eliminate women's problems?	10, 17	6	7,8	9,1 0	5	5	7	6	5,6	5,6	5	5	4	4	4	6	6	4	4	1,3	4

## **Appendix 12**

Theme Five – Conception of Feminism



			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
<b>Feminism</b>																							
5	<b>Definition - Personal</b>																						
	5.1.1	Previous Knowledge			9	10	6	6	8	7	6	6	5	6	5		5	7		5	4	4	4
	5.1.2	No formal training	18	6	9	10		6	8	7	6	6		6	5	5	5	7	6			4	4
	5.1.3	Mass Definition	18,19	3,7	9	10,11	6	7	9	8	6	6	6		5,6	5		7,8	7	5	5		5
5	<b>Image of a Feminist</b>																						
	5.2.1	Favorable						7			7												
	5.2.2	Unfavorable	18,19	5,7	9,10	12	6	7	9	8	7	7	4,6	7	5,6	5	5	8	7	5	5	4	5
5	<b>Self-Identified Feminist</b>																						
	5.3.1	Yes		3,6,7	9		6	7	9			4,6	5			5			6	5	4		4
	5.3.2	No				11				7				7	5,6								
	5.3.3	Not sure									6							8				4	
	5.3.4	Other	19														5						

# Appendix 13

## Map of India



## Map of West Bengal



Name: Aditi Mitra

Date of Degree: July, 2005

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: CHALLENGES OF WOMEN VOLUNTEERS AND ACTIVISTS  
IN WOMEN'S NGOs IN INDIA: A FEMINIST STANDPOINT  
ANALYSIS

Pages in Study: 237

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: Sociology

Scope and Method of Study: This dissertation is situated in the context of post-colonial understanding of feminism and the spread of the women's movement as a global phenomenon. It analyzes how urban middle and upper class women working in non-governmental organizations in Kolkata (India) construct a feminist praxis in terms of their everyday lived experiences as volunteers and activists, and as urban Indian working women in the non-profit developmental sector of Indian civil society. Can engaging in feminist activities, gender empowerment and developmental projects be a viable career choice for educated urban Indian women? Another critical issue revolves around the conception of 'feminism' among women volunteers and activists in a non-western setting. Testimonies from twenty one women forms the crux of the data collected via semi structured bilingual interviews and participant observation. Using literature primarily from the U.S and India, I use Feminist Standpoint Analysis as a theoretical framework to examine the social, cultural and organizational challenges that these women face in their personal and professional lives.

Findings and Conclusions: By studying the testimonies of these women, the study is able to examine alternative processes of agency and change in order to define challenges and motivations of middle and upper classes of Third World women volunteers and activists, by offering a new set of lenses for viewing the gender-stratified Indian civil society that is by and largely documented by men. Finally, this study offers current knowledge and research on the conception of feminism among women volunteers and activists in a non-western setting and how they construct the image of a feminist. It offers directions for research in transnational feminism, International Women's Movement, Womanism and Social Inequality Studies. In keeping with the methodological commitments of revolutionary pragmatism, this study also helps to develop a new image of Indian women as active agents of change, rather than just suffering victims in a globalized framework.

## VITA

Aditi Mitra

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: Challenges of Women Volunteers and Activists in Women's NGOs in India: A Feminist Standpoint Analysis

Major Field: Sociology

Biographical: Born in Kolkata, India. Lived and studied in various countries, mainly in the United Arab Emirates, Europe, the United States and India; a British Chevening Scholar, Richard Dodder Scholar, O.D.Duncan Scholar, Phi Beta Delta International Scholar.

Education: Graduated from Abu Dhabi Indian School (U.A.E) in 1987; received Bachelor of Arts in English Literature (Honors) from Loreto College, University of Calcutta (India) in 1992; received Postgraduate Executive Diploma in International Business Management from London City College (United Kingdom) in 1996 and Master of Arts in Mass Communication from University of Leicester (United Kingdom) in 1999; received Graduate Certificate in International Relations from Oklahoma State University (USA) in 2004. Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree at Oklahoma State University in July, 2005.

Experience: Worked as Instructor (SOC 4950; SOC 1113) in the Department of Sociology at Oklahoma State University since 1999; part-time faculty at Pioneer School of Management Studies in India; worked as Research Assistant at non-governmental organizations in India and with several national and regional grants at Oklahoma (USA).

Professional Memberships: Alpha Kappa Delta (AKD) International Honor Society for Sociology, USA; Phi Beta Delta International Scholars Honor Society, OSU, USA; Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS), USA; American Sociological Association (ASA), USA; Mid-South Sociological Association (MSSA), USA; Midwest Sociological Society (MSS), USA; Southwestern Sociological Association (SSA), USA; Indian Federation of University Women (IFUW), India; United Nations Association in United States of America (UNA-USA), USA.