Abstract

This thesis aims to provide a critical account of poor women's empowerment in urban India in the wake of the collaboration between NGOs and the state in urban planning since the mid-1990s. It focuses on the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in the slums of Ahmedabad. While the success of SEWA and other similar movements has generated debates about the nature of women's resistance to dominant development discourses, there has been insufficient analysis of the resurgence of state power in development that has shaped the reinvention of women's activism. This study investigates the impact of NGO-state collaboration on poor urban women's empowerment.

The study develops an urban sociological approach that seeks to bridge the divide between macro- and micro-focused theories of the role and effectiveness of women's movements. On the macro level, it focuses on the restructuring of NGO-state relations in urban India. This involves examining the penetration of the state into people's everyday lives and how it has shifted the loci of NGOs towards 'community participation' by the poor. On the micro level, the study analyses the power relations surrounding poor women. Particular attention is paid to the way in which poor women's choices do not effectively translate into decision-making power over production, reproduction and consumption in the household. This is to understand how a culturally-based power structure is unconsciously reproduced by women.

This analytical framework is applied to the case of the Slum Networking Project (SNP), a World Bank and UNDP-supported project that since 1996 has sought to create a partnership between the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation and NGOs in improving basic amenities of the slums and promoting community participation of slum dwellers. The study investigates how and why SEWA has collaborated with the local state through the SNP and the impact of this NGO-state partnership on its approach to working with poor women. In particular, the study examines whether and how SEWA has sought to forge common interests among them in addressing gender inequalities and to what extent it has empowered women in terms of their household and community decision-making.

Applying a case study methodology that draws on a survey, interviews, documentary evidence and participant observation, the study proposes that public-private partnerships are unlikely to challenge the ways in which the everyday subordination of women is reproduced by traditional and modern institutional hierarchies, which act as a fundamental constraint to building common, gender-based collective identities.