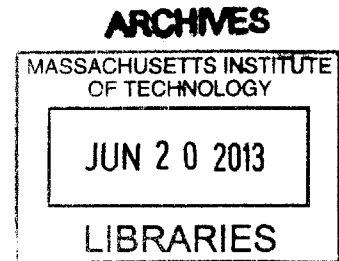


Stree Mukti Sanghatana:
Exploring the Work of an Indian NGO through Gender, Economy, and Civil Society

By

Anna Gaffney Gross

BA in Environmental Studies
Yale University
New Haven, CT (2004)



Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master in City Planning

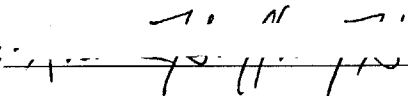
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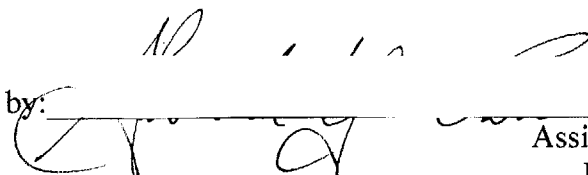
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Signature of Author:  _____
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
May 23, 2013

Certified by:  _____
Assistant Professor Gabriella Yolanda Carolini
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by: _____
Associate Professor  Christopher Zegras
Chair, MCP Committee
Department of Urban Studies and Planning

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ABSTRACT

Learning how to use multiple tools to develop a rich and complex base of knowledge is at the core of the planning profession. While it is easy to acknowledge the importance of such integration in the development of a comprehensive, multi-faceted analytical framework, it is more difficult to apply in daily practice. It is only through constant reflection and a willingness to let go of specific conceptions of what is true that a planner is able to develop his or her skills. In my work with Stree Mukti Sanghatana (SMS), an NGO in Mumbai, India, I was able to simultaneously reflect upon my role as a planner and the organization's role as a supporter of female waste pickers. There are many parallels between my own journey and that of SMS, as it continues to expand its mission and engage with new communities. Combining my experience with the knowledge of other participants and researchers, I analyzed the case through the frames of gender, economy, and civil society. It was only through the synthesis of multiple sources of information that I was able to find the intersection between my skill set and the needs of the organization. Rather than focusing on the construction of a series of biodigesters, which was my initial approach, I came to realize that supporting the growth and development of SMS' zero waste school/environmental center might be a better role for me as a planner.

Thesis Supervisor: Gabriella Yolanda Carolini
Title: Assistant Professor

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INTRODUCTION

I have spent the majority of the last two years grappling with my role as a student learning about planning; I will likely spend the rest of my career grappling with my role as a member of the field. While any conscientious worker will engage in personal and professional reflection throughout his or her practice, this struggle to define identity and involvement seems to characterize planning in a more dominant manner than in many other disciplines. Social science as a whole has often been considered less rigorous than natural (or “normal”) science because it is harder to explain with rules and hypothetico-deductive reasoning (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In attempts to adhere to the rationalist framework that has pervaded the scientific field since the time of Socrates and Plato, researchers often seek to form generalizable, replicable lessons from their studies. This puts pressure on fields such as planning that can limit, rather than enhance, their efficacy.

My interest in environmental conservation and international development led me to pursue a graduate degree in urban planning. As the world’s population increases and space and natural resources dwindle, efficient and equitable forms of city management become more complex. It was not until I began my studies that I realized the extent of that complexity. I was forced to question much of what I had assumed about the way things are and the way they ought to be. My education opened my perspective in a way that was exciting, but also overwhelming, confusing, and exhausting. When I saw an opportunity to work on waste management, I thought it would provide a more straightforward lens through which to direct my learning process: waste was bad, so reducing it was good. Not only did I soon realize that this binary was misleading, ascribing to it on even a basic level did not begin to address the political, social, or environmental issues surrounding its management.

Working with Libby McDonald, Program Director of Global Sustainability Partnerships in MIT’s Community Innovators Lab (CoLab), I learned that waste provides a livelihood for millions of people around the globe. The sector is dominated by marginalized communities, especially in developing countries where manual waste picking, or scavenging, is a primary source of income for those with limited resources and without access to other opportunities. In many areas, including Mumbai, India, this means that women and their children, who are much more vulnerable to the hazards of working in and around dumpsites, subsist by sorting recyclable materials to sell to middlemen who often set unfair prices (Dandekar & Mahajan, n.d.). They have no access to health services and are stigmatized by the nature of their work. McDonald has been particularly interested in organizing these populations around integrated waste management and the establishment of small-scale waste enterprises using innovative technologies.

During the summer of 2012, stemming from my year-long involvement with McDonald’s projects, I traveled to Mumbai, India with a fellow classmate to learn about a women’s liberation organization – Stree Mukti Sanghatana (SMS) – that has been working with waste pickers since 1998. The primary purpose of our trip was data collection, though the specific objectives were hard to conceptualize due to our limited knowledge about the project. As we understood it, SMS was engaged in an entrepreneurial endeavor to set up a network of biodigesters as part of a decentralized waste management strategy. We were to work closely with Jyoti Mhapsekar, the

president of the organization, and observe and interpret as much as we could during our time in country so we would have the necessary pieces in place to write a grant proposal upon our return.

Much of our preparatory work was based on past experience, literature review, and speculation of need based on incomplete information about SMS and its initiatives. Our working outline, generated pre-departure, included five sections: (1) Observation and Assessment of Current Practices; (2) Community Engagement, Participatory Planning, and Education; (3) Feasibility of Biogas Dissemination; (4) Process Evaluation and Personal Reflection; and (5) Next Steps. Each included: objectives, outcomes (deliverables), participants, timeline, resources, tasks, and references (Mumbai Biogas Outline, 30 May 2012). While the process of putting together this document was useful for focusing our approach, much of the detail was rendered obsolete as soon as we began to learn more about the project.

The most important distinction between the project we had envisioned and the one we encountered was one of ownership – while the impetus for our involvement was rooted in McDonald’s involvement with and interest in female-headed, waste picker-run refuse management enterprises, the business component of SMS’s biogas initiative was actually being implemented by three male graduates of the TATA Institute for Social Sciences (TISS). Though we were aware of the students’ involvement, we had understood it to be much more auxiliary than it turned out to be. In fact, the three students had co-founded a private enterprise – Sampurn(e)arth – with Mhapsekar and three other women from SMS and were the primary agents in charge of establishing and overseeing a zero-waste business model based heavily on biogas dissemination. So, if we were not in Mumbai to support the development/expansion of a female-owned waste enterprise, what was our role?

In our first couple of weeks in Mumbai, this unexpected shift in focus was troubling. My classmate and I felt somewhat directionless, and it was evident in my reflection upon our work:

In general, I have felt a bit overwhelmed/disheartened since arriving in Mumbai. I was nervous about this project before we left, and continue to feel unsure about my current/future role in development. This work is incredibly difficult, and there is little concrete/straightforward guidance because there is no clear solution. At certain times I think I shouldn't be working internationally at all because there are so many cultural aspects that will always be foreign to me; what place do I have to assert that my presence in/involvement with this country is going to be beneficial? I do believe that there is a place, but I am having so much trouble wrapping my head around what it might be. Or what it should/ought to be? . . . I currently feel as though we are being humored as students who want to work on an international development project. The thing is, based on reading materials and discussion, I do think we could be of major assistance in the organization, professionalization and direction of this emerging enterprise. But, does Jyoti [Mhapsekar] see us primarily as a gateway to funding? She was under the impression that we were architects; what would she like from us as planners? What are the deliverable she is expecting? Can we be of more assistance to the students? Are we functioning based on our desire to be useful? Is there a distinction between what we are expecting to provide and what they are expecting us to produce?

(Author’s Personal Reflection, 05 July 2012)

Looking back over these comments, one of the most telling statements is that Mhapsekar originally thought that we were architects. This was due to some confusion about our association with Lucia Fernandez, an architect who currently works with Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), “a global action-research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor in the informal economy, especially women” (WIEGO website). As Fernandez was central to our involvement with SMS, it is not surprising that Mhapsekar was under the misconception that we worked in the same capacity. In addition to the expansion of the biogas business model, Mhapsekar was in the process of constructing a zero-waste school/environmental education center and thought we might be able to assist in its design and implementation. While we were disheartened at the time by the misunderstanding, in retrospect Mhapsekar’s desire for assistance with the environmental center speaks to our utility as planners as much as, if not more than, our participation in biogas business modeling. Through the course of my analysis, it has become clear that the two components are much more interrelated than we originally thought.

At the time, however, the fact that we were not architects seemingly steered Mhapsekar away from her initial focus on the environmental center, and toward our collaboration with the TISS graduates. In the initial stages of the project, it felt as though her disappointment in our supposed skill set led her to believe that we would be most useful partnering with other academics. For the first two weeks we sat in the office where the graduates worked, trying to learn about what they were doing without disrupting them. They did not know why we were there or how they were supposed to engage with us and, frankly, neither did we.

Our initial understanding of our objective was to help organize a group of female waste pickers and investigate the potential of linking their efforts into the municipal waste management structure. The TISS graduates had already established a private business model that, while centered on the work of the SMS women, was not *of* the women in the way we had anticipated. I felt ill-informed and ill-prepared to work with them and, as a result, struggled to find a purpose in our involvement.

I had a [moment] on Friday during which I felt that I should neither be here in India working on this project nor in the field of urban planning at all. I think it was triggered by a lack of direction since arriving here which, while not entirely surprising, is quite frustrating nonetheless. My contention was that we hadn't received any additional information since arriving that could answer any of our more pertinent questions. Also, [my classmate] seemed surprised that I felt directionless because she thought she had so much work to do already . . . We didn't really broach the subject again until Monday, but we clarified a few things yesterday that made our task seem slightly more manageable. [My classmate]'s understanding was that our sole (or at least primary) objective was to figure out how to secure additional funds for this project. That is, that we had little value to the project aside from sourcing money. As I reread our original outline and [an] email concerning the project, my understanding was that we were to not only gather information that would aid [a] proposal, but develop something of a guide to creating/building enterprise opportunities from waste management. This includes not just the financial components but the organizational/institutional and educational ones as well. My frustration stemmed from the fact that I felt we needed to be much more

integrated into the project in order to accomplish the additional goals and it didn't seem like the [TISS graduates] were interested in working with us. Also, there is very little to read about the plan/direction of the current approach and getting information from [Mhapsekar] feels a bit scattered without context. I like to really understand the background/purpose/direction of a project before I start asking questions, and there isn't an opportunity to do that in this case. It does seem that we are going to have to work very hard to make this trip beneficial, but that just means we have to be organized in our approach.

Some more thoughts on the project thus far:

1. I am starting to conceptualize a divide in entrepreneurship strategy and the notion of 'capacity building.' I think one of my issues with the term is that it insinuates that capacity is a specific, tangible, and mutually agreed upon notion. Or maybe it doesn't, but I think we have to be very clear when we use it, and offer further definition. In this case, the establishment of a private company, run by [the students from TISS], was triggered by a number of factors, many of which were legal (concerning labor laws, etc.), but not the least of which is that the SMS women were not interested in running a business but preferred to be employed and earn a set salary . . . Not everyone is/wants to be an entrepreneur, even in the case of independent, organized and pro-active women. I think there is a divide inherent that needs to be honored and not overlooked. It should not be our job to convince people that they want to run a business but provide support that is in line with their goals . . .

2. I am also wondering which external factors have an impact on a group's/individual's entrepreneurial aspirations. Do gender roles have an impact? Is that something that should be addressed on a higher level on a longer-term basis or should we be more cognizant of ingrained socio-normative and cultural structures? In India there seems to be little female entrepreneurship from what we have seen/experienced thus far. There are few female employees: there are none at our hotel or in any of the restaurants (at least in terms of the public face/server/hosts, etc.). While there is a clear prevalence of men, is the ratio reflective of just an unbalanced gender breakdown or are there just very specific jobs/roles that women embody?

All of these question, and likely many more, play into the structure of this biogas project. Is [Mhapsekar] an anomaly? Right now, SMS, a women's liberation organization, is developing a private company run by three men. In addition, the only two technicians currently are men. Are these trends, or more personal decisions at the heart of a lack of female entrepreneurship? (Author's Personal Reflection, 10 July 2012)

Many of these questions pervaded my time in Mumbai, and when I returned to the US I was overwhelmed by my experience and the prospect of continuing my involvement with the project. It was not until I acknowledged that my experience was just one component of my knowledge base that I fully began to realize the importance of my trip. The role of a planner is not to enter a situation and immediately understand how to make it "better". It is part of a continual process that includes not just observation and reflection, but theoretical application, contextual research, and active participation. So much of my angst while in India was the feeling that I was little

more than a potential fundraiser. Once I started to apply the other components of my education and experience to the case of SMS, I was able to better understand my part in the process. I came to realize that my utility does not have to be stunted by the limitations of the tools at my disposal; it is only by using them in conjunction with one another that I will be able to transition from the acquisition of evidence to the creation of a useful knowledge base (Davoudi, 2006; Krizek, Forysth, & Slotterback, 2009; Rydin, 2007).

How can I combine my experiences, research, education, and personal interactions to create a more complete, contextualized understanding of SMS and its trajectory? What do I know about this organization, and how does it inform my current and future work? What aspects of my understanding are necessarily limited, and how do I account for those shortcomings instead of struggling in vain to overcome them? Arguments concerning gender, economy, and the role of civil society are particularly relevant to my questions about SMS, therefore I will use these lenses to further my exploration of this case.

Gender

Given that SMS was founded by a group of feminists in an effort to promote the constitutionally provided rights of Indian women, it makes sense to consider the work and growth of the organization from the standpoint of gender. One of the dangers of such an analysis, however, is that it divides the population in half using an indicator that, while biologically and socially relevant, nonetheless creates a grouping that disregards cultural, political, financial, and situational distinctions between (and among) women and men around the world. When the gender conversation becomes one of male versus female, to the exclusion of all other factors, it is easy to incorporate generalizations that lead to misguided assumptions or conclusions.

Economy

Until 1998, SMS did not work directly on issues of employment. Though the work was tangentially related, the primary focus was on activism, awareness, and support for women in the form of social welfare. The decision to become involved with waste pickers changed the nature of the NGO, in that it introduced a more entrepreneurial component to its work. The origin of its involvement is important when comparing the trajectory of SMS with other groups of waste pickers or informal workers. In many ways it is a unique case, as it is a women's rights organization that happened to start working with a specific group, leading it progressively toward issues such as labor rights and economic security. This is distinct from collectivization in the form of a workers' cooperative or trade union.

Civil Society and the State

As SMS has strengthened and expanded it has done most of its work independently, but has also engaged with the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) on a few projects. Mhapsekar has become disillusioned by these interactions and favors the creation of a parallel, rather than integrated, waste management structure (Discussion with Jyoti Mhapsekar, 12 July 2012). While there is an attraction to the idea that those dedicated to solid waste management (SWM) might be able to perform more effectively by circumventing the formal, bureaucratic (and often corrupt) municipal system, the long-term sustainability of such endeavors is unclear. As MCGM begins to invest more heavily in SWM, there is an opportunity for the city to embrace, rather than cast aside, the work and experience of the informal sector. Though political engagement can be frustrating and time-consuming, organizations such as SMS might have an

opportunity to improve working conditions and increase access to social services for the informal labor sector if they fight for municipal recognition of the value that waste pickers provide to the city.

CHAPTER I: Background

STREE MUKTI SANGHATANA

Formation and Mission

Jyoti Mhapsekar, together with a group of fellow middle-class feminists, founded Stree Mukti Sanghatana (SMS), a Mumbai-based non-profit, in 1975. The organization, whose name means “Women’s Liberation Organization,” was intended to support the implementation of the legal entitlements for women established by the Indian Constitution of 26 January 1950.

The Constitution of India as well as other laws have conferred equal rights and status on women. These however have not been actualized as yet. In every field, women occupy a secondary and subsidiary place. The role of Stree Mukti Sanghatana therefore becomes necessary to help liberate women from economic political, cultural and psychological oppression. (Stree Mukti Sanghatana website, accessed 20 March 2013)

Since its inception, the majority of SMS activities have revolved around creative performances, awareness campaigns, and the provision of social welfare support for women. Mhapsekar, as a playwright, has been integrally involved with the SMS cultural troupe that has been performing her plays since 1975. She has written extensively about major issues of women’s rights in Indian society, and her plays address themes such as selective abortion, dowry, and access to education. In addition, groups of 40-60 activists participate in 10-15 day awareness campaigns throughout the region – *Yatra* – that include these performances as well as presentations and poster exhibitions. SMS also partners with the Institute for Psychological Health and the Mumbai Police to provide programs for students – *Jidnyasa* – that cover topics such as stress management, sex education, and individual and societal values (Stree Mukti Sanghatana website).

The individualized services that SMS provides range from family and financial counseling to medical consultations and treatment. In every component of its work, the organization seeks to instill strength, confidence, and an expectation of equal rights in women. In its Declaration, SMS states that the women of India must be liberated from economic, social, political, cultural, and psychological oppression, and it therefore seeks to address all areas through different components of its work. Though the NGO’s original objectives were more generally focused on the social welfare, its aims to improve living and working conditions for women eventually directed it toward Mumbai’s waste picking community and led to the establishment of the Parisar Vikas (PV) Program in 1998. Given the numerous factors that force so many women to make their living in this field, many of which are wrapped up in the forms of oppression specifically addressed by SMS, it is not surprising that the organization began to focus on this issue. PV expanded SMS’ mission and range of services to include “economic development, entrepreneurship, job training and poverty alleviation” as well as a strong sense of environmental stewardship (Dandekar & Mahajan, n.d., p. 7).

The Parisar Vikas Program

In 1994, SMS performed one of its street plays in Govandi, Mumbai. The area is home to Deonar, a major dumping ground run by the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM), and consequently many waste pickers attended the play. As they engaged with the attendees, the SMS representatives began to wonder about the size of the city's waste-picking sector, which appeared to be comprised primarily of women and children. Identifying the community as one that might benefit greatly from SMS welfare services and opportunities, they decided to conduct a survey to learn more about the population and its needs (Dandekar & Mahajan, n.d.). The survey, of approximately 2000 women, revealed a great deal about the waste picking community in and around in Govandi, Mumbai. Sulakshana Mahajan, an architect/planner who works closely with SMS, produced a report with Hemalata Dandekar of Arizona State University citing the following statistics from the survey:

Ragpicker's ages ranged from 7 to 70 years;
Ragpicking was a caste and gender based activity in that 95% of all the ragpickers were women and from scheduled castes (Dalits).
90% of all ragpickers were the main breadwinner for their families;
98% of ragpickers were illiterate;
98% of ragpickers had no alternative skills; and
all the ragpickers were from drought-prone areas of Maharashtra and other southern states. (Dandekar & Mahajan, p. 8, n.d.)

Though not all waste pickers were interested in the objectives of SMS, which were to organize the women and provide greater security in the form of cooperatives, many decided to work with the organization. Aside from a general interest in the services that the organization was already providing, the workers were also enthusiastic about potential access to credit schemes, literacy programs, and education for them and their children (Participant observation, June-July 2012).

When it was originally founded, the ultimate goal of SMS was to hold the state and society accountable for the rights to which women are entitled by law. As it has expanded its work with waste pickers it has supplemented, but not replaced, this framework. The organization still provides social welfare services to all sectors of the community, but has become more well known for waste management and now works with approximately 600 waste pickers throughout the region (Gokaldas, 2012). Involvement in this field links the organization with a more complex framework of institutional relations. Not only is the NGO now engaging with the solid waste management structure of Mumbai, it is involved in the broader challenges that come with working with a legally unrecognized sector of the labor market.

The PV program originated with the management of dry waste, which was essentially a more formalized model of the work the waste pickers were already doing on their own, including the collection, sorting, and sale of recyclable materials. In 2001, SMS ventured into wet (organic) waste management by experimenting with composting, and by 2002 had established a class on the topic for the waste pickers. At the same time, Dr. Sharad Kale, of the Bhabha Atomic Research Center (BARC), began training a few of the waste pickers to run small-scale

biodigesters.¹ The intent was to simultaneously create an integrated waste management program and provide alternative forms of employment for the women. (Discussion with Jyoti Mhapsekar, 17 July 2012). Women who have been trained in composting and biodigester operation generally consider it an improvement over waste picking. Many of the benefits are those that come with any transition from an informal working environment to a more formal one – regular hours, salary, support networks, etc. One issue raised among the women, however, was the fact that they weren't able to acquire larger sums of cash if the need arose. While the reliability of a regular salary was attractive to most, this lack of potential did mean that some women returned to waste picking (Participant observation, July 2012).

In taking on the cause of this particular community and establishing the PV program, SMS created a demand for additional forms of knowledge and expertise. This has incentivized partnerships with various stakeholders, originally those trained in specific waste management techniques, such as Kale, and more recently those trained in business. All forms of waste management in which SMS is engaged are entrepreneurial endeavors that bring with them not only the need for market analysis and modeling, but a responsibility to address the deeper challenges that waste pickers face in their continual struggle for fair wages, workers' rights, and state recognition of their services. Unsurprisingly, the more tangible, shorter-term components of enterprise development, such as contract generation, marketing, and outreach to potential clients, have proven easier to tackle than deeply entrenched socio-political causes of systemic inequality.

The NGO has begun to address the expansion of its entrepreneurial work in with the foundation of Sampurn(e)arth. The board is made up of seven members: the three graduates from TISS – Debartha Banerjee, Jayanth N, and Ritvik Rao – and four representatives of SMS – Mhapsekar, Susheela Sabale, Sunita Patil, and Sulakshana Mahajan. Apart from managing the biodigestion network, the company is creating a comprehensive waste management model with which to approach potential partner institutions. The intent is that Sampurn(e)arth will maintain all contracts with clients and SMS waste workers will provide labor. Contract management has become problematic as the PV program has grown: while SMS oversees some of them, individual workers' cooperatives handle others. In addition, there are no standard terms or payment schedules, and the documentation is scattered and incomplete across the board (Discussion with former SMS technical trainer Azima Khan, 29 July 2012). SMS' recognition of this deficit, and its willingness to reach out to those more experienced in social entrepreneurship, regardless of gender (a point that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter), reflects a certain degree of institutional awareness of its own limitations and the benefits of collaboration.

¹ Biodigestion is a way of processing organic waste to generate two useable by products – methane, which is captured as a gas, and fertilizer, which consists of the solid effluent that remains at the end of the process. Reutilization of organic waste is not as widespread as recycling, but it is extremely important for the potential to divert organic waste from the landfill. When organic matter decomposes under landfill conditions the process is anaerobic and, as a result, it generates a number of greenhouse gases, the most potent being methane. As with composting, biodigestion is difficult to promote because it is hard to make it economically viable as a business model. SMS is involved with a specific type of biodigestion – Nisargruna – established by Kale at BARC. The link between BARC and SMS hinges on the personal relationship between Kale and Mhapsekar.

WORKER ORGANIZATION: Self Help Groups and Federations

SMS organizes waste workers into government-registered Self Help Groups (SHGs) of ten members, which are then incorporated into federations (alternatively referred to as Self Help Promoting Agencies – SHPAs) (Salomo, Rao, & Kumar, 2012). There are two federations to which the waste pickers belong: Parisar Baghini Vikas Sangh (PBVS) and Parisar Sakhi Vikas Sanstha (PSVS), the former being the larger and more prominent. While the SHGs and federations work with SMS, once formed they are autonomous groups. The role of the NGO is to provide an opportunity for isolated waste pickers to come together; SMS does not manage or oversee the function of these cooperatives (Discussions with Jyoti Mhapsekar, June 2012).

SHGs are crucial for a large percentage of the Indian population, of which at least 84% is considered to be employed informally (ILO, 2012) (See Chapter III). With the establishment of the SHG Banking Pilot Programme in 1992, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) permitted banks to lend to informal groups without collateral. In 1996, SHG banking became standard practice and, as of March 2011, 7.462 million SHGs had savings accounts, with an aggregate balance of over 70 billion rupees (1.26 billion USD). Access to such networks is vital to successful mobilization and generation of financial opportunities (Salomo et al., 2012). This structure provides a support system for the women in lieu of a formal employer. Though it requires more investment than merely showing up to perform a job, it also affords the waste pickers an opportunity to take ownership of the process through which they make their living.

The purpose of federations is to link SHGs into a larger network in order to address broader concerns that are too large or complex for a single group of 10 people to tackle. They also create opportunities to scale up financially through collective economic investment. As of July 2010, there were 164,000 federations in India (Salomo et al., 2012). It is here that SMS might have an opportunity to start to engage some of the longer-term objectives of widespread employment generation and improvement in working conditions for the marginalized sector. Federations are involved in various types of social and livelihood development and therefore provide an opportunity for mobilization of waste pickers. Though SMS works closely with PBVS, it has not yet engaged in the political mobilization strategies that have characterized the work of other waste worker organizations such as Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP) in Pune (See Chapter IV).

CHAPTER II: Gender

The “third world woman” as conceived of by conventional Western thought is “a homogeneous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit *victims* of particular socioeconomic systems . . . This mode of defining women primarily in terms of their *object status* (the way in which they are affected or not affected by certain institutions and systems) is what characterizes this particular form of the use of ‘women’ as a category of analysis” (Mohanty, 1991, p. 57). Such a conception limits the conversation to one that revolves around power. Women are viewed as an oppressed, marginalized group, in which the details of their lives and personalities are rendered irrelevant. In isolating gender as the most important component of a woman’s existence, this perspective might actually serve to strengthen the divide between sexes. Placing women in positions of power is perhaps a necessary, but not sufficient, tactic for promoting gender parity in the broader society. There is a danger for such women become superficial symbols that conceal deeply entrenched inequalities that require more significant structural change to address.

While there are certainly reasons to focus on women in development, to assume that they are universal is limiting. Those aspects based on sex alone are intertwined with contextually distinct details that serve to alter the simplistic distinction between male and female. Though there is a cohesive biological grouping, based on sex, that encompasses what it means to be “female,”² it is just one component of what constitutes gender. There are networks of cultural and sociological factors that are all mutually influential; to claim solidarity based on one aspect of an interconnected system is to inaccurately define it as an isolated and self-contained unit.

When women are considered a homogeneous unit, the attributes that supposedly define gender are used to determine or justify their participation in projects. Women are frequently identified as more compassionate, or more responsible, or easier to train. Ela Bhatt, founder of the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), recently authored an endnote to *Organizing Women Workers in the Informal Economy* in which she stated that, “By focusing on women, there is potential for a different kind of change – a more integrated growth – and this occurs at the family level. Women are resilient, hard-working, used to sharing and pooling and creating mutual support systems. They nurture and sustain the family unit under all circumstances” (Bhatt, 2013, p. 277). Bunker Roy, founder of the Barefoot College, has repeatedly made the case for empowering women as a means for sustainable development and the organization has adopted the slogan, “Train a grandmother, change the world!” as part of its fundraising campaign (barefootcollege.org; accessed 20 April 2013). In her essay, *Under Western Eyes*, Chandra Mohanty eloquently summarizes this phenomenon:

What is problematical about this kind of use of “women” as a group, as a stable category of analysis, is that it assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as socioeconomic political groups within particular local contexts,

² This is a simplistic interpretation, which frames the biological definition of sex as binary. In fact, there is a wide body of literature that supports the assertion that sex, as well as gender, is a spectrum (Anthony et al., 2006). It is not within the scope of this analysis to address this debate.

this analytical move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities. What characterized women as a group is their gender (sociologically, not necessarily biologically, defined) over and above everything else, indicating a monolithic notion of sexual difference. Because women are thus constituted as a coherent group, sexual difference becomes coterminous with female subordination, and power is automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (read: men), and people who do not (read: women). (Mohanty, 1991, p. 64)

SMS' description of the impetus for its work makes it clear that a pro-woman standpoint does not equate to one that is anti-male:

Women from the working class, agricultural, labour and white-collared employees have been fighting along with men regarding problems in their own field. There have not been sufficient efforts, however, to make them aware about the specific problems of women. It was believed that such efforts would create a split between the men and the women. This notion is totally erroneous. The obstacle in the path of women's liberation is not men but the entire social system and, the male chauvinism and mental slavery engendered by the system. If this is borne in mind it will be seen that the struggle and movements launched on specific problems of women will in fact strengthen the unity between men and women as well as the general unity of the movement. (Stree Mukti Sanghatana Website, 2013)

Though Mohanty shapes her argument by highlighting the impact that Western thought has had on the classification of women in the developing world, it is interesting to note that both Bhatt and Roy are middle-class Indian nationals. Without establishing whether specific paradigms should be attributed to citizenship, class, education, or other factors, it is sufficient to acknowledge here that the geographic distinction to which Mohanty has attributed differences in feminist theory is more complex than merely Western versus non-Western. This example shows the danger of focusing on single elements of interconnected systems when constructing arguments – there is no clear cut way to consider gender, class, environment, governance structure, or any other factor in isolation; all are part of a story that is complete only when narrated without such rigid categorization.

In their introduction to *Organizing Women Workers in the Informal Economy*, Naila Kabeer, Ratna Sudarshan, and Kirsty Milward address the class distinctions that often exist between organizers (such as Bhatt and Roy) and those being organized, especially as they pertain to women in the informal sector:

It is striking – but not surprising – that most of the organizations discussed in this book have their origins in the efforts of actors who come from a different class background to the women workers being organized. Given the struggles for survival and security which dominate the everyday lives of working women drawn from some of the poorest sections of their society, and given their location in forms of work that are denied not merely social recognition, but also self-recognition, the likelihood of spontaneous self-organization among these workers is extremely low. In the absence of some kind of widespread revolutionary momentum, organizational impetus has largely come from the efforts of middle-class actors belonging to NGOs. However, in most cases, the role of

these external actors was that of facilitation rather than active organization. The emphasis was on letting women learn to articulate their own priorities and identify their own pathways to change. Crucially, this is a very different approach to that adopted by organizations that work to predetermined goals and are dedicated to the expansion of their memberships. (Kabeer, Sudarshan, & Milward, 2013, p. 8)

This trend is observed in the origins of SMS as well. Jyoti Mhapsekar and the other founders of the organization were from middle-class backgrounds, with access to educational opportunities and resources that the waste picking community does not have. When considering the organization as a single entity – that is, as a women’s liberation organization – it is easy to overlook additional dimensions that might complicate theoretical assumptions. Yet, SMS does not confine itself to working with one particular type of woman, and recognizes its responsibility to consider context when designing and implementing projects.

The problems of women in different spheres of activity and from different economic groups are quite different in today’s situation. It is necessary to recognize and admit that the educational levels and cultural atmospheres of the women from different groups are different. Hence, the organization and movements of the different groups will need different methods of building up. The activities and programmes will also differ. The Stree Mukti Sanghatana has a broad and comprehensive outlook about the general problems of women. It will therefore aid women from different groups in getting organized and will make the efforts to give these organizations a definite direction. (Stree Mukti Sanghatana Website, 2013)

Mhapsekar is an active organizer who is heavily involved with the function of SMS, yet her work has evolved with its growth. She spends much of her time interacting with external parties, overseeing larger scale projects, and facilitating the expansion of the NGO’s efforts. Day-to-day management is in the hands of a growing staff comprised of women from various backgrounds. Often, these individuals are current or former beneficiaries of SMS services who have been with the organization for a number of years. There is not a forced imposition of female leadership, but a natural progression that is the result of investing in women. As highlighted by Kabeer et al. in the quotation above, the emphasis is on “letting women learn to articulate their own priorities and identify their own pathways to change.” This is quite a different approach than one that seeks to empower women by *placing* them in leadership roles.

One of the primary problems with context-independent strategies is that they conflate cause and effect. Ignoring the importance of process to more quickly arrive at a desired outcome can have the effect of masking deeply entrenched structural issues, which can often only be addressed on a much longer timescale. Furthermore, there is an implicit assumption that the stated objective is the appropriate one, creating an inflexible and overly generalized model. There are multiple dimensions to context; it cannot be defined simply by describing the components of a situation at a particular moment in time. Context-based evaluations must also be sensitive to the evolution of systems over time.

Mohanty’s critique of the conception of power as a limited commodity distributed along gender lines is particularly important when considering the structure of SMS. Though women staff the

SMS office and oversee the basic operation of the biodigesters, men are responsible for the more technical and entrepreneurial components of the work. From the standpoint of a Western development worker, or potential donor, this might be considered problematic. The immediate reaction might be to assume a deliberate agenda wherein women are not afforded the opportunity to be in positions of power that require more technical expertise. It is worthwhile, however, to explore both the context of the current leadership, and the assumptions inherent in considering it problematic.

While there are number of women who have taken on leadership responsibility as SMS has grown and diversified, many of them are not (at this point) interested in anything aside from engaging with the network as a waste picker or biogas worker. In informal conversations with the women, they often cited a reluctance to be in charge of those with whom they formerly worked side-by-side. They stated that such a move would cause a shift in the dynamic of their relationships with the other women, and that they would rather continue in their current position than risk the changes that might result from becoming a leader. In many cases, however, those who were opposed to assuming leadership roles were either more advanced in age, or were relatively new to the organization (Discussions with SMS members: Shalu Nanaware, Tara Garud, Chaaya Kange, Kaushalya Khandagale, and Lata Padmukh, July 2012). Such trends might point to a less tangible effect that tenured association with SMS is having on the women who, as they gain experience and self-confidence, *do* decide to assume greater responsibility.

The current biogas technicians, both of whom are male, were integrated into the project through Dr. Kale, founder of the Nisargruna technology. As they already worked with Kale, and were qualified to run and maintain biodigesters at the time SMS began to work on biodigestion, it made sense for them to become the primary trainers and technicians. In short, it was not a conscious decision, but a circumstantial one. In anticipation of building more biodigesters, SMS has begun to train one of its female members to work in the same capacity. Yet, there is no overt effort to place women in specific positions in order to prove a point or meet a quota. No one is compelled or persuaded to take on any role with which she is uncomfortable or for which she feels unprepared. It is understood that opportunities for education and leadership are available to everyone, regardless of gender. There is a sense of patience and trust that comes with this outlook, as it allows room for an organic process to unfold without being restricted by targets based on a specific conception of how women are empowered.

In a similarly circumstantial manner, Mhapsekar joined forces with three male graduating students from TISS as they were finishing their degrees in social entrepreneurship to form Sampurn(e)arth. Mhapsekar conceivably could have insisted upon partnering with an all-female board for such an endeavor, but an opportunity arose wherein male students were interested in and enthusiastic about working with SMS. While there are moments in which the symbolic effect of choosing a female leader over an equally qualified male would be seen as a victory for feminism, the utility of such an approach was not appropriate in this case. As so aptly observed by Kabeer, Sudarshan, and Milward,

. . .strategies evolve and change over time. The ‘long feedback loop’ entailed in efforts to address the structural aspects of women’s positions in their communities – and society more generally – means that highly politicized demands are unlikely to bring women

together in the first instance. As women come together around the more practical concerns of their daily lives, however, as their collective identity starts to grow and strengthen, they appear to become more willing to take on these more political issues. Thus it may be that initial strategies are gently, less, confrontational, with continues affinity with the 'weapons of the weak'. Over time, a greater willingness emerges to engage in open conflict, to take legal action against those in power who violate their rights, and to use their organization's clout to influence political and policy processes and to assert themselves as citizens. (Kabeer et al., 2013, p. 42)

The transformations needed to move toward societal change are multi-dimensional. There are scales of change that range from the individual to the institutional and, while they might be tackled in distinct ways, they are all intertwined. Each progresses in its own way, and at its own pace. Collective learning results from the accumulation of interactions between individuals as they move away from context-independent rules and engage with real-life situations that are unpredictable and chaotic. Yet, people are constantly engaging in multiple capacities: as individuals, as women, as mothers and daughters, as representatives of institutions, as members of society. This idea speaks to Elinor Ostrom's conception of part-whole units (2005) – there is no way to isolate the effects of training an individual, or to predict the effects it will have on the rest of the system.

The process of being trained according to rules and methods is an integral, yet incomplete part of the learning process. As one moves from novice to expert, the importance of adhering to rules and procedures subsides in favor of intuitively addressing situations and applying such rules subconsciously and in a more complex way. It is a shift that can only come from repeated experiences in which one has seen the consequences of following certain rules in certain scenarios (Flyvbjerg, 2001). That is, there is a process of learning is based on a reciprocal relationship between the learner and her environment and is constantly evolving. It can therefore only be understood by looking at its movement through space, rather than its location at one particular moment.

When SMS began to work with waste pickers, its involvement, as a women's liberation organization, was based on the fact that 95% of waste pickers they surveyed at the start of the project were women from scheduled castes (Dandekar & Mahajan, n.d.). By organizing individual workers, SMS sought to empower those considered the "poorest of the poor", who had little support from other networks. In the field of waste picking and recycling, the women SMS encountered were already experts in their trade; the benefits linked to their collaboration with SMS, therefore, were primarily those of an economic and social nature, as membership provided access to financial savings programs and basic health care.

While training to become an expert in being female would seem an odd endeavor, training to become a female citizen who is aware of her rights and understands the mechanisms through which to assert them, as an historically marginalized member of Indian society, makes sense. There is a more proactive approach implied by the framing of the latter that goes beyond an assumption of victimization that unites all women. The initial training focus for members of SMS was comprised of an organizational, financial, and rights-based education in order to instill in them the power of the collective and provide opportunities for them to connect with each

other. Though one might argue that this is the work of women around the world, and that the basic tenets of organization and empowerment transcend geographic boundaries, it is misleading to apply such universal ideals without first assessing their contextual significance. It is here that the distinction between being a woman, and being a waste-picking woman in Mumbai becomes crucial.

CHAPTER III: Economy

Though SMS began working with members of the informal sector in 1998, debates concerning its definition and role in the global economy had already been taking place for more than 20 years. To fully understand the fight for waste picker rights and benefits, it is important to first outline the contentious nature of this conversation. Though SMS has successfully harnessed the skills of technicians, academics, and other specialists, it has so far refrained from using community organizers to mobilize its workers. A brief overview of theoretical arguments concerning this point might provide insight into why the NGO seems reluctant to engage in a more politicized way.

When first acknowledged by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1972³, the common understanding of the informal economy was that it was separate from the formal sector – a philosophy attributed to the “dualist” school of thought (Chen, Vanek, & Carr, 2004). This perspective is now considered outdated, as those in the field recognize that “the two segments are neither disconnected nor distinctly different in all their characteristics” (Sanyal, 1991, p. 40):

[Thirty years ago, it] was widely believed at the time that political modernization of the Western kind, involving established political parties and organized formal sector labour, would go hand in hand with economic modernization via industrialization. In this optimistic scenario, no one referred to the role of the UIS [urban informal sector]; and in so far as its presence was noticed, the UIS was viewed as a transitory phenomenon that would disappear in the course of economic and political modernization. In other words, UIS participants were seen as a working class in embryo. The possibility that they might have interests different from those of organized formal sector labour was not considered. (Sanyal, 1991, pp. 41–42)

Though the two sectors are now generally recognized as part of an interconnected economic system, the fact that they are defined in relation to the state’s regulatory regime still lends greater legitimacy to the formal sector. Such framing is incompatible with the realities of the Indian labor force, of which 68.8% is employed in the (non-agricultural) informal sector, and an additional 15.4% is engaged in informal employment outside the informal sector (ILO, 2012). If “formal” is defined as “being in accordance with the usual requirements, customs, etc.; conventional”⁴, the use of “informal” to describe the dominant working condition is deceptive. The primary issue, though, is not a question of semantics, but an assumption of how an economy ought to operate.

In the executive summary of their handbook, *Mainstreaming Informal Employment and Gender in Poverty Reduction*, Martha Chen, Joann Vanek, and Marilyn Carr (2004) observe that,

³ The term “informal economy” was first defined in 1971 by Keith Hart, a social anthropologist, during his work in Ghana (Chen et al., 2004).

⁴ <http://dictionary.reference.com>

Over the past two decades, belief in the ‘trickle-down’ benefits of market-led growth has been tempered by a growing recognition of the systemic disadvantages of the poor and the need for broad-based labour-intensive patterns of economic growth as well as a complementary set of policies to manage growth and redistribute national incomes. Despite this shift in thinking, orthodox policy prescriptions continue to favour free markets over state interventions. This makes it difficult for developing countries to do what is needed to ensure that growth is equitable and reduces poverty. (Chen et al., 2004, p. xiv)

While there is an acknowledgement of structural inequalities, Chen et al. are more interested in exploring practical steps to improve conditions for the informal sector than they are in suggesting ways to overhaul the global financial structure. One of their primary arguments is that, regardless of economic principle, employment is not sufficiently incorporated as a poverty reduction tool. Though the authors summarize the work of stakeholders at various levels, the primary focus is on policy. Following the recommendation of Joseph Stiglitz that the debate should center on the context and applicability of specific policies rather than on a qualification of globalization as “good” or “bad” (Stiglitz, 2003), Chen et al. attempt to broaden the conversation by focusing on the impact that the evolution of the global economy has had on the working poor, especially women (2004).

In 2004, the national government of India established the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS) to “review the status of unorganized/informal sector in India including the nature of enterprises, their size, spread and scope, and magnitude of employment” (National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, 2009, p. i). The Commission was active for four and a half years, during which time it conducted a comprehensive survey of existing conditions. The main conclusion – that the state should focus on employment – aligns with the recommendations of Chen et al. As with the regulations regarding gender equality, however, legal codification is only effective to the extent that it is implemented and enforced. It is not yet clear how such policies and programs will affect waste pickers and their collective organizations.

In conversations with Mhapsekar (June-July 2012), the divide between formal and informal economies was seldom explicitly discussed. This could be attributed to the fact that she does not consider the two separately, or because the nature of SMS’ work has not been contingent on defining that relationship. While the goal of adequate “Decent Work”, defined by the ILO as accompanied by “opportunities, rights, protection and voice” (Chen et al., 2004, p. xix) is not something that Mhapsekar would refute, there is a distinction between the scale at which she is tackling the issue and broader objectives of advocates such as Chen. There are elements of a bottom-up versus top-down debate inherent in the two perspectives, but it would be imprudent to end the analysis there. Looking more closely at the specific experiences of SMS, one would discover a nuanced history that is not fully captured by categorization as a “grassroots NGO”, “women’s group”, or “collective of waste pickers”. It is here that the synthesis of multiple types of knowledge becomes indispensable.

As will be further explored in the next chapter, Mhapsekar does not have much confidence in the ability of the state to provide basic services. SMS’ approach to gender is grounded in the notion

that, even though the constitution provides equal rights for women, there is no functional legislative mechanism to support, much less enforce, such regulations. From this perspective, it is understandable that the strategies of SMS, at least in the present political environment, would not be overly concerned with the “formalization” of the waste-picking sector. This is not to say that its members are not interested in receiving state recognition for the services they provide, or that it would reject an *effective* governmental initiative to improve their working conditions, just that its actions are not primarily policy-driven. Though a slower and less radical approach, it has been, at least to this point, contextually appropriate given the hesitation about the reliability of the government. It seems shortsighted to promote inclusion in an unequal system as a way to legitimize the work of those who have suffered most from its perpetuation. The conversation, therefore, must evolve in a way that addresses the complexity that surrounds the determination of where an organization such as SMS can most effectively operate.

It is informative to compare the experience of SMS with that of Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), a trade union of waste pickers established in Pune, India. The impetus for the group’s formation in 1993 was not rooted in gender equality, even though 92% of Pune’s waste pickers are women (Tangri, 2012). Rather, the union emerged in reaction to the poor treatment of waste pickers by the rest of society. Workers in the area were not only denied access to the waste that supported their existence (unless they paid bribes to police), but were repeatedly harassed and sexually abused. Therefore, “from the beginning, the union was established with a larger goal of fighting for social justice, and against social, economic, cultural, and political exclusion” (Tangri, 2012, p. 8). The movement quickly gained momentum and now has over 6000 members, a fact that has been acknowledged by its founders as key to its strength. In addition, Pune much smaller than Mumbai, and the municipality has supported the waste pickers by integrating their services into the waste management system for the city (Narayan & Chikarmane, 2013).

The success of the KKPKP model might spur a motivation to replicate it in those who are working in the waste sector in India. To a less-informed observer, or one wedded to a theoretical approach, the similarities between the trade union and SMS might cause him or her to consider mimicking the Pune model in Mumbai. The two organizations might even be grouped together by researchers as similar examples of female-dominated waste management programs led by waste pickers. Yet, while there are certainly transferable components, there are also a number of fundamental contextual differences that could limit the success of the KKPKP approach for SMS. Factors such as political environment, population, number of workers, individual personalities, and impetus for organization could have an impact on the way particular programs are created and carried out.

With that caveat, it is worthwhile to consider what a more politically engaged approach might do to strengthen SMS’ investment in waste pickers’ rights. The patience and trust that has served the organization so well from the perspective of women’s rights might not be as effective in the long term with regard to labor. In large numbers, workers have an undeniable power that can be used to cripple a city’s economy. This threat, even when not explicit, is constantly present, especially in a country where the majority of people work informally. With effective organization, India’s informal sector could theoretically shut down the country and demand legal protection and social services. There is no equivalent option for overturning entrenched gender dynamics; no single

collective action that could potentially result in the sudden reversal of centuries-old subjugation of women. The distinct nature of these problems might mean that they should be considered separately in the formulation of their solutions. Whereas SMS has been able to influence change in the lives of women without much interaction with or support from government entities, it might need to take a more aggressive approach when it comes to labor rights and the impact of unionization. For an entire sector that has been marginalized based on its exclusion from an economic and regulatory regime, engagement with the state might eventually become a necessary step toward structural change.

CHAPTER IV: Civil Society and the State

Solid waste management (SWM) has not been prioritized as a prominent political and environmental issue in India until fairly recently. Given the other concerns inherent in managing a mega-city in which a large percentage of the population resides in slums, garbage has likely been considered an aesthetic nuisance more than anything else. While accumulation of solid waste is a substantial human health concern and environmental hazard, it has not been addressed with the urgency it demands. From a development standpoint, the basic services that are prioritized include sufficient potable water, sanitation facilities, and provision of electricity. It was not until 1996, when the national and state governments, as well as the municipal authorities, were sued in a public interest lawsuit for failure to properly manage solid waste, that the country as a whole became more directly focused on SWM (Zhu, Asnani, Zurbrugg, Anapolsky, & Mani, 2008). There has been a clear reaction in Mumbai, where the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) budgetary allocation for waste management increased by 94% between 1997 and 2004, at which point it constituted 14% of the total municipal budget (Davos, n.d.).

The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) is the national legislative body in charge of publishing solid waste legislation that is to be carried out at the municipal level. The Ministry published the Municipal Solid Wastes (Management and Handling) Rules (MSWM Rules) in 2000, with subsequent rules regarding specific types of waste such as plastics, hazardous substances, and electronic waste. The rules establish municipal responsibility for implementation, infrastructure development for collection, storage, segregation, transportation, processing and disposal of solid wastes. Municipal authorities are to report annually to state and district level officials, who are responsible for the overall enforcement in their metropolitan cities or jurisdictions, respectively. Each state is required to have a Pollution Control Board (or in the case of a Union territory, a Pollution Control Committee) that monitors compliance standards and reports to a Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). The CPCB, in turn, reports to the Central Government (MSW Rules, 2000).

While the MSWM Rules outline an implementation schedule (Schedule I) and detail the compliance criteria of each parameter of MSW management (Schedule II), their efficacy has been questioned both by outside researchers (Balasubramanian & Birundha, 2001; Kumar et al., 2009; Zhu et al., 2008), and by the Ministry itself. In March 2010, MoEF formed a committee to assess the state of waste management regulation. In its “Report to the Committee to Evolve [*sic*] Road Map on Management of Wastes in India,” the Committee stated, “The local self government bodies have neither any capability of implementing the MSWM Rules, nor have the resources for implementing the same . . . Lack of an established system for collection, transportation, treatment, disposal and complete networking of the system is the mayor drawback in the proper management in these cities” (MoEF, 2010, p. 13-14). Though the MoEF has established a set of national rules, the Indian urban governance structure is such that the logistical and financial responsibilities of implementation are both at the municipal level. There is a challenge, therefore, in attempting to standardize and regulate solid waste management practices. To date, there has not been a single example of successful enforcement of MSWM rules.

There is continued debate within the field of development about the role of state and non-state actors. The tension between approaches that are considered “top-down” and those that are considered “bottom-up” has served to limit the debate to one that pits the state against NGOs. Though there is a great deal of literature that defines the work of stakeholders, there is less about the nature of their intersection. In order to establish functional municipal systems, one has to consider the network of institutions that are involved as a holistic entity. This extends to market structures as well (Sanyal, 1994).

Systems in which basic services such as waste management are centrally managed and ensured by the state as public, private, or public-private goods cannot be assumed the end goal for all societies. Though there are benefits to large scale, centralized infrastructure, blindly implementing such projects in the wrong context can be disastrous. Many times such projects fail, even after being heavily subsidized by outside agencies, due to factors such as insufficient technical training, lack of political support, or high costs of maintenance and operation.

The implications of working within the municipal governance system depend on the nature of the relationship between stakeholders. The municipal response to engagement opportunities with non-governmental entities depends on how city officials perceive the process of managing Mumbai’s waste. Ideally, their conception would extend beyond the aesthetic and political benefit of getting garbage off the streets to include a comprehensive, environmentally sound and socially responsible approach. The issue of waste production in an emerging economic center such as Mumbai is compounded by the fact that individual consumption increases with accumulation of wealth. Statistics show that the generation of municipal solid waste (MSW) in the has fast outpaced the rate of population growth (Rathi, 2007; Zhu et al., 2008). This means that MCGM must not only plan for greater population density, but for an increase in per capita waste production as the economy continues to grow.

One might argue, as does Hawthorn (2001), that it makes more sense to move away from a reliance on a dysfunctional bureaucratic state. Circumventing the state role requires the creation of an alternate means of oversight. SMS has acknowledged this fact in the establishment of Sampurn(e)arth, a move that reflects its lack of confidence in Mumbai’s waste management system. SMS, as an NGO, cannot officially employ the waste pickers/biogas operators. In the creation of Sampurn(e)arth, the organization is formalizing the work of the women by creating an employer. This also suggests uncertainty about the ability of the current Indian government to interface with the waste pickers or acknowledge the value of their work. Inherent in this decision is an underlying question of short term versus long-term approach. What steps can be taken to simultaneously address the gap in regulatory capacity and create a process through which citizen demand for infrastructural support is effective? The strategies that have been so successful in providing for women should be acknowledged, then scrutinized, as the organization expands its work. Which tools transcend the organization’s evolution from a women’s organization to one that is more broadly defined, and which will have to be re-imagined to better fit with the specific needs of the waste pickers?

CONCLUSION

Knowledge is inherently multiple, with multiple claims to representing reality and multiple ways of knowing (Sandercock, 1998). This is in contrast to the positivist claim of modernism that examination of the facts will reveal the truth. Closely associated with this insight is the argument that knowledge is not just the domain of the expert – whether a scientist or a planner – but rather is associated with a variety of actors in a variety of social locations. Knowledge now has a variety of sources and takes a variety of different forms. (Rydin, 2007, p. 54)

Understanding the how best to utilize available information allows greater flexibility in the way we acquire knowledge. It is difficult to paint a comprehensive picture of a body of work or organization using a single frame; recognizing that all pieces are integrated in a larger whole allows us to glean more information by using them in tandem. The challenge of my involvement with SMS was learning how to acknowledge the inherent limitations of my participation, work with all of the tools and forms of knowledge available to me, and try to dissect the lenses through which I might evaluate my role. In doing this, I was able to become more aware of my own conceptions and the impact they were having on my work.

As I have applied these lessons to the case of SMS, using a combination of theoretical perspectives on the organization's work and my own experiences and interactions, my understanding of my role as a planner has been transformed. Though I left Mumbai feeling overwhelmed, confused, and somewhat powerless, once I began to process the experience and synthesize it with other forms of knowledge, I saw that there were specific areas in which my input as an outside observer might actually be beneficial. My detachment from SMS, which I initially considered a liability, was not only unavoidable (and therefore not worth trying to circumvent), but allowed me to broaden the base of knowledge supporting its vision and objectives. Looking back at my personal reflections, much of my thoughts and ultimate conclusions were masked by my frustration with day-to-day work in Mumbai; I was not able to access them until I began to realize that my initial assumptions were inhibiting my ability to reframe my approach.

When we started our engagement with Mhapsekar and SMS, we framed it as an opportunity to support an emerging women's enterprise through capacity building and financial support for the construction of up to five additional biodigesters. While not entirely incorrect, our assumptions, combined with insufficient context-specific information, led us to an incomplete definition of the problem. Once we arrived, the nature of the assignment shifted, but we never stopped to readjust our framework. In many ways, we were trying to fit the project into our conception of it, rather than the other way around, which inhibited our progress. Though our pre-departure outline included a heavy emphasis on community engagement, participatory planning, and education, all three components were linked to the notion of supporting the emergence of confident female entrepreneurs. Once we realized that this was not the current objective, we continued to work on the entrepreneurial component of the project, even though the marginalized population with whom we had set out to engage was secondarily involved. Consequently, our time was mostly spent assisting middle-class male graduate students who were more experienced in business

development and more well versed in Mumbai's socio-political environment than we were. When viewed from this perspective, it is not surprising that I struggled to (re)define my relationship to the project.

This is not to state that our efforts were not worthwhile, nor that the entrepreneurial work of the TISS graduates is not important. It is just to point out that upon reflection, combined with the use of multiple types of knowledge, it makes sense to pause before pursuing an infrastructure grant to build more biodigesters. It was not until I began to apply a series of alternate frames – gender, economy, and civil society – that I began to see the inadequacy of our initial approach. We had a conception of the best strategy to ensure long-term, quality employment for marginalized women, and it was rooted in a female-owned-and-operated biogas business. Yet, even once we realized that women were not interested in owning the business, we continued to focus on that aspect of the project. In retrospect, it reflects a subconscious adherence to the notion that women would one day feel confident/empowered/liberated enough to take over the enterprise and that, once the business was established, the opportunity to do so would always be available in the future. If that was *not* the implicit assumption, then the mere construction of a few biodigesters, without support from the municipal government or assurance of long-term financial support, does not equate to sustainable employment for marginalized women. Such an investment would create a maximum of ten jobs for female biogas operators, all of which would be vulnerable in the event of biodigester failure or termination of institutional investment. In sum, focusing on infrastructure alone by supporting the construction of five biodigesters does not create a clear path toward alternate employment for waste pickers.

In many ways, upon analysis, the zero waste school/environmental center seems a more appropriate site for primary investment. Mhapsekar's vision of a central location to train waste pickers and educate the public on waste-related issues is a way to apply the time-tested approach of SMS in a concrete and sustainable manner. By serving as a place to engage with others in the field it would play a primary role in the exchange of knowledge and dissemination of ideas. It would likely promote further growth of the organization's work and membership, which could have positive repercussions for the empowerment of the informal sector. Looking at Mhapsekar's work and the organizational structure of SMS from several perspectives, it is clear that its strength is in its ability to unite and educate women. Its involvement with the waste pickers has allowed it to support the women who work in the sector, even though municipal waste management is not necessarily its expertise. At the same time, had the scope of work not expanded to include waste picker collectivization, SMS might never have had the opportunity to extend its message of women's equality to such a wide audience.

Though the union of SMS and the waste picking community has been mutually beneficial, it is imperative to continually reflect on how best to maximize the skill sets and efforts of everyone involved. It was a good idea to join forces with the TISS graduates, as they are much better equipped to navigate the world of privatized waste management in Mumbai than many others in the SMS office. That said, they have only just finished their education and have very little real world experience. Investing in biodigester construction as a primary means to support the growth of Sampurn(e)arth seems not only limited in scope but a risky gamble in terms of securing an employment future for waste pickers. In contrast, the environmental center has been constructed and its proposed work is based on the rigorous educational program of SMS. Supporting its

growth and development not only as an internal training site but as a way to reach the broader community on issues of gender, waste, and social justice would be a substantial step toward influencing structural change in Indian society. Based on our experience, it appears that the socio-political environment in Mumbai is not yet primed for a network of female-owned-and-operated biodigesters to manage the city's waste on a scale that would address issues of workers' rights, equality for women, and environmental conservation. Focusing investment on the establishment of a private enterprise that is hoping to accomplish this goal is unlikely to produce the desired results without a more long-term strategy for addressing the underlying inequalities that are perpetuating the status quo. There is a great deal of work to be done from an educational standpoint before this vision could materialize in a sustainable way.

In hindsight, our time in Mumbai might have been better spent learning about and formalizing the plans for programming at the environmental center. Yet, it was only through the synthesis of multiple types of knowledge that we were able to come to that realization. The important thing is that it is never too late to change focus. Wedding oneself to a particular course of action implies that it is possible to know *the truth* about the way a particular reality ought to unfold (Rydin, 2007). Planning is not a linear process, and feeling the need to have all of the pieces in place before taking action can be debilitating and counter productive. My observation that, "I like to really understand the background/purpose/direction of a project before I start asking questions, and there isn't an opportunity to do that in this case" (Author's Personal Reflection, 10 July 2012), was one of the root causes of my frustration. I have since learned that is not the way planning works. It takes time and experience to learn to be comfortable with the unknown. Many times, it is not until going through a process that a planner realizes the flaws in her approach. It is not a wasted expenditure of effort, but part of learning. Problems are not static or constant over time. A planner's knowledge of a situation is always evolving, based on individual growth and contextual change. As with SMS's approach toward women's empowerment, there is a sense of patience and trust that comes with this outlook, as it allows room for an organic process to unfold without being restricted by targets based on a specific conception of the future.

The role of a planner, or any social scientist, is to synthesize the components of the puzzle – to be the overseer of the information-gathering process without being limited by the tools and techniques. There is no "best" way to go about this work, which speaks to Flyvbjerg's (2001) conception of the learning process. No one will ever really be an "expert" planner, because the process of planning is different every time. It is the nature of the profession. Yet, with that acknowledgement comes both responsibility and freedom: responsibility to practice in a reflective and thoughtful manner, and freedom to accept that mistakes will be made and there is no final word/decision/authority on any situation. Everything is in flux, and everything is a work in progress.

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