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## Agency, Injury, and Transgressive Politics in Neoliberal Times

**T**his article draws attention to vulnerability, risk, and injury involved in mobilizing for transgressive politics.<sup>1</sup> Feminist activists, development practitioners, and policy makers often invoke women's agency as an instrument of social change and as a means of achieving development outcomes. Underlining this development logic is an assumption that development goals meet with greater success when women not only mobilize in their support but also assume responsibility for their success. Our tasks in this article are threefold: first, we query this turn to individual agency within development thinking, which we call "agency-in-development," and locate its ascendance within the discursive and political landscape of neoliberalism.<sup>2</sup> Second, we examine the philosophical premises underlying this particular invocation of agency and explore the technologies that enable the emergence of subjectivities amenable to agency-in-development. Finally, we develop an analysis of the risks, injurious practices, and personal costs that accompany agency-in-development but are overlooked when transgressive modes of struggle are involved.

Through an analysis of a state-sponsored initiative for women's development in Northwest India, we detail the processes through which certain subjects of development are formed and their agency mobilized in support of state development policies. We query the circulation of understandings of agency and empowerment that underpin development discourses to suggest that these policies are predominantly informed by

The authors thank Anne Phillips, Kalpana Wilson, Kate Nash, and the three anonymous reviewers for *Signs* for their thought-provoking comments on earlier drafts of this article.

<sup>1</sup> We use the phrase "transgressive politics" rather than "integrationist politics" (Jahan 1995, 9) as a way of emphasizing agenda setting, which also sets the term apart from deliberative, process-driven approaches to politics through its focus on social transformation (Rai 2007).

<sup>2</sup> See also Kalpana Wilson's (2007) critique of the "re-appropriation of women's 'agency' into neoliberal discourses of development" (126).

a universalist, individualized, and voluntaristic understanding of agency that privileges the individual as the locus of responsibility but not of injury. We argue that development interventions mobilizing citizen participation need to display awareness of and sensitivity toward the risks and injuries that accrue to individuals and groups as a result of their political participation and that their interventions must acknowledge precariousness, risk, injury, coercion, oppression, and the formation of gendered subjectivities in contexts of severe inequality.<sup>3</sup> We maintain that mobilizing, framing, and exercising agency must be informed by a mapping of power relations and multiple subject positionings—of class, caste, religion, gender, space, and sexuality. This mapping alerts us to the risks involved in exercising agency in a landscape where political power is manifest as well as hidden, disciplining as well as disruptive. We argue that it is politically responsible and normatively imperative to acknowledge both the agency of actors and the risks undertaken in the exercise of agency. While stereotyping agents as victims can lead to political nihilism, failing to recognize that they can be victims of the systemic power relations that they challenge can be deeply irresponsible: while not acting might prolong social injury, strategizing for change needs to involve attention to the parameters of power within which agential subjects seek to act. We suggest that some aspects of deliberative politics might help us to formulate alternative, transgressive modes of activism.

We make these theoretical arguments by examining the story of the Women's Development Programme (WDP), where we find an early example of mobilizing agentic subjects for development with destructive consequences for some of those called upon to participate in bringing about certain forms of social change or performing development. Through an analysis of the WDP, we argue that it is not enough to foreground women within development programs: it is imperative to locate their subjectivities, forms of subjection, and political agency and danger within existing social-political and economic contexts—an exercise ill achieved through the intellectual lenses of voluntarism, choice, and free action. Ignoring the socially embedded and contextual nature of agential capacities has led to the design of ahistorical development interventions that have resulted in catastrophic consequences for both the individual agents involved and the projects or programs in which they are engaged.

There are different agents involved in the WDP story—individuals, groups, and organizations—local and international, state and nonstate. There are also different expectations of change, some that integrate past

<sup>3</sup> See Mouffe (1993), Naples (2002), Madhok (2003a, 2003b, 2007), and Rai (2008).

practices and others that set new agendas (Jahan 1995), as well as different modes of practice—reflexive, deliberative, consciousness-raising, mobilizing, reporting, and networking. And, finally, there are different outcomes—withdrawal of support, violent opposition, embodied and psychic injuries, renewed mobilization for change, and unexpected and unforeseen changes—both for the individuals and the groups concerned. All of these differences raise questions about the ethics and politics of these development initiatives. Below, we shall first outline the difficulties of thinking about agency and representation in third-world women's contexts—a difficulty only exacerbated by the political economy of neoliberalism. We then provide the background behind the establishment of the WDP and detail its institutional arrangements. We outline the duality of its development discourse, which influenced the different strategies developed and adopted by the chief actors of this program—*sathins*, or women social workers—in elaborating their selfhood and subjectivities. Finally, through discussions of a violent injury incurred by one *sathin* as a result of exercising agency-in-development, we make the case for taking account of the risk, vulnerability, and injury involved in agency-in-development.<sup>4</sup>

### **Developing the third-world woman: Neoliberalism, agency, and representation**

In this section, we argue that agency-in-development is strongly influenced by neoliberal politics. The bid to produce subjects in harmony with the increasingly neoliberal development agenda has led to a corresponding shift in the language with which this development is articulated. This new

<sup>4</sup> For want of space, in this article we focus in particular on the experience of *sathin* Bhanwari Devi. The ethnographic fieldwork presented in this article was conducted by Sumi Madhok in two districts of Rajasthan, Jaipur and Ajmer, in 1998 to 1999 and in 2004. The field study focused on documenting the moral and practical engagements of the *sathins* with the conceptual and literal language of rights. The narratives of ninety *sathins* were documented, and Madhok also interviewed official, nongovernmental, and academic commentators and participants in the WDP. The narratives were collected and recorded over extensive and repeated conversations; personal and small group interviews; and through participant observation. Madhok traveled with the *sathins*, attended meetings organized by the WDP state hierarchy, and observed the work practices of the *sathins* in their villages. While questions of location and positioning of the author in relation to the “researched” would require more space than is available here, it is important to note that the researcher found herself differently positioned in relation to the various constitutive elements within the WDP: the *sathins*, the WDP bureaucracy, and the NGO or academic community, which inevitably led her to enter into complex negotiations over aspects of her location and reception with respect to all the three.

language of development invokes agency and empowerment—both integral to a feminist vocabulary—to create subjects who would be amenable to its economic and political project (Wilson 2007). Although neoliberalism is often referred to in the singular, it is experienced in the plural. The heterogeneity of neoliberalism is now cogently argued and empirically documented in numerous grounded studies of neoliberal-led globalization.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have also pointed to neoliberalism’s predominantly rational-economic framework, which privileges human subjects as principally *homo economicus*, evaluates the state in terms of the quality of market function, produces social policy in the service of creation of entrepreneurial subjects, and converts civic citizenship into entrepreneurial activity.<sup>6</sup> Under neoliberalism, state-economy relations experience an inversion (Lemke 2001), with the market becoming the “organizing and regulative principle of the state and society” (Brown 2003).

Neoliberal governmentality, scholars suggest, produces docile bodies and subjectivities in its wake, essential for its maintenance. It is in the production of these desiring (Rofel 2007), self-disciplining, and self-shaping subjects (Burchell 1996; Foucault 2000; Coole 2007) that neoliberalism legitimizes itself, and it is through its political rationality that neoliberalism produces “prudent subjects” (Brown 2003) along with new ways of organizing sociality that reflect its economic rationality. Agency, within this discourse, is mainly associated with the formation of autonomous preferences, desires, and choices free from sociological and structural constraints and exercised independent of collective solidarity or action. Underpinning neoliberal accounts and formulations of agency is a subject who is rational, self-affirming, self-reliant, self-sufficient, responsible, and capable of authoring and executing her own actions.

The growing appropriation of this individuated conception of agency (and increasingly of empowerment) within neoliberal-inspired development discourse is not too hard to explain: the autonomous, rational, self-determining subject of classical liberalism is reformulated to appear within neoliberal political thinking as a hyper-rational subject who determines the course of his or her life actions in accordance with prevailing “economic incentives and disincentives” (Dean 2008, 49) and “bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action, no matter how severe the constraints on this action” (Brown 2003; see also Benería 1999). In this context, the individual is empowered when acting in his or her own interest

<sup>5</sup> See Barrientos and Perrons (1999), Ong (1999, 2006), Burawoy et al. (2000), Rai (2002), Rankin (2003), Rofel (2007), and Shakya and Rankin (2008).

<sup>6</sup> See Bakker and Gill (2003), Bakker (2007), and Rai and Waylen (2008).

to maximize productivity by efficiently garnering, improving, and utilizing his or her own resources (Brown 1995; Cruikshank 1999, 68; Parpart, Rai, and Staudt 2002).

It has been a primary feminist concern to urge women to strive for autonomy, understood both as freedom from patriarchal oppression and as freedom to realize women's own capabilities and aspirations. Certain forms of feminist thinking uphold not only these aspirations and goals but also the model of the liberal humanist subject—one who is the author of her own voice or alternatively the passive object of feminism's universalist normative or prescriptive progressive agenda (Mahmood 2005). From a transnationalist feminist perspective, not only is this construction of the autonomous subject a gendered construction, it is also an ethnocentric one. It does not travel well and leads to serious misdescriptions and misrecognition of gendered sociality in non-Western contexts. The neoliberal discursive turn within development has somewhat altered the nature and manner of representation of the traditional subject of development discourse: the third-world woman. There is a well-established critique of the portrayal of third-world women as passive and victimized within feminist circles, and it is not our aim to rehearse these arguments.<sup>7</sup> We simply want to point to the changed nature of representation and the neoliberal political rationality that fuel this shift. Accompanying the standard descriptions of the third-world woman, her poverty, exploitation, and disempowerment, is a shift in the responsibility for overcoming these. Increasingly, representations of poor women's successful management of the debilitating conditions of their poverty-stricken lives (John 1996) through the exercise of their agential capacities fill the institutional reports of various development agencies, including state institutions. This neoliberal turn within development discourse is most pronounced in the co-optation and reformulation of the feminist language of empowerment through collective struggle over public resources into one of a private striving enabled by active participation in market relations, principally through microcredit schemes. This enthusiasm over microenterprises and credit schemes sees market-friendly replacements to the inefficient and costly state welfare provisioning as justified in terms of their empowering individual women through releasing their "entrepreneurial spirit" (Wilson 2008, 85).<sup>8</sup>

Here, we are not discounting the importance of challenging oppressive

<sup>7</sup> See Ong (1988), Mohanty, Russo, and Torres (1991), Appfel-Marglin and Simon (1994), Escobar (1995), and Liddle and Rai (1998).

<sup>8</sup> See Cruikshank (1999), Rankin (2001), and Laraip-Fonderson (2002).

contexts and conditions but rather suggest that this challenge must not be seen as reflective of any teleology of progress or of any conceptions of the good life, emancipation, or agency that are always already there waiting to be discovered as persons travel further on the linear continuum of progress. In short, by introducing the concept of risk into our analysis we highlight that individuals and groups challenge dominant social relations not as they please but within specific social contexts that are underpinned by power relations and are therefore open not only to new possibilities but also to the risk of harm. Thus, struggles for change do not unfold in ahistorical, universalist, and acontextual frames—they do so in specific contexts, in languages that are laden with history and through agency that is framed by risks. In the next section we analyze the WDP in the state of Rajasthan in Northwest India to substantiate these theoretical arguments.

### **The WDP: Institutions, discourses, subjects**

The WDP was launched by the Government of Rajasthan, India, in April 1984 as a response to the failure of various state-led development programs to involve or to benefit women.<sup>9</sup> While several development programs had a women's component built in, the state development bureaucracy conceded that these had little or no effect on improving the inclusion and the participation of women within development. The development indices for women in Rajasthan made for dismal viewing in the 1980s and continue to do so.<sup>10</sup> According to the Rajasthan Human Development Report (Government of Rajasthan 2002), despite the improvements recorded since 1961 Rajasthan continues to be among the poorer states in India.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See the "Women's Development Project Rajasthan" (DRDPR 1984); see also Government of Rajasthan (1999).

<sup>10</sup> The sex ratio was as low as 830 women for every 1,000 men in rural areas of Bharatpur district, and the overall sex ratio in the rural areas of the state was 919 women for every 1,000 men. The female literacy rate in Rajasthan for rural women was just 5.46 percent (it was 4.03 percent in 1971, registering only a 1 percent increase in the past ten years and a 0.1 percent increase annually).

<sup>11</sup> As the report outlines, literacy levels, especially for girls, are among the lowest in the country; health indicators are among the poorest in the country; the total fertility rate was as high as 3.73 in 1998–99, recording a decline of only 4.8 percentage points between 1989–91 and 1994–96, whereas nationally it declined by 7.6 percentage points; life expectancy in the state is among the lowest (in 1991–95 it was 59.1 years: 58.3 for men and 59.4 for women) in the country (nationally it was 60.3 years: 59.7 for men and 60.9 for women in 1991–95) despite the improvements recorded since 1961. Rajasthan continues to have a

The WDP drew upon several strands of development ideas. It incorporated ideas espoused via internationalist women's development frameworks, feminist conceptual frames, and the development goals set by the Indian state in its sixth five-year plan. Its stated aim was "to empower women through communication of information, education, and training and to enable them to recognise their social and economic status" (DRDPR 1984, 1). The WDP's conceptual document prepared by the Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj listed a number of social practices that discriminated against women. These included widespread discrimination in matters of nutrition, education, and wages, as well as social and physical indignities such as dowry, polygamy, purdah, wife battery, and alcoholism among men. It noted that women exhibited very low levels of consciousness of their subordinate social and familial status, and, more significantly, it recognized that improvements in education and in the economic status of households did not translate into better conditions for women. In order to ameliorate the depressed conditions for women in Rajasthan, a number of development priorities and strategies were spelled out. In addition to employment-related, educational, health, and legal priorities, the WDP concept document emphasized the importance of the "formation of appropriate organisations for women in order to facilitate communication, learning and organised action" (DRDPR 1984, 20). The formation of women's collectives in the villages, it was hoped, would generate awareness of rights, welfare entitlements, and development policies; allow for communication and the flow of information; and give women confidence to recognize their "independent identities, needs, problems and aspirations" (DRDPR 1984, 20). In order to achieve the empowerment of women, the WDP considered it important to "encourage and create agencies, groups and individuals to articulate concern towards indignities and discrimination against women" (DRDPR 1984, 1).

These concerns were translated into practical measures of providing departmental support for the development of women's groups at the village level and by involving women's activists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and academics in the program. The latter were entrusted with the responsibility of training the primary workers who would meet the challenges of the program. The primary workers within this program are known as *sathins* (woman friends), and it is their experience of discursive regimes and practices of development that form the empirical

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more skewed sex ratio than that of India as a whole, though the gap between the two has narrowed over the years.

basis of this article. Our argument is not that individual actors such as the *sathins* were expected to act in isolation—in fact, they developed a group identity and got support from various sources. Rather, we point out that the program was insufficiently aware of and prepared for the network of power relations that both constrained the *sathins* and exposed them to risk. We make this claim without suggesting that awareness and preparedness would have eliminated constraints and risks, but we do maintain that without such awareness the risks are higher and therefore strategies to identify and approach risk, or to garner support to avoid and in some cases overcome risk, are minimized. This puts agents such as the *sathins* in harm's way and also undermines the sustainability of development programs such as the WDP.

The training of the *sathins*, at least in the initial years, reflected a development perspective that privileged limited agency without giving due consideration to the risks attendant upon exercising it. In contrast to the avowedly women-in-development perspective of the state, the *sathin* training—conducted by the academics at the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur, and by the social activists involved—favored the feminist empowerment framework and consequently presupposed a very different version of the *sathin* subject (Das 1992; Unnithan-Kumar and Srivastava 1997). The integration of this empowerment framework into the WDP can be attributed to the following developments: First, the structural partnership envisioned within the WDP—the state, women's NGO activists, and academics—allowed for different development perspectives to coexist within the program. Second, the financial arrangements through which UNICEF bore the cost of the program in the first six years of its existence made it possible for these divergent perspectives on women's development to coexist. The program was accorded a low priority by the state government, which meant that feminist NGOs, activists, and scholars invited to participate could take advantage of its “low-profile development” status, tailoring the program according to their intellectual and ideological leanings.<sup>12</sup> This in turn meant that the variance in the way the WDP and its nongovernmental partners interpreted program expectations, objectives, and the role of its primary workers led to parallel versions of the WDP—one existing in state documents and the other in the WDP training modules and at the level of implementation. This generated tensions that came to the fore as the program developed.

At the outset of the program, it is reasonable to assume that both types

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Sharada Jain, March 1999, Jaipur.

of development discourse included an awareness that the achievement of development goals would involve some kind of transgressive politics; after all, it is hard to imagine how efforts to eradicate untouchability or domestic violence would not challenge dominant social hierarchies. Indeed, the growing confidence of the *sathins* resulted in a backlash against their presence in the villages, which in turn led to a realization among the trainers that there may have been a “mismatch between the training . . . and what exists in society” (Jain et al. 1987, 15). Instead of developing strategies to challenge this backlash, the trainers responded by modifying the nature of training such that it might more effectively mirror socially acceptable behavior patterns. In the case of the state administration, this awareness resulted in a reorientation of the program itself, shifting the focus from the *sathin* to village self-help groups, from consciousness-raising and activism to microcredit programs (Madhok 2003a).

#### **Producing new subjects for development: The *sathin***

In the government documents on the WDP, the role of the *sathin* was spelled out as that of a grassroots worker bearing a “low profile.” She was required to familiarize herself with the village institutions and interact with the village *panchayat* (elected council) and with village women. She was not a part of the state hierarchy and consequently received not a salary for her activities but an honorarium. The amount of the monthly honorarium was set at Rs200 in 1984 and has since been raised to Rs350. Her nonofficial status was seen as essential to the establishment of effective communication with the villagers, especially with the women, since she would be “one of them.” The conceptualization of the *sathin* as a woman volunteer from the village working in harmony and cooperation with the rest of the village was so strong that even the selection of the *sathins* was carried out in accordance with the “wishes of the village,” which, in effect, meant in accordance with the wishes of the village males (Madhok 2003a).

However, this assumption of harmonious functioning was to prove naive and ignorant of the challenges that each *sathin* would face in her capacity as a primary worker with the WDP and in the discharge of her everyday duties—since she was both a state worker and a friend of local women. The *sathins* also experienced this ambivalence about their precise positions within the state administrative hierarchy.<sup>13</sup> In the beginning, the

<sup>13</sup> For example, at the public meetings organized by the District Women’s Development Agency (DWDA), it was observed that the *sathins* identified themselves with the DWDA

*sathins'* initiatives met with resistance, which in turn led to a conflictual relationship with the villagers, who saw the *sathins* as a corrupting influence on other village women. This hostility led to a deep-seated suspicion about the *sathins*, their moral character, and the nature of their link with the state. The distance that developed between the villagers and the *sathins* also appeared between *sathins* and the members of the women's collective they organized in the villages. For the *sathins*, this work in a negotiated landscape resulted in new self-awareness and new ways of thinking that set them apart from those they were trying to organize; they often referred to themselves as not being "ordinary women."<sup>14</sup> While the *sathins* felt more empowered through their work, the state version of the "empowered woman" was at variance with their developing self-confidence—the empowered *sathin* was not a reflexive subject but one who undertook state-approved initiatives to deal with specific social and development issues.<sup>15</sup> A review of the functioning of the first four years of the program gave descriptive accounts of the initiatives undertaken by the *sathins* on issues of water supply and sanitation, environment and social forestry, health, the status of women, child marriage, girls' education, famine relief, and so on, which reaffirmed the family as the unit of development rather than challenging the ways in which the familial oppression of women reproduced women's subordinate social position.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to the statist vision of the *sathin*, the training exercises developed by women's groups as designated trainers presumed the *sathins* as subjects with their own reflective and experiential contributions to make to the program.<sup>17</sup> The training of *sathins* was based on a "stubborn faith in their abilities" (Banerjee 1984, 17). The trainers adopted several innovative techniques that took into account the lack of formal literacy skills

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officials rather than with the women of the villages they were supposed to mobilize, perpetuating the distance between the villagers and the *sathins* (Shail Mayaram, personal communication, November 1998, Jaipur).

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., the interview with Bhanwari Devi described below.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., the Government of Rajasthan's "A Review of the Women's Development Programme Rajasthan, 1984–1988" (Government of Rajasthan n.d.b); see also "Parliamentary Committee on Women and Empowerment" (Government of Rajasthan n.d.a).

<sup>16</sup> *Sathin* activism as a measure of success was evident only in the initial years of the program. The subsequent reports of the DWDA increasingly seemed to deny recognition of the *sathins'* agency and ceased to record descriptive accounts of the initiatives they undertook, replacing these with columns of statistical evaluations.

<sup>17</sup> The government concept paper on the WDP remarked that an "innovative project" such as the WDP required trained development workers, and consequently, the task of training the *sathins* was entrusted to existing NGOs working in the field of adult education and rural development (DRDPR 1984).

among the women to be trained, which included among others, describing a day in one's life; recounting various proverbs, popular sayings, and folk songs that denigrated women's work; or discussing the relativity of social norms and values through the staging of plays. In addition to familiarizing the *sathins* with the administrative organization of the WDP and the state bureaucracy through discussions and trips organized to the Panchayat Samiti, a significant amount of time was spent on inculcating objectives of "team work, leadership skills, self reliance, self expression, decision making, concerted action, internalisation, consolidation of information, establishing rapport, creating solidarity, introducing, elaborating on issues" (Banerjee 1984, 15).<sup>18</sup> Sessions were held during the training encouraging the *sathins* to shed inhibitions, especially those of caste and religion, and to discuss ideas relating to control over one's body, the necessity of controlling one's earned income, marital rape, and the relationship between property rights, inheritance laws, and women's status in society. Legal discussions were centered around fundamental rights and the authority of the Constitution of India, the vagaries of the legal system, the local *thana* (police station), the power of the *thanedar* (police officer), and civil and political rights. Thus, the training exercises of the *sathins* were not pedantic ones emphasizing the virtues of cleanliness, nutrition, and child development but were experimental exercises in "creating a climate of questioning, reflecting, sharing, choosing, seeking and discovering—through listening and talking" (Jain et al. 1987, 13).

Despite the growing awareness within institutional quarters of the complex and subordinated social positioning of the *sathin*, there was an assumption that the *sathin* would somehow be able to extricate herself from the prevailing power hierarchies within the village, transcend her subordinate social positioning, and be able to construct networks of solidarity among the women in the village through the creation of women's groups, which would be her insurance policy against overt aggression as she worked to achieve the development goals of the WDP. Questions of the sheer precariousness and the personal insecurity that such a working role would involve were shifted onto the *sathin* herself, and it was often pointed out that it was the *sathin* who would create solidarity for herself. Both the state and its feminist development partner upheld a transgressive politics for the fulfilment of development goals without too much soul searching about the personal costs of this transgression. In fact, when the injuries resulting from such a transgressive politics became evident, the response

<sup>18</sup> A Panchayat Samiti is a midlevel tier of local government connecting village-level governance with that of the district.

of both the main actors (the state and the feminist groups) was to reign in the program, thereby leaving the individual *sathin* even more vulnerable. So, despite the very real support extended by feminist groups through the delivery of training programs and in support of *sathins* at different junctures during the unfolding of the program, in the end, feminist partners of the WDP shared the framework of progressive developmentalism, thereby contributing to the injury-laden consequences of failing to attend to questions of risk and violence.

### **Politics of transgression: Risk, conflict, injury**

From its very inception, the creation of the marked identity of the *sathin* invoked risk. The idea that a lone woman, often belonging to a vulnerable caste and class position, would somehow be able to mobilize women in the village toward socially challenging and hence progressive activities was a risky idea. The mode of selection of the *sathin* provides an insight into the awareness of this risk not only by the framers of the program but even by the *sathins* themselves (see Madhok 2003a). Furthermore, the risk perception among the *sathins* over their perceived role was very strong and did not at any time diminish. The *sathin* herself was caught up in the conflict between the two: desiring official status for herself while inhabiting a subjectivity that was more complex than the subjecthood envisioned either by the state or its feminist and nonstate partners. There were essentially three instances that brought about a perceptible change in the relationship between the *sathins* and the state. These differences manifested themselves first in the different interpretations of roles over time; second, in the conflict between the two over the *sathins'* demand for an increased honorarium; and finally, in the uninterested and insensitive response of the state apparatus to the sexual assault of *sathin* Bhanwari Devi.<sup>19</sup> These reactions were reflective of the perceptual difference between the state and the *sathins* regarding the latter's role, subject positioning, and the boundaries of transgressive politics.

As we discussed above, the position of the *sathin* within the state administrative apparatus was ambivalent at best. According to the original terms of her employment, she was not a government functionary. However, public perception of her position was that she was a government employee, and indeed *sathins* saw the *sarkari* (governmental) tag both as

<sup>19</sup> The *sathins* demanded increased remuneration in early 1990 and from 1993 onward through their workers union. For a detailed account of the monetary dispute between the state of Rajasthan and the *sathins*, see Navlakha (1995).

legitimizing their position and providing them with a sense of security. While public meetings of women, often from other villages and districts; frequent sightings of WDP bureaucracy and state vehicles in the village; and the arrival of the *kagaj* (official monthly document) addressed to the *sathin* contributed to cementing popular perceptions of the “official access” that the *sathins* enjoyed, this perceived association with the state was not without risks. While this popularly perceived proximity with the state lent the *sathins* a very real sense of status in the village, it was also a source of grave conflict.<sup>20</sup>

A long-standing point of conflict between the *sathins* and the state has been over the exact nature of their status within the state bureaucracy—that is, if the *sathins* were to be considered workers employed by the state, they ought to be paid salaries instead of honoraria; if they were not considered state workers, then they should be allowed to exercise their democratic rights to organize as a workers union and demand worker-related entitlements from the state. The state vociferously upheld the *sathins* as nonstate workers while appearing to contradict itself in its refusal to allow them to organize into a union. The *sathins*, however, mobilized their resources and organized themselves into a union, demanding the “regularizing” of their status as government employees who enjoy the security of employment and an adequate wage for their work. Following this, in 1990, the *sathins* went on strike over this issue. The government agencies refused their demands, stating that the *sathins* were volunteers, not employees, and that they were uneducated and illiterate and therefore could not be government employees. According to Uma Chakravarti (2006), “From the movement of the *sathin* around wages and other related issues it is clear that while the *sathins* had been transformed from being ‘passive recipients’ of development policies the ‘upper’ levels of the WDP had remained class bound and instrumentalist in their approach to the program.”

However, it was the gang rape of *sathin* Bhanwari Devi in September 1992, as “punishment” for trying to stop a child marriage within the Gujjar community in her village of Bhatari, that propelled *sathin*-state relations into severe crisis. In the days preceding the rape of Bhanwari Devi, there were strong rumors of impending child marriages in the house-

<sup>20</sup> According to Maya Unnithan-Kumar and Kavita Srivastava (1997), the *sathins*’ demand to be included within the official state administrative structure was resisted by the Information Development and Resource Agency, established for dispensing technical support and training to the WDP and the team of researchers involved with the WDP at the Institute of Development Studies, although they supported the *sathins* in their bid for increased remuneration.

hold of a powerful Gujjar family. Upon hearing these rumors, the WDP officials congregated at Bhateri and visited the Gujjar household in order to dissuade the family from going ahead with the marriage of their infant daughter. The news about these negotiations spread, and the police visited the village and the home of Ram Karan Gujjar. Slighted by the shame brought by the police inquiries into their familial affairs, the Gujjar men resorted to a series of threatening and violent actions, and on September 9, 1992, five men raped Bhanwari Devi in the fields of her own village.<sup>21</sup>

But the rape itself constituted only the first in a long list of humiliations and betrayals suffered by Bhanwari Devi. The local police refused to register a first information report on the incident. After considerable pressure from the project director of the Jaipur District Women's Development Agency a report was filed, but Bhanwari Devi was first denied a medical examination and only examined after intense lobbying—fifty-two hours after the sexual assault, in which time nearly all of the implicating evidence was destroyed. Because of the hostility of the local police as well as that of the state-level police, including the crime investigation department, women's groups insisted that the rape investigation be handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation, a federal crime investigative agency. The investigation of the rape was protracted, with none of the five accused charged in the first year and the first arrest made seventeen months after the rape. In November 1995, after more than 180 court hearings, the judge (the sixth appointed on the case) at the district and sessions court acquitted all five suspects. The judgment noted the following: "Rape is usually committed by teenagers and since the accused are middle aged and therefore respectable, they could not have committed the crime. An upper caste man could not have defiled himself by raping a lower caste woman" (in Tomar 1998).

Several women's groups expressed disbelief at the gender and caste biases that had prejudiced the judgment. In a press release they argued that the trial had violated the rights of the victim and had deviated from the new provisions of the 1983 rape law.<sup>22</sup> Bhanwari Devi was particularly

<sup>21</sup> The sexual assault of Bhanwari Devi attracted the attention of the national media as well as that of the women's organizations based outside of Rajasthan. In a women's rally organized a month after the rape, on October 22, 1992, thousands of women activists from other states and rural women from Rajasthan marched through the streets of Jaipur in protest against the failure of the state agencies to apprehend the rapists (Madhok 2003a).

<sup>22</sup> Forum on Violence Against Women (Jaipur), Sakshi, Action India, Center for Feminist Legal Research, All India Democratic Women's Association, Jagori, Butterflies, and Janwadi Mahila Samiti, organizational press release, November 30, 1995.

bitter about the treatment meted out to her by the different institutions within the justice system:

It [the state] should have said . . . in the beginning . . . do not raise particular issues, do not stop child marriages, do not raise women's issues. . . . I would not have bothered with these. . . . However, I went by what we were trained in and believed the state wanted us to stop marriage of little children. But see, doing so has only resulted in the death sentence hanging on me. The *sarkar* [government] should have come to my aid. Those who violated the law have been set free. Even working for the government, I have no justice, then how can *ordinary* women ever hope to gain justice from the state? Why did the state did not give me justice, when it was abundantly clear that I had been raped? . . . It chose to speak up for the rich and the powerful and for the upper castes.<sup>23</sup>

The legal travesty attached to the Bhanwari Devi case enraged a women's rights group called Vishakha, which filed a public interest litigation case in the Supreme Court of India demanding safety for women in the workplace. In response the court, invoking the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, expanded the meaning of "fundamental rights" and held that gender equality included protection from sexual harassment at work and the right to work with dignity.<sup>24</sup> In passing a landmark judgment in the *Vishakha* case, the court laid down guidelines to be followed by establishments dealing with complaints about sexual harassment with the proviso that these guidelines were to be in place until legislation was passed to deal with the issue. But, as Mihir Desai (2003) notes, "the guidelines were followed more in their breach. Very few complaints committees were set up, service rules were not amended and the judgment was widely disregarded both by public and private employers. But one of the outcomes of the judgment was that many civil society organizations became aware of it and started to publicise it and pushed for its implementation. Around the same time many women who were being sexually harassed started breaking their

<sup>23</sup> Bhanwari Devi, interviewed by Sumi Madhok, Bhatari, 1999.

<sup>24</sup> *Vishakha and others v. State of Rajasthan and others*, AIR 1997, SC 3011; see the text of the decision at [http://www.iap.res.in/files/VisakaVsRajasthan\\_1997.pdf](http://www.iap.res.in/files/VisakaVsRajasthan_1997.pdf). In Mihir Desai's (2003) words, the *Vishakha* decision found that "if the Indian Government makes . . . commitments in international fora it shall be binding on the Government even within the nation and it will be treated as part of the national law unless there is a law within the country which is in direct conflict with such a law."

silence and started demanding action from the employers” (Desai 2003). The National Commission for Women took the lead in drafting a bill called Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention and Redressal) Bill (2006).<sup>25</sup>

In the meantime, Bhanwari Devi continues to wait for justice in penury. She has received a number of awards but no meaningful financial support. As Kavita Srivastava, a prominent civil liberties activist points out, “Bhanwari’s case was a pioneering one for the anti-rape movement. It brought about a change even in the system of accountability of the police. Many women have gained from Bhanwari Devi’s struggle, but sadly not her” (in Kurup 2006).

### **Reflections: Politics of risk, injury, and agency in development**

The above account of *sathin* subject formation and subjectivities presents a brief description of the processes, the nature, and the form through which development discourses and practices enter social settings and interact with and remake subjects.<sup>26</sup> The discursive reliance on agential capacities and responsibility is vital to the making of pliant subjects. We have suggested that risks are involved in mobilizing agentic subjects for development and have noted the perils of participating in the effort to implement social futures advocated in the name of development. Even in the critical literature (Giddens 1990; Beck 1992), understanding of risk assumes an ontological security as well as a regularity in the social environment in which agents operate (Giddens 1990; Rosa 2000) that is unavailable to the *sathins* in the WDP. The mainstream literature on risk rarely, if ever, focuses on the social environment. Instead, in neoliberal frameworks, risk is embedded in the individual who is the risk taker and who evaluates risk in relation to profit or loss, success or failure—always in terms of cost. The perception and calculation of risk, therefore, is the

<sup>25</sup> As defined in the 1997 Supreme Court guidelines in the *Vishakha* decision, sexual harassment includes such unwelcome behavior as physical contact; a demand or request for sexual favors; sexually colored remarks; showing pornography; or any other unwelcome physical, verbal, or nonverbal conduct of a sexual nature, e.g., leering, telling dirty jokes, making sexual remarks about a person’s body, and so on. A revised version of the sexual harassment legislation is available on the National Commission for Women’s website at <http://ncw.nic.in/sexualharassmentatworkplacebill2005.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Many of the ideas in this section were developed in Shirin Rai’s work on Civic Driven Change (see <http://www.iss.nl/Portals/Civic-Driven-Change-Initiative>; see also Rai 2008). She would like to thank Kees Bierkart, Alan Fowler, and Niraja Gopal Jayal for comments and discussion on the issue of risk.

responsibility of the individual agent; indeed, it is integral to agentic subject formation. The obverse of this, of course, is that if the agent suffers through her action, the responsibility must lie with her: her evaluation of her own position and resources, the obstacles to overcome, and the system of support that she can depend on must be flawed.

The dilemma we pose for agency thinking is this: How are subjects who are formed within and through power relations and enmeshed in a web of risks and injuries expected to harness resources from within and mount challenges to those very constitutive power relations?<sup>27</sup> In light of the above theoretical dilemma, how do we frame participation and agential activity in the context of this web of risk such that, while being aware of the chance of injury, we are also able to develop strategies for minimizing it so as not to face the risk of prolonging exclusion through nonaction? In contexts of deep inequality and exploitation, to act is often to risk all for the sake of subsistence; agential moments then might be imperatives not for empowerment but for survival (Rai 2008). So, how can we produce accounts of individual or collective acts without designating these either as instances of resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990) and transgression or as displays of normative models of sovereign, agential selfhoods (Asad 2003)?

At first reading, the publicly performed, everyday political, and deliberative practices of the *sathins* might lead us to identify these as examples of democratic subject formation and even deliberative politics. But this would be too quick, for as we will see below, the experience of the WDP complicates normative understandings of agential deliberative politics by exposing the complexities of the fields of power within which public enactments unfold (Stokes 1998). Advocates of deliberative politics identify open debate and participation marked by courtesy, listening, and pluralism as devices for disturbing and challenging “hegemonic discourses” and holding political institutions more accountable (Rai 2007, 66). At the same time, in privileging public conversation, deliberative theorists assume informed consent on the part of participating rational deliberative individuals, but such a view does not attend to the difficult processes through which consent is manufactured nor to the dominance of prejudicial interests and the failure of institutional disclosure—that is, what and who are the institutional drivers, key players, or agents bearing responsibility and accountability for development initiatives, and what is the nature of necessary information, often withheld, that must be placed in the public domain and deliberated over before any form of meaningful consent can be procured. Clearly, these processes were not evident in the WDP. It is

<sup>27</sup> See also Seymour (2006, 304).

also unclear in the case of the WDP whether the women who became *sathins* volunteered to be in this program on their own account.

As we have noted (see Madhok 2003b), the process of becoming a *sathin* was often one of appointment through consultation between the village elders and prominent members and not of volunteering; the criteria had little to do with prospective *sathins*' qualities of leadership but with their caste, religious, marital, and class status. Even so, we wonder what "internal conversations" (Archer 2003) these women had before accepting these positions. What was the nature of the institutional communication between them, the WDP, and those in their communities actively involved in shaping their consent to participation? What information were these prospective *sathins* given? Did they have a clear idea about the risks that they would encounter and about the support that they would need and who would provide it? What solidarities did they anticipate? After all, deliberative processes favor focus on moments of cooperation, negotiation, conflict, and resolution or breakdown at and between different levels of governance. In the early phase of the WDP, the *sathins* met in village squares to deliberate on issues of women's status and empowerment (Madhok 2003a)—they performed deliberative politics. One outcome of these deliberative practices that seemingly reflected a flouting of hegemonic fields of power in Rajasthan villages was the increased visibility and therefore vulnerability of the *sathins* to gender violence. By occupying the village public space through the mechanisms of *jajam* and *shivir*, the *sathins* created a performative rupture that was dangerous—openly transgressive rather than adaptive—to the local social hierarchies.<sup>28</sup> But this politics of visibility was precarious and without institutional support, thereby exposing the limits of deliberative politics. Meanwhile, caught between institutional aspirations for social change that were largely neglectful of local power relations and their own increased vulnerabilities in the face of this negligence, the *sathins* bore the costs and injuries of disturbing hegemonic fields of power (Rai 2007) and practices, including those upheld by the state upon their persons.

When we think of agency, we also need to think about the spaces within which it is exercised. In terms of evaluating risk, this poses questions that can have unforeseen answers. The empowerment literature often assumes

<sup>28</sup> The literal translation of *jajam* is "a spread blanket." The *jajam* invokes a space set aside for collective deliberation. *Shivir* literally translates as a "camp" and is an assembly of women, most of whom are associated with the WDP, mainly for the purposes of information and knowledge sharing about a problem or situation commonly experienced by WDP workers.

that local space is the most accessible to agents (Parpart, Rai, and Staudt 2002), a space about which the actors have the most knowledge and in which they are most invested since they themselves live there. The local space is also one where a community takes shape, is nurtured, and is sustained. The argument there is that the local is not only closer to the lives of people but also allows for greater sensitivity to local ecology, is more accountable, and is more participatory. However, the local space is not an uncomplicated space. As we have seen in the story of the WDP, the levels of locally validated oppressions, exclusions, violations, and surveillance that women experience in villages can be extremely high. The intimacy of spaces makes for intimate violence. Given the structural framing of the WDP, was this issue examined? How did the *sathins* negotiate this (un)familiar terrain in their familiar and unfamiliar selves? Did they raise these questions with their trainers? The local space was assumed to be a benign space by all those involved, and as a result the risks of transgressive politics in communities were neither acknowledged nor assessed. The village then became the stage where the spectacle (Debord 1990) of state governance broke down and where the spectacle of community governance (Baxi, Rai, and Ali 2006) was brutally enacted in the humiliation of Bhanwari Devi.

In the WDP, we argue, risk plays out in two different ways. First, it is structural (or, as Robert Castel argues, factorial)—it is the product of a set of social relations that are “managed” by experts in order to produce strategic outcomes by “matching trajectories” of development to ensure that “human profiles match up to them” (Castel 1991, 295). In this sense, the agency and subject formation of the *sathin* is instrumental to such development outcomes and therefore is managed as a resource in order to minimize risk to the WDP. When Bhanwari Devi attempted to influence the decision of the upper-caste family to marry off their infant daughter, she was acting alone but presumably with the support of the collective and indeed of the state as represented by the WDP (Rai 2008, 112). Her estimation of her own vulnerability was clearly underpinned by several factors: her (ambiguous) status as a *sathin* involved in the WDP, her buying into the discourse of both gender equality and empowerment as discussed in the training sessions, and her evaluation of the strength of support she had from the state bureaucrats running the program. The tensions that had already emerged among the *sathins* regarding their employment status could have alerted her to the increasing cracks appearing in the edifice of the WDP, but they obviously did not; in seeking to stop a child marriage, something that was well within the purview of the gender-justice and empowerment frames of the program, she was, in her estimation, sup-

porting the state's strategic developmental goals as inscribed into the WDP. Clearly, the complicity of state officials—the WDP program officers, the police, and the local judiciary—must have come as a shock to her, even as it might seem entirely predictable to us. The question here, however, is not simply about Bhanwari Devi getting it wrong. It is also about the expectations that she had of the others involved in the WDP. The threat awareness that she must have had was mediated by a sense of security attached to this program, whose only protection in the end was not network solidarity but accommodation—*sathins* should not challenge patriarchal social relations but help meet state population targets.

Second, risk is the inherent danger that dwells in the moments of transgression of these social relations; it disciplines agents and attaches itself to defiant bodies and social spaces where acts of defiance are performed. Our argument is that while weight is given to individual agency of women within the WDP, there is an almost deafening silence on the question of risk that *sathins* face and negotiate—successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully—in the cause of progressive developmentalism. The nature of change as well as the level of risk attendant upon it envisioned by Bhanwari Devi and state officials was very different. The explosive moment of violence that Bhanwari Devi experienced was the risk that was not prevented (or even preventable?) through conceiving of change as an issue of “management.” The violence inherent in the situation became manifest in the rape of Bhanwari Devi not only because of the WDP's failure to make a political assessment of the demand that persons exercise oppositional agency within openly coercive contexts but also because of its failure to position this demand for agentic activity within “historically situated analyses of women's struggles” (Parpart, Rai, and Staudt 2002, 17).

An analysis of the WDP thus alerts us to the contexts within which development programs are conceived, designed, launched, and funded. The WDP was conceived at a time when women's invisibility within international developmentalism had been registered and women's roles within development emerged as a prominent concern within both development activism and academic feminism. This focus on women's inclusion within development found an expression in the Indian state's national and provincial policy making. The WDP was an outcome of this linking of international, national, and provincial development discourses on women and development. This linking is further evidenced by the fact that UNICEF absorbed the expenditure costs of the WDP for the first six years of the program. This assumption of financial responsibility by an international agency resulted in the WDP enjoying relatively higher degrees

of autonomy in its day-to-day running as compared to other state-sponsored development programs. However, this seeming autonomy was rudely broken when UNICEF withdrew financing from the WDP and when the *sathin* grew increasingly visible as an activist figure. The public activism of the *sathins* exposes the limits of agency in development and the naïveté of assuming that agential capacities and activism thus mobilized can be monitored and regulated to meet predecided development or modernization goals. It also highlights the multiple and differing versions and visions of change upheld by the various actors within the program, including the *sathins*, and brings to the fore the nature of political investments and stakes involved in a collaborative politics with the state (Madhok 2003b).

Thus, in conclusion, we argue first that agency-in-development neglects the structural and temporal risks attached to performing transgressive acts. We need to recognize that the exercise of agency has risk attendant upon it: to act or not to act is not an individual but a social process with different outcomes and varied risks. Second, risk is also diverse—risk can be individual as well as collective and institutional; it can be reputational or operational, but for many it can also be directly physical. Third, to the extent that risk is inversely related to social and economic advantage, greater attention to risk also focuses our attention on redistribution in society as it highlights inequality and potentially offers new ways of dealing with it. Fourth, a lack of risk awareness can and does result in a neglect of contexts, an ahistorical developmental framework that has catastrophic consequences both for the individual citizens and for development programs, projects, and initiatives such as the WDP. And finally, an awareness of risk need not lead to a political paralysis or to exercise of agency without due regard to security. Indeed, regard for risk assessment and a commitment to minimizing it can work toward a longer and more sustained citizen engagement in struggles to shape change. A critical reading of the WDP, then, allows us fresh perspectives on both agency and risk in development.

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