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Gender, Survival and Self-Respect: Dimensions of Agency for Women Within a Poor Rural Indo-Fijian Community

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A thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

Date: February, 2008
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature: [Signature]

Date: 28th February, 2008
DEDICATION

To the women in this study of strength, justice and hope, who band together to change their own lives and the lives of their families and communities.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation may not have seen the light of the day without the constant guidance of my supervisors, Dr. Alastair Greig and Dr. Rachel Bloul. Their incisive comments helped sharpen the argument and strengthen the structure of the dissertation. I would also like to thank them for going through the several chapter drafts, which at times can be a painful exercise. My deepest and fathomless gratitude to my supervisors, whose intellectual inspiration and professional guidance, I will always cherish for the rest of my life. Few words can aptly describe their penetrating thoughts, unrelenting wisdom and passion for perfection, which, in an infectious way, dramatically shaped my own intellectual development.

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ABSTRACT

The overall aim of this study is to outline the major methodological and conceptual challenges to understanding poverty in Fiji from a gender perspective. This study has sought to go beyond previous poverty approaches used in Fiji by examining poverty and intra-household relations using Sen’s capability approach. I examine how Sen’s capability approach can be used to study one core and overarching feminist concern, namely gender inequality and domestic power imbalances in the context of poverty and well-being evaluations. The thesis is divided into two interrelated parts. The first part is an exploration of Sen’s capability approach with emphasis on intra-household relations and its implications for a theoretical framework on gender inequality. The second part of the thesis is about Indo-Fijian women’s lived experiences of poverty and the ways in which these experiences denote gendered dynamics of survival, forming the basis on which to test my central concerns. The premise of my argument is that while women may experience gendered poverty as part of the capability failure, they never fail to utilise their agential capacities in their daily struggles of survival and fight against poverty and patriarchy. It is only through grounded analyses like this study that issues of agency can be meaningfully assessed, because it is only at that level that the context, content, and consequences of choice can be understood and interpreted. Women in traditional societies are likely to make choices which are essentially disempowering and also detrimental to their economic well-being. This is because deeply entrenched rules, norms and practices often influence women’s behaviour, define values and shape their choices. The understanding of agency informing the capability approach in this research is qualified by being anchored within an institutional understanding of the conditions of choice (i.e. structures of constraint) and participant’s situational accounts of choice and their agential capacities.
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GLOSSARY

ailyo- paternal grand father.
Aamandani- income.
Asura- demons.
Aurat- woman.
Badkau- elder brother-in-law.
Badki- eldest sister-in-law.
Bhaini- sisterly relationship.
Beti- daughterly relationship.
Bhabi- sister-in-law.
Bhaiya- general term used to address an elder brother.
Bhandara- large ceremonial feast.
Bakhaar- it is a small shed used for the storage of rice grains found mostly at Indo-Fijian farmer's house.
Cha- tea.
Chaddor- veil.
Chardevari- literally means four walls
Chotki- It is an Indo-Fijian kinship relationship between the elder brother and his younger sister-in-laws.
Coolie lines- housing in Fiji during the indenture period was referred to as “coolie lines” and consisted of long, rectangular buildings, each containing eight to ten small rooms divided by partitions that did not reach the metal roof. A family however, large, occupied a single room to live and raise any children. There were no separate areas for cooking or latrines within the building.
Dada- father's elder brother known as uncle.
Dai- is a local Hindi term for a woman who carries out the duties of a midwife.
Daru- locally brewed rice whisky.
Dekhi- is a traditional device commonly used for milling of rice grains.
Devi- goddess endowed with various attributes and power.
Dhal- lentil soup made of split peas and other grains.
Dharma- Laws, duties and obligations.
Dharmashastras- ancient Indian body of jurisprudence that is still fundamentally the family law of Hindus living in territories outside India.
Dholi- was a man-made carriage used to transport brides from one her parent’s place to the in-laws place. The bride and the carriage were carried by a group of 4 to 6 men supporting the weight of both on their shoulders.

Didi- elder sister.

Diwali- also known as Deepawali or the festival of lights. It is celebrated normally in October or early November each year. Homes are filled with oil lamps, candles, lights and it’s a tradition to wear new clothes on this occasion.

Dulhain- bride.

Durga- goddess of protection and power. Also known as Chandi.

Gharana- is defined as a clan or a family ancestry and the many lines of descent.

Ghare/bhaires- inside/outside.

Gharwala- husband.

Girimiti- from the Agreement that brought the indentured laborers to Fiji.

Girimitiyas- indentured laborers.

Hari Katha- a discourse on mythological stories accompanied with music.

Holi- is an annual Hindu festival usually celebrated sometime in March and it signifies the victory of good over evil. People usually rejoice by playing with color and share food and sweets with others in the community.

Izzat- family and personal honour.

Jahaji- fellow travelers.

Jeela- sister’s husband.

Jutha- polluting power of saliva which underlie many practices in preparing, serving and consuming food.

Kaka- father’s younger brother.

Kala panis- black sea.

Kali- goddess of power.

Karma- the word karma originates from the Law of Karma i.e., for every event/action that occurs, there will follow another event/action whose existence was caused by the first, and this second event/action will be pleasant or unpleasant according as its cause was good or bad.

Karwa Chauth- is a fast undertaken by married Hindu women who offer prayers seeking the welfare, prosperity, well-being, and longevity of their husbands.

Koro- a closely-knit village where most of the indigenous Fijians live.
Kulambar- overseer, from ‘Call Number’ which the overseers asked the girmitiyas to do every morning.

Lakshmi- goddess of wealth.

Laws of Manu- the most famous Sanskrit treatise on human conduct.

Mahabharata- great Indian epic which includes the Bhagavad-Gita.

Mahila mandal- a women’s group or association for good company and spiritual communion.

Mandap- refers to the wedding area within a big shed where the actual ceremony and rituals of a Hindu wedding is conducted by a Hindu priest.

Manusmriti- a pivotal canonical source of religious law for Hindus.

Maryada- duties and responsibilities of a good husband.

Mataqali- refers to a Fijian patri-lineal tribal grouping and is one of the most common land owning units in Fiji.

Mukti- eternal liberation from life.

Nama- maternal grandfather.

Nani- maternal grandmother.

Ordini- meaning veil and also known as palla.

Paal- rough mat of stitched jute sacks.

Patho- daughter-in-law.

Piala- enamel bowl used for drinking black tea.

Pooja- daily worship at home or temple.

Poth- land rent paid to Fijian landowners.

Prakriti- nature.

Prasad- food and savories prepared to be offered to household deities during any pooja events like Ramayana recital gathering.

Pundit- priest.

Purdah- the Muslim or Hindu practice of keeping women hidden from men outside their own family; or, a curtain, veil, or the like used for such a purpose.

Ramayana- is one of the great epics of India. The Ramayana has been a perennial source of spiritual, cultural and artistic inspiration, not only to people of India but also to the people all over the world.

Ramayan Mandal- it is a group or association of Indo-Fijian men who get together for Ramayana recital for their spiritual communion and to spread the teachings of Ramayana to the local people.
Ram Lila- an enactment of a myth, is presented as a cycle-play with the story of Ramayana varying from 7 to 31 days. The Ram Lila performance evokes a festive atmosphere and enables observance of religious rites.

Ram naumi- nine days long festival celebrating the birth of Lord Rama.

Roti- It is also known as the Indian chapatti or Indian bread made out of flour dough rolled into thin but round shapes and baked on pan.

Saadi- Hindu wedding.

Saas- mother-in-law.

Saajan- pronounced as seijan. It is a horseradish/drumstick tree and its leaves are used in Indian cooking providing a rich source of iron.

Sari- is a six-yard length of cloth draped beautifully in the most intriguing manner by the Indian women and young girls. It is worn with a matching stitched blouse and a petticoat.

Saram- embodies the meanings of modesty, shame and embarrassment according to different contexts.

Saraswati- goddess of learning and knowledge.

Sativa- dedication to one's husband for life.

Shakti- energy.

Sirdar- each working gang (group of men) had a sirdar (driver). The sirdars were usually Indians during the indenture period. However, in modern Fiji the word sirdar is used to refer to the leader of the group of cane-cutters (i.e. gang) within an Indo-Fijian settlement who is also responsible for their wages and their welfare in the sugarcane settlement.

Sita- Daughter of King Janaka and wife of Lord Rama.

Siva Purana- The puranas are a vast storehouse for getting insight into all aspects of ancient Hinduism and Siva purana enjoins several rites of worship and acts of homage, comprising a series, of physical and spiritual practices in accompaniment to the Tantra, Yantra and Mantra appliances.

Sohar- derisive and sometimes obscene songs sang by Indo-Fijian women at weddings to mock men-folk and in-laws.

Streedharma- is a Hindu text on the ideal behavior of women.

Suki- refers to dry pandanus leaves used mostly by Indo-Fijian rural men in place of cigarettes.

Tabu- taboo.
Tapas- a form of self-denial that is thought to create positive energy that can be transferred to another individual for their welfare.

Tattiya - bamboo reeds used to make walls of a thatched house.

Tikina- A hierarchy of Fijian chiefs presides over villages known as koro and sub-districts (tikina).

TIV Mather Sangam- sister organisation of TISI Sangam mostly administered by the local south Indian community groups in Fiji.

Vanua- Fijian term for land.

Vedas- are the primary texts of Hinduism and it contains hymns, incantations, and rituals from ancient India.

Vrat- fasting to mark a religious event or festival in the Hindu calendar.

Yaqona- in Fiji and other parts of Polynesia the drinking of yaqona (pronounced Yangona) or kava, is a common ceremonial and social custom. The yaqona ceremony has great significance in Fijian life but is now considered a social drink amongst the Indo-Fijian community as well.

Yasana- Fijian term for province.
Chapter One

Outlining a Study on Rural Indo-Fijian Women and Poverty

Introduction

This study is concerned with the frequently ‘silenced’ and ‘hidden’ aspects of women’s lives which highlights that there is more than a material dimension to gendered hardship and subordination. This, in turn, is an important element in stimulating more multidimensional analyses of poverty in Fiji. The overall aim of this chapter is to outline the major methodological and conceptual challenges to understanding poverty from a gender perspective. The first section provides a synopsis of the ways in which poverty analysis and research have been conducted in Fiji and this discussion centres on two objectives: firstly, to highlight the gaps in the literature, notably the persistent insensitivity to gender within mainstream approaches to poverty analysis in Fiji, and continued inadequacies in data collection on gender and poverty; and secondly, to introduce the capability approach as a means to conceptualise and assess gender inequality and women’s well-being in this research. My empirical research questions and my feminist methodology are anchored in this evaluative framework which argues that the philosophical and methodological baggage of the most commonly used income/consumption poverty approaches may ignore issues of women, thereby creating significant ‘gaps’ in the analyses of poverty and gender inequality at intra-household levels. In doing so, this study seeks to reformulate understandings of poverty to reflect the distinctively gendered nature of disadvantage for both women and men. This involves expanding notions of poverty beyond narrowly materialist viewpoints and toward greater recognition of gendered identities, ideologies and struggles, as well as toward a relational field which encompasses more cultural perspectives.
General Background of the Study

There has been a great deal of discussion in recent years about growing poverty, vulnerability to poverty and heightening inequalities between different groups in Fiji (Barr, 1993a; 1993b; Bryant, 1990; 1991; 1992; 1993; HIES, 1977; Kanbur, 1984; Stavenuiter, 1983; UNDP, 1996). My purpose here is not to give a comprehensive critical analysis of the various approaches or concepts used but to outline an alternative but complementary approach, which can help to assess the extent of differences in living standards within the household. Poverty in Fiji has most commonly been defined in terms of exclusion from ordinary life due to lack of resources (UNDP, 1996). In measuring poverty, though, most of these studies rely on income (or expenditure) to distinguish "the poor" from the non-poor, using a variety of methods to construct income poverty lines. Reliance on income as a measure of living standards assumes that it is a reliable indicator of the economic resources available to people, and that economic resources largely determine living standards. It remained a standard practice to measure poverty at the level of the household or family, and the resources and needs of individuals within these collective units were not considered separately. If different individuals within the household are likely to experience different levels of well being,

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1 The discourse of poverty research in Fiji outline a wide variety of conceptual and empirical approaches and these vary in standard and quality of data with some depending on nationwide statistics of income, health, employment, education etc., and others utilising small, in-depth surveys specifically examining the situation of those known to have low-incomes. However, none of them has found universal acceptance. Each study has been justified by its contribution of new perspectives to the phenomenon of poverty. An important aspect of a study such as this one is to obtain the best quality of data available and to supplement those data with case studies and examples of the situation facing those already considered to be poor.

2 Instead, see Chattier (2005: 251-54) for an overview of previous poverty studies highlighting the current data available on the extent and nature of poverty in Fiji.

3 Amartya Sen (1979) has emphasised that the "direct method" focusing on consumption and the "income method" are not two alternative ways of measuring the same thing, but represent two alternative conceptions of poverty. The former identifies those whose actual consumption fails to meet (what are accepted as) minimum needs, while the latter identifies those who do not have the ability to meet those needs within the behaviour constraints (e.g. on expenditure patterns) typical in that community. Despite this clear distinction many of the studies in Fiji using income appear in fact to be taking it as a measure of living standards rather than of consumption "possibilities". An interesting debate exploring "Quality of Life Indicators" can be found in Feminist Economics, July 1999.

4 Little distinction is made in this research between a 'household' and a 'family' since I want to concentrate on the general issues which arise when income units encompass several individuals. In practice, though, the distinction between households and families is important (Chapter Five explores this distinction in some length).

5 The equal sharing assumption has long been questioned and recently the neglected gender dimensions of poverty composition and risk is given great emphasis especially by feminist writers elsewhere (see Bramen and Wilson, 1987; Buvinic, 1983; Graham, 1987; Millar and Glendinning, 1987, 1989).
this could have major implications for our understanding of poverty and gender inequality.

Poverty is multi-dimensional, and hence limiting measures to income or consumption shortfalls at household level masks the true extent of poverty, particularly for the vulnerable groups like women and children within the household. As noted by Greig et.al. (2007: 18) "poverty lines assume homogeneity of needs when heterogeneity may be the dominant characteristic within a population". What is less clear in conventional approaches is the relationship between household-level poverty and female well-being, i.e. does gender discrimination intensify or diminish with poverty? The factors that make men and women more vulnerable and the different ways in which they are able to move out of poverty have yet to be explored in Fiji’s poverty studies. The answer to this question is not easy, as gender and poverty have not been adequately addressed in poverty research and literature in Fiji as much as ethnicity and places of residence (Bryant, 1993; Naidu et.al., 1999; UNDP, 1996). This neglect becomes a problem for feminist analyses that argue that the household, irrespective of its location, is a key site of gender discrimination and subordination. Razavi (1999: 412) stated that despite long-standing feminist concerns about intra-household resource distribution, it remains “rare to find standard surveys embarking on a quantitative exploration of intra-household poverty”. Hence, previous poverty studies in Fiji tell us little about the specifics of poverty experienced by women and, in particular, about the poverty experienced by the vast majority of women who are married and/or living with a male partner.

The assumption that resources/ incomes are pooled within a household and that all outcomes are equally shared between household members has been frequently scrutinized by feminists for its androcentric biases (see England, 1993; Evans, 1991;

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6 For example, studies elsewhere have shown that the burden of poverty- of doing without and trying to make ends meet- falls mainly upon women (see Graham, 1987; Parker, 1987). This self-sacrifice on the part of women is viewed as a legitimate result of their altruistic and care-giving ‘nature’ (Millar and Glendinning, 1987: 10). In effect, the needs of women are assumed to be, if not less than those of men, certainly of less importance; self-denial is still seen as women’s special share of poverty (Land and Rose, 1985: 86). Tip of the veil has already been lifted by these studies showing that there exist intra-household differences between spouses but such a nuanced understanding of poverty suffering by women within poor households in Fiji is yet to explored. This research aims to open up the black box of the household/family and analyze the ways in which scarce resources are allocated between members.

7 See also Lister (2004: 56-7) for discussion of the ‘hidden’ inequality and poverty that household surveys mask.
Folbre, 1988; Jennings and Waller, 1990). Households cannot be viewed as monolithic institutions in which all the members agree on the strategies and means to be used to maximize family and household welfare. The fallacies of aggregation which underpin household analyses of poverty are evident in large part because they are not individualistic enough. They fail to capture the intra-household dynamics of resource allocation and distribution, which may depend on socio-cultural relations of gender, age, kinship, race relations and spatial distribution of resources and opportunities. Therefore, one has to look within the family or household to see how resources are distributed before one can judge whether or not all the members are in poverty. As Shamima Ali noted:

Though men are poor, women are still poorer because women’s opportunities are usually less than men. Their education opportunities are less, they are found at the lower level where jobs are concerned, they are also abandoned, a lot of times they are given the role of just staying home and doing the housework when they are supposed to be given the opportunities they deserve...these are some of the reasons why women are so poor (Fiji Times, March 12: 2001).

Previous studies support the view that women are generally poorer than men. For example, Bryant (1993) in her study of urban poverty found that of the 174 household surveyed, 15.5 percent were headed by women, an increase of 5 percent since 1989, and the majority of them were living in poverty. UNDP (1996) further indicated that “...poor households have a higher proportion of women as their heads than other income groups”. Concern about the “feminisation of poverty” over time has been an important theme in Fiji’s poverty research. Poverty lines may not be able to penetrate the household, but it is theoretically possible to generalise about the types of households in order to depict the extent of poverty among women according to the statements such as:

A disproportionate number of poor households in Fiji - almost one in every seven - are headed by woman and these households figure prominently among the case records of welfare organisations (UNDP, 1996:54)\(^9\)

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\(^{1}\) The above mentioned feminist economists have explored in great length the androcentric biases in the assumptions regarding the neoclassical model of the household and these need not be repeated here (see England, 1993; Ferber and Nelson, 1993; Folbre, 1986; 1988; Sen, 1990a). Most importantly they have argued that the unitary model of the household embodying Becker’s (1981) “rotten-kid theorem” (which posits an altruistic family head who takes the utility functions of family members as arguments of “his” own utility function) is seriously suspect in explaining intra-household relations and poverty. See also anthropological studies of Chiappori, 1992; Haddad et.al., 1994; McElroy, 1992; Thomas, 1992; and Whitehead, 1981.

\(^{9}\) The report of the Social Welfare Department (2004) indicates that of all family assistance recipients, 68 percent are women and the number of recipients has doubled in the last five years (see also UNDP, 1996). A recent review of eight major welfare non-government organisations (NGOs) also found that 47 percent of their clients were women (Fernando, 1995:167). In Fiji, having a female head usually implies that an adult male has left the household through death, divorce, or desertion. Married women are rarely described as the head of the household, even though they may be the principal breadwinners. In rural
The evidence from published poverty reports in Fiji does show that female-headed households tend to be over-represented among the poor and that lone women are more likely to experience poverty than lone men (UNDP, 1996). While there is much debate on the ‘feminization of poverty’, using ‘household’ as a model for estimating the number of women living below the poverty line is problematic. It is the measure that masks the extent of poverty among women. The measure is cast in a narrow framework of poverty that focuses on income alone and on the household as a unit, a focus that leads to ignoring intra-household disparities. It would be inaccurate, however, to see this as a problem confined to the workings of household (though this is a major element), because the ways in which women and men relate to material resources are grounded in their different social relations and subject positions in communities and societies at large. The idea of poverty as a condition, and the expectation that all resources have the same meanings to all members of the household, needs to be replaced by a more relational concept of poverty which also admits gendered subjects. If we are to understand more than the fact that economic inequality exists and that most often it is women who are economically disadvantaged, then we must understand the nature and causes of women’s poverty as they are constructed and maintained under the system of patriarchal relations of domination. In this thesis I argue for recognition of the gendered character of all poverty rather than feminization of poverty which only concentrates on household poverty.

Only when gender relations are factored into the poverty equation can a thorough understanding of women’s impoverishment be gained. As far as the uncovering of women’s poverty is concerned, the focus of this research is to understand the structure of relationships within the household and explore how women often are poor within marriage, regardless of the level of income received by the male head of the household. As argued by Greig et.al (2007: 28):

areas, an unmarried woman is rarely described as the head of the household although this is more common in urban areas (UNDP, 1996: 53). In general, where a woman is described as the head of a household, this reflects some degree of disadvantage, not her choice.

10 There has been a recent spate of literature elsewhere on the ‘feminization of poverty’ and among others, like Scott (1984), Lewis and Piachaud (1987), Northrop (1990), Pearce (1978) and Thomas (1994). Other studies show that women living alone are at a much higher risk of poverty than men living alone (Fukuda-Parr, 1999; Pressman, 2003; Quisumbing et.al., 1995). The increase in the numbers of women in such situations is one of major factors behind the increasing recognition being given to the ‘feminization of poverty’.
Rather than looking at the symptoms of inequality (individual opportunities and outcomes) the focus should be the underpinning processes and causes (social structures that foster unequal power relations). Inequalities are not simply carefully constructed measurement scale but complex webs of dynamic social relations that privilege some while constricting the life-chances of others.

Methodologically, the household model is not conducive to ask, let alone answer, the kind of feminist questions about gender, asymmetric power and intra-household relations that this thesis seeks to generate. This study then seeks to know whether or not women experience relative poverty risks and vulnerability when issues of gender, hierarchy and power relations are brought into the analyses of the household.

Gender divisions are treated here as lying at the heart of the social (Anthias, 1998) because they constitute particularly salient constructions of difference and identity on one hand, and hierarchisation and unequal resource allocation modes on the other. It is therefore necessary to develop an analysis which is able to understand unequal social outcomes and processes underlying intra-household relations. In this study gender is called upon to understand woman’s poverty more than class analysis because social-class categories often ignore the multiplicity of women’s positionings within contemporary social life (see Barrett, 1991, 1992; Zmroczek and Mahony, 1997). Following Dorothy Smith’s (1992) proposal, I start from women’s concrete experiences, recognizing differences in economic and cultural contexts, and then locate the processes through which these experiences come into existence in wider social relations. Feminist literature and research suggest that economic dependence on a man is the starting point for understanding the gender processes that eventuate in the experiences of the economically dependent housewife (see Acker, 1999; Anthias, 2001; Skeggs, 1997). As Acker (2003: 58) writes:

> Feminist scholars recognized at least 30 years ago that to understand gender it was necessary to study the concrete activities of women and men, activities through which differences were created and inequalities maintained. The conventional approach to class analysis, which emphasises the family or household as the unit of analysis and the feminist perspective which claims the priority of the individual, stand at the opposite poles of the debate.

Here I argue that women are less likely to gain positions of high economic value because they are women and this relates to the system of gender hierarchies and material inequality. In this context, I explore how social norms regarding female exclusion, for example, reinforced through familial and conjugal relations, impose severe constraints on women’s ability to access resources and opportunities both within and outside the household. But even where social norms do not inhibit such access and
physical mobility in public spaces, I found that women are often bound by labour demands placed by their male kin, particularly husbands or fathers, making them unable to freely dispose of their labour for their own account or for leisure.

Therefore, social class identification for women is tied to the social organisation of gender woven through the social organisation of work and family relations. Women’s kinship roles serve to define relations of production and women become defined more as wives and relate to production only indirectly—by virtue of their marriages to their husbands. For instance in this research, as sisters, participants remain in their village of origin and share ownership of the means of production with their brothers. Yet upon marriage, women move to their husband’s villages and they begin to occupy a subordinate position of wife. Wives claim their access to resources (e.g. property ownership) indirectly—only through productive and reproductive activities for their husband’s kin groups. Women do not directly assume the class position of their husbands, although their standard of living and the social expectations they face are obviously results of the husband’s position. Rather, they are in different situations than their husbands within the system of patriarchal relations that constitute gendered processes of resource allocation, distribution and ownership. In fact, women’s social mobility is represented by marital mobility, that is, from their father’s position to their husband’s, implying that married women’s social status is well represented by their husband’s, not by their own. To see more clearly the part that gender takes in structuring relations and promoting compelling systems of belief that justify and perpetuate domination, this study begins analysis at the level of the individual (i.e., economic situation of women within the household). It is argued that women face more restrictions on their choices and opportunities than men and this reflects an important dimension of female deprivation that needs to be explored in detail. Amartya Sen’s capability approach provides a useful evaluative framework for an engendered understanding of poverty and for further explorations of well-being, gender inequality and female agency in this thesis.
The Capability Approach

I now argue that a solution to the concerns raised above is found in a version of the *capabilities approach*- an approach to quality of life assessment pioneered by Amartya Sen (1980; 1982a; 1985a; 1992; 1999). Much of Sen’s work has focused on inequality and poverty. Different interpretations of the capability approach across academic disciplines have led to several conflicting views. Sen’s formulation of the capability approach is an important conceptual advancement for considering gendered poverty, because it shifts the unit of analysis from households to individuals and from a focus on resources themselves to command over commodities. In his capabilities approach to well-being, Sen argues that commodities cannot be taken to indicate well-being because possessions do not guarantee a state of being; what matters is not the commodity but what it allows a person to be or do (1993: 31-33). Sen distinguishes between “capabilities” as the potential for beings and doings, and “functionings” as the achievement of those beings and doings. This is a helpful move away from private consumption poverty concepts such as income measures, because looking at gender differentials in command over resources overcomes some of the problems with commodity-based measures.

Ultimately, approaches which focus on outcomes rather than processes are very blunt tools for describing gendered disadvantage, since how capabilities become functionings for women and men depends both on other social identities (e.g. age and ethnicity) and on social processes such as intra-household relations. Hence, it is argued that for women and men commodities become capabilities and functionings in ways that are enabled and constrained by their household relations. The capability approach is therefore

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11 Amartya Sen is renowned for his humanitarian approach to economics. His contribution has also been crucial to the development of several aspects of feminist economics and gender analysis. Many of his writings have addressed gender concerns directly, but even when not explicitly feminist, his work has often engaged with themes that are central to feminist economics and philosophy (see also Fukuda-Parr, 2003; Hill, 2003; Iversen, 2003; Nussbaum, 2000; Peter, 2003; Robeyns, 2003). Amartya Sen’s research has ranged over a number of fields in economics, philosophy, and decision theory, including social choice theory, welfare economics, theory of measurement, development economics, moral and political philosophy. Throughout his career, Amartya Sen has been preoccupied with questions of social justice. Inequalities between women and men have been especially important in his thinking, and the achievement of gender justice in society has been among the most central goals of his theoretical enterprise.

12 Ingrid Robeyns has discussed some of those views, and explained at length different interpretations of Sen’s capability approach (see Robeyns, 2000). It is also sufficient to note here that Nussbaum’s version of the capability approach has different aims than Sen’s and relies on different concepts, even if their labelling overlaps. For comparisons of the two approaches, see Nussbaum (2000: 12-15), Sen (1993: 46-48) and also Gasper (1997), Qizilbash (1998) and Crocker (1995) among others.
attractive for the feminist concerns of this research, because it rejects the idea that women's well-being can be subsumed under wider entities such as the household or the community, while not denying the importance of social relations and interdependence between family and community members in well-being evaluations. While the capabilities approach can be applied conceptually and practically in useful ways for evaluations of well-being, there is a need for a more dynamic view of gender and disadvantage.

Another strand of Sen's (1990a: 123-49) work which looks at gendered processes and relations- his cooperative-conflict model of intra-household relations- offers a clearer understanding of how well-being outcomes for individual men and women reflect intra-household negotiations within specific extra-household contexts. The starting point here is the concept of a household in which individual members negotiate their personal interests with a mutual desire to cooperate. From a poverty perspective, the cooperative conflict model suggests how capabilities are, or are not, converted into functionings since women and men are (differently) embedded in the dense social relations of marriage, parenting and kinship. More significantly, it suggests the possibility that women may face everyday lives in which the societal context of gender bias set the terms of intra-household bargaining. On one hand, the capability approach provides a good intellectual framework on multidimensional conceptualisation of poverty and on the other hand, some limitations still remain in its application towards understanding women's well-being and agency in different contexts. Since the capability approach is not a fully fleshed-out theory, the cooperative-conflict model will be utilised in this thesis to complement the capability framework in formulating a better theoretical understanding of intra-household relations and gender inequality.

It will be argued that there are multiple sets of "norms" that are drawn upon by women as discursive resources to provide a particular interpretation of events, or justification for a particular action or behaviour; and this plurality is the ground for explorations of female agency and/or resistance which constantly reformulates the "rules" of social life. My thesis argues that even though dominant socio-cultural norms deprive women of capabilities, they are contested by women through counter-discourses. Thus, the cooperation of women within a cooperative venture such as a household livelihood is not easily predictable from representations of cultural norms and economic relations,
since so much depends on specific opportunities for creative struggle. The premise of my argument is that while women may experience gendered poverty as part of the capability failure, they never fail to utilise their agentic capacities in their daily struggles of survival and fight against poverty and patriarchy.

**Central Research Question and Other Related Questions**

This research will examine Sen’s capability approach from a feminist perspective and later in the thesis I will explore its adequacy in evaluating gendered dynamics of poverty, well-being and female agency within the household. The following research questions will facilitate discussion in the respective chapters of my thesis:

(1) What is Sen’s notion of the ‘capability approach’? Can this approach be applied to conceptualise and assess gender inequality within the context of poverty? What are its linkages between intra-household relations and gender inequality within households? Is this approach adequate enough to address some feminist anxieties about the nature and determinants of intra-household distribution and domestic power imbalances? (see Chapter Two)

(2) What is the most useful way to gather and analyse information on qualitative dimensions of well-being such as self-respect and dignity, as well as understanding ‘who gets what’ within the household? How can researchers penetrate the ‘subculture’ of the lived experiences of research participants and record their views in contexts where they can express themselves freely? (see Chapter Three)

(3) What images and ideas of femininity are constituted within patriarchal discourses of power and how do they inform and mould women’s capability? What is the relationship between structural forms of constraint and women’s agency? How do we investigate the ways women’s capabilities are limited through asymmetrical power structures and at the same time treat women as active participants in the construction of social life? (see Chapter Four)
(4) How does the patriarchal discourses of power translate into asymmetrical social norms and perceptions about resource distribution and allocation within the household? In particular, whether or not marriage and kinship protocols perpetuate ideologies of gender inequality in capabilities? (see Chapters Five and Six)

(5) What are the links between intra-household bargaining and bargaining outside the household? What determines Indo-Fijian women's extra-household bargaining power and to what extent does the extra-household parameters strengthen or weaken Indo-Fijian women's bargaining options? (see Chapter Seven)

(6) Do the gendered dynamics and/or strategies of survival and well-being within the household in the context of my participants lived experiences signify a need for an alternative conceptualisation and understanding of agency? In the light of these critiques, what sort of positive claims can this study make about women's social reality, female agency and about feminist theory? (see Chapter Eight)

Nature and Organisation of Thesis

The present study explores the above-mentioned questions through ethnographic research with eighteen women of rural Indo-Fijian households undertaken during February till May 2003 and follow-up interviews in August and September 2004. The field site was situated in the island of Vanua Levu in the northern division of Fiji. The study examines the relationship between poverty and intra- and extra-household relations and is primarily a qualitative account that contextualises the experiences of participants with historical, socio-economic and comparative literature on Fiji. The thesis aims to contribute to a fuller understanding of how different socio-economic processes (within and outside the household) are articulated in the lived experiences of Indo-Fijian women in rural households.

I explore the implications of the capability approach in evaluations of poverty and gender analysis from a feminist perspective in Chapter Two, which comprises the most substantial part of my literature review. The discussion in this chapter is centered on both the adequacy and the limitations of the capability approach. Chapter Three outlines
my methodological approach and provides a detailed discussion of the research methods used to collect and analyse data. A feminist constructivist integrated research approach has been utilised throughout my study. In Chapter Four, I explore how traditional religious discourses theorize the notions of ‘ideal’ Indian womanhood and create subject positions for Indo-Fijian women. Here I argue that Indo-Fijian women’s “means to achieve” their capability depend on a specific set of behavioural constraints concerning how Indo-Fijian women should live in a patriarchal Indian society. It ranges from strictest purdah norms to the belief that ‘a woman’s place is in the home’. This controls both their sexuality and economic independence. However, this presentation leaves little conceptual and political space for uncovering the subtle and ambivalent ways women may be negotiating at the margins of power, most often constrained by but also resisting and even undermining asymmetrical power structures. Hence, this study pays close attention to discursive micro-practices through which women may negotiate from within the margins of power in response to their different socio-economic, material and cultural pressures.

Chapter Five provides a glimpse of how the institutional structures of marriage and religio-cultural discourses discussed in Chapter Four reinforces the notion of ‘ideal’ Indian womanhood through the concepts of female modesty and chastity as seen from the lives of rural Indo-Fijian women. This is interrelated with participants own ‘expectations’ and ‘experiences’ portraying interplay between dominant discourses in religion and tradition with local beliefs and practices. This chapter also establishes that kinship protocols reinforce and perpetuate ideologies of gender inequality and hierarchical differentiation between households as well as within them. Patrilineage largely determines the social axis of gender and generation whereby the male head of household[s] was and is still predominantly the main point of contact for household welfare, distribution of resources, work and opportunities. This also reflects male dominance within the formalised structures of household relations and represents important socio-cultural issues which constrain women far more than men as far as achievement of their basic human capabilities are concerned. These discussions serve as a springboard for understanding gender inequality in capabilities and well-being outcomes as illustrated in Chapter Six.
Chapter Six begins the discussion on negotiation of resources at the intra-household level and highlights participants’ attitudes to some of the main resources of the household such as food, house, land, money, labour and education. A glimpse of how households are socio-culturally situated in relation to gender and generation gives a more comprehensive picture of how poor households operate on a daily basis. This chapter uses the capability framework to indicate a space within which comparisons of well-being are made. The accounts of my participants’ poverty will seek to justify why the capabilities listing (see Chapter Two) are relevant for gender inequality analysis. In doing so, the research seeks to unveil the ‘paradoxical’ paths of agency undertaken by these women in the light of their religio-cultural ideals and expectations. It is argued that women, with their multiple positionings in the family and the home, respond to sometimes reinforcing, sometimes contradictory pressures arising from their socio-economic realities and contexts. Marriage and kinship relations seem to be a major dividing factor among women as far as resource allocation and distribution is concerned. Gender differences in access to economic resources mean that few women dare abandon the very institution that they might seek to critique. Most can challenge the family from within but limited opportunities outside the household may further hamper women’s mobilising and organising efforts to confront structures and relations of inequality.

Chapter Seven presents an argument that in evaluations of women’s well-being it is important to recognize that capabilities often have a distinctly interdependent dimension. Such interdependencies are pronounced not only within the realm of the household, where extensive conflict often coexists with pervasive cooperation but also outside the household which affects women’s well-being choices and access to opportunities through the natal family, religious forums, community, the state and non-government organisations (NGOs). This chapter examines the robustness of concepts such as agency, choice and freedom embodying the capability approach and how they affect women’s opportunities to achieve well-being outcomes and their negotiation abilities outside the household. It is argued that the focus on the language of freedom and autonomy embodying the capability approach may neglect evaluations of well-being in terms of social relations and personal relationships, which are important sources of women’s well-being and non-material notions of power and their status in the society. This discussion culminates into an exploration in Chapter Eight of the ways in
which the notion of agency underlying the capability approach may be reconceptualised from my feminist understandings of Indo-Fijian women’s experiences of survival, well-being choices and their strategic use of the bargaining and/or negotiation skills. The question is not whether women are victims or agents but, rather what sorts of agents women can be in the light of their subordination and women’s everyday problems (their “practical” needs and interests). This thesis explores the distinctive ways and diverse arenas in which women deploy their agency, the different people over whom they may exercise it, and the practical agendas of survival that orient and direct it. Only then can we determine what is central to feminist agency and imagine how women’s agency might translate into feminist political activism.

Scope and Significance of the Study

This thesis is an exploration of the daily experiences of survival and poverty of eighteen women who participated in my research. In adopting a constructivist research paradigm which recognizes the local and specific applicability of the research, this study entails a move away from generalisations and embodies the voices and perspectives of the eighteen rural women as well as my own voice as the researcher. The significance of my study is three-fold. First, it helps illuminate a gendered understanding of poverty, highlighting that multidimensional concepts of poverty are more useful than a focus purely on household income levels. A capability framework can better grasp the multidimensional aspects of gender disadvantage such as lack of power to control important decisions that affect one’s life. It also enriches poverty conceptualisation by suggesting how the lived experience of poverty is conditioned by gender identities for both women and men. In this thesis, I have argued that the inclusion of gender perspectives in poverty analysis should take place on terms which recognize the analytical strengths of gender analysis, in particular the separation of women from gender, the integration of the domestic and the societal, the relational focus of gender and the gendered meanings of poverty. The research is then of academic significance.

13 My initial search for literature and existing qualitative and even quantitative studies revealed that I was working in an ‘intellectual vacuum’ as far as my topic on Indo-Fijian women’s poverty within the household was concerned. Two exceptions were, however, Shaiota Shameem’s exploratory work on Indo-Fijian women in 1990. Her (1990) doctoral thesis “Sugar and Spice: wealth accumulation and the labour of Indian women in Fiji 1879-1930” looks back through history and traces the class exploitation, racism, and sexism of the indenture experience. More recently, Sue Carswell’s study in 1998 looks at the contributions of Indo-Fijian women’s unpaid labour on sugarcane farms in rural settlements. These two studies took on post-structuralist concerns while retaining a legacy from Marxist and feminist frameworks.
because comparison of well-being indices using the capability approach between household members to assess gender inequality within poor households in the context of Indo-Fijian society has not been undertaken before.

Second, this research aims to critically rethink the notion of agency underlying the capability approach and its focus on freedom (defined as personal independence). Sen’s (1985b, 1993) *theoretical* focus, as indicated by his discussions of agency freedom has been normative and concerned with what a person can be or do in line with her/his perception of the good. He takes agency seriously as one of the constitutive features of the person: “what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important” (Sen, 1985b: 203). The notion of agency that Sen invokes is that of positive freedom and autonomous will. However, this study argues that a conceptualisation of agency that focuses on freedom may neglect evaluations of well-being in terms of social relations and personal relationships. More importantly, it argues that women’s well-being is often characterised by an interlocking set of values embedded in traditional gender norms. For example, most women are embedded in family and community, their major (though not necessarily exclusive) sources of security and sense of worth. The trope of a good wife (i.e. devotion to duty and self-sacrifice) is redolent with moral affirmation through which women often derive a sense of social worth. It is argued that women may make “patriarchal bargains” in expectation of rewards for good behaviour (Kandiyoti, 1988). This gives little space for images of women freely making decisions about their own lives, and it tends to put the nature of women’s agency into doubt. In analysing the complexity of women’s agency and well-being evaluations, this study then suggests that agency be seen not as a synonym for freedom and/or resistance to relations of domination, but as a capability for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create. Thus, I present a paradoxical situation in which there are simultaneous processes of complicity as well as resistance. I suggest that women can engage both with the established cultural models and with a range of other versions of their experience which then forms a realm of contention and negotiation over gender power and control. In doing so, I hope to continue a conversation initiated by feminist critics who explore the tensions attending

that seek to integrate an analysis of gender and economic relations. Carswell’s discussion on the way gender relations intersect with generational relations, denoting age and kinship, in orientating socio-economic processes within the farm provides an interesting backdrop towards an understanding of intra-household relations in this study. However, Indo-Fijian women’s experiences of poverty, from their own perspectives and from within landless poor households have remained unvoiced.
the dual character of feminism both as an 'analytical' and 'political' project (Butler, 1990; Mohanty, 1991a; Strathern, 1987).

Third, this redefined conception of agency can make significant contributions to the way we think about feminism and feminist politics. Here I argue that even though eighteen rural Indo-Fijian women as a group share similar structural constraints but as individuals they relate to their social positionings in different ways; the same person may relate to them in different ways in different social contexts or at different times in their lives. In fact individualist ideology of liberal individualism obscures explorations of gender inequality because women are dispersed among all these groups such as race, gender, religion and sexuality. This research argues that the operation of marriage, kinship forms and religion keep women divided because as individuals women move and act in relation to their own social realities. I propose a way out of this dilemma by borrowing the concept of 'seriality' (Young, 1997: 22) to help solve the conundrums of talking about women as a group in feminist theory and politics. Leckie (2002) first applied the concept of seriality in Fiji's context by explaining the complexities of women's agency and activism. She argued that women do identify within the common category of 'woman' but also align with ethnic, religious and traditional identities. In a similar vein, gender as a seriality is utilised in this thesis by articulating the concept of situated agency whereby woman is a serial collective defined neither by any common identity nor by a common set of attributes that all the individuals in the series share, but rather names a set of structural constraints and relations to socio-economic realities that condition action and/or inaction and its meaning. Therefore, the contexts in which my participants act, the bases on which they act, the issues which they address, the alliances and linkages which they create, and the contradictions and conflict which arise, cannot be generalised.
Chapter Two

Exploring a Feminist Appropriation of the Capability Approach to Conceptualise Gender Inequality and Poverty

Introduction

The discussion in the introductory chapter highlighted various gaps in Fiji’s poverty literature as far as gender inequality and household relations are concerned. While highlighting the androcentric biases in household analyses, I suggested the capability approach as more suited to social evaluations of gender inequality and poverty. My objectives in this chapter are two-fold. First, I will examine the capability approach and evaluate its usefulness in terms of an engaged and conscious opposition to unitary models of the household and then I ask whether this approach can be applied to conceptualise and assess gender. Second, I will complement the capability approach with the ‘bargaining model’ to address some feminist concerns about the nature and determinants of intra-household distribution and gender relations. However useful the capability framework may be to gendered evaluations of poverty, the multidimensional role of female agency so far has been unduly neglected in gendered articulations of social choice and discussions of subjective well-being underlying the capability approach.

Feminist Concerns and the Capability Approach

This section investigates how the capability approach can be applied to conceptualise and assess gendered poverty and inequality. First, I will provide a brief description of the capability approach. Second, I will argue against the endorsement of a definitive list of capabilities and instead defend a procedural approach to the selection of capabilities. This procedural approach is then used to generate a list of capabilities for conceptualising gender inequality in the context of my research. However, to contextualise my discussion I have chosen to concentrate on ‘traditional’ societies and their relevant literature on social processes of discrimination and the politics of access,
control, agency and empowerment. Little can be assumed about gendered relations of disadvantage in any society. Nonetheless, this study aims to contribute towards understanding micro-level evidence about gender relations within poor households in Fiji using the capability framework.

A Brief Description of the Capability Approach

Many scholars interpret Sen within their own (disciplinary) paradigm and this has led to a variety of interpretations on Sen’s capability approach. In this section I evaluate Sen’s capability approach through a feminist lens, as an alternative framework to understanding the questions of poverty, intra-household relations and gender inequality. The capability approach stipulates that an evaluation of individual or social states should focus on people’s real or substantive freedom to lead the lives which they find valuable (Sen, 1993: 31). This real freedom is called a person’s capability. A person’s capability reflects a person’s potential well-being, or their well-being freedom, in contrast to the actual well-being which she/he has realised, that is, her/his achieved well-being (Sen, 1985b: 171-175). This achieved well-being is made up by a number of functionings (ibid.); for example, being mentally healthy, being physically healthy, being sheltered, being well fed, being educated, having a satisfying job, caring for the children and the elderly, enjoying cultural activities, and being part of the community. Therefore, capabilities are people’s potential functionings and functionings are their beings and doings. The difference between a functioning and a capability is similar to

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14 It is important to note that my own feminist analysis of the capability approach is similar to what Ingrid Robeyns (2001; 2003; 2004) had done in the context of affluent and technologically advanced societies. Robeyns (2004: 3) noted that in affluent countries average living standards are well beyond those of physical survival and empirically these countries often coincide with liberal democracies, where every person’s idea of the good life would, at least in theory, be respected by the government, and where state and religion are constitutionally separated. She did mention that this caveat does not imply that the analysis is irrelevant for societies or communities that are not affluent and technologically advanced, and that do not have a liberal constitution and law (ibid.). But it seems reasonable enough that for these countries other concerns will have to be taken into consideration and in the context of my study where cultural, religious and gender norms are relatively stronger compared to affluent countries, how extreme poverty influences these norms and social institutions and vice versa requires integrating additional social theories in further specifications of the capability approach.

15 Ingrid Robeyns has discussed some of those views, and explained at length different interpretations of Sen’s capability approach (see Robeyns, 2000).

16 Some confusion has arisen between single capabilities and the overall, compound, complex or aggregated capability (or capability set), because both of them are often referred to as ‘capability’. Therefore, I would suggest naming the latter a person’s compound capability, or in the more technical discussions one could stick to ‘capability set’.
the difference between an achievement and the freedom to achieve something, or between an outcome and an opportunity.

All capabilities together correspond to the overall freedom to lead the life that a person has reason to value (Robeyns, 2003: 63). Sen (1993: 33) stresses the importance of "reason to value" because we need to scrutinise our motivations for valuing specific lifestyles, and not simply value a certain life without reflecting upon it. By advocating normative evaluations which should look at people's capabilities, Sen criticises evaluations that focus exclusively on utilities, resources or income. He argues against utility-based evaluations; for example, an income/expenditure poverty approach that is used at a household level might in fact hide important intra-household dimensions and result in misleading interpersonal or inter-temporal comparisons.¹⁷ According to Sen (1993: 33-34), resources are only the means to enhance people's well-being and advantage, whereas the concern should be with what matters intrinsically and people's abilities to convert these resources into capabilities. Robeyns (2004: 4-5) argues that a person's capability set depends on three different types of conversion factors (social, environmental and personal) which then enables and influences their capabilities (see Figure 1).¹⁸

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¹⁷ For example, a person may be in a desperate situation and still be content with life if he/she has never known differently. As noted by Robeyns (2003: 63) a utilitarian evaluation will only assess his/her satisfaction and will not differentiate between a happy, healthy, well-sheltered person, and an equally happy, but unhealthy and badly sheltered person who had mentally adapted to his/her situation. This is especially important from a gender perspective because utility seems to have a gendered dimension as my discussions in later chapters will show.

¹⁸ Robeyns (2004: 4) noted that the social conversion factors are determined by a number of societal aspects, such as social institutions (e.g., the educational system, the political system, the family etc), social norms (including gender norms, religious and cultural norms), traditions and behaviour of others in the society (e.g., stereotyping and prejudiced behaviour). The environmental conversion factors are determined by the environment in which a person lives and the personal conversion factors are determined by one's mental and physical aspects such as disabilities or bodily vulnerabilities which affect the types and degrees of capabilities one can generate with resources.
Figure 1: A Schematic Representation of the Capability Approach

Non-market production
Market production
Net income
Transfers-in-kind

Means to Achieve

Social Institutions
Social Norms
Other people’s characteristics and behaviour
Environment Factors

Individual Conversion Factors

Capability Set:
Capabilities

‘Choice’ as a subset of situated agency (my emphasis)

Achieved Functionings

Personal mental make-up
Preference formation mechanisms
Social Influences on decision making

Goods and Services

Freedom to Achieve

Personal characteristics
Bargaining/Negotiation skills (my emphasis)
However, the focus on capabilities does not deny the important contribution that resources can make to people's well-being. Indeed, inequalities in resources can be significant causes of inequalities in capabilities and therefore also need to be studied. For example, Agarwal (1994a: 1455) has argued that "the gender gap in the ownership and control of property is the single most critical contributor to the gender gap in economic well-being, social status and empowerment". A more complete analysis of gender inequality would not only map the gender inequalities in functionings and capabilities, but also analyse which inequalities in resources cause gender inequalities in capabilities and functionings. This is especially important for assessing intra-household bargaining and negotiability options between members of a household and how this affects the distribution of capability well-being (see discussion on Intra-Household Distribution). However, Robeyns (2003: 64) claims that the capability approach is a framework of thought, or a normative tool, and not a fully specified theory to provide complete answers. It is not a theoretical template that prescribes how to measure inequality or poverty, nor is it a complete theory of justice and equality. The first question that we need to ask is whether the capability approach is sensitive to feminist concerns. Then I look at its applicability in my research context.

**Strengths and Weaknesses of the Capability Approach**

In this section I will discuss three strengths and an important weakness of the capability approach for assessing inequality in general and for gender inequality analysis in particular. The first advantage is that functionings and capabilities are properties of individuals and hence the capability approach implies ethical individualism. This means that each person will be taken into account in our judgments rather than households or communities. At the same time, the capability approach is not ontologically individualistic. As discussed earlier, the capability approach does not assume

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19 Sen's capability approach does not defend one particular world-view but it is a normative framework which depends on exploratory or ontological views of human nature and society. If we interpret all of Sen's work as being one integrated body of thought, as Sabina Alkire (2002: 87) does, then many theories of human nature and society would be excluded (e.g. strong libertarian or communitarian theories), but there will still remain a range of theories (example, most strands of liberal theories) that are compatible with the capability approach. A good introduction to these theories can also be found in Will Kymlicka (2002).

20 In agreeing with Ingrid Robeyns (2001) I also oppose that Sen's capability approach is ontologically or explanatory individualistic or the more general claim that Sen's capability approach is "too individualistic" (see also Robeyns (2000: 16-18). In my reading of Sen, the capability approach embraces ethical individualism, but does not rely on ontological or explanatory individualism. The stylized figure
individuals are independent of others, nor that our functionings and capabilities are independent of our concern for others or of the actions of others. Social and environmental conversion factors such as gender relations allow us to take into account a number of societal features, such as social norms and discriminatory practices (see Figure 1). In sum, the ethically individualistic and ontologically non-individualistic nature of the capability approach is a useful characteristic for well-being and inequality analysis (Robeyns, 2001). This is also attractive for my research concerns, because ethical individualism rejects the idea that women's well-being can be subsumed under wider entities such as the household or the community, while not denying the impact of care, social relations, and interdependence between family and community members. Thus, conceptualising and measuring gender inequality in functionings and capabilities would help me avoid these problems, since it focuses on the lives that eighteen Indo-Fijian individual women can or cannot (and do or do not) choose to live, rather than on their average household income.

The second advantage of the capability approach is that “it is not limited to the market, but looks at people's beings and doings in both market and non-market settings” (Robeyns, 2003: 66). The inclusion of non-market dimensions of well-being in my analysis can reveal complexities and ambiguities in evaluations of well-being that an analysis of income or wealth alone cannot capture. Sen's capability approach fulfills
this requirement for my research as far as evaluations of women’s well-being in non-material settings are concerned. As this study argues, that women’s well-being also depends on relations outside the household such as the natal family, community, religious forums, the state and NGOs.

The third strength of the capability approach is that well-being is measured for the individual across diversities. The neoclassical theory of the family underlying many poverty approaches (such as the income/consumption measure) assume that all people have the same utility functions or are influenced in the same way and to the same extent by the same personal, social and environmental characteristics. But the capability approach acknowledges human diversity, such as race, age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and geographical location in evaluations of poverty, deprivation and well-being. As Sen (1992: xi) noted:

Investigations of equality- theoretical as well as practical- that proceed with the assumption of antecedent uniformity...thus miss out on a major aspect of the problem. Human diversity is not a secondary complication (to be ignored or to be introduced “later on”), it is a fundamental aspect of our interest in equality.

Again, this characteristic of the capability approach is important for gender inequality analysis because issues of diversity will help understand intra-household inequalities and beyond. Feminist scholars have argued that many theories of justice claim to address the lives of men and women, but closer scrutiny reveals that men’s lives form the standard. Gender inequalities and injustices are assumed away or remain hidden, and are thereby indirectly justified (see Buebek, 1995; Folbre, 2001; Okin, 1989; Robeyns, 2003). Okin (1989: 10-13) calls this “false gender neutrality” where some theories of justice use gender-neutral language but they ignore the biological differences between the sexes, and the impact that gender has on our lives through gendered social institutions, gender roles, power differences and ideologies. Thus “gender-neutral terms frequently obscure the fact that so much of the real experiences of persons” (Okin, 1989: 11) does in fact depend on what sex they are. By conceptualising gender inequality and intra-household relations in the space of functionings and capabilities, there is more scope to account for human diversity, including the diversity stemming from people’s gender.

It is important to recognize that limitations still remain in the application of the capability framework for understanding women’s well-being in different contexts.
Many critics have argued that the capability approach is deliberately underspecified (see Alkire, 2002; Iversen, 2003; Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2003). Sen himself is far less concerned with taking and defending a substantive but contentious position than he is with showing how the capability approach can be shared by persons of diverging, even contradictory, philosophical disciplines. In *Inequality Re-examined*, he identified two grounds for allowing incompleteness:

Firstly, the ‘fundamental reason for incompleteness’ is that the ideas of well-being and inequality may have enough ambiguity and fuzziness to make it a mistake to look for a complete ordering of either. Secondly, the ‘pragmatic reason for incompleteness’ is to use whatever parts of the ranking we manage to sort out and the world shines in dazzling clarity (Sen, 1992: 49).

Therefore, the capability approach can be contextualised in each culture differently for varied psycho-sociological reasons and explanations. In this sense, I concur with Sen’s arguments on the incompleteness of the capability approach.

However, the interpretations of agency used in Sen’s capability approach are too restrictive (see also Peter, 2003). Sen defines agency as freedom and “what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuits of whatever goals or values she or he regards as important” (1985a: 203). Insofar as Sen’s notion of agency can be read as personal independence, using the capability approach may neglect evaluations of well-being in terms of social relations and personal relationships, which are important sources of and constraints to women’s well-being and their agential capacities. I will argue in this study that the notion of agency as freedom is too restrictive and fails to take into account the creativity of a person’s strategy in bargaining and negotiation outcomes via interpersonal relations within the household and beyond. Similarly, Gasper and Staveren (2003: 157) argue for an alternative language that lays more explicit stress on other values, such as respect, friendship and caring that are as important as freedom. Values that are also means and ends of development should emphatically be embedded within a fuller account of agency underlying the capability approach.23 This has important practical implications for my study because the conversion of rural Indo-Fijian women’s resource endowments into well-being will depend not only on their individual characteristics, resource endowments and the group-dependent constraints

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23 Here I endorse aspects of the work of Nancy Folbre and Julie Nelson (2000) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), among others who have suggested that varied values and the corresponding valuable capabilities require more specific and substantive designation, investigation, and support that is not available in the generalised language of ‘capability as freedom’.
but also on values concerning their self-esteem and dignity. I therefore needed to take
into account the distinct socio-psychological contents of values that women in this study
uphold, and explore the relevance of such values in the light of women’s socio-
-economic well-being and their fallback positions (see discussion later). In evaluations of
poverty and gender inequality, it is important to understand the relationship between
women’s intentional choice, self-direction and their relations with cultural values and
identities.

Against this backdrop lies the need for at least two additional specifications before I can
apply the capability approach in my evaluations of poverty and gender inequality. First,
based on the literature I had to select a tentative list of capabilities that are important for
evaluating gender inequality. Second, I had to revise and select a list of relevant
capabilities based on the context of my research. I also had to take a stand on whether or
not these capabilities are relevant for gender inequality analysis and intra-household
dynamics (see Chapters Six and Seven).

The Need for a Definite List

Given the intrinsic under-specification of Sen’s capability approach, there cannot be one
catch-all list of capabilities. Instead, each application of the capability approach will
require its own list. Sen’s reasons for not endorsing a definite list of valuable
capabilities have been articulated over the years (see Qizilbash, 2002; Robeyns, 2003).
Sen clearly has certain methodological concerns about the use of the capability
approach because he wants it to be used in numerous contexts and thinks that different
lists may be relevant in different contexts (Qizilbash, 2005: 157). In contrast, Nussbaum
(2003: 42-45) has argued that one should endorse a definite list of valuable capabilities,
if she/he wants to apply the capability approach to social justice and gender inequality.24
However, along with Alkire, (2002) and Robeyns (2003), I reject the claim that one
should endorse a definite list of capabilities. In fact, a list of capabilities must be context

24 Nussbaum (1995; 2000; 2003) has drawn up such a list of capabilities that she defends as universally
valid. Yet, Nussbaum and Sen have different strategic reasons for their particular views about how the
capability approach is best developed (see Qizilbash, 2002). They nonetheless, agree on certain central
claims that are advanced both in his capability approach as well as in her capabilities approach. They also
welcome the emerging set of lists—some of which are discussed later in this chapter. Nussbaum (2005:
178-9) has recently suggested that the debate about lists is one of a number of topics where there is scope
for further refinement and development of work on capabilities.
dependent, where the context is both the geographical area and culture to which it applies, and the sort of evaluation that is to be done. For example, Robeyns (2003) developed her own list for the context of gender inequality in developed countries and Alkire (2002) has also developed her own list elsewhere. Sen (2004: 77-80) has argued that:

> Capability assessment can be used for different purposes (varying from poverty evaluation to the assessment of human rights or of human development), and public reasoning and discussion are necessary for selecting relevant capabilities and weighting them against each other in each context. It would be a mistake to build a mausoleum for a “fixed and final” list of capabilities usable for every purpose and unaffected by the progress of understanding of the social role, importance of different capabilities and a concern with autonomy and agency.

Sen no doubt welcomes the articulation of various lists. For instance, the list of component indices in the United Nations Development Program’s (UNDP) well-known measure of development (the Human Development Index- HDI), which emerged from Sen’s work with the UNDP, attempts to get at dimensions (such as health and education) that might be agreed by all nations. However, Sen has been very clear that it is, in part, pragmatism that leads him to advance a general perspective, which can be used in distinct ways in various contexts. He writes that:

> [A] general approach can be used in many different ways, depending on the context and the information that is available (1999: 86)...defining lists in favour of one fixed, pre-determined, or canonical list restricts its extensive reach because then the approach is not open to change through public reasoning or through the re-evaluation of values over time and across social contexts (2004: 77-80).25

When applying the capability approach to particular research questions in this study, concerning gender inequality and intra-household relations, I prefer lists to be derived from, embedded in, and engaged with the existing literature and empirical evidence from the field as opposed to using a list with universal claims (see discussion below). Summing up, if we want to respect Sen’s capability approach as a general framework for normative assessments, then we cannot endorse one definite list of capabilities without narrowing the capability approach.26 I now turn to the question: how can this selection be made without violating the basic tenets of Sen’s approach?

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25 Nussbaum would no doubt reject the suggestion that her list is fixed, pre-determined, canonical, or not open to revision through public reasoning. So Sen’s response would not necessarily constitute a critique of Nussbaum’s project and her “definite” list, which is open to revision, and left vague so as to be open to multiple specifications across time and place (see Nussbaum, 2000: 77; Sen 2003; Qizilbash, 2005).

26 Scholars, who endorse Nussbaum’s capability theory instead of Sen’s approach, might argue that the fact that Sen only offers an approach and not a fully fleshed-out theory is exactly the problem, as it does not sufficiently inform us about how to apply it. I think such a claim would be unwarranted. Indeed, the application developed by Alkire (2002) on poverty reduction in small-scale NGO projects in Pakistan, and the measurement of gender inequality in achieved functionings for Britain (Robeyns, 2002) illustrate that it is perfectly possible to use Sen’s framework to address normative questions and come to definite evaluations.
Selecting Relevant Capabilities to Contextualise Gender Inequality

The fact that the capability approach is not a fully-fleshed out theory means that its further specifications can be diverse. For each such specification, we will need a relevant list of functionings and capabilities. How should this selection be made, and what type of list is appropriate? In this section I will defend a procedural approach to selecting relevant capabilities and provide some selection criteria as suggested by Robeyns (2003: 70-71):

When drawing up a list of capabilities for any study, the following five criteria should be met: (1) the criterion of explicit formulation; (2) the criterion of methodological justification; (3) the criterion of sensitivity to context; (4) the criterion of different levels of generality and (5) the criterion of exhaustion and non reduction.

Below I will defend a list of capabilities for an evaluation of gender inequality within the context of poverty in a specific third world society (namely Fiji) as required by the criterion of explicit formulation. But before doing that, I will justify the method and show how I respect the criterion of context. Methodologically, I have followed three steps to generate the following list. The first step was to derive a tentative list by engaging with existing academic literature and debates on gender inequality. This step involved engaging with other lists of capabilities discussed below. The second step was to test the draft list through a participatory exercise with my research participants during my first round of fieldwork interviews. Through this exercise I was able to identify the relevant capabilities and why these capabilities are to be something my participants' value and have reason to value. The third step involved revising the list further when additional information on intra-household relations and gender inequality was collected during second phase of my fieldwork. Given the method is much more deductive than inductive, and accesses to knowledge in different spheres of life was based on the contextual data of my fieldwork evidence, constructing and revising this list became a substantial part of this thesis— a process which is likely to continue into the future.

First, I engaged with existing literature on other lists of capabilities (the first step of my methodology) as a means to derive my own list. My comparison is with the lists proposed by Sabina Alkire and Rufus Black (1997), Martha Nussbaum (1995) and Ingrid Robeyns's approach to gender inequality assessment (2003). Table 1 presents these different lists and their dimensions. Alkire and Black (1997) argue that the elements on a list should be the most basic reasons that people have for acting; that is, reasons for doing or not doing certain things. They argue that one should compare lists
to see whether some of the dimensions overlap. Only those dimensions that cannot be reduced to another dimension should be kept, so as to arrive at a list of completely non-reducible dimensions. By comparing the works of Grisez et al., (1987) with Nussbaum’s (1995), Alkire and Black end up with a list that contains the dimensions listed in Table 1: life, knowledge and appreciation of beauty, work and play, friendship, self-integration, coherent self-determination, transcendence and being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants and the world of nature. But applying the criterion of context makes it immediately clear that this list will not be very helpful in my discussions of gender inequality and poverty assessment. Many items of this list are too abstract and vague for the purpose of this study such as appreciation of beauty, and being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals. It is a list of abstract capabilities, as opposed to the more specific capabilities that I propose for the assessment of poverty and gender inequality because it fails to look at material dimensions of life.

On the other hand, a list of capabilities proposed by Nussbaum (1995: 83-5; 2000: 78-86) includes ten dimensions: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, sense, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play and control over one’s environment. My concerns overlap considerably with Nussbaum’s although there are several differences. First, Nussbaum’s interpretation of functionings and capabilities is different from Sen’s, and my concerns follow Sen’s conceptualisation. For Sen, capabilities are real opportunities, but for Nussbaum they also include talents, internal powers and abilities. This implies that for Nussbaum, Sen’s conversion factors are integrated in the concept of capability itself. The question then is: should we use Sen’s conceptualisation of capabilities or Nussbaum’s? For measurement of individual advantage and the design of socio-economic policy proposals, the criterion of context used in this study favours the use of Sen’s conceptualisation. This is because Sen’s

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27 Here, Nussbaum’s interpretation of the capability approach, in contrast to Sen’s interpretation, downplays the role of agency dimension. According to Nussbaum (2000: 14), the role of agency is already safely packed into the distinction between capability and functioning. Such an interpretation assigns, however, a very limited role of agency: agency is allowed is play in the achievement of functionings given a set of capabilities, but not in the definition of relevant capabilities. For this reason, I follow Sen’s interpretation of the capability approach which takes into account people’s agency in capability definitions which is of relevance to people in the context in which it is being used.

28 Hence, Nussbaum’s list will be more appropriate in other discussions, mainly those concerning moral philosophical principles that might result in the legal rights and political declarations, or in qualitative analysis of how people can cultivate their capabilities (see Nussbaum, 1995).
capability approach in general accommodates a multiplicity of possible contexts of application. Sen (1993: 31) argues that:

[In dealing with extreme poverty in developing countries, we may be able to go a fairly long distance with a relatively small number of centrally important functionings and the corresponding basic capabilities ... In other contexts ... the list may have to be much longer and much more diverse.]

Second, as highlighted earlier, Nussbaum's list differs in character from other lists (Robeyns, 2003: 75). In addition, at the national level, she uses the capability approach to argue that society should make meeting the minimum needs of all a priority, one that she believes should rightfully be embedded in a country's constitution and government priorities to keep inequalities in check (Nussbaum, 2000: 78-80). This belief in government stands in sharp contrast to some critical theory, which sees some governments as part of the problem of injustices (Menon, 2002). In formulating my concerns, I steer clear of both positions. Rather, my concern is to highlight aspects of gender inequality and disadvantage in poverty assessment. Thus, even if some of the same capabilities figure in Nussbaum's list and mine, their character and normative assertions will be distinct.

Alternatively, Robeyns (2003: 71-72) has proposed an important list of capabilities for the conceptualisation of gender inequality in post-industrialised Western societies. Her list has fourteen dimensions namely: life and physical health, mental well-being, bodily integrity and safety, social relations, political empowerment, education and knowledge, domestic work and non-market care, paid work and other projects, shelter and environment, mobility, leisure activities, time-autonomy, respect, and religion (ibid.). Even though Robeyns list is contextualised in post-industrialized societies, I found her list to be more in tune with my research concerns. She has noted that "some of the aspects of my capabilities list would be common to developing countries" (Robeyns, 2003: 88). To contextualise my discussion, I have concentrated on gender inequality and poverty literature in the developing countries.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Low</th>
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<td>7. Family and Community</td>
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<td>9. Physical Environment</td>
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<td>10. Cultural Environment</td>
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<td>11. Physical Environment</td>
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Table: Comparison of a Key List
Thus the difference between Robeyns’s list and my concern is that even if I take from Robeyns’s list only those capabilities that are real opportunities, my concerns differ in what is included. For instance, my conceptualisation of gender inequality under the functioning of physical health outlines two dimensions of health, that is, access to health services and intra-household food allocation and distribution. Similarly the dimensions of other functionings in my capability list takes into account inequalities in household income and spending, property ownership/transfers and socio-economic bargaining networks within the household and beyond (natal family, community, religious forums, the state and NGOs). These are important socio-economic factors in Third World societies as far as poverty assessment and intra-household relations are concerned and I will discuss some of these issues in the next section of this chapter. In my list I have also combined a number of the functionings (such as mobility and social relations, time-autonomy and leisure activities, and being respected and treated with dignity) to avoid repeating my discussion of empirical data that may be of relevance to both functionings.

Using the fourth criterion (i.e., the criterion of different levels of generality) I drew up my list in two stages. The first stage involved drawing up a kind of “ideal” list, unconstrained by limitations of data or measurement design through consultation with existing studies of human values and development (see Alkire, 2002; Braybrooke, 1987; Grisez et.al, 1987; Narayan, 2000; Nussbaum, 2000; Qizilbash, 1996; Robeyns, 2003). My list has ten dimensions which include: physical health, shelter and environment, domestic work and non-market care, paid work and autonomy in household spending, time-autonomy and leisure activities, mobility in social relations, education and knowledge, bodily integrity and safety, being respected and treated with dignity and religion. Generating a list at the second stage involved moving from ideal to a more pragmatic list taking into account constraints and limitations related to the measurement design and data collection underlying this research context. As Robeyns (2003: 70) noted, without this differentiation between the ideal and the pragmatic, the list could automatically reproduce existing biases. For the conceptualisation of gender inequality and intra-household relations in the context of my research, I proposed the following list of capabilities at the ideal level.\footnote{As noted by Robeyns (2003: 70-71) if the specification aims at an empirical application, or wants to lead to implementable policy proposals, then the list should be drawn up in at least two stages. The first stage can involve drawing up a kind of ‘ideal list’, unconstrained by limitations of data or measurement}
the existing lists are reconcilable. Context and strategic reasons play a major role in determining the length and content of different lists, rather than fundamental differences in the accounts of well-being or advantage.30

In this section I have investigated how we can use the capability approach to study gender inequality in the context of poverty assessment. After arguing against one definite list of capabilities, I adopted Robeyns (2003: 70) five procedural criteria which allowed me to present a proposed list for the purpose of this research. So far I have only listed the selected capabilities but I will have to justify why these capabilities are relevant for gender inequality analysis in the context of my research (see Chapters Six). However, before I present my empirical evidence on gender inequality in these capabilities, it may be worth looking more closely at interdependence and gender dimension within the realm of household relations. A person’s capabilities can depend on his/her partner’s capabilities and this might pose a challenge for critical evaluations of agency and well-being. This has not been sufficiently addressed in applications of the capability approach for assessing gender inequality.

*Intra-Household Distribution, Bargaining and Gender Relations*

A main goal of the capability approach is to capture the importance of human diversity in judging advantage (Robeyns, 2000). But is this framework sufficiently sensitive to the influence of domestic power imbalances on individual opportunities to achieve well-being? Robeyns (2000: 2-3) focuses on the individual and social characteristics that influence the conversion of commodity entitlements into functionings, and on what a person is able to do or be with the goods at their disposal, rather than with the fact that our command over goods may be constrained in the first place. It is evident that the principal source of disparities in well-being may lie not in unequal abilities to convert goods into functionings, but in unequal abilities to establish command over goods. Sen is aware of this difference. He notes (1985a: 174):

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30 Nevertheless, for the mentioned reasons of agency and legitimacy, it will remain important to involve affected people in the selection of capabilities and not to impose on them a list they simply have to accept, especially when the capability approach is used in political and policy contexts.
There are, of course, cases of joint ownership and even of social ownership. In the case of such jointness and also when the ownership is not joint but the use is (as with a family), there is a further problem of internal division of commodities commanded by the multi-person unit.

Let’s focus on two rural Indo-Fijian women, Paaru and Kala Wati, and their respective functionings of being able to read and write. If we interpret their entitlements in Figure 2 as their general access to literacy programs, the conversion of the program into literacy requires that we account for the “structural or group-dependent constraints” (Robeyns, 2004: 5) facing the two women. Suppose, for simplicity, that these constraints are identical. The women’s access to literacy may still differ if they have different abilities to negotiate with their husband on the time they can actually spend in class. It is possible that Kala Wati, because her influence on intra-household decision-making is restricted, will spend less time in the literacy class than her friend, even though the two women attach similar values to literacy. The main source of Kala Wati’s capability deprivation may thus lie not only in the constraints affecting her conversion of class time into literacy, but in the fact that she is unable to negotiate with her spouse more time for attending the literacy class.

Until recently, most economists were quite content to treat households as if their members had congruent interests. Over the last two decades, however, reservations about this unitary perspective have intensified among economists and other social scientists. The unitary paradigm has been weakened by its failure to explain systematic household disparities in developing countries. The growing evidence of persistent intra-family inequalities in the distribution of resources and tasks, and of gender differences in expenditure patterns, as well as descriptions of intra-family interactions

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31 This is analogous to Bina Agarwal’s (1997) observation that within the realm of the household, social norms may contain bargaining sets or the domain for contestation, by effectively precluding feasible functionings from actual consideration.

32 While I am aware of the ambiguities and definitional problems underpinning the concept of ‘household’, I shall nevertheless use the phrases ‘household’ and ‘family’ interchangeably throughout my thesis, given the considerable empirical variability of these units across regions, and their definitional variability across the literature. In the context of the present study, however, it would be useful to conceptualise the household/family as a complex matrix of relationships in which there is ongoing (often implicit) negotiation, subject to the constraints set by gender, age, and the type of relationship (kinship association).

and decision-making, indicate the need for a conceptualisation of the household that takes account of multiple actors, with varying (often conflicting) preferences and interests, and differential abilities to pursue and realise those interests. Disparities in the command over essential goods and services have been explored by bargaining theories which interpret intra-household allocation of resources as outcomes of bargaining process. A brief outline of the bargaining framework is therefore warranted with particular emphasis on its applicability within the context of my research concerns.

**Bargaining Model and Intra-household Relations**

In the context of the present study, the nature of intra-household interaction between the household members and their command over resources could usefully be derived as simultaneously containing elements of both cooperation and conflict. The members of a household cooperate in so far as cooperative arrangements make each of them better off than non-cooperation. However, many different cooperative outcomes are possible in relation to who does what, who gets what goods and services, and how each member is treated (Agarwal, 1994b: 54). These outcomes are beneficial to the negotiating parties relative to non-cooperation. But among the set of cooperative outcomes, some are more favourable to each party than others. The outcome depends on the relative bargaining power of household members. A member's bargaining power would be defined by a range of factors; in particular, the strength of the person's fallback position (outside options that determine how well-off s/he would be if cooperation failed) and the degree to which her/his claim is seen as socially and legally legitimate (Agarwal, 1994b: 54).

As my discussion in later chapters will argue, rural Indo-Fijian women who have a stronger fallback position (better outside options), and/or whose claim enjoys greater legitimacy, emerge with a more favourable outcome; and some find themselves in a

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34 'Bargaining' theories are interpreted to include theories with a game- or bargaining-theoretic foundation, including the non-cooperative models (Ulph, 1988; Wolley, 1988), the cooperative Nash-bargaining models (Manser and Brown, 1980; McElroy and Horney, 1981), the gendered spheres model (Lundberg and Pollak, 1993), and the conjugal contract model (Carter and Katz, 1997).

35 The term 'cooperative conflict' to describe these intra-household interactions has been popularised by the writings of Amartya Sen (1983a; 1985c; 1990a), which will be discussed in more detail below.

36 By social legitimacy, Bina Agarwal (1994b: 54) means that which is accepted and enforced as legitimate by the community (identified by kinship, caste, religion or location) of which the household is a part. By legal legitimacy she means that which is established in law. The two need not coincide but social legitimacy is especially important in the context of gender relations in this study.
much better-off position via cooperation with members of the household and community.\textsuperscript{37}

The application of a bargaining perspective involving cooperation and conflict and the notion of fallback position to characterise intra-household dynamics is relatively new, but growing. As Folbre has argued (1986: 251):

The suggestion that women and female children “voluntarily” relinquish leisure, education and food would be somewhat more persuasive if they were in a position to demand their fair share. It is the juxtaposition of women’s lack of economic power with the unequal allocation of household resources that lends the bargaining power approach much of its persuasive appeal.\textsuperscript{38}

Folbre’s (1986) focus on gendered differences in opportunities to achieve well-being within the household can be closely linked to the central tenet of the capability approach utilised in this study. While the bargaining literature seeks to unpack the determinants of intra-household inequality by focusing on alternative types of power and their material and non-material foundations, the capability approach is concerned with evaluating opportunities. As Iversen (2003: 96) notes, the bargaining perspective complicates interpretations of market behaviour and intra-household distributions by considering not only individual interests but also the differential abilities to act on those interests, that is, the ‘means to achieve’ in the capability approach. The focus on domestic power imbalances makes the bargaining perspective particularly attractive as a backdrop for a discussion of the capability approach and its applicability within the context of poverty and gender relations.

To see whether the capability approach can accommodate such discussions on the role of domestic power imbalances, we need to revisit Sen’s own reasoning on intra-household inequality.\textsuperscript{39} In critiquing the Nash-bargaining model of marriage,\textsuperscript{40} Sen

\textsuperscript{37} My emphasis on these factors is not to deny that feelings of love and concern are also important in shaping family relations and economic outcomes.

\textsuperscript{38} Nancy Folbre’s (1986) statement might suggest that economic power is the only type of power that can be analysed in a bargaining framework. This, I will later argue, conveys too narrow an interpretation of at least some bargaining models in the context of traditional societies like this study.

\textsuperscript{39} As is well recognized, Amartya Sen has done much to bring intra-household inequality and gender to the forefront of analyses and policy debates. Sen (1981) demonstrates that there was a noted gender bias disfavoring girls in the aftermath of the 1978 floods in West Bengal. Again, using anthropometric measures and data from two villages in West Bengal, Amartya Sen and S. Sengupta (1983) find girls under 5 to be nutritionally disadvantaged. See also Sen (1990a; 1990b; 1999) and Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen (1995), among others.
(1990a) argues that the feature that fallback positions or disagreement points alone determine bargaining power is based on too narrow an informational base. A theory that aims to explain intra-household inequality should accommodate what he terms ‘the perceived interest response’ (and the ‘perceived contributions response’). For example, Sen (1990a: 136) argues:

Given other things, if the self-interest perception of one of the persons were to attach less value to his or her own well-being, then the collusive solution, if different, would be less favourable to that person, in terms of well-being. He notes that this overlap between women’s personal and household interests preserves intra-household inequality. If a woman in a bargaining model perceives the welfare of other household members on par with her own, then intra-household distribution would tally with this interest perception.41 I adopt Agarwal’s (1997: 25) decision to place “much less emphasis than Sen does on women’s incorrect perceptions of their self-interest and much more on the external constraints on their ability to act overtly in their self-interest”. Sen (1990a: 149-50) views this ambivalence of female interests as closely associated with a curtailment of the agency aspect of personhood:

Our actual agency role is often overshadowed by social rules and by conventional perceptions of legitimacy. In the case of gender divisions, these convictions often act as barriers to seeking a more equitable deal, and sometimes militate even against recognising the spectacular lack of equity in the existing social arrangements.

It may therefore be necessary to explore and acquire in-depth knowledge about the pluralistic aspects of female agency and its openness about overt and covert manifestations that enable women to mediate intra-household power relations, improving their opportunities for achieving well-being outcomes within the household and outside.

A framework for well-being evaluation cannot remain oblivious to such manifestations of women’s abilities to exercise power. This poses an interesting challenge for gender

40 The Nash-bargaining models of marriage developed by Manser and Brown (1980) and McElroy and Horney (1981) introduced economic power and bargaining into the domestic arena. In a Nash-bargaining model of marriage, the intra-household allocation of resources is determined by what has broadly been termed the bargaining power of the two spouses. I adopt the convention of referring to this as the intra-household allocation of resources. By that I mean the intra-household distribution of goods and services, taken to reflect individual commands over or ‘possessions’ of the relevant goods. The terms ‘commands over’ or ‘possessions of’ will be used interchangeably throughout the thesis. In the jargon of Figure 1, these goods are the ‘means to achieve’ well-being outcomes.

41 However, Bina Agarwal (1997: 22-5) argues that maximisation of family welfare may reflect women’s long-term self-interest and questions whether women suffer from a ‘false consciousness’ about their self-interest by drawing on her empirical evidence showing women’s covert resistance. She further argues that women’s overt compliance with social norms does not necessarily mean they have accepted the legitimacy of intra-household inequality; it might merely reflect their lack of options.
inequality and well-being evaluations underlying the capability approach because we need to analyse whether or not such forms of female agency strengthen real opportunities that correct women’s relative disadvantage within the household. In short, by affecting the balance of power, individual abilities of household members may influence the intra-household distribution of goods and services, that is, the means to achieve in the capability approach. Hence, the individual abilities of women through their bargaining and/or negotiation strategies can be equally important in evaluations of well-being. The emphasis on bargaining skills supports the idea that even in situations of overt sex-role asymmetry, women may have some form of agency other than assumed and this is equally important for understanding intra-household relations and gender inequality.42

I therefore suggest that explorations of the pluralistic nature of female agency are an important way to strengthen our understanding of well-being evaluations underlying the capability approach. I have found insights offered by poststructuralist theorists into power and the constitution of the subject particularly useful in analysing rural Indo-Fijian women’s agency and well-being choices in the context of this study. 43 Germane to this formation is the reconceptualisation of power and subject formation which encourages us to understand agency not simply as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as capacity for action that specific relations of subordination enable and create. In following Foucault, the feminist theorist Judith Butler calls this the paradox of subjectivation, inasmuch as the very processes and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent (Butler, 1997a; Foucault, 1980, 1983). This conceptualization will enable us to explore whether or not participants in this study also become the willing subjects of a particular discourse whilst trying to resist patriarchal demands by evaluating the costs and benefits involved. Importantly, to understand agency in this

42 As noted by Kabeer (2001), while access to loans may have expanded the sphere of decision-making for one group of poor Bangladeshi women in her sample, this group already enjoyed a significant role in household decision-making, emanating from their superior (and possibly innate) managerial skills. It is distinctly possible, and rather plausible, that abilities of this kind may be quite unrelated to education and material possessions, but highly correlated with bargaining skills (see also discussions in Chapters Seven and Eight).

43 Importantly, this approach is not a rehearsal of arguments made by poststructuralist feminists, as it may seem at first glance. Rather, it is born out of the realisation that despite the fact that poststructuralist critiques have been quite influential in decentering liberal notions of autonomy, voluntarism, and the transcendental subject, the normative subject of poststructuralist feminist theory remains a liberatory one, her agency largely conceptualised in terms of resistance to social norms.
manner is neither to invoke a self-constituting autonomous subject nor subjectivity as a private space of cultivation. Rather, it draws our attention to the specific ways in which one performs a certain number of operations on one's thoughts, body, conduct, ways of being, in order to "attain a certain kind of state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or impartiality" (Foucault, 1997: 24) in accord with a particular discursive tradition.44

Drawing on Butler's argument,45 it is important to point out that this study departs from her work insofar as it urges us to consider my participants agency: (a) more in terms of capabilities and skills required to undertake particular acts (of which resistance to a particular set of relations of dominations is one kind of an act); and (b) as bound with the historically and culturally specific discourses through which a subject is formed. Despite Butler's acknowledgment at times that agency is not to be conceptualised as "always and only opposed to power" (1997a: 17), her theorisation of agency (as much as her demonstrations of it) are almost always derived from, and directed at the articulation of resistance to social norms and subordinating function of power.46 Agency, in Butler's work is largely thought of in terms of the capacity to subvert norms (especially heterosexual norms). Her concern with locating possibilities of resistance to subordination is understandable in light of her commitments to progressive politics.47 Therefore, as useful as many of the studies on resistance (for example, Pruyne, 1999; Scott, 1985; 1990) and resistance in the context of intra and extra (household) relations (see, Agarwal, 1994c) are to this study, I take to heart Abu-Lughod's (1990) caution against the "romance of resistance" and second Ortner's (1995) conclusion that there is no such thing as pure resistance; motivations are always complex and contradictory (see

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44 My analysis draws on Foucault's later work on ethics and "technologies of the self" (1988, 1997). See Ian Hacking's (1986) interesting discussion of how this aspect of Foucault's work contrasts with his earlier focus on the process by which subjects are made into objects of discourse.

45 Crucial to Butler's analysis are two simultaneous moves. First, she locates the possibility of resistance to norms within the structure of power itself rather than in the consciousness of an autonomous individual (1997b: 14), second she considers this act of resistance to be the paradigmatic instance of agency (1997a: 29). The second point is clearly and succinctly stated by Butler when formulating her theory of subjection: "an account of iterability of the subject...shows how agency may well consist of opposing and transforming the social terms by which it is spawned" (ibid.). Although I am in considerable agreement with her first move, it is the second that I find more problematic in this study of gender inequality and agency as discussed below.

46 See, for example, Butler (1993: 121-66) for an analysis of specific instances of agency.

47 In her analysis of the debate between Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler around the notion of agency required for feminist political projects, Fiona Webster (2000) is troubled by the practical implications of Butler's notion of agency. Webster (2000: 1-22) contends that while Butler's notion of agency is of theoretical importance to the feminist theory, it is inadequate to deal with the actual freedom or type of resistance required by embodied subjects or groups of subjects in the political arena.
also, Ahearn, 2000; Gamburd, 2000; Jeffery and Basu, 1998; Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996). Hence, I find MacLeod’s (1992: 534) work helpful in conceptualising women’s agency in this study. She notes that women:

Even as subordinate players play an active part that goes beyond the dichotomy of victimisation/acceptance, a dichotomy that flattens out a complex and ambiguous agency in which women, accept, accommodate, ignore, resist or protest- sometimes all at the same time.

Such a nuanced understanding of agency will enable me to explore the multiplicity of motivations behind my participant’s actions.

If the desire for freedom and/or subversion of norms is not an innate desire that motivates women, then the question arises how we analyse operations of agency that construct different kinds of desires, capacities and virtues that are historically and culturally specific, and whose trajectory does not necessarily follow the realization of liberatory politics. My point is that if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes ‘change’ and the capacity by which it is effected), then its meaning and sense cannot be fixed a priori, but must be allowed to emerge through an analysis of the particular networks that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of conformity and compliance from a progressive point of view, may very well be a form of agency- one that must be understood in the context of the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, I look into whether the agential capacity of my participants entails not only in those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim towards continuity, stasis, and stability. Engaging critically with existing feminist debates on the notion of agency and the interconnectedness of many forms of agency in well-being evaluations, I will explore participants ‘creative capacity’ (Wray, 2003: 514) within the conditions of possibility afforded by patriarchal discourses and their socio-economic constraints.

In the light of discussions above, this research proposes a pluralistic and multidimensional interpretation of women’s agency as defined by Naila Kabeer (1999: 438):

... [t]he ability to define one’s goals and act upon them. Agency also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or “the power within”. While agency tends to be operationalised as “decision
making" in the social science literature, it can take a number of other forms. It can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. It can be exercised by individuals as well as by collectivities.

The appeal of the above definition lies in its openness about overt and covert manifestations of agency, in the shape of either overt autonomy in strategic life-choices or more covert talents that correct for women's relative disadvantage within the household. Hence, Kabeer's definition has been useful in highlighting some of the overt and covert manifestations of my participants' agency ranging from self-expression, negotiation, bargaining, and resistance to secrecy.

The bargaining perspective or approach is particularly useful in examining gender relations and such complexities of female agency (see also Seiz, 1991). The bargaining perspective will allow us to distinguish between command over goods and services established by social norms and distributions determined through contestations and bargaining. An emphasis on the material foundations of agency distracts attention from other potentially significant manifestations of agency that enable women to mediate intra-household power relations and thereby improve their outcomes. In any case, my purpose here is to focus on some gender dimensions that are critical to bargaining outcomes, but which most discussions of household bargaining treat as exogenous and outside the realm of their analytical specifications, such as the following:

- What determines intra-household bargaining power?
- What is the role of social norms in determining bargaining power and in setting the limits to what is bargained over?
- How are bargaining processes and outcomes affected by differences in individual perceptions (about needs, contributions etc), and pursuit of self-interest?
- How are intra and extra-household bargaining processes and outcomes affected by differences in personal skills, abilities and characteristics?
- What are the links between intra-household bargaining and bargaining outside the household? And what determines extra-household bargaining power?

See Agarwal (1994b; 1997) who examines both the material and ideological basis of bargaining power and much of her works has been influential to this study on poverty and gendered evaluations of well-being (see discussions that follow in the next section and other chapters).
In the section which follows I examine how these neglected dimensions of bargaining will be factored into evaluations of my participants' agency and well-being.

Factors affecting Bargaining Power and Negotiability

Any attempt to identify the determinants of bargaining outcomes must grapple with several complexities. As Agarwal (1997: 7-8) notes, a wide range of factors can define a person's bargaining power, some quantifiable (such as individual economic assets) others less so (such as communal/external support systems, or social norms and institutions, or perceptions about contribution and needs). To contextualise what determines an Indo-Fijian woman's bargaining power within the family in relation to subsistence needs and well-being outcomes, at least three factors appear important in this study; that is, traditional rights in household resources, traditional social support systems, and support from the state and NGOs (see also Agarwal, 1997; Beck 1994; Folbre, 1997; Harrington 2004).\footnote{The category, NGOs, is broadly used here to include organisations that differ in size, the social backgrounds of their members, their objectives, ideological positions, issues taken up, forms of operation, and so on. Some might have a mass base, others small memberships. I will use the terms 'gender-progressive' NGOs or groups for those whose activities are centrally or partially aimed at reducing gender inequities. This could include organisation with mixed (male and female) membership but with a specific gender focus in their activities, as well as women's groups promoting gender-specific programs.} Other considerations involve social norms embodying accepted notions about the division of labour, resources etc, social perceptions about contributions, needs and abilities (i.e., who deserves what) and self-perceptions and altruism embodying self-interest of household members. In conceptualising participants' bargaining strength within the family vis-à-vis subsistence needs and well-being outcomes, I have taken into account the following factors:

- Ownership of and control over assets, especially arable land;
- Access to employment and other income-earning means;
- Access to traditional social support systems such as patronage and kinship;
- Support from the community and communal clubs;
- Support from NGOs;
- Support from the state;
- Social norms embodying bargaining power and/or constraints in negotiability;
• Social perceptions about needs, contributions and other determinants of deservedness; and

• Self perception and altruism.

Gender will be the significant basis for understanding inequality within the context of intra-household relations and strategies of bargaining and/or negotiation. Age and kinship relations may also play a part in the bargaining process through social norms and perceptions (see Chapter Six). Furthermore, outside the household/family, gender interactions can take place in several arenas, of which five are especially important in this study, that is, natal kin, the community, women’s religious forums, the state and NGOs.\(^5\) The bargaining approach can usefully be extended to characterise gender interactions in these arenas as well.

Existing literature on Fiji suggest that norms and perceptions set limits to women’s processes of bargaining and/or negotiation within the household and beyond (see also Harrington, 2004; Jalal, 1997). Agarwal (1997: 10-15) also notes that social norms, social perceptions and self-perceptions, can affect subsistence distribution both directly (in that intra-household allocations depend on perceptions about deservedness and on prevailing norms of sharing within families), and indirectly (by impinging on the other extra-household factors such as the community, state and NGOs).\(^5\) This study seeks to fill some of the gaps in existing poverty and gender analyses by exploring how social norms impinge upon participants’ bargaining outcomes in at least three ways: (1) they can set limits on what can be bargained about; (2) they might be a determinant of, or constraints to, bargaining power; and (3) they can affect how the process of bargaining is conducted (for example, covertly or overtly, aggressively or quietly). These limits to bargaining may favour some groups over others (say men over women), or favour some individuals over others (say older women over younger). They can draw legitimacy

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\(^5\)We have noted at various points in this chapter that women’s bargaining power within the home is clearly associated with their situation outside it. Although, as mentioned earlier, some discussions of household bargaining recognize that “extra-household environmental parameter” (McElroy, 1992) impinge on intra-household bargaining power, we need to go beyond mere recognition to examine how such parameters can themselves be bargained over. Folbre (1997), in her discussion of gender-specific environmental parameters, and Agarwal (1994b), appear to be among the few who, in different ways, have engaged with this question.

\(^5\)In the literature on intra-household economics only a few authors explicitly recognize the importance of social norms and model them. Of those that do, some treat them as exogenous (Lundberg and Pollak, 1993), while a few recognize the possibility of their being endogenous (e.g., Agarwal, 1994b; Folbre, 1995; Hart, 1993).
from religious and other socio-cultural beliefs and they can reflect the dominant social perceptions of the needs and rights of people prevailing in a community (see Chapter Four).

Perceptions would usually be only one among several factors influencing social norms, while also affecting intra-household allocations and bargaining power independently of norms. For understanding rural Indo-Fijian women’s perceptions on inequitable gender relations within the household, we therefore need to examine not only their overt acts of resistance but the many covert ways in which they express their (dis)satisfaction and self-interest (see Chapter Six, Seven and Eight). This has important practical implications for this study since the conversion of women’s resource endowments into well-being will depend not only on their individual characteristics, resource endowments and the group-dependent constraints but also their own self-interest/perceptions (expressed in both overt and covert manifestations of their agency). The idea that women have no agency vis-à-vis men, even in circumstances of structural adversity, should be subject to careful scrutiny. One inquiry that this study engages with is whether Peter’s (2003: 24) claim is valid that “we need to find ways of rendering social evaluation of well-being responsive to the interests of those whose agency is restricted”. A complete assessment of well-being should include contextualised understandings of functionings like agency, power and autonomy. This research will see whether women’s deprivation in capabilities involves traditional patriarchal practices and beliefs. But at the same time belief systems and practices may have positive outcomes on women’s self-esteem and aspirations and this might pose a challenge for the capability approach.

**Conclusion**

My discussion in this chapter has centered on how the capability approach can be used to study gender inequality. After rejecting the view that Sen’s capability approach needs a definite list of capabilities, I contextualised this framework to select relevant capabilities for the purpose of my research. The failure of the capability approach to encompass the pluralistic aspect of female agency may preclude meaningful interpersonal comparisons of well-being within the household. Recent literature on
household behaviour with a bargaining foundation provides a useful basis for examining economic and non-economic sources of power and their impact on the opportunities for women and others to enhance their well-being within the household and beyond. Such accounting is necessary because individual opportunities of household members to achieve well-being will be influenced by power relations, which in turn are influenced by each party’s material and non-material endowments. But the question that remains is how to gather information on qualitative dimensions like social norms and perceptions affecting power relations within the household. Methods used to penetrate the ‘subculture’ of the lived experiences of my research participants and to record their views in contexts where they can express themselves freely is discussed in Chapter Three.
Chapter Three

A Feminist Constructivist Research Paradigm to Study Women and Poverty in Fiji

Introduction

In this chapter I outline my methodological approach, provide a detailed discussion of the research methods that I have used to collect and analyse data for my study of Indo-Fijian’s women’s lived experiences of poverty, and examine the variety of issues that had to be confronted before undertaking the research process. The underlying aim in my choice of methodological practices was to develop a methodology that could overcome the androcentric biases embedded in research methodologies which do not take ‘gender’ as problematic. Engendering methodological practices is of particular significance when research on women focuses on topics such as poverty, intra-household relations and bargaining between members within the household. The first two sections provide a definitional framework of feminist research and how these theoretical perspectives can be applied in the present study respectively. In the third section, my study site and research participants are introduced, and so is an overview of the pragmatic factors that resulted in their selection. An outline of the methods used during my fieldwork will also be included in this section, together with a review of my approach to analysis of empirical materials. Finally, I will consider some of the ethical and moral considerations involved in my research write-up and its presentation.

Defining a Feminist Research Paradigm

While there is debate about what constitutes a feminist research paradigm (see Code, 1995; Harding, 1987; Reinharz, 1992), there is a general consensus that the feminist methodological stance is focused on uncovering the social relations which deny the lived realities of oppressed groups, particularly women. There is also an acknowledgment that research for (rather than on) women ought to be attentive to
power relations between ‘subjects’ and ‘researchers’. Grounded in the political imperatives of feminism, this research aims to correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in existing poverty studies in Fiji. This entails the substantive task of making gender a fundamental category for our understanding of the social order, ‘to see the world from women’s place in it’ (Lather, 1988: 571). The following discussion will outline the ways in which the principles of feminist research are realized in research practices.

In this study the ontological question of how we know reality is guided by the interpretative paradigm (Guba, 1990: 26). Particularly useful were constructivist and feminist approaches which form the theoretical foundations of the present study. This research endeavour takes an explicit focus on the lived experiences of women and the diversity of those experiences. It also recognizes that women’s lives and experiences are situated within broader social, political and economic contexts and, therefore it seeks to uncover the multiple social relations that shape the lived realities of women. This involved research at multiple levels of analysis including: research at the macro level which examines broad structural forces, such as socio-economic arrangements and processes; research at the meso level which looks at the institutional constraints on women’s lives, such as access to opportunities and resources; and research at the micro level which examines women’s everyday lived experiences in the domestic sphere and the meaning that women attach to these experiences.

The feminist theories I found most relevant for my research purposes discussed ontology in terms of an ‘embodied subjectivity’ and replaced totalising generalities with analysis of specific locales, with their own histories and socio-economic contexts. This resonates with di Leonardo’s (1991) theoretical threads which influenced the present study. These ideas include: the constructed and culturally contingent notions of gender and sex; historical contingency; and the embeddedness of gender construction within a social and material world that crosscuts with other social divisions such as age, generation, ethnicity and religion; and the importance of social location in perception of cultural realities (di Leonardo, 1991: 27-33). My interpretation of di Leonardo’s (1991: 30) ‘embedded nature of gender’ means recognizing that gender constructs influence social beliefs and practices that become ‘embedded’ within traditions, organisations, institutions and legislation. Hence, women must be studied within such contexts and
must be seen in relation to other women as well as men, remembering that the
crosscutting of other social divisions impact on gender. In echoing the criticisms laid by
many third world feminists (for example, Kabeer, 1994; Trinh, 1989; Shameem, 1990)
against the homogenization of the categories ‘men’ and ‘women’, I argue that there is
no shared experience based solely on being a ‘woman’. As Linda Alcoff (2000: 312)
states, the constructive power of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and other forms of
identity must be recognized as a relevant aspect of almost all projects of inquiry.\footnote{Ong and Mohanty’s perspectives are useful here, in problematising non-western women as an
undifferentiated category- the ‘Other’ of western feminists- and their critiques have encouraged
“openness to difference and a reluctance to essentialise ‘woman’…” (Parpart and Marchand, 1995: 8).
Their critique appropriately cautions analysts to remain “…wary of an unproblematic ‘Third World
woman’, and acknowledge the need to adopt an approach that recognizes the multiple axes/identities
which shape women’s lives, particularly race, class, age and culture (ibid.).” What should be taken from
the postmodern feminist critique is its emphasis on “…the need to situate women’s voices/experiences in
the specific, historical, spatial and social contexts within which women live and work (ibid.).”}

Significant to above mentioned epistemological considerations in this study are the
concepts of “reflexivity” and “intersubjectivity” (Shields and Dervin, 1993: 67).
Reflexivity attempts to place the researcher on the same critical plane as the researched
through an explicit situating of the researcher in the research (Harding, 1987). How the
inquirer knows the ‘known’ is always going to be constructed and filtered through
his/her own social location. By bringing to this study my own socio-cultural experiences
of gender and ethnicity I was able to critically reflect upon the role of these
subjectivities in my own research outcomes and strategies. For example, as a non-
western (Indian) feminist living in Australia, I often found myself torn between the
desire to communicate with honesty the miseries and oppressions that I think my own
culture confers on its women and the fear that this communication is going to reinforce,
however, unconsciously, western prejudices about the “superiority of western culture”
(Narayan, 1989: 259). In cultures that have a pervasive religious component, like the
Hindu culture with which I am familiar, everything seems assigned a place and value as
long as it keeps to its place. Confronted with a powerful traditional discourse that values
woman’s place as long as she keeps to the place prescribed, it may be politically
counterproductive for non-western feminists to echo uncritically the themes of western
feminist epistemology that seek to restore the value of ‘women’s experience’. For me as
an Indian woman, familiar with the Hindu religio-cultural way of life, one of the points
of tension I often faced was how to reconcile feminist critiques of priority traditionally
granted to the variable ‘gender’ in the Western discourse with a feminist redefinition of
the embodied subject in a network of interrelated variables of which gender is one, but set alongside other powerful axes of subjectification, such as race, religion and culture. This double-edged project of both relying on genderised or sex-specific notions in order to redefine the female feminist subject and on deconstructing them at the same time has led to some strong feminist rejections of sexed female identity and to the critique of the signifier woman as a meaningful political term.

Hence, I found the concept of ‘epistemic advantage’ contentious to deal with. Uma Narayan (1989: 262-64) used the term ‘epistemic advantage’ in the context of post-colonial feminist epistemology to explain that oppressed groups, whether women, the poor or racial minorities, may derive an advantage from having knowledge of the practices of both their own contexts and those of their oppressors. This advantage is thought to lead to critical insights because each framework provides a critical perspective on the other. I would like to balance this account with a few comments about the ‘dark side’ (the disadvantages), of being able to (or having to) inhabit two mutually incompatible frameworks that provide different perspectives on social reality. I suspect that non-western feminists, given the often complex and troublesome interrelationships between the contexts they must inhabit, are less likely to express unqualified enthusiasm about the benefits of straddling a multiplicity of contexts. While the location of myself both as a feminist researcher and as an insider (studying my own people) confers on me an “epistemic privilege” I found that my academic training in feminist epistemology and theory often conflicted with the experiences of my embedded self as an Indian woman. During my fieldwork encounters with participants and local Indian community I was constantly reminded about the religio-cultural norms of modesty embodying my gendered positioning in the field which I found disconcerting to deal with. In other words, I found ‘epistemic privilege’ a contentious notion to deal with because the reaffirmation of religio-cultural distinctions constricted the articulations of women’s interests within the terms of reference set by Indian patriarchal discourse.

Therefore, whatever feminist consciousness I may have achieved through my western education were sacrificed in the interests of community identities placed on me as an Indian woman. The advantage of my epistemic privilege turned out to be ‘disempowering’ because my position as an Indian woman often demanded and
burdened me with moral responsibilities not just to my own family but the Indian community as a whole. My fieldwork and exposure to a culture in which a woman’s role was so strictly circumscribed also meant that some facets of my life concerned my participants as well: why, for example, being a married woman I was without children, unlike many village women of my age and why I was not accompanied by my husband? More distressing to the older women among whom I studied was the conclusion that I was more interested in following my studies than bringing up children. Although the role of an educated woman had come to be accepted by the community at large (especially women), the problem involved priorities. Being married without a child, I predicated my adulthood on education and depended on the community’s acceptance of it as a legitimate goal for women to attain. After initial disappointments, men and women alike respected this, although never failing to remind me of the fundamental responsibilities of my role as a woman. As one older woman put it to me: “education is good, but women are weak. No matter how much money they have, no matter their education, they cannot manage without men. You have to start your own family”.

My research endeavour also takes an explicit epistemological stance that acknowledges the intersubjectivity between the researcher and the researched. This means that my study acknowledges women as knowers, as experts on their own lives and experiences, and does not privilege the “knowing” of the researcher over that of the researched. The acknowledgment of the reciprocal sharing of knowledge and experience between the researcher and the researched attempts to undo the conventional dichotomies and hierarchies in the research situation through emphasising the dialogic or dialectical relationship between both practices involved in the research itself (Shields and Dervin 1993: 67). Significant to adopting the constructivist framework in this study was that women being studied be seen as experts on their own lives and viewed as research partners, not as ‘subjects’ or informants’. Hence, the word ‘participant’ is used in place of other terms such as ‘research subject’ or ‘research objects’ as a methodological ploy to acknowledge the active participation of the women in my study. This also entailed including my participants input in the collection of data and interpretation of results. The features of a feminist research discussed above, which included placing value on women’s experiences and subjectivities, the critical analysis of gender, reflexivity and intersubjectivity guide the methodological concerns of this study.
Feminist Constructivist Methodology

Methodology in social research is concerned with procedures for making knowledge valid and authoritative.53 My research was primarily guided by the constructivist paradigm that entails qualitative methodology to pursue an understanding of the social expressions and actions of the participants. The reason for selecting a constructivist paradigm was because it celebrates the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims towards an interpretive understanding of subjects’ meanings (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1994). Dominant conceptualizations of poverty, with their narrow focus on monetary indicators, inadequately represent the multidimensionality of poverty phenomena because it often leaves out the social forces and contexts that shape women’s lives, well-being and living conditions. This means that the constructivist paradigm is characterized by the rejection of the notion of a single external reality proposed by the positivist and post-positivist postures. Rather, it operates under the assumption that there are multiple socially constructed realities whose form and content are dependent on the individual/group involved in the constructions (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). One of the reasons why a feminist constructivist perspective was adopted in this study was because it challenges narrow constructions of reality and supplements it with social, cultural and economic understandings that take into account the contexts in which poverty emerge.

Consistent with its relativist ontological position, constructivism adopts a subjectivist epistemological stance which takes the ‘interaction’ between the researcher and the researched as the process by which data or knowledge is created (Guba, 1990; Schwandt, 1994). This facilitates the reconstructions of previously held constructions of personal stories from the lives of research participants’ during the interaction between the researcher and the participants through a process which involves “a continuing dialectic of iteration, analysis, critique, reiteration, reanalysis...” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:110). Versions of the dominant feminist method - that is, in-depth interview and participant observations (see Reinhart, 1992)- has been used in this study in an effort to

53 As noted by Silverman (2001: 4) a methodology in social research comprises rules that specify how social investigation should be approached. Each methodology links a particular ontology (for example, a belief that gender is social rather than natural) and a particular epistemology (a set of procedures for establishing what counts as knowledge) in providing rules that specify how to produce valid knowledge of social reality (for example, the real nature of particular gender relations).
understand the world as seen through the eyes of the participants and to give presence to women's voices and experiences in their own words. Positivism, on the other hand insists on an experimental/manipulative approach intent on empirical testing to verify hypotheses about certain levels of poverty above or below a constructed line. The constructivist feminist methodologies allow me to use the lived experiences of women participants as a methodological means to validate and empower women's voice in existing poverty studies in Fiji. Hence, this study seeks to redress the absence of women's voices in poverty studies by articulating women's stories from their own perspectives and relevances.

In utilising a constructivist mode of inquiry into the lives and experiences of the Indo-Fijian women who participated in my study, I wanted multiple, socially constructed realities about poverty as understood by these women to emerge as a result of the interaction of myself and the women participants. Placing women at the centre of analysis and emphasizing the ways that gender and its associated social roles and rules affect the women's well-being, constructivist perspective recognizes the diversity of life circumstances facing women due to a variety of social characteristics, locations or identities. Of particular importance was the validation of women's experiences, ideas, conceptions and relevances from their own standpoint, that is, their ways of understanding their poverty situation in the context of myriad contradictions entailing gender, kinship, age, race and social class relations. To do this, assumptions about shared experiences between and among women need to be addressed, as must numerous issues surrounding its implications for methods used and underlying ethical and practical dilemmas.

Research into Indo-Fijian Women's Lived Experiences of Poverty

This section of the chapter presents an outline of the methods used for my study of Indo-Fijian women's lived experiences of poverty. My philosophical approach to data collection and analysis has been influenced by writers in feminist methodology (DuBois, 1983; Harding, 1986, 1987; Klein, 1983; Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992; Stanley, 1990; and Stanley and Wise, 1983). The following discussion is divided into three components: (1) definition of my research participants and my field site; (2) an
outline of data collection methods and analysis with its limitations; and (3) discussion of the some of the ethical dilemmas I faced during the phase of this research.

**Locating the Research Participants and the Field-Site**

It is essential to the research design that those who volunteer to participate in this study meet certain criteria. The research participants in my case were selected through the process of purposive sampling. This research is not concerned with conducting a household income and expenditure survey to determine the level of poverty in rural areas. It was more about selecting the 'poor households' in 'rural Indo-Fijian settlements' and then locating 'Indo-Fijian women' within these households who may be interested in participating in the research process through a series of conversations and narratives about their 'daily experiences'. The philosophy underpinning a feminist constructivist paradigm leads the thesis to focus on a relatively small sample, selected purposefully on the assumption that a great deal can be learnt about issues of concern from the detailed study of a few information-rich cases. Carvalho and White (1997: 5) state that in purposive sampling, the expertise of key informants and specialists is used to select poor people or field sites for an in-depth study which include for my purposes, criteria such as wealth ranking (i.e., ranking individuals or households by well-being or wealth), social mapping (i.e., constructing maps of communities or community facilities) or indicators such as housing condition. In my research I used purposive sampling in identifying and selecting women for participant observation and focused conversations.

I identified my target group as ‘women-members of a household’ because of the dearth of research on them and the representation of women in research traditionally as passive objects of research whose perspectives have been ignored (Harris, 1993). My research participants were eighteen\(^{54}\) Indo-Fijian women (between the ages of 33-50)\(^{55}\) being

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\(^{54}\) This is rather a small sample is in accordance with my feminist-constructivist research paradigm whose primary focus is on the local applicability of the research rather than a generalization to a larger population. The focus is on ‘understanding’ rather than quantifying the socio-economic realities of rural women.

\(^{55}\) Even though the selection of my participants was based on a certain age criteria, that is, a range between 25 to 50 years of age, my sample included the youngest participant, aged 33 and the oldest aged 99. The reason for selecting a certain age criteria was because I wanted to see how patriarchal intra-household relations within the family affect women occupying different ages.
members of male-headed households, who lived in a rural area. Indo-Fijian women living in a rural settlement were chosen because, apart from the national Household Income and Expenditure Surveys (HIES) in 1977, 1991 and 2002 many smaller studies have only looked at poverty in urban areas, concentrating on squatter settlements (see Chapter One). My initial search for literature and existing qualitative and quantitative studies revealed that I was working in an ‘intellectual vacuum’ as far as my interest in rural poverty and women’s experiences of poverty was concerned.

I chose my participants from a rural settlement situated in Labasa (see Appendix 1: Map of Fiji Islands showing my study area). The majority of the Indo-Fijian households live in the two main sugar cane growing regions in Fiji, the Northern Division56 where the research was undertaken and the Western Division. The residence of Indo-Fijian households in these sugar cane growing areas dates back to the historical formation of smallholder sugarcane farms during and after the colonial period.57 But from the very beginning of Fiji’s history, indigenous Fijians have always resided in villages typically known as koro.58 Therefore selecting a rural settlement in the sugar-cane belt region (Northern Vunua Levu i.e., Labasa) was a consequence of my choice of ethnicity.

Indo-Fijian women, however, were chosen because of my own identification with this ethnicity and my familiarity with the socio-cultural issues of Indo-Fijians. As an Indo-Fijian woman, I feel I was in a dual position of being the researcher and the researched. Oakley (1981: 53) posits a cultural affinity between feminist interviewers and the

56 The divisional terms relate to government administrative areas. Here, the Northern Division refers to the cane growing area on Vunua Levu. The Western Division refers to the cane growing areas in Viti Levu (see Appendix 1- Map of Fiji Islands showing the sugarcane growing areas).

57 The production of sugar cane in Fiji was initially based on a plantation system owned by European colonists and worked by indentured labourers from India. Notably, the Australian owned company, CSR became the major player as both an owner of plantations and miller of cane to produce raw sugar. Moynagh (1981) conceptualises the transfer of cane production from European plantations to Indian smallholdings in three stages. It was during these three stages, some of the labourers decided to settle in the colonial structured smallholding sugar cane farms which are currently known as Indo-Fijian settlements in census reports of Fiji (Bureau of Statistics, 1998).

58 Indigenous Fijians have always lived in closely-knit villages called koro. This suited the traditional hierarchy and Fijian administration based on the obligatory system of vanua, mataqali, tikina and yasama and its implications for Fijian residence in villages. Indians on the other hand lived on their farms and their scattered houses over a larger area are referred to as settlements. The difference between a village and a settlement is now being obliterated and the ethnic divide is also getting blurred. Indo-Fijians no longer are confined to rural settlements. With non-renewal of land leases they are moving to squatter settlements and to residential blocks in peri-urban areas. Similarly, Fijians especially those from outer islands and interior areas of Viti Levu and Vunua Levu are moving to urban and peri-urban squatter settlements in search of jobs and better education.
women they are interviewing: “A feminist interviewing women is by definition both ‘inside’ the culture and participating in that which she is observing”. Feminist research is particularly concerned with the personal affiliation of the researcher within her research, and, as such, my identification as an Indo-Fijian gave me a valuable insight into my own life but also into gender and kinship relations within the context of intra-household relations. Vance also noted the advantage of scholars doing research as members of the group under study, as these allow one to be “most attentive to and attuned to nuances in the material…” (1992: 18).

An alternative view has been expressed by Phoenix (1994: 50), who claimed that simply being a women and as a member of the same ethnic group discussing ‘women’s issues’ in the context of a research interview is not sufficient for the establishment of rapport and the seamless flow of an interview. She also highlighted that the complexity and range of respondents’ reasons for taking part in a study means that the women interviewer-women interviewee situation does not always produce rapport through gender identification.59 Nor are the power positions between researcher and researched fixed; the balance of power between the interviewers and interviewees shifts over the course of a study.60 In my research, same gender and racial identification with the participants was helpful from my point of view in understanding the deeper sociocultural realities or complexities of gendered household relations, but I also feel that this strategy of matching interviewers and respondents on particular characteristics (such as gender and/or race) does not automatically imply the production of ‘better’ or ‘rich’ data. For me as a feminist researcher, it was more about being able to establish rapport, and gain an entry into the lives of the participants’ and address the complex issue of ‘empowerment’ throughout the research process. As noted by Ramazanoglu (1989: 101), the political priorities of working-class and peasant women appear very different from those of women who do not share their conditions of poverty or exploitation. They

59 Catherine Reisman’s discussion of two contrasting interviews- one with a middle-class Anglo (white American) woman and the other with a working-class Puerto Rican woman- both carried out by middle-class Anglo interviewer show that sex is “not enough to create shared understandings” (1987: 173). Reisman found that whilst in the Anglo-Anglo interview the process “was aided by gender, class and cultural congruity, which produced the unspoken but shared assumptive world of the two women”, in the Anglo-Puerto Rican interview, despite sex congruity, the interview “was hindered by a lack of shared cultural and class assumptions” (1987: 190).

60 For example, at recruitment, respondents have the ultimate power to refuse to be involved in a study. In the interview situation power does not only lie with researchers but shifts and varies, while during the analysis of the data and writing-up of the study, the researchers are almost always more powerful than their respondents.
have struggles which they share with working-class and peasant men, rather than with all other women (Afshar, 1985; Mies, 1986). Hence, the class relations between my participants and myself had to be taken into account, because ‘women’s dream of unity’ as Dorothy Smith has put it (1983: 40) “is almost certainly illusionary”.

Trust between myself and these Indo-Fijian women participants was therefore not something that was easily established on the basis of our gender and race affiliation alone but had to rest on other factors as well. All my participants were very careful to make sure there would be confidentiality and most of them were also concerned about my motivations - why I was doing this research, who was funding it, who would the written report be for, what angle was I coming from? Using the consent form I made sure that any identifiable information in regard to participant’s name was encoded and not identifiable in this research or any future publication(s). In the case where the participants have voluntarily given permission to use excerpts of their interviews/conversations in their original form confidentiality was still preserved through the use of a ‘false name’ which the participants had chosen themselves. Another important clause in the consent form ensured that the participants had the liberty to withdraw their participation and contribution at any stage of the interview process. Hence, a number of factors had an impact on whether potential participants took part in this study and, if they did, how they felt about their participation. These included, women’s living circumstances, permission of women from their husbands to participate in the research, and the level of comfort discussing their private lives with an outsider.

Soon after the selection criterion of my participants was finalized I was faced with the problem of selecting the rural settlements - one which suited the scope of the study and was not at the same time too inconvenient for me to reach, stay in, and study. When I arrived back in Fiji from Australia I had a basic understanding of Indo-Fijian settlement that I was interested in. The task of identifying the rural settlements, which I thought would be difficult and taxing, turned out to be the easiest part of the research. Because of my knowledge of the language spoken in Labasa, my home town, I had decided to study rural areas around Labasa town. To this I had added a personal, non-academic preference: as far as possible the rural settlements would be situated near Labasa town where I could have my parents and friends as a support network. With these considerations in mind, I found two settlements with the characteristics that I was
looking for: that is, an Indo-Fijian settlement, prevalence of poverty in the area, sugar-cane farming community, and most importantly its classification as a rural settlement.61

Another issue of concern was “how to enter the field” and “which family could be trusted upon as my host/adoptive family”. In some highly patriarchal societies (especially in Arab and Muslim settings), several feminist scholars describe gaining entry through male privilege - that is, through the connections of their father, husband, or brother (Abu-Lughod, 1993).62 Similarly, my father had insisted that he help me locate the host families and settlements. His firm insistence on accompanying me to the field can be explained in two reasons. First, as a typical Indian father he was not comfortable with me travelling alone to these settlements and persuading people to cooperate in my research. He believed that my protection was not just paramount for maintaining his family honour but also for ensuring my marital fidelity and being respected by my in-laws upon my return from the field. Second, since my father was a school principal from 1987-1989, he believed that his social standing in the community would have confirmed for both the host families and the local people my respectability and membership in their community.63 With these considerations, my father identified two families who also happened to be our distant relatives.

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61 I must mention here that influenced by some books on social survey methodology, I was keen that the village settlement selected should be ‘representative’ or ‘typical’. After visiting few settlements, it became clear to me that there was no such thing as a representative or typical village in a vacuum. Representative-ness or typically was determined by the purpose of the study. No rural settlement could reflect all the characteristics associated with the settlements of a country as a whole. Settlements or villages varied on many counts, and typically had meaning only in relation to the problem or interest of the researcher. My visit to the settlements and the reading I had done in different parts of Fiji had given me some confidence. It was only then that I broached the subject of choosing a settlement with the help of my father. From his anecdotal evidence about the state of poverty in the two chosen settlements, I was more than convinced that these were the settlements that interest me and my project.

62 Lila Abu-Lughod, an Arab-American anthropologist who researched Bedouin women, was brought to the field by her Arab and anthropologist father who lives in the United States, who introduced her to and entrust her into the care of a Bedouin patriarch, whose daughter she became. During her second fieldwork venture, she was accompanied by her father and her husband (Abu-Lughod, 1993). A Turkish feminist and economist, also describes the importance of her husband’s presence during her fieldwork: indeed, most villagers continued to think that it was his research that brought them there. Because male villagers felt more comfortable talking with him, a Turkish male, his input and assistance constituted a crucial contribution to his wife’s project as he distracted husbands while Gunsoli interviewed their wives at home (cited in Wolf, 1996: 9).

63 Having mentioned the importance of my father’s employment to my entry into the field, the anonymity of my participants is still maintained through the use of fictitious village names.
When we approached these two families, my father explained the situation and sought their assistance in placing me under their protection. It was clear that I came from a good family, so they could accept me as a member of their household without compromising their social standing. I carried out intensive fieldwork in Rampur basthi and Krishnapur basthi (both are fictitious names of the two rural Indo-Fijian settlements) for a period of four months from February to May 2003 and follow-up sessions during August/September, 2004.\textsuperscript{44}

Both the settlements had the advantage of being situated in the vicinity of my hosts' house so that it was easy to orient myself. My association with both the families of Goundar and Swamy\textsuperscript{45} proved to be of utmost importance. This was partly one of the reasons which made fieldwork in rural Labasa possible.\textsuperscript{46} My host families were instrumental in formally introducing me to people and over the weeks my host sisters escorted me to different houses to visit. I was often asked whom I was staying with, and there was a general relief when I stated that I was staying with the family of Mr. Goundar or Mr. Swamy. I gradually came to realise my host family's widespread popularity as politically and socially active people in the community and their integrity made them respectable to a variety of social groups. Most of the participants' houses were within easy walking distance from my host family's house, which was convenient for day excursions as transport was not readily available. At each location I had a primary participant who had arranged to meet me and I would spend the majority of the time with her, participating in the activities where I could. At my host family's house as well I endeavoured to participate in activities as much as possible and experience rural life.

\textsuperscript{44} A total of seven months was spent for the collection of data and fieldwork in Fiji, taking into account library research and interviews with a variety of officials in government and non-government organisations.

\textsuperscript{45} In order to protect the anonymity of individuals being studied, family names and place names have been changed. Out of concern for the privacy of informants, identifying personal details have been omitted and altered (see last section of this chapter on the ethical considerations of informant privacy).

\textsuperscript{46} Being a young married Indo-Fijian woman from Australia but without the company of my husband, would have made it difficult for the local people to place me socially and to understand my motivations for being in their village. They were extremely generous in allowing me to stay for so long and I owe them a great debt of gratitude. Through them I met their friends and neighbours and thus the networking for participants began.
While I felt like I was living 'fieldwork' twenty-four hours a day, my approach to ethnographic research meant that I was more than a 'researcher'. My relationships with the majority of the people were more than researcher/participant/respondent. At times I felt the research was almost incidental, although I was always conscious of its presence. In this way my professional and personal 'modes' became inseparable (see also Storey, 1997). People were extremely generous with their time and resources and I tried to be as considerate as possible and sensitive to local proprieties. There was hospitality in the midst of scarcity, give-and-take in the midst of disputes and conflicts, and joy and fun in the midst of sorrows and misfortunes.

**Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

Several types of data collection can be used in a qualitative project like mine. In this section, I will outline some of these qualitative methods of data collection and presentation which fully "recognizes the critical inter-relationship between subjectivities of both researcher and her participants in the social construction of knowledge" (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995: 9). Qualitative methods adopted in this study are not emancipatory in themselves, but they do have considerable potential in the quest to do research for rather than on women.

(i) **Ethnographic Research:**

Ethnographic research entailing participant/observation methodology and qualitative interviewing techniques were used to collect data in this study. The positive attributes of these methods were that a more in-depth knowledge of peoples' beliefs and practices was obtained as I lived with the participants over an extended period of time. Emerson et.al., (1995: 2) state that the ethnographer seeks:

>A deeper immersion in others' worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important...give[ing] the fieldwork[er] access to the fluidity of others' lives and enhances his sensitivity to interaction and process. Furthermore, immersion enables the fieldwork[er] to directly and forcibly experience for herself both the ordinary routines and conditions under which people conduct their lives, and the constraints and pressures to which such living is subject.

The researcher cannot live the lives of their respondents and so while they might develop empathy, their experience will always be different. With the above research

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47 Elsewhere I have explored in detail my personal reflections on my fieldwork in Fiji (see Chattier, 2006).
methods in mind, my knowledge of poor Indo-Fijian households was gained inter-subjectively through shared conversations and activities. Doing so was central to the quest of building rapport and developing cooperative relationships with my participants.

This quest was by no means achieved automatically but it involved adjusting both my lifestyle and my way of thinking to the field situation. As noted by Pahriwala (1991: 29), the dilemma involved in conforming to 'indigenous role models' is most acutely faced by a woman researcher studying her own culture. I had to project an acceptable image, an image which did not disturb the status quo within the community. I was made conscious of many of the norms concerning women, especially a married woman without the company of her husband. I knew I was breaking these norms by undertaking fieldwork in this area. How far does one conform to indigenous role models in order to be accepted by the community? I had persuaded myself to believe that if the women saw me being engaged in tasks similar to theirs, then they might accept me more easily. For example, I collected water from the well as they did to mingle with them in the course of their work, listen to their gossip, and break down some of their reserve.\(^6\)

While accepting these norms, I had to make sure that I did not completely conform to their female stereotype. I had to make it clear that my domain was not restricted to the home and family and that I could also interview men. Throughout my fieldwork there was a constant tension within me to appear 'traditional' and yet gain acceptability as a modern professional.

Observing and participating in the daily activities of my participants provided me with an opportunity to cross-check information provided in the interviews and also to reflect participants' own experiences and understandings of them in their own words. Participant observation also offered a space which facilitated closer analysis and deeper exploration of the meaning of women's diverse experiences and understandings of poverty and well-being. However, this method was no substitute for in-depth interviews because it was not possible for me to engage myself in constant observation and

\(^6\) Helping them with the household chores, I succeeded in gaining greater acceptance for myself. But did it help me otherwise? I had to spend considerable time, 2-3 hours each day in fetching water, cooking, washing and cleaning. The energy spent on these tasks could have been spent more fruitfully in collecting valuable information. It did give me openings to information but its benefits did not outweigh the costs. Listening to gossip while carrying heavy buckets of water, especially when I myself had no interesting snippet to relate, was not a skill I mastered to any great degree of proficiency. My participation in the daily activities surprised many of the village women and also failed stereotypes they had about urban woman being a lady of leisure sitting at home all day while her servants did all the household chores.
participation day in and day out. Thus, I had to supplement this method with lengthy
sessions of focused conversations with my research participants.

(ii) **The Use of Focused Conversations:**

I used focused conversations to reach into the lived experiences of my participants and
to use their own words and concepts to define problems and areas of concern to them.
Strongly influenced by Oakley (1981: 30) I adopted her stance that the practice of the
traditional interview is problematic for women interviewers whose “primary orientation
is towards the validation of women’s subjective experiences as women and as
people...”, rather than a mere data gathering exercise. Establishing an intimate and non-
hierarchal relationship with my participants was crucial not only to achieve the level of
information required but also to ensure participant involvement and participation.
Additionally, focused conversation provided a platform where Indo-Fijian women’s
own interpretations of their lives were validated and given authority and I viewed
myself as ‘informed’ but by no means an expert.

A ‘conversation’ comprised of a two-way interaction process in which both the
researcher and the participants exchanged information through questions and responses.
My own conversations with the Indo-Fijian women into their lived experiences meant
sharing our experiences of the pressures imposed on us to aspire to a model of
femininity and, in turn, I was interested in how they lived up to the ideals of femininity
on a day-to-day basis. This two-way interaction facilitated the build-up of rapport and
thus resulted in a non-hierarchal and intimate research relationship between myself and
my participants. The conversations were conducted in Fijian Hindustani,⁶⁹ in which both
myself and the research participants were conversant. Furthermore, the exploration of
this particular topic on gender and poverty involved emotional, cognitive, moral and
ethical issues - which I felt would be easier for the participants to express in the
language that they use every day. The translated data for all interview sessions were re-
checked with the participants the following day for correctness of interpretation and
subtle meanings that may have been missed in the translation process.

⁶⁹ Fiji Indians (Indo-Fijians) have their own language, Fijian Hindustani and Fijians have their **Bauan** as the
official indigenous dialect. Often English is taught at schools and many people do have competency in
this language. However, everyday conversing is conducted in vernacular languages that are used
interchangeably when people from both ethnic groups are present. English is not used so much as a
bridging language as it appears to be in urban centers. I was fluent in Fijian Hindi and therefore I chose to
use the local language with my fieldwork participants but English was used to interview officials from
various organisations.
My conversations with the participants involved asking initial, open-ended questions which placed them in a position where they took some control of the interview by addressing the topics and themes they wished and recalling and recounting the details important to them. Here I worked with an assumption that each conversational session was a collaborative and consensual enterprise among women, but this does not preclude their responsibility to earn trust, exhibit sensitivity and show support (Kasper, 1994: 270). Conversations were often 'focused' on pertinent issues of Indo-Fijian women’s poverty situation and intra-household relations to allow for more specific content to emerge (Grieve and Burns, 1994). However, women's narration of their lives was often complex and not as clear as I had hoped. The direction of questioning was negotiated and open-ended and shifted between the arbitrary categories that I constructed. The categories overlapped and I ran into difficulties when I tried to impose some order and sequence on their narrations. For example, when I asked my participants about their aspirations in life they often talked about the aspirations of their children instead of their own. It was good that I had a guideline as my instrument for questions (see Appendix 2-focused conversation schedule), but I added contextual questions to probe diverse experiences and perspectives of the eighteen women. As Judith Rollins (1985: 10) explains, “the guide is used sparingly, more to produce discussion than to direct it”. This manner of asking encouraged the discovery of unexpected issues and was based on the fundamental assumption that those who have lived an experience will know more about it than those who have not.

Alongside the imperative to talk with women about their own experiences, Kasper (1994:271) stresses the importance of listening well:

Listening rather than dialogue or a string of questions is an essential component of in-depth interview method. Listening may be more valuable to the collection of data than the most carefully crafted questions. And, listening in active and different ways means hearing the words which are the infrastructure of an account (not merely answers to questions) and which reflect a woman’s effort to give an accurate portrayal of her experience.

In this case listening involved not only hearing what was said, but also the ways in which it was said, which included (but is not limited to) paying close attention to hesitant or halting forms of talk (Devault, 1990: 103). I was particularly cautious to note the difficulties women had in expressing their ideas and beliefs, periods of silence, the intensity of speaking voice and emotional content and tone. Listening and 'talking' to women thus enabled me to gain access to the ongoing activities of their lives and, further, to capture the essence of poverty in a language that is plain and simple, and in
which women were most comfortable speaking. Most of the conversations in this study took place in “naturalistic settings”: conversing over an ‘Indian bowl’ of black tea in an outside kitchen or outside shed; helping women in their household chores, chatting on a doorstep or in a vegetable garden out back; or accompanying women to the welfare office or to the ‘Indian temple’ for religious functions; taking part in women’s club activities at the local school or temple; while observing children in a school classroom or playing with them at home. For the most part, these were spontaneous situations occurring in the normal course of daily life, daytimes and evenings, during Hindu ritual ceremonies or on any ordinary day.

Conversations with the women in my study was, then, a strategy for documenting women’s own accounts of their lives - that is, as a tool for making possible the articulated and recorded commentary of women on their very personal business of being a female within the context of their intra and extra household relations. Oakley (1981: 57) sees this as the insider’s perspective which comes from the shared experience of being a woman, that is, “a feminist having in-depth conversations with women is by definition both ‘inside’ and participating in that which she is observing”. My ‘pseudo-kinship role’ (Ahmed, 1980: 22) made my life much more comfortable as a woman researcher in both the settlements. As my research got under way, the female dimension of my identity encouraged women’s willingness to express their thoughts and beliefs relatively freely. But, as expected, not all women exhibited the same degree of confidence in their beliefs and willingness to share them with an outsider like me. Here my experiences of interviewing women did not match perfectly with Oakley’s (1993) and Finch’s (1984) standards of rapport, trust and disclosure. This neither indicates that I employed a defective research technique, nor that Oakley and Finch were wrong in their analysis of woman-to-woman interview situations.

70 I established such fictive kinship relations of a sister and daughter with some of the participants in the area. They helped me in getting data in every possible way. One of them still maintains contact with me through letters, which I consider as one of the biggest achievements of my fieldwork. Other feminist ethnographers have also written about how their assigned kinship roles as honourary mothers, daughters, wives or sisters created solidarity and empathy during their fieldwork process (Abu-Lughod, 1988; Rabeja and Gold, 1994). For Sue Carswell (1998: 35-36) she now has two Fijian babies who were named after her father; these acknowledgements predicated ongoing relationships that she had in her fieldwork in Fiji.
Rather, it supports Edward’s (1990:478) statement that “gender alone is not enough to win full acceptance into female concerns” and also any analysis should include discussion of the structural divisions between women, such as race, class, age, and lifestyle. These differences can result in shifts of power within social relations of research. For instance, my role as a student researcher from Australia, age and my assumed class affiliation may have been seen as a source of potential domination. It made the women, particularly those of the older generation, cautious in opening up with me. Hence, I attempted to create some form of informality between us by insisting that the participant continue with whatever she happened to be engaged in and by offering to lend a hand at one or some other chores. After some initial hesitation, most would accept my offer, thus enabling me to avoid turning the interview into a formal question and answer session. I hoped such reciprocity would add a social background to my researcher role by stressing the similarities rather than the differences in our respective ways of life, thus easing the participant’s suspicions of me as an outsider.

However, not all my offers of help appeared to be acceptable and it appeared that my social status also had an effect. It was taken to imply that there are specific chores that a town wala aurat (female urbanite) such as myself could not possibly be used to (such as scouring the pots and pans with ash and coconut husk or drawing water from the well). I realized that my offer of help could very easily be misunderstood as a patronizing attitude. Thus the perceptual difference between my participants and myself and the relative power in the interview situation was more complex and thought-provoking than suggested by Oakley (1993). The notion that power lies with the researcher rather than the researched in interviews did not tie in with how I felt. This may have been due to the disempowerment I had already experienced in trying to fit myself into female role models and maintaining social restrictions required of an Indian woman. Despite my attempts to fit in, there was still some reservations from a few participants and I found that they did not want to discuss certain areas of their lives with me. Respecting these boundaries, I followed Ramazanoglu’s (1989) position that feminists are committed to ways of knowing that avoid subordination.

All conversations were tape-recorded after seeking permission from each woman or otherwise recorded as field notes. The transcripts were then drawn up from these
recorded conversations. To demonstrate that data collected through these conversations with participants were dependable and reliable enough I had to use more than one method. Apart from maintaining longer engagements with the participants and personal observations, I consulted other people in the village to confirm and/or supplement the stories of my participants. In addition, I followed Hall and Stevens' (1991: 19) suggestion to use two methods of measuring data reliability, that is "diachronic reliability" and "synchronic reliability". Using the diachronic reliability I was able to ascertain whether participants' themes maintained some degree of stability over a period of time (in this case, initial fieldwork from March to May, 2003 and follow-up sessions in August to September, 2004). Synchronic reliability ensured whether participants' had similar responses in a single period of time, that is, during my prolonged conversational sessions with them during two phases of my fieldwork in Fiji. These standards served as important auditing criteria for affirming the accuracy of my research processes and outcomes.

(iii) Interviews with Organisational Personnel:

I also undertook an extensive search of official documents and/or interviews with various individuals in institutions who were either directly or indirectly associated with poverty alleviation and women's issues in Fiji (see Appendix 3- interview schedule for informants). These institutions included the following: Native Land Trust Board, Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Women, Culture, Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation, Social Welfare Department, Fiji Ministry of Microfinance, and Fiji's Central Planning Office. They were mostly state departments and ministries and the documents gathered included official policy statements, official reports and confidential documents, amongst others. The interviews with personnel at these institutions provided an invaluable resource and important leads for this research. For example, the Fiji Bureau of Statistics provided me with findings of the 2002 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) as the most recent account of poverty in rural settlements; the Social Welfare Department gave me an indication of poverty in my study area and

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71 These transcripts are the records of the stories of these women who participated in my study. After transcribing the tapes in English, some editing and cutting was required to avoid an overly repetitive narrative. When the women were confronting, reliving or remembering traumatic incidents, the conversational interviews were punctuated with emotional frustrations and behavioural outburst of pain, sadness and grief. Unfortunately, the transcription process flattened any affect- the laughter, the cries and the angst in their voices.
the benefit resources available to people; the Department of Lands and Native Land Trust Board (NLTB) provided maps, details of land tenure and number of expired farm leases in my study area. Information and statistics from these official sources provided a means to verify and/or supplement data gathered from participant interviews.

However, one of the difficulties that I saw in this method was the degree of bureaucratic resistance and secrecy, compounded by political restrictions in regard to accessing the official documents and files. My ethnicity as an Indo-Fijian researching on Indian women and poverty in Fiji was seen as a potential threat and that my research capacities could lead to leakage of inside information on the severity of poverty amongst Indians in Fiji. A lot of reluctance was also due to the fact that many of the affirmative action policies in Fiji were pro-Fijian on the basis that Fijians occupied greater numbers and or percentages in poverty. Hence, many of these government institutions and departments were reluctant to readily provide documents, especially when it concerned poverty figures and poverty alleviation taskforce committee reports. They feared that if I had access to recent poverty figures in Fiji it may be politicised against the government of the day. In this case, I had to devise practical solutions to overcome such limitations which included making verbal promises not to publish the contents of the documents, or going through a second or third person to acquire the required documents.

Furthermore, during fieldwork other interrelated issues such as health, schooling, finance, social welfare, and domestic violence all seemed vitally important. As I identified issues, I began to interview people in various non-government organisations and professions at a local level. Not all of this rich information could be included in the thesis but it did provide a valuable background. For example, interviews with officials at NGOs like Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS), Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education & Advocacy (ECREA), FemLINK Pacific, Fiji Human Rights Commission (FHRC) and Citizens Constitutional Forum (CCF) provided information for evaluating the conditions many of the rural poor families faced. Interviews with officials at various women’s organisations like Fiji Women’s Rights Movement (FWRM), Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre (FWCC), National Council of Women (NCW), Fiji Human Rights Commission (FHRC), United Nations Fund Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) - Pacific Chapter were extremely helpful because they provided background information on women’s concerns, rights and issues in the context of Fiji
and the Pacific. For instance, the Department of Women and Culture both at national and local levels provided me with their national plan of action for women in Fiji which outlined the government programs in place for empowerment of women. Similarly, Labasa Women’s Crisis Centre (WCC) alerted me to local views on gender relations and domestic violence.

Furthermore, the information collected using this method provided an internal audit of my research processes and enabled me to ascertain whether official documentation and interpretations were supported by data gathered from the participants and vice versa. As suggested by Hall and Stevens (1991: 24) the coherence of a study is important insofar as it draws raw data into logical discourse and remains faithful to the stories told. In this study, while reflecting the complexities of women’s experiences, I ensured that coherence of my research process was strengthened by demonstrating how behavioural, verbal and affective elements coincided with other verbal responses and written records.

(iv) **Data Analysis and Presentation:**

My analysis of the empirical fieldwork materials began by reading through the eighteen focused conversations with rural women as well as the supplementary interviews with government and NGO officials to identify the emergent key themes. Data analysis in this study included three flows of activity:

- data reduction, which included the process of identifying emergent themes in the data; data display, the process of organizing and clustering the information to be used for deriving conclusions; and conclusion drawing and verification, the process of deciding what experiences mean, noting patterns and explanations, and verifying our findings (Segal and Demos, 1998: 5).

I prepared an essay for each participant in which I described what I had learned from them. This enabled me to safeguard the individual life stories, perceptions, and diverse perspectives as data analysis yielded more and more abstract categories that were intended to be representative of all the participants.

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72 These stories give the meaning of kinship structures, decision-making vectors, cultural symbols, systems of obligations and rights, and of economic and social adaptation to particular environments. In the stories customs, symbols and values come to life as they are manipulated, within the range of deeper cultural understandings, to realize the goals of the household. The stories provide us with a rich mine of materials on which to reflect–the events of life are tied to the themes and to woman’s present situation, the events of the past acting as a prelude to the present.
Issues about the ways in which these stories should be disseminated also became an important part of this research process. Creswell (2000: 528) calls this “restorying the story”. In this project I spent hours reflecting on the stories/data I had gathered and on the ways in which I should be “restorying” these stories. Consistent with the constructivist research position I selected parts of these stories to use as case studies which highlighted the key themes and issues of relevance to participants in this study. The analysis of the case studies presented was informed by insights gained from a wider body of empirical materials. The writing up was done in such a way to give a sense of the women as whole people rather than “sound-bites” (Harrington, 1998: 46). I used their perspectives of their situations as the starting point of my analysis. In presenting the women’s stories, I highlighted their agency and active choices in shaping their lives wherever possible.

The final issues with respect to presentation are those of representativeness. The constructivist research framework adopted in this study entailed searching for cases where divergent experiences and other explanations are possible which supported conclusions about consensus, since these divergences are more illustrative of the complexities of lived experience. Inconsistency, then, does not render perceptions of similarity invalid, but serves to illustrate the variety of thoughts, actions, position and feeling held by different women.

**Ethical and Moral Dilemmas**

In professing an ethical commitment geared to the protection of my participants in this study, I strictly observed ethical concerns such as informed consent, right to privacy and protection from harm (Fontana and Frey, 2000; Neuman, 1994). Before I even endeavored to meet my participants in Fiji, I had to defend the ethical protocols of my research to the Australian National University’s (ANU) Human Research Ethics Committee.\(^7\) At the beginning of every interview, I handed out and explained the

\(^7\) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (1999) requires all researchers to ensure that informed consent has been secured. The most standard practice is to assign pseudonyms to all participants and delete designations that might reveal identities. I had to put up a very defensive proposal as to how my research will minimize any harm to my participants and this section looks at some of these ethical issues of my research.
informed consent form to my participants (see Appendix 4- informed consent form).\textsuperscript{24} Lykes (1989: 177-78) writes about her experience as a researcher that through the informed consent, “control [of the research] remains in my hands. Through introducing the form when I did I asserted my role as a researcher, changing the terms of the previously established grounds of our interview”. I share Lykes’s (1989) concern about informed consent. The apparent rapport that I had with the participants seemed to unravel whenever I handed out the consent form. Many asked me, “What is this for?” I tried explaining the purpose of the informed consent: “The form is to protect you, the participants, from the abuses of my power as a researcher but at the same time, protecting researchers from any form of libel”. I was always embarrassed when an explanation was required. In fact the formal procedure of following research ethics was at odds with ‘establishing rapport’ with my participants and it brought out the open power relations - hence the embarrassment. But all participation was voluntary and did not involve any subtle coercion that I was aware of. The women were not obliged to share any information nor answer any questions that they found uncomfortable.

Confidentiality and anonymity were preserved through the use of pseudonyms which the women were requested to choose for themselves. A study of intra-household relations and daily life implicitly intrudes on the privacy of participants. The parameters of privacy were negotiated in the field as participants organized where I could and could not go. They would decline certain avenues of questioning and encourage others, and decide where I could photograph and how they should arrange themselves. From these negotiations I attempted to become sensitized to what was and what was not acceptable. It is because of this concern over privacy that I have not explicitly identified household formation or which household informants belonged to when using quotes. The risk of more easily identifying participants outweighs this information. This influenced the organisation of the thesis which focuses on themes and participants’ experiences and comments regarding those issues rather than a biographical approach. A dilemma I faced was that some of the material collected through photographs had to be omitted so that it does not identify the woman concerned. In a small country like Fiji it can be difficult to preserve anonymity and I realize the photographs may identify certain participants. However, to protect their identities I had to use ‘participant and community pseudonyms’ (Geest, 2003: 15) throughout the thesis so that the participants could not

\textsuperscript{24} The aim of the informed consent was to release the institution (i.e. ANU) from any liability and, at the same time, accede control and license of the research process to the researcher.
be traced back to the same village or community where I conducted my ethnographic research. A few of the elderly participants felt privileged to be a part of my thesis and even wanted to see their names appear on paper. They said they did not like any attempt at confidentiality because their main worry was that after death they would sink into oblivion and my writing about them will help them to be remembered. Had I made the wrong decision when I chose to use pseudonyms in order to preserve confidentiality in biographical accounts of my participants? Their trust did not surprise me, but it disturbed me. I wanted them to be more protective of this meaningful and important space.

While all researchers have to deal with questions of confidentiality and exposure of data, for those who return to live with the people they study - and even more so for those who are participating members - these considerations have more immediate consequences. Sometimes I felt as if I was a 'parasitic' observer using their lives for my academic gain. To minimize these unequal power relations I incorporated the use of the Indo-Fijian women's 'voices' in my thesis. Excerpts of conversations are used to represent these voices. In addition, I revisited my participants in my second visit to Fiji (August 2004) and shared their stories with them. Some of them were filled with emotions and felt privileged to see something being written about their lives on paper. But a few of them enquired whether or not their stories were of any help in getting assistance from the government to alleviate their poverty. Also one of my participants claimed that participating in this ethnographic study has afforded her the opportunity to reflect upon her life and to face it anew.73 I also helped participants' children with their school homework. Personalized photos of each family taken over the period of fieldwork, and special event photographs, were something small but hopefully memorable that I could give back. People were very obliging and often asked me to take family portraits, particularly during ceremonial occasions.

But no matter what help I could offer to my participants, I always felt that I was the one who came out ahead. I had no illusion of ever reaching a state of balanced reciprocity in the course of the fieldwork transaction. The issue of reciprocity has concerned me as I

73 Reliving her story through our interviews has, Paaru says, "forced her to face problems she had in raising her daughters". Furthermore, Paaru claims that having a person so interested in her life and accompanying her has given her courage, just as I discovered I have received courage through this research process to claim various parts of myself.
was always aware participants were giving me much more than I could give them, particularly as they were giving me information that would enable me to gain academic status and earning potential. Despite these complications and potential for harm, I agree with Wolcott (1995: 123) that “confronting and understanding the multiple and often irreconcilable contradictions” therein constitutes awareness of the ethical dimensions of fieldwork and can only lead to practices that seek to minimize harm to individuals.

**Conclusion**

This chapter examined the ways in which a feminist constructivist methodology can be incorporated into research on women and poverty in Fiji. I used methods (such as in-depth focused conversation and participant observation) that enabled me to successfully collect qualitative data on the lived experiences of the participants and highlight the diversity of their experiences. In this study I took an explicit epistemological stance that acknowledged diversity in social constructions of reality. Hence, a feminist constructivist perspective was adopted which allowed me to recognize the multiple voices of women and how different socio-economic circumstances shape their realities. To that end, a distinguishing feature of this study is its focus on examining gender as a fundamental category of understanding the social order and how it crosscuts with other axes of analysis such as kinship relations, age and race in the context of poverty and household analysis. This brings us to the next chapter which provides a background to understanding the ideologies of power conceptualising gender relations and inequalities within the household.
Chapter Four

Patriarchal Discourses of Power and Social Control

Introduction

To have some understanding of the structural and cultural causes of women’s poverty, it is necessary to understand how traditional patriarchal Indian discourses influenced the present day experiences of Indo-Fijian women. In this chapter I will explore the traditional Indian discourses of power which not only constitute patriarchal power relations within the household but also represent notions of femininity and cultural ideals about sexual behaviour, family status and female propriety. This chapter is a step towards understanding how social norms and perceptions about well-being and intra-household relations affect women’s capability deprivation.

In the first section, I will explore how traditional religious discourses theorize the notions of ‘ideal’ Indian womanhood and create subject positions for Indo-Fijian women. The social legitimacy derived from religious and cultural beliefs will throw light on dominant perceptions of the needs and rights of women. The concepts of dharma, mutual love and respect, fertility and a healthy prosperous life whilst always adhering to religious duties emerge as important concepts throughout the chapter. This discussion will also enable me to comprehend how Indian women are portrayed as dependent, obedient and with a primary duty to serve men. The second section of this chapter will then highlight how these customs and traditional expectations take shape and form in the contemporary rural context.

Patriarchal Discourses and Gender Relations of an Indo-Fijian Society

My discussion in this section centres on examining the dominant ideology of gender identities, roles and relationships in Indo-Fijian society. ‘Femininity’, as I see it, is a ‘patriarchal fiction’ which women are socialised to embrace as their own social reality,
as their own gender identity regardless of what their lived experiences reveal. Being feminine within patriarchy means embracing a particular kind of appearance (locked in your body) and adopting a particular set of behaviour traits that is considered desirable (being locked into gender). Being feminine also means acting in a way that renders women powerless through the adoption of a ‘passive femininity’. However, the tendency to reduce women to passive victims of patriarchy who merely internalise a false consciousness of themselves and their social reality is called into question in this thesis. But before that we need to examine how notions of femininity have been constructed within patriarchal discourses of Indo-Fijian society. Firstly, I shall provide a historical account of prevailing gender ideologies of Indians now settled in Fiji. Secondly, I examine how the ideal of Indian womanhood is constituted through various roles and characterisations in Indian mythologies and religious texts. Thirdly, I look at how religious ideals legitimise cultural norms and perceptions about women and family relations, as religion is an integral part of life for my participants in this study.

The Construction of ‘Passive’ Femininities: A Historical Account

In order to have a better understanding of the present Indo-Fijian social structure and position of women therein, it is imperative to know the operation of various historical, political, cultural and economic factors. It is argued that the experience of indenture had a profound impact on discourses of ideal Indian womanhood in Indo-Fijian society. Public debates surrounding female sexuality and marriage practice during the indenture period provide a strong background to understanding patriarchal ideologies of gender expectations in contemporary Indo-Fijian society. This section provides a general overview of what constitutes the belief systems about gender relations within Indo-Fijian society without going into the details of periodisation and variations in the discourse of indenture.76

Common belief systems presuppose much of the day-to-day activities and values of Fiji Indians despite the religious differences. As Lateef (1987: 68) stated, while religious

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76 Authors such as Ahmed Ali (1980); Ken Gillion (1977); John Kelly (1991); Brij Lal (1985, 1992); Vijay Mishra (1979); Vijay Naidu (1980); Shaista Shameem (1990) and Subramani (1995) provide fuller accounts of the indenture experience. The literature is by no means comprehensive in discussions of what impact indenture had on Fiji Indian family relations, but tends towards the public debates surrounding female sexuality and marriage practice.
ideologies can be located as having their origins in Hinduism and Islam, the transformation of the religious ideas into secular practice becomes the taken for granted everyday traditions of Indian culture in Fiji. It is important to note that the separation of Hinduism and Islam that informs Indo-Fijian culture and society in general occurs only at the level of sacred texts, not at the level of everyday ideological practices. As a result, Lateef (1987: 67) stresses that when we talk about the predominant culture of Indo-Fijian women, it is one in which "the prevailing gender ideology is one of 'Indianness' as opposed to regional variation of religious differences". I take my cue from Lateef's (1987) analysis which argues that present day gender ideologies in Indo-Fijian society are embedded within this general 'Indian tradition' rather than how they are constructed by specific religious differences. For example, Lal (2004: 12) pointed out how during indenture and migration of Indians to Fiji, men and women of different ages, different social, economic and religious backgrounds, often speaking a variety of mutually incomprehensible languages, with contrasting expectations of life, met and mingled and out of this interaction emerged a new culture.

In the following paragraphs, I provide a brief historical account of indenture in Fiji and then illustrate the patterns and processes of change by focusing on the caste system, marriage and gender relations. The period of indenture during the late 1800s had a profound effect on both caste  and regional differences which had existed in the lives of the girmityas (indentured labourers) in India. The voyage across the kala panis (black sea) to Fiji as well as the experience of indentured life on sugar plantations in Fiji undermined regional differences and other social divisions of caste (Jayawardena, 1979; Lal, 1979, 1983; Mishra, 1979). Indenture dealt a mortal blow to the caste system as a social institution of practical relevance in everyday life of the migrants, although vague notions of distinction and difference survived. Each girmitya was individually contracted to the plantation, and was paid according to the amount of work he or she accomplished, not according to social status. Moreover, most immigrants were young.

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77 Caste- a hierarchy based on the denominational group into which a Hindu enters at birth. Four principal castes (Varnas) are the Brahmins (priests), the Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), the Vaisyas (businessmen and farmers), and the Sudras (servants or menials). Outside this Hindu social structure, a fifth class (Panchamas) known as outcasts or untouchables was located.

78 Jayawardena (1979) in his article, talks about the disappearance of many of the distinctions and differences between various social groups (e.g. castes and other social divisions) during the journey that the indentured labourers made from India to Fiji by ship. Jayawardena discusses this breakdown of differences during the experience of a voyage together using the notion of the institution of jahaji (fellow travellers) (1979: 44-45). Writers such as Gillion (1962: 123-26) and Lal (1992: 75) have also observed a general disintegration of the caste system among girmityas and their descendents.
and illiterate and unaware of the rituals and ceremonies associated with the caste system. The disproportionate sex ratio on the plantations produced cross-caste marriages and breaches of caste rules could not be punished. As Jayawardena (1979:94) puts it:

Since everyone has the same rights and duties, co-ordination of behaviour in matters of common concern was achieved by voluntary co-operation and recognition of the self-interest of equal and free agents. Culture and religion rather than caste became the basis of identity in the new community.

The institution of marriage also suffered during indenture. The massive disparity in numbers that existed between female and male indentured labourers during the period of the *girmilt* (indenture) meant that intermarriage between the various castes was common and this further broke down caste divisions (Jayawardena, 1979; Lal, 1979; Shameem, 1990). Traditionally, marriages took place within a narrow, restricted circle prescribed by custom. But these were difficult to maintain on the plantations because the crowded conditions meant that there was no privacy, and close proximity between the houses of the unmarried and the married encouraged illicit relationships. Furthermore, marriages conducted according to Hindu and Muslim customs - the only ones the immigrants knew - were not recognized in colonial law and this encouraged the unscrupulous and the criminally opportunistic to exploit the situation to their advantage, disavowing relationships and obligations when it suited them (see also Kelly, 1991). For instance, Lal noted (2004: 13) how the practice of some fathers ‘selling’ their daughters to several prospective husbands for financial gain became a major source of tension in the coolie lines. On the whole, the plantation system undermined a stable family life - but not completely, for marriages continued to take place and families were raised after indenture as a sign of changing times (see Jayawardena, 1983; Mayer, 1954).

Insofar as gender relations during indenture were concerned, men evaluated women’s roles on the plantations in stereotypes and often labelled them as ‘immoral’ and ‘socially unredeemable’ (Lal, 2004: 14). Some measured them against the ideal of *Sita*, the paragon of Hindu womanhood, who gave up everything to accompany her husband, Lord Rama, into exile. The ideal Indian woman accepted her fate without complaint, glorified the virtues of motherhood, deferred to male authority and, above all, worshipped her husband. The discourse on Indian women was couched within the Hindu religious beliefs and religion remained central to *girmiltiya* life. Kelly (1991: 44)

79 Other Indians, however, who did not emigrate under indenture, have generally retained their caste identity especially when it came to marriage, for example the Gujerati community (see Leckie, 1998).
notes that the Ramayan Epic was used as an analogy for indenture as the labourers felt sentenced to exile like Lord Rama, (and Sita his devoted wife who went with him), who underwent terrible hardships and loss of social status. Ravan who was evil and kidnapped Sita symbolised the Europeans and their abuse of Indian women. On the plantations, men sought to reassert the patriarchal structure of Indian society, wanting to own the means of production as well as the labour of women. Lal (ibid.) noted that Indian men failed to appreciate that emigration and indenture had dramatically restructured women’s positions and thence their relationship with men. In fact women were employed on the plantations as individuals in their own right. Control over their own hard-earned income gave them a measure of power as well as economic and social independence. If circumstances demanded, they left their husbands when their life became constantly embroiled in tension and torment or was otherwise endangered. When indentured women demonstrated such individualised choices, it was often seen as disrespectful to marriage, family and other institutions of the Indian society. Hence, these historical developments of gender relations during the indenture period need to be understood in the light of traditional Indian discourses which theorise notions of femininities and patriarchal power relations.

**Understanding the ‘Ideal’ of Indian Womanhood**

Traditional discourses of Indo-Fijian women’s femininity and sexuality have their historical roots in ancient and modern India. The ideal of Indian womanhood as espoused by the feminine, self-sacrificing, subordinating, and heterosexual identity in various roles and characterizations will be explored in this section via Indian mythologies and religious texts. It must be noted that all my participants are Hindus and therefore I will mainly concentrate on the legitimating mechanism of Hindu religious ideologies and mythologies to formulate understandings of gender relations in contemporary Fiji. The feminine identities available to Indo-Fijian women today are reminiscent of those available in these discourses. Repressive in their outlook, traditional discourses on Indo-Fijian women’s womanhood constitute women’s sexual identities in terms such as pure and impure and good and bad. Patriarchal Indo-Fijian culture conceives of women’s feminine identity in terms of strict codes of conduct which write themselves into the social structure of the Indo-Fijian society.

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80 For further discussion of the relationship between Rama and Sita see the next section.
Mythological characters like *Sita* and *Savitri* from some of the great epics of India such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are prized as the ideals to which real women have to live up to. Chaste, puritanical, self-sacrificing, faithful and submissive, the characters of *Sita* and *Savitri* epitomize a concept of womanhood that constitutes the kind of passive feminine identity which Indo-Fijian women are socialized to embrace in a patriarchal culture. They occupy a status where they could be worshipped as goddesses; yet they are rarely given as much freedom as the sacred cows. Therein, Indo-Fijian women are held hostage to ‘ideals’ of womanhood that are virtually impossible to live up to. The ideal Indian woman is a matrix of both cultural and religious influences from the Vedic period. The following observations on the nature of women from the Brahmin lawmakers are typical and signify strict control of women:

> Women remain chaste only as long as they are not in a deserted place and do not get the chance to be acquainted with any man. That is why it is necessary that respectable women should be always guarded by friends [Arundhati, in *Siva Purana*] (Rudra, 1973: 47).

> Women should never do things which give displeasure to their husbands. Sacrificing her own self, she should devote herself to the welfare of her husband [Panjali to Satyantha in the *Mahabharata*] (Caplan, 1985: 192).

> It is the nature of woman to seduce man in this world, and hence the wise are never unguarded in the company of females [Manu, the great Hindu law-giver] (Gupta, 1982: 6).

Ideal Indian womanhood, which dictates the proper sexual conduct for women, has its foundations in what can be viewed as the dual characterizations of women in Hindu ideology. The notions of honour, shame, purity, pollution, chastity, sexual repression and the value of virginity, and *purdah*; play important roles in controlling Indian women and regulating their sexuality. However, femaleness in Hinduism embraces contradictory images. On the one hand, the Indian woman can be pure, benign, creative, an ally and a goddess (Allen, 1990: 1). On the other hand, she can be impure, sinister, destructive, an opponent and a witch (ibid.). These characteristics also exist in

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81 *Purdah*, or the practice of female seclusion, marked gender segregation in tasks and activities, roughly corresponding to an “inside/outside” (ghare/lai) divide. Many writers have drawn comparisons between the institution of *purdah* and sex role divisions which resulted in men and women operating in separate worlds of the public and domestic respectively (see for example, Agarwal, 1994a; Amin, 1997; and Kabeer, 1990). The practices embodying *purdah* ideology is the principle of avoidance in interaction with men, although the specification of which men and in which social contexts varies across groups and communities. Veiling, the most visible aspect of *purdah* and that which is most commonly associated with it in the popular imagination. Its norms vary between Muslim and Hindu communities in Fiji. For example, Muslim women in patrilineal societies like Fiji are expected, from soon after puberty, to veil before all men defined as outsiders (strangers, distant relatives) but usually not before near kin, close family and friends. In contrast, a Hindu woman is usually required to veil only from older male affines. Overall, the range of men before whom women are expected to veil themselves is narrower among Hindus than Muslims. For useful discussions of the differences and similarities in Hindu and Muslim veiling norms and practices elsewhere, also see (Mandelbaum, 1988; Papanek, 1982; Vatuk, 1982).
combinations to produce Indian women's identities such as a faithful wife, sacrificing mother, dutiful daughter, virgin or, in contrast, negative characterizations such as impure woman, selfish wife or mother, and so on. Most of these identities are produced in terms of extreme characterizations and seem far removed from the realities of women in their everyday life. As Wadley (1975) argues, there is no differentiation between goddesses and normal women and this characterisation has had serious implications on the ideological construction and reproduction of the ideal Indian womanhood.\footnote{In ancient Hindu mythology the symbolism and iconography relating to the themes of the feminine range over a wider variety of moods, powers and roles. Thus, mythology presents not only Sita who is an epitome of unquestioning surrender and sacrifice, but also Saraswati (Goddess of learning), Durga (Goddess of protection and power), Kali (Goddess of power) and Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth). In fact, hardly any aspect of life has escaped iconolatry in female forms. The traditional iconography of these goddesses is in harmony with the concepts they embody. Whereas the image of Saraswati arouses feelings of peace and fulfillment, those of Durga and Kali arouse awe and fear. Yet we find that this variety in the mythological imagery is missing in the actual theories of femininity which display the stereotyped view of woman as essentially weak and vulnerable beings.}

The paradoxical notion of female power in Indian mythologies and philosophies has had serious implications both in the general perception of women in Indian society and the rationale for social control of Indian women. Goddesses such as Lakshmi (Goddess of Fortune), Kali (Goddess of Power), Durga and Chandi in Indian mythologies are endowed with the presence of infinite and boundless power (Rudra, 1975; Thapur, 1975). As Rudra (1975: 170) explains: "in the Shakti cult the supreme divine power is conceived of as a woman, either as the benign and radiant Durga; or as the formidable Chandi, killing Asuras (Demons); or as the dark, terrible, blood-thirsty and ogress Kali, adorned with garlands of severed heads and arms, standing on the prostate figure of Lord Siva". But there is no such variation with male gods though one of the ancient myths in cosmology suggests that goddess Shakti used her powers to create three male gods, namely, Brahma [the educator], Vishnu [the ruler] and Shiva [the meditator] (Kumar, 1994: 32-34). As far as gender relations in cosmology are concerned, it is suggestive of cooperation and negotiation. For example, after being refused for marriage by Lord Brahma and Vishnu, Shakti lashes out with violence and kills them. As a consequence, this persuades Shiva to try bargaining instead of refusing to marry her (ibid.). Goddess Shakti is quite willing to bargain as well. The assaulting, decapitating goddess readily relinquishes some power (her masculine power - that is,
her third eye) in order to achieve her goal of marriage and creation. Since then Lord Shiva got control over the powers of Shakti and it is now captured in his third eye.\(^{11}\)

This duality is confusing and attempts are made by scholars to explain the cultural logic of the concept of Shakti. For example, Wadley (1988: 24) suggests that the principle of Shakti (divine power) reflects the characteristics of the “female as both benevolent, fertile bestower and malevolent, aggressive destroyer”; and such divinely powers call for the need to contain and control women. Two facets of the conception of femaleness are: first, femaleness is *shakti* (energy/power) and, second, femaleness is also *prakriti* (nature) [Wadley, 1988: 28]. Fusing these two aspects of femaleness, women are both energy and nature. Therein lies the contradiction of women’s/goddesses’ positioning within Hindu thought as both malevolent destroyer and benevolent fertile bestower. Because of the conception of women as nature, boundless and wild, the presence of *shakti* in women equates into a dangerous situation which Brahmin-inspired Hindu philosophy has sought to translate into something less potent (Singh, 1998: 52). In Hindu ideologies, such uncultured power possessed by women translates into the need for strict control of women and the need to contain this power.

Both Western and Indian patriarchal societies are similar in their understanding that women’s power must be contained even though their strategies differ. Women in the West are historically characterized as weak and fragile creatures in need of protection (see Verma, 1995: 435). In contrast, in India, the Shakti legacy has implications for Hindu culture in terms of their portrayal of women as “dangerously powerful” (Liddle and Joshi, 1986: 56). Hence, in Indian societies, there is the necessity and compulsion for men to constrain women due to women’s incapacity to control their powers. It is important to note, as Liddle and Joshi (1986) point out, that male control of women is justified not because women were seen as too weak to control their power but because women’s *shakti* is too great, too immense, too vast for her to contain. Liddle and Joshi (1986: 56) further argue that “such a view legitimates a system of strong physical control to restrain women which makes no sense within the Western concept of women as the weaker sex”. Thus, the value structure representing the dual character of women

\(^{11}\) Kumar (1994: 33-34) draws attention to the fact that form of *Shakti* in the goddesses usually stands alone and it is not encompassed with a higher male principle. She adds: ‘The principle of power finds expression in the goddesses who represent ‘shakti’, who come to the aid of man and the gods in periods of cosmic darkness, by killing the demon who threaten the entire cosmic order’ (ibid.).
seems to have been successful in creating a myth that Indian women possess power, but this may or may not be in visible terms. While the concept of Shakti remains shrouded in ambiguity, it is a very valuable concept in understanding gendered dynamics of survival and women’s position in contemporary Fiji.

**Female Propriety: Sita’s Virtue and Streedharma**

I have already noted the importance of mythological characters like Sita and Savitri in Hindu religion being identified as the ‘ideal’ of Indian womanhood. Here I will further explore these religious ideals in relation to notions of family and intra-household relations, as Hindu religion is an integral part of life for my participants in this research. Hindu teachings have permeated daily life, folklore and popular culture to become an essential part of Fiji Indian Hindu identity. As noted by Lateef (1985: 21):

Sacred ideals and stereotyped female images are transformed and internalized through ritual, festive occasions, song, popular literature, folk tradition, Hindi films and the dramatization of the great Hindu epics.

All the Hindu participants followed the Sanatan Dharma and participated regularly in Ramayana prayer meetings that were rotated on a weekly basis around a group of households. I attended several of these prayer meetings and saadi (weddings) as well as major Hindu festivals like Holi and Ram Naumi. The Sanatan Dharma form of

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84 Who is Sita? She is the heroine of the Ramayana, an action-packed tale in which the representatives of Good (the ordained way, dharma) are pitted against all manner of foe, from scheming relatives and corrupt advisers to hostile demigods and man-eating demons. Its hero is Prince Rama, who, though mortal, is unbeknownst to himself an incarnation of the god Vishnu. He radiates courage and virtue. The tale, with its grandeur and carnage, its mix of mortals and divinities, contains the seeds of much universal folklore. Here is one element of the story. The childless king Janaka, while plowing his field, had found a baby girl in a furrow. He adopted her and made her Sita. She grows up to become a beautiful princess who marries Rama. As noted by Mitter (1991: 86-87), the Sita ideal is part of a Hindu woman’s psychic inheritance and she inculcates it, both overtly and unwittingly, in her daughters. Not only does a girl learn to bear cheerfully and without complaint all kinds of discomfort, injustice, and misfortune, but she also deduces that one does not defy, belittle or expect too much of men. As Mitter notes, the Sita legend provides a glimpse of the Hindu imagery of manliness. Rama, with all his godlike heroic traits, is emotionally fragile, mistrustful and jealous, very much a conformist to general opinion. What one can extrapolate from the Epics like Ramayana shows that real relations between everyday men and women fall far short of the Brahmanic ideal (see Chapters Five and Six of this study).

85 Sanatan Dharma means the eternal religion without beginning or end. For a detailed account on this see Wilson (1979).

86 Holi is usually celebrated sometime in March and it is a festival that carries the country into the bright days of summer. The legend of King Hiranyakashipu is associated with the festival of Holi. This legend signifies the victory of good over evil and to mark this legend, the bonfires are lit on the eve of Holi. People rejoice by playing with colour and share food and sweets with others in the community. Ram Naumi is a festival to celebrate the birth of Lord Rama, one of the most popular and highly revered incarnations of Lord Vishnu. In modern days where Indian communities reside people assemble in very
devotional Hinduism based on the *Tulsi Das Ramayana* became the predominant form of Hindu worship amongst Fiji Indian Hindus (Kelly, 1991: 43). In the words of Mitter (1991: 82), “it is through the recitation, reading, listening to, or attending a dramatic performance of this revered text (above all others) that a person reasserts his or her cultural identity as a Hindu and obtains religious merit. The popular epic contains ideal models of familial bonds and social relations to even a modernized Hindu”.

What is pertinent to the discussion in this study is the way ideals of devotion are applied to the relationship between husband and wife. The *Tulsi Das Ramayana* addressed themes of endurance, the importance of righteous conduct and the obligations of duty, loyalty and honour. Of particular importance was how women should live one’s life and it revolved around concepts such as devotion, dharma (moral and religious duty) and chastity for women. The relationship between Sita and Rama can on one level be interpreted generally as devotee (Sita) and god (Rama), but they are also the ideal married couple. Thus:

the marriage relationship itself becomes a primary devotional relationship. For the wife, the husband is to be worshipped. They are transformative of the self, the two people becoming permanently connected. The hierarchical relation between them enjoins duties upon both, but especially upon the wife, whose chastity and social nature are completely and newly defined. For the husband, protecting the wife becomes one of the duties of his ongoing life; for the wife, the husband is an instantiation of divine form (Kelly, 1991: 232).

Young (1987: 78-9, cited in Carswell, 1998), analysing the *Ramayana*, says that the epic stresses “the feminine orientation of *streetharma* with its emphasis on loyalty, chastity, docility and humility, but also strength, which arise out of *tapas*.” Throughout the story, Rama displays unwavering courage and suffers constant anguish; but frequently benefits from situations or tactical aid from gods, who keep him clearheaded about the demands of his dharma (his destiny as a warrior prince). However, Sita only has her *streetharma* as guide, that is, her inner implicit knowledge of how to comport large numbers in Rama temples and enthusiastically participate in the *Ramanavami* festivities. Ceremonial recitation of the religious book called *Ramanayana* (usually spread over the nine days), arranging religo-cultural programmes like *Hari-Katha* (discourse on mythological stories accompanied with music) and classical music or devotional songs are quite common.

87 From earliest childhood, a Hindu has heard Sita’s legend recounted on any number of sacral and secular occasions: seen the central episodes enacted in folk plays like the *Ram Lila*; heard her qualities extolled in devotional songs; and absorbed the ideal feminine identity she incorporates through the many everyday metaphors and similes that are associated with her name. Thus, ‘she is as pure as Sita’ (Kakkar, 1988: 53) denotes chastity in an Indian woman, and ‘she is a second Sita’ (ibid.), the appreciation of a woman’s uncomplaining self-sacrifice.

89 *Streetharma* is a Hindu text on the ideal behaviour of women. *Tapas* are a form of self-denial that is thought to create positive energy that can be transferred to another individual for their welfare (Carswell, 1998: 109).
herself as a worthy Hindu wife (Mitter, 1991: 86). For example, when Rama was banished to the forest for fourteen years he urged Sita to remain comfortably in the palace and await his return. But she refuses, saying:

For a woman, it is not her father, her son, nor her mother, friends, nor her own self, but her husband who in this world and the next is ever her sole means of salvation. If thou dost enter the impenetrable forest today...I shall precede thee on foot, treading down the spiky kusha grass. In truth, whether it be in palaces, in chariots or in heaven, wherever the shadow of the feet of her consort falls, it must be followed (Mitter, 1991: 82).

The message of the Ramayana is clear: Sita is to most Hindu women and men the epitome of the proper wife. For example, when Sita is kidnapped by the demon called Ravanna, who keeps her captive for twelve months, Sita has to prove her purity to Rama, her husband, when she is rescued from the demon. She calls for a huge fire and the flames avoid touching her. Sita is purity itself: there is nothing to burn. With joy in his heart, Rama takes Sita back. Rama is convinced in his inner heart that Sita is chaste but is obliged as a king and guardian of the dharma to prove to the people both Sita’s purity and his own austere devotion to principle. Therefore, an Indian woman’s devotional behaviour embodied in her feminine loyalty to her husband not only accrued her good karma that allowed for a better rebirth or even the possibility of salvation, it also gave strength to her family and community (Young, 1987: 78-9 cited in Carswell, 1998). This, her great and eternal merit, is held up for emulation to Indian women today. The story of Rama and Sita is well known to most Hindus in Fiji and is enacted yearly, with greater or lesser splendor, in villages and cities all over Fiji.

Sita’s qualities are often praised in devotional songs and her name is synonymous with purity, patience and self-sacrifice. The theme of devoted wife also recurs in connection with calendrical rites like observing Karwa Chauth Vrat (literally meaning a true and devoted wife who fasts for her husband and his long life). Furthermore, the ideal women of Indian mythology, who have been extolled as paragons of virtues like Savitri,

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89 “By killing Ravanna,” Ram says, “I have wiped away the insult to our family and to myself, but you are stained by dwelling with one other man than myself. What man of high degree receives back a wife who has lived long in another’s house? Ravanna has held you in his lap and gazed upon you with lustful eyes. I have avenged his evil deed, but I am unattached to you; O gentle one, I am forced by a sense of honour to renounce you” (Vatsaxis, 1977 cited in Mitter, 1991: 85). Depending on the version one reads, Sita grows either tearful or angry, tries to convince Rama of her recititude or demands its immediate demonstration.

90 Again, versions differ. Some translators accept Ram’s declaration: “Because this beautiful woman remained in Ravana’s clutches it was necessary for her innocence to be made clear in front of all people. If I had taken her back without any hesitation, people could have said that I did do out of desire and passion, and I would thus have been a bad example” (Vatsaxis, 1977 cited in Mitter, 1991: 85). Other interpreters suspect Ram of having real misgiving, of displaying sexual jealousy and a selfish interest in keeping his own dharma-record clean.
Draupadi, and Damyanti, are dutiful, truthful, chaste, self-sacrificing women of unswerving wifely devotion whatever the temptation. This ideal is re-enforced through numerous myths and legends. For example, Hindu women yearly worship the goddess Savitri. Her renown emanates from her extreme devotion to her husband, through which she saves him from the god of death (Wadley, 1988: 32). The story of Savitri is held up as a prime example of the lengths to which a wife should go in aiding her husband. A good Indian wife should save her husband from death by observing penances, following him anywhere, proving her virtue, remaining under his control and giving him her power.

The basic rules for women’s behaviour are also expressed in the passages of Laws of Manu, the most famous Sanskrit treatise on human conduct, which clearly exhibits the polarized male perception of the female.\(^1\) Manu laws were imposed as the Hindu law code giving posterity a celebrated portrait of the complete Hindu woman. Here once again the Sita ideal is grafted onto that of the perfect homemaker, for example:

> She should do nothing independently even in her own house. In childhood subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her husband is dead to her sons, she should never enjoy independence. She should always be cheerful, and skilful in her domestic duties, with her household vessels well cleansed, and her hand tight on the purse-strings... In season and out of season her lord, who wed her with sacred ties, the virtuous wife should ever worship her lord as a god (translated by Mitter, 1991: 88-9).

The above passage from the Laws of Manu deals with the duties of women whilst the following set is excerpted from the section regarding the duties of wife and husband:

> Day and night, women must be kept in dependency by the males (of) their families, and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyment they must be kept under one's control...Considering that the highest duty of all castes, even weak husband (must) strive to guard their wives...Through their passion for men, through their mutable temper, through their natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands, however, carefully they are guarded in this world. Knowing their disposition, which the Lord of creations laid in them, to be such, (every) man should most strenuously exert himself to guard them (cited in Wadley, 1988: 30-31).

Hence the advice from the classical Hindu book of moral law, the Laws of Manu, is that a woman must be subjected to lifelong control by male kin. The above passages stress the need to control women because of the evils of the female character. Ideal women are

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\(^1\) Written by one historical individual in the early centuries of our era, this treatise is the first of the Dharmashastras, verse-form instructions in the sacred law. In minute detail it lays down the rules of conduct, the privileges and obligations of each division of society, and penalties and punishments for wrong or inappropriate behaviour. Manusmriti and other dharmashastras contain several pronouncements in this regard for example, woman as necessarily weak and dependent being; woman must always obey and be governed; woman as only an auxiliary to man; woman mainly as a means to beget sons; woman as basically mean and immoral; and woman as goddess and as an essential partner of life with feminine virtues and self-negating (Verma, 1995: 436-438).
those who do not strive to break these bonds of control. Thus, the salvation and
happiness of Indian women revolve around their virtue and chastity as daughters, wives
and widows. These themes are not only found in ancient Sanskrit laws; they constantly
reappear in Hindi cinema. For example, these stanzas are evident in Bollywood films
(1989), and Saajan ka Ghar (1994); where accused husbands justify criminal behaviour
in terms that show a self-serving adhesion to Manu’s dicta. Yet neither the Epics nor
Manu have conceived of wifely devotion alone but also in terms of what it takes for a
man to be a good husband. The husband, like the king, has the responsibility to be
benevolent and paternal towards the women of his household. As Manu writes: “Where
women are honoured, their gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred
rite yields rewards...Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly
perishes; but that family where they are not unhappy ever prospers” (Kakar, 1982: 76).\(^2\)

As noted earlier, the splendor of feminine imagery in the religious symbolism
completely vanishes at the secular level, and despite the imagery of all-powerful Kali,
Durga and Saraswati, codes of the tradition present women as essentially weak and
incapable of higher learning and responsibilities. To a certain degree, every woman is
assumed potentially capable of calling upon such power. The question is what does she
do with this power? Shakti, as epitomized in the supreme goddess Kali/Durga, is a
volatile and dangerous force and if channelled, the energy brings positive results;
unchained, it wreaks mayhem (Mitter, 1991: 102). Thus, in principle Shakti needs to be
channelled, contained and made responsive to the male. Far from being fissile
tendencies or contradictory attributes of woman, Shakti and Streedharma ultimately
fuse. To preserve the right order of things, goddess, epic heroine and everyday wife all
submit their powers to masculine control. For example, goddess Lakshmi, bestower of
wealth, and Saraswati, purveyor of wisdom, provide models. Benign ladies without
clear-cut personalities, they are tranquil consorts of their god-husbands (Mitter, 1991:
102). Similarly, the legends of Sita and Rama depict dramas of power and containment;
they reflect recognition, and a deep-seated fear of, female power. Extolling the self-

\(^2\) *Manusmriti* has that famous and oft-quoted verse that Gods reside where woman is worshipped (ch.3,
sl. 56) (cited in Verma, 1995: 438). And the *Vyas Sandhi* says that an unmarried man is ‘only half and as
a half cannot beget a whole’ (sl. 14) and that ‘a wife is weightier than the world with its virtues and
wealth because with the help of no auxiliary other than a wife he bears its burden’ (sl. 15). *Manusmriti*
also emphasizes the importance of keeping women happy with ornaments, food etc (ch. 3). This
apparently elevated status of woman is linked with feminine virtues which, like most other cultures, are
negating ‘virtues’, and attaching them exclusively to femininity, causes women to take pride in their subjugation and to resist change for the better (Verma, 1995: 439). Such a paradox about the status of Indian women is to a large extent due to the halo created around womanhood by such mystification. Generation after generation, women have been moulded by the ethics of self-negation and trained to take pride in being the best custodians of these norms. However, it is useful to explore how such ideal images of Hindu women have symbolic ramification in the lives of actual women in contemporary Fiji.

**Social Control of Indo-Fijian Women in the Contemporary Rural Context**

This section examines how the above-mentioned traditional discourses have formed the basis for understanding the social control of Indian women and marriage in the contemporary Indo-Fijian rural context. My argument is that to fully understand how social control impacts upon women’s lives, firstly, we need to conceptualise the study area and explore all the possibilities in considering both conformist and conflicting discourses of femininity and womanhood available to women; secondly, we need to consider how the above discourse curtails women’s agency and freedom in the application of the capability approach.

Even though Fiji’s patriarchal Indian society is similar to that of India’s subcontinent in necessitating the control of women’s power, Fiji embraces quite different methods which are strongly influenced by its specific historical development of gender relations during the indenture period. For example, Andrews (1920: 380) alluded to a ‘women’s movement’ among female girmitiyas (indentured labourers) and observes that “[t]he Indian women in Fiji are certainly more independent than in India.” I noticed this at every turn. He goes on to blame the gender ratio in the ‘coolie lines’ as the cause of this:

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93 Shameem (1990: 176-78) observes that approximately 64 percent of the women who were recruited for slave labour in Fiji were single and most of them registered outside their home districts. This indicated that many of them have already left home which was not unheard of as many women were involved in labour migration within India at that time (Lal, 1985: 57). Shameem also proposes that for women being single and away from their families meant that they enjoyed some autonomy from patriarchal kinship protocols, although not from other forms of male dominance as discussed below.
...roughly that of three men to every one woman. The result has been to throw immense influence into the women's head. For the woman, in these circumstances, was able to choose her mate, or mates. In such a state of society, the woman had naturally obtained the advantage over the man: and the men were very soon made aware of it. The least quarrel, - and the woman would go off to find another mate! Again and again, hen-pecked husbands have come to me, asking me to solve their domestic troubles or to get back for them their wives (Andrews, 1920: 381).

The literature shows that some Girmiitiva women in Fiji did change husbands (and lovers), which highlights their power in the marriage process, but this has to be contextualised within the harsh environment of indenture, women's lower wages and the strategies to survive. In her research, Shameem (1990) addresses the lack of Indian women's voices in the discourses concerned with their exploitation and sexual morality. Here she discusses the exploitation of women by the plantation owners and by Indian men and how these women demonstrated overt and covert strategies of survival (not necessarily an intent to resist). For example:

Women's poor wages forced them to consider associations with men who could also attract them with promises of a better life. But competition between men for women's services and affection led to women attaining a form of independence. This was expressed in the way women "changed their husbands", disregarding the customary laws of faithfulness to husband for life (Shameem, 1990: 171).

Furthermore, Kelly (1991: 228) stated that:

...the indenture rhetoric emphasizing the virtue or chastity of women carried with it the representation of a woman who did not follow the rules of satvita, dedication to the man who was her husband. Interviews with surviving girmiitivas conducted in the 1970s (Ali, 1979; Naidu, 1980) suggest the girmiitiva women were measured against two extremes, pressured to be the good, chaste woman and not good, the wicked manipulator, while also pressured by circumstances and even by violence to leave one man for another.

Other forms of resistance directed at European bosses involved using their sexuality to attain certain material advantages and taking time off under the pretext of pregnancy and nursing which resulted in many complaints about women's low work participation (Shameem, 1990: 172).

While Shameem (1990: 39) notes the resistance and autonomy Indian women asserted within the exploitative practices of indenture, she also claims that European and Indian men constantly pressured women to act out their designated 'feminine' roles as obedient docile domestics. During the indenture period, Indian women were often judged as sexually immoral and promiscuous when they left one man for another. However, legislation was passed and European standards were established on Indian marriages to control such practices. For example, a 1916 marriage bill proposed compulsory registration of marriage, aided by licensing religious officiates, to enforce requirements such as minimum age and stop practices such as polygamy and 'unlawful' relationships.
(Kelly, 1989: 375). Imposing European standards on Indian marriages through legislation would, colonial administrators reasoned, resolve the ‘irregular’ marriage practices that were not only immoral but also seen as a cause of strife and violence in the Indian community.\(^4\) Shameem (1990: 232) also noted that the permanency of the relationship between wives and husbands within families served as the standard against which “morality” on plantations could be measured both by the Indians themselves and by the colonial authorities. The marriage debates on the Marriage Ordinance Law\(^5\) were part of this process which was seen as a collusion between European and Indian patriarchy.

Furthermore, the move to farms and women’s withdrawal from paid employment also resulted in women’s ‘domestication’. It is relevant to note that CSR exploited the hopes of men and women to have their own family farms in order to reduce labour and other production costs. Initially cane contracts were only given out by the CSR to men who were married (Jayawardena, 1975; Shameem, 1990). Thus CSR changed their perspective on marital relations in accordance with their changing production strategy. As Shameem (1990: 409) commented on CSR’s role in the marriage debates:

> Despite it having been complaints against the CSR for not permitting Indians to marry\(^6\) that had started the whole question, the company officials offered few comments as debates progressed. The CSR farming scheme was dependent on some permanency of personal relationships but the activities of Indian men and government officials freed the officials from taking more than a cursory interest in the matter… if CSR could not get the labourers they need from India, then a substitution had to be accepted and the marriage of Indians suited the small farmer and contractor schemes for cultivation.

Smallholder farming contracts to men relied on family labour and CSR counted on successive generations to provide a labour pool for harvesting and mill operations. This curbed any autonomy that women possessed as they were trapped within the confines of

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\(^4\) This included violence that arose because of ‘sexual jealousy’. As noted by Naidu (1980: 71) murders were by and large committed by indentured men on their women, and the main reason for this was “sexual jealousy”. Women were murdered for infidelity. As observed earlier there was a great disproportion between the sexes, and many women exploited the advantage that their scarcity brought them. Men were also killed because they were the lovers of the women concerned, or were their husbands (ibid.).

\(^5\) The marriage ordinance debates were about regulating and controlling women’s sexuality and general autonomy. The emphasis put on women’s sexuality in the political debates of the time are reflected in concerns with female virtue prevalent today. In the present study, participants placed great emphasis on a girl’s/woman’s chastity. Ideally she should be a virgin at marriage. For a discussion of sexual morality in the present study see following paragraphs of this chapter.

\(^6\) The control CSR had over indentured labourers extended to charging employees who had not asked their permission to marry, particularly between free and indentured labourers. ‘CSR officials were in the practice of refusing their labourers permission to marry. Many Indians married anyway but when found out were taken to court by the CSR’ (Shameem, 1990: 394).
marriage, family, and social protocol even though their labour still contributed to the profit margins of CSR (Shameem, 1990: 361). For Indian men it gave them control of their marriages, particularly when the gender ratio evened out, and on legal and religious grounds it provided a more secure basis for the development of kinship relations that ultimately favoured men (see Chapter Five). CSR\textsuperscript{77} sold its Fijian operations to government in 1973, including its freehold land. The government formed the Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) which ‘was incorporated in Fiji by an Act of Parliament and is the largest public company in Fiji. Its shareholders include the Fiji government, statutory bodies, local public companies and individuals’ (Galuinadi, 1996: 3). While CSR departed from Fiji long time ago, the structures within the industry such as the smallholder farming contracts still remains (cf. Moynagh, 1981: 243). The smallholder system is then still the mainstay of cane production in Fiji accommodating the ideal of nuclear family operation. Ethnographic accounts of Fiji Indian smallholder cane farming households such as Carswell’s (1998) and Shameem’s (1990) specifically address the continued contributions of women’s labour, focusing on gender relations and concepts of femininity in the control of female labour within Indian households. Thus from the smallholder farming scheme’s inception it was reliant on the notions of family that had a male head of household who ostensibly controlled the labour and resources of his family.

This view of male hegemony within marriage was the dominant ideal and is still to a large extent legally and socially recognized in contemporary Indo-Fijian society. For example, Lateef’s (1987) study highlighted the significance of marriage and the social, cultural and economic conditions of existence of Indo-Fijian society that makes marriage inevitable rather than a choice for women. As Lateef explains further, the inevitability of marriage for Indo-Fijian women is a direct result of both women’s absence or minimal participation in the economic sphere which sustains continued dependence on men as well as the prevailing gender ideologies that contribute significantly to Indo-Fijian women’s continued subordination. In recent times, the virtual disappearance of the dowry system has lessened economic pressures on women’s families but low workforce participation rates force the dependence of a majority of

\textsuperscript{77} In 1961 CSR formed a subsidiary company South Pacific Sugar Mills Ltd (SPSM) to take over operations in Fiji. When SPSM was formed CSR offered shares to people in Fiji, however only a small number were bought (FSC, 1995).
Indo-Fijian women on their fathers, husbands, boyfriends and other male members of the family for economic support (Lateef, 1987). Women, however, remain a ‘family’ burden whose responsibility is to guard reputation and ensure family respectability.

If we are to ask what Indo-Fijian women are actually able to do and to be, we come closer to appreciate how these social control mechanisms operate against full justice for women. What then are the consequences of such social controls and norms via institution of marriage on rural Indo-Fijian women’s poverty and vulnerability as far as their command over household resources and opportunities is concerned? Do unequal social circumstances give women unequal human capabilities? As noted in Chapter Two, the capability framework adopted in this study is an important conceptual advancement for considering gendered poverty because it shifts the unit of analysis from households to individuals. Chapter One and Two illustrated in much more detail why thinking about gender offers a stronger conceptualisation of rules of entitlement for all the poor, not just women, because it insists on examining the connectedness between the domestic and the public, between the well-being of the household and its members, and it conceives of women and men as social actors making their worlds, albeit within structures of constraint.

Therefore, using the language of capability framework, the central question asked is not, “How satisfied is Karuna or Paaru (my research participants)?” Or even, “How much in the way of resources are these women able to command?” It is instead, given the social construction of an ideal Indian wife, daughter and mother via institution of family and marital relations, “what is Karuna or Paaru actually able to do and to be?” How capabilities become functionings for women and men depends both on other social identities (e.g. age and ethnicity) and social processes such as intra-household relations. The starting point for the capabilities approach in analysing poverty is that means and ends may mean different things to different people; in particular, women and men may have very different priorities and possibilities. Moreover, we need to recognize that women’s lives are governed by different and often more complex social constraints, entitlements and responsibilities than those of men. As witnessed earlier, the traditional discourses and historical developments during the indenture period provide different boundaries and references as to how Indo-Fijian women should construct their social realities than those of men. In formulating gendered definitions of poverty and social
reality we therefore need to explore how culture, identity, agency and social structure are central to the processes that create poverty. Using the capability framework, traditional discourses of power encompassing the patriarchal norms of social control can be seen as constraints affecting Indo-Fijian women’s ability to convert their capabilities into functionings of well-being.

By grounding my analysis in these traditional discourses of power, issues of agency and well-being evaluations can be meaningfully assessed because it is only at that level that the context, content and consequences of choice can be understood and interpreted. The question as to whether social structures of constraint limit women’s choices or alternatively whether women are able to subvert gender-biased social norms depends on the issue and context at hand. While the social reality confronting my participants is largely given by the dominant discourses of power discussed above, this study argues that there are always multiple sets of “norms” which women can draw upon as discursive resources for a particular interpretation of events or justification for a particular action. This plurality is the ground for the analysis of women’s agency and/or resistance which constantly reformulates the “rules” of social life. Thus, Indo-Fijian women’s social reality is not easily predictable from the representations of cultural norms and economic relations within a cooperative venture such as a household, since so much depends on specific opportunities for creative struggle.

This study also focuses on the discrepancy between traditional gender ideologies and my participants’ gendered identities. I argue that this discrepancy raises a number of issues about the complexities of Hindu beliefs of duality and the female principle of Shakti. My empirical evidence will show how women are not exactly without the capacity to countervail the social constraints. To jettison the force of social constraints on agency, I think, warrants close scrutiny. An analysis of how rapid social and economic changes have fractured the relationship between traditional ideals of Indian womanhood emanating from religious/mythological texts and those conceived of during contemporary times therefore needs further exploration. In the next chapters, I will show how my research participants, whilst portraying the exemplary wife like Sita as seen in the Ramayana, proceed to recognize or deny their ‘prodigious womanly powers’ or embrace covert and (or) overt ways to protest their subordination. In this research, I explore the pluralistic aspects of female agency that enable women to mediate intra and
extra-household power relations via bargaining and negotiation as strategies for the practical logic of survival. The following chapters will examine everyday life experiences of the eighteen Indo-Fijian women in this study and will highlight how power and women's agency operate in the most mundane situations and contexts.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the processes surrounding patriarchal discourses of power to explore what they reveal about the construction and maintenance of gender ideology and family relations. It is within this complex that intra-household relations in the present study operate. Gendered differences in opportunities to achieve well-being, resource control, distribution and prioritizing at the household level are predominantly dictated by protocols that are culturally and religiously sanctioned. This chapter was contextualised within relevant literature which focused on historical and mythological analysis. The literature also highlighted Fiji Indian responses to colonisation and their reconstructions of family life. The underlying issues of fidelity and paternity, so threatened by indenture, have been (re)layered over religio-cultural concerns of purity, virtue, sacrifice and duty, exemplified by 'Sita'. This contributes to the Indo-Fijian constructs of 'woman'. The marriage ordinance debates were part of the Indo-Fijians' reconstruction process and also served to reinforce the ideals of Indian womanhood such as streedharma, sativta and dharma to parents, husband and in-laws.

The framework for examining the husband/wife relationship and consequent family relations in the present study is situated between the interplay of ideals and realities in the marriage process. While gender is one significant basis of understanding inequality and power relations within the household, attention will also be paid to the diversity of women's encounters with marriage and their positioning within the family. Age and kinship relations may also play an important part in the bargaining and negotiation processes.
Chapter Five

Marriage, Family and Intra-Household Relations

Introduction

This chapter draws together the voices of eighteen Indo-Fijian women who were involved in this study to present their views, opinions and experiences of poverty within the context of marriage, family and intra-household relations. In line with the main issues discussed in the previous chapter on patriarchal discourses of power and social control, I have identified the key themes of this chapter as: parental and societal expectations, purdah, religious influences, household hierarchy and intra-household relations. The purpose of this selection is to provide the basis for my analysis of the lived experiences of these Indo-Fijian women as they explained them in relation to the discourses of power in Chapter Four. My aim here is to draw together the experiences of eighteen rural Indo-Fijian women whose social location furnishes them with a critical perspective on the conflicts of being exposed to repressive androcentric discourses of femininity. Their experiences further reflect the complexities, conformities, ambivalences, contradictions and richness of their gendered dynamics of survival amidst their poverty. The central rationale for my use of excerpts of these conversations was to provide a medium for the ‘voices’ of women, enabling them to actively participate in the constructions of their lived experiences from their own perspectives. This chapter is divided into three sections: the first section outlines Indo-Fijian family/household relations contextualised within the wider socio-cultural environs, such as village life and livelihood and the structures of kinship. The second section briefly

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98 The eighteen included: Muniamma, Guddi, Jai Raji, Tara, Santamma, Saam Raji, Kala Wati, Sangita, Geeta, Karuna, Sadhana, Paaru, Maya, Nirwani, Umila, Ram Rati, Savita and Sukh Dai. In the following paragraphs and later chapters, attempt is made to incorporate the stories of these eighteen women and about their poverty and well-being situation. But it must be noted that due to word limitation and repetition of similar themes, some sub-sections may include a selection of stories and not the voices of all eighteen participants.

99 Terms/adjectives used to portray the Indo-Fijian women throughout this chapter are the words used by the women to describe themselves during the conversations (though translated in English. I made sure that the meaning of the conversation and words did not lose its originality and authenticity). For this reason, these words are in quotation marks.
introduces my participants. Finally, the third section demonstrates how parental and societal expectations and notions of purdah representing the religio-cultural ideals legitimise the institution of marriage in the lives of my participants.

**Household and Family Relations**

An individual’s position within Indo-Fijian households is determined by the various intersecting hierarchies of age, gender, kinship status and prevailing socio-economic conditions. In this study I have adopted the version of the household offered by Sen (1990a), which retains the basic bargaining format, but extends it in ways that address more explicitly issues of gender and power within the household. Sen views the household as a site of cooperative conflict as far as distribution and allocation of household resources and opportunities are concerned. As argued earlier (see Chapter Two), the bargaining model is particularly attractive when used with the capability approach because it introduces the idea of unequal power within the household, thus raising issues of conflict and cooperation. Therefore, it is important to explore the ideologies, norms and practices embodied in the ‘implicit’ contracts of household and kinship relations that have a direct impact on women’s lives and on their ability to gain access to resources and opportunities. The following chapters will discuss household relations in terms of allocation and organisation of work, distribution of resources/income and opportunities within this context. This is an area that would benefit my research on the capabilities approach and intra-household relations by conveying a better understanding of social relations and how they are maintained and challenged in participant’s daily struggles of survival. Household relations are played out within the kinship structures and environment of rural Indo-Fijian settlements and the purpose of this section is to provide a description of that setting. In the following discussion, I begin with a description of living conditions of my participants; and then, I outline social relations and the expectations among common relations found within Indo-Fijian households.

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100 Intra-household relations themselves have been shown to be a powerful determinant of individual access to utilities and capabilities. Twenty years of feminist argument and evidence about the need to analyze the household as a system of social relations (Evans, 1991; Folbre, 1986; Kabeer, 1994; Whitehead, 1981) plus the evidence of gender differentiated poverty outcomes, has led to several socio-economic analysis approach that takes into account gendered poverty processes and outcomes. This study also looks at the ways in which intra-household inequalities might contribute to gendered poverty outcomes in poor Indo-Fijian households.
Living Conditions in Rural Indo-Fijian Settlement

This section describes the study village, its people, settlement pattern, land and cropping pattern, the types of houses, structures and amenities, and transport and communication which occupy an important role in my participant's day-to-day lives. I conducted my research in two rural Indo-Fijian settlements in Labasa. The two settlements, with approximately 50-70 households, had a population following a variety of occupations. The majority were farmers and landless cane cutters. In both the settlements, the majority of the dwellings were located fairly close together in a small residential hamlet and others were scattered along a few miles of back roads heading out into the surrounding hinterland (see Appendix 5A and 5B- showing schematic maps of the settlements). Each house was situated in a garden of lush vegetation, while the well, kitchen and sacred spots of worship for the household were all located near the dwelling structure (see Appendix 6A and 6B- diagrams for the layout of a farmer's house and a landless cane-cutter's house, respectively).

Sugarcane farming was the backbone of the village and a source of livelihood for both the farmers and cane-cutters. Most of my participants were dependent on their husband, sons or daughters for their source of livelihood and survival and, in most cases, the husbands or sons were seasonally employed as manual cane-cutters during the sugarcane crushing season. They are also households with no secure livelihood as Indo-Fijian cane-cutters comprise the poorest social group in the Fiji economy (UNDP, 1996: 79). During my fieldwork many of the sugarcane land leases for Indo-Fijian tenant farmers had expired and the land was seized by native Fijians for their own use. The expiry of sugarcane land leases meant that some of the Indo-Fijian farmers had to leave their villages to reside elsewhere- either close to Labasa town or migrate to Suva city. This meant that many of young Indo-Fijian men in the village were out of job because the Fijian landowners were not willing to hire them as cane-cutters. The changing socio-economic conditions of the village setting also implied changing economic roles for

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10 Therefore these households do not have weekly income/wages but the head of the households (husband, son or son-in-law) gets paid for 3 weeks and on average these manual cane-cutters earned around $1500 per season (i.e. 6 month season). The reasons for their low income are their low productivity and rate of pay, the declining value of their income (rising costs of living), the seasonality of the work and most importantly these Indo-Fijian cane-cutters do not have any land titles except for their house sites. Most of these households do not even own the house-sites because they are only occupying the house-site at the mercy of the Fijian landowners (see also Chapter Six and Seven for empirical discussion).
women within poor households. Rural Indo-Fijian women now had to look for jobs either in the village or in town to support the family in their daily struggles of survival. This in many ways was a remarkable phenomenon in a rural settlement where strong cultural and religious prescriptions have long constrained women’s work options to secluded, home-based and casual forms of employment and where male family members - fathers, husbands, brothers and sons - acted as primary breadwinners and social guardians. The entry of few of my participants into the public domain in search of employment was generally associated with dire economic need. In assessing the impact of new wage earning opportunities on women’s lives, it is important to note the possible challenge that their new earning capacity might pose to gender hierarchies and identities within the household and outside (see Chapter Six).

Participant’s houses were made out of different materials, including wood, concrete, bamboo and corrugated iron. The size and type of housing among participants varied and was to some degree a reflection of their poverty situation. Many of the participants lived in bamboo houses of one room only, while others lived in raised wooden houses, consisting of two to three rooms. Recent hurricane destroyed more unstable structures and the wear of tropical weather and vermin meant bamboo houses in particular needed fairly regular maintenance. The main house structure served as an area for sleeping, eating and activities such as sewing, doing homework and entertaining. A few of the houses had separate indoor kitchen and all the houses had separate structures for cooking food i.e. a ‘lean-to’ kitchen at the side of the house or a small shed like structure that was also used for food preparation. Other structures of the house were pit toilets and shower ‘sheds’ built around the outdoor taps. Some of households had private shrines within the house or special places to worship Hindu deities. Nearly all of the households had chickens which are kept for eggs and meat and one household had ducks which were sold for their meat. Households also grew a variety of vegetables, fruits, herbs and spices which were estimated by participants to account for anywhere between 30-50 percent of the weekly food intake. Otherwise edible goods could be bought at the sparsely located local shops or in town from the market or supermarkets.
Yet, not all housing characteristics contribute equally to acceptable standards of living. Water supply and toilet facilities have a larger impact on health, for example, than does the source of fuel for cooking and lighting. The amenities available to the households were extremely limited.\textsuperscript{102} About nine households had access to mainlined electricity but none of them had access to refrigerators for food storage which meant perishable food items, such as meat, fish, cooked food, vegetables and milk, had to be procured regularly. Spring water is piped into nearly all the households in the form of an outside tap. At least three households in this case study had indoor plumbing and flush toilets. Other households either had access to well and/or streams/creek which is an essential source of water for household use. The roads in the case study area were of minimal standard and poorly maintained. The dirt roads were subject to the vagaries of the weather and it becomes impassable with high rainfall, and when dry into large ridges and pot holes. Having described the living conditions of my participants, it is imperative that we now examine the social relations in the household and family in terms of gender and generation.

\textit{Kinship Relations within the Household}

Household relations are played out within kinship relations and the purpose of this section is to provide a description of that setting. The way a household decides on who does what, who decides what and who gets what, influences intra-household distribution mechanisms and negotiations. This section provides a contextual analysis of such divisions of power among household members by expanding on the inter-relations between wife/husband, children and parents, and siblings and in-laws. Most importantly, it is the kinship structures and institution of marriage that impinge on how claims, rights, needs and obligations are defined and negotiated.

\textit{Wife/Husband Relation}

The framework for examining the husband/wife relationship and consequent family relations in the present study is situated between the interplay of ideals and realities in

\textsuperscript{102} In this order, having walls of makeshift or improvised materials was most undesirable; then squatting; having water source from borehole, well, creek or river; using kerosene lamps for lighting; using a pit latrine; cooking with wood; and, as least desirable, not having electricity. With these ranking in consideration, I felt that most of houses constructed with makeshift materials, squatting, having an unacceptable source of water, or using kerosene lamps were basically living in poor living conditions.
the marriage processes and practices. *Girmityas*' experience of indenture challenged Indian social relations and formation of kinship structures in a number of ways. Fierce debates surrounding female sexuality were part of the process of the Indian community reconstructing themselves as they sought to end indenture and establish political and religious freedom. It is worth noting the Marriage Ordinance debates that raged in the earlier part of the twentieth century reflected the contesting political, social and religious concerns of the Indian community. Tensions arose between civil and religious forms of marriage, as Indians wanted their traditional practices and religious ceremonies recognized, which posed a problem for the colonial authorities.103 The main issues of these debates were betrothal practice, marriage age, consent and sexual morality. The Marriage Ordinance debates were also about regulating and controlling women's sexuality and general autonomy (see Chapter Four).104 Shameem (1990:414) emphasizes this aspect of the debate, asserting that patriarchy was the underlying ideology that influenced the notions of kinship rules for Fiji Indians after indenture:

With expanding kinship, rules and regulation had to be set up for the monitoring of family relations. Guidelines for appropriate behaviour were constructed, and since women were most affected, these guidelines controlled and monitored their ability to associate freely with men. The pooling of resources through the construction of kinship relations enabled Indian men gradually to acquire more resources in the form of land or stock. Since then wealth had to be protected, rules of kinship had to be followed, again imposing particular and unique restrictions on women rather than men. Thus, women's lives increasingly revolved around home and hearth as they were restricted from the public life of education, franchise and paid work.

What is evident in the reconstruction of family life after indenture is that religious, political and economic factors all played a part in the social practices and attitudes pertaining to marriage and family ideals.

Religious legitimation of the hierarchical relation between husband and wife is evident in the *Sanatan Dharma* beliefs outlined in Chapter Four. The virtuous, dutiful wife should obey her husband who reciprocates by being a provider and protector. There is a strong sense of complementarity in Fiji Indian marriage ceremonies where husband and wife as partners ensure the success of their family through their respective roles. I found

103 See Kelly (1989, 1991) and Shameem (1990) for a full account of these debates. Kelly (1989, 1991) gives an interesting analysis of the different perspectives taken by protagonists in these debates, demonstrating the variety and complexity of their positions. Indians in Fiji and India objected to the censure of their customary practices and there ensued a flood of debates over the marriage ordinances which were changed many times and involved colonial authorities in Indian, Fiji and Britain and different interest groups amongst the Indian community in Fiji.

104 The emphasis put on women's sexuality in the political debates of the time are reflected in concerns with female virtue prevalent today. In the present study participants placed great emphasis on a girl's/woman's chastity will be discussed later in this chapter.
in the present study that qualities people identified as desirable were influenced by pragmatic as well as more idealistic concerns. The wife should obey her husband in a hierarchical relationship where they endeavour to work hard and provide for the family in their own domains. For example, the woman looks after the children, the household, daily food, the in-laws, visitors and farm work. The man looks after the farm, cane harvesting and sometimes house construction and maintenance. He should be able to provide a good house and living for his wife, children and if applicable, members of his extended family. The participants in this study echoed these ideal roles in their interpretations of a good husband and wife. While the roles of ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ may be complementary, they are not equal, as it is clear that the man is regarded as head of the household. This hierarchical relationship between husband and wife is particularly evident when the management and allocation of daily activities, resources and opportunities are examined.

Households in this context were characterised by strong systematic sanctions supporting and possibly enforcing cooperation in decision-making and therefore leaving women with minimal incentives to engage in open conflict over these processes. The patriarchal risks associated with women’s dependent position may lead them to adopt overly cooperative strategies which maximise their longer-term security, often at the cost of their personal well-being. I found that participants seldom neglected the many norms associated with attributes of their personal identity as a good “Hindu wife” that structure paramount social relations in the household and in the community. As Kandiyoti (1988) points out, women’s strategies to maximise their security always involve gaining and keeping the protection of their men through the adoption of attitudes of subservience, propriety and self-sacrifice. Paaru is a classic example illustrating this point. In her struggle to survive, she seemed to know which strategies of investment and which practices yielded the highest results.

There were a number of occasions when the participants asked why it was better for them to stay with their husband and his kin and not leave him to stay with their natal family or other men. The answer lay in the respect and well-being attached to their marital status, not just in the husband’s community but also in their natal kin. Furthermore, we need to highlight the importance of behind-the-scenes negotiations and participants’ observations and experiences of marriage illustrating the realities of family
life and their practical strategies of survival. In fact the ‘back stage’ of the household opens up the discussion for active participation of women in intra-household negotiations and tensions with the ideological promotion of patriarchy. Thus, we need to understand the complex relations between women’s agency and their well-being, characterised by the interlocking sets of values embedded in the traditional gender norms and hierarchal relations within the household.

*Children and Parents*

There is also a hierarchy of decision-making, needs and proprieties (associated with age and gender), a hierarchy to which my participants appear to subscribe. Patterns of intergenerational assistance and solidarity are shaped to a considerable extent by the patrilineal bias inherent in the local kinship system. It was evident that different levels of welfare and access to resources may apply to different categories of household members, depending on gender, seniority and the state of interpersonal relations between genders and generations. For example, there are different expectations for daughters and sons as seen amongst these households. Conversations with elderly women have shown that daughters are not assumed or expected to contribute to the support of parents and this is an important factor in shaping gendered expectations of sons and daughters. In this respect the differences between sons and daughters constitute a major contrast in familial expectations in that while sons require early care, as daughters marry and move elsewhere, sons stay, reimburse and provide for their parents in old age. Participants mentioned that daughters are often spoken of with ambivalence or as a burden, a loss or even a double loss.

In familial calculations, the continuity and security of sons as assets are set alongside the liability and drain on family resources associated with daughters who time and again are deemed transient, outsiders, guests or someone else’s property. As Sangita said, “the daughter is not ours...she has to follow her husband. So everyone want to have a son”. Other women also stated that “a daughter belongs to somebody else’s family”, “investing in a girl is a loss”, and “a family with daughters is a dead-end family”. It could be argued that it is in women’s material interests to subscribe to the general son-preference which characterises patriarchal culture and that they invest in a great deal of selfless devotion in order to win their sons as allies and insurance against an uncertain
future (see also Chapter Six). However, when sons fail to fulfil such expectations of long-term support for their mothers, participants expressed shame and dishonour. For example, Guddi feels that “it look so bad when people see me, a mother live in poverty with my daughter. But my son lives in a good house and eats well. My son lives in the same compound with his family but he never helps me”. What is of interest to this study is that since women and men are differently positioned in relation to the division of resources and responsibilities within the household, they are likely to have different, and often conflicting priorities in production, distribution or both.

Using a capability framework, this study argues that there are other non-monetary dimensions (apart from income) that can be brought into the conceptual and measurement issues of poverty. This approach permits the analysis of poverty from gender dimensions and allows for the discussion of the multiple levels at which women experience poverty differently because of their gender. As analysis in this chapter and later chapters will suggest, the interacting gender asymmetries within and outside the household domain set up gender specific regimes of risks in different contexts, including the risks faced by women and men in the context of household conflict. This thesis shows that women appear to acquiesce to- and indeed actively perpetuate-discriminatory practices in intra-household distribution in order to assure their own longer-term security. ‘Maternal altruism’ is one of the practical strategies that women may adopt by being biased towards their sons in intra-household resource distribution in their response to patriarchal risk. In fact women are not entirely powerless but their subversion of male decision-making power tends to be covert. The accounts of daily dynamics will provide examples how women’s agency taking this clandestine form, on one hand, reflects their lack of options outside the household cooperation and on the other, how they determine women’s bargaining power within the household in relation to subsistence needs. In this context gender analyses of poverty will allow me to take into account the hierarchical allocational practices and power differentials enacted in domestic units.

_Siblings and in-laws_

Gendered analyses of poverty need to go beyond household-headship approaches. At the microeconomic level, there is a need to understand gender and age-based power
relations within households, the mechanisms of cooperation and conflict as well as
dynamics of bargaining that shape the distribution of work, income and assets. Such
processes of bargaining do not take place in a social vacuum. They are affected by
social norms and perceptions as well as the differential access men and women have to
opportunities and resources depending on seniority protocols of the household. In the
Indo-Fijian kinship system, the eldest son has seniority over the siblings and incurs
added responsibility as well as status. Marriage to the eldest son therefore entails extra
responsibility as well as authority as the senior sister-in-law (Carswell, 1998: 173). In-
marrying sisters-in-law are ranked according to the seniority of the son they marry. In
Indo-Fijian kinship relations there is a traditional tabu (taboo) between father-in-law
and daughter-in-law and between elder brother-in-laws and younger sister-in-laws
(Jayawardena, 1975: 83; Mayer, 1961: 166; Toren, 1990: 43). This involves not
speaking together or having any contact unless absolutely necessary. For Indo-Fijians
this still occurs in some families, involving women wearing the ordhini or pallu (veil) so
the senior male relatives will never see their faces. However, this has changed in the
majority of households of the present study. In many of these families this change was
marked by their practicality. Geeta said:

Now I don’t pull palla on my head because my badkau say it’s old ways. Today it’s not
good to waste money to buy palla because my iizzat [chastity and modesty] is not protected
by cloth but what I do and whom I talk to.

Similarly, Sangita feels that “it’s no use covering your head with a veil because shame
is not in your hair or head but in your body”. This is not to imply that taboos are no
longer practiced within Indo-Fijian families in this area, as many families maintain
practices such as segregated eating and social spaces. Even without the ordhini and with
‘freer’ association, there are still lines of protocol where deference and respect are
shown to senior relatives and where men and women should not become overly
familiar.105 This alludes to notions of female modesty and respectability.

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105 Jayawardena (1975: 83) noted in his fieldwork that the avoidance and segregation among Fiji Indians
was said to allow for the ease of integration of the new bride into her husband’s family. While Mayer’s
(1961: 167) research found some people attributed the different relationships between a younger sister-in-
law and her elder brother-in-law and that of the elder sister-in-law who may talk and joke with her
younger brother-in-law as a “buttress to the authority of the older members of the household”. This is
because the eldest brother’s authority should not be threatened by accusations from a younger brother
regarding misconduct with his wife, whereas it is acceptable for an elder sister-in-law to admonish a
younger if things get out of hand. The former scenario threatens the stability of the household and could
cause divisions (Mayer, 1961: 167).

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Probably the most important relationship for a new bride coming to her husband's home, besides that with her husband, is her relationship with her mother-in-law. It is her mother-in-law that more than likely will be explaining what she has to do on a daily basis. While the mother-in-law is still able, it is her responsibility to organise and oversee the work of other women and younger children in the household. Jai Raji explained that "when I stay with my in-law, my saas [mother-in-law] tell anything everyone has to listen to her. She is boss of the house, you know...but I tell my chotkis [younger brother-in-law's wives] what to do in house". For most of the participants moving to the husband's house proved to be a big change in lifestyle. They had to learn how to do farm work as well as adjusting to the routines of a different household together with their new marital status. Participants like Santamma, Karuna, Tara, Muniamma and Sukh Dai have fulfilled multiple roles and responsibilities of being a wife, daughter-in-law, mother and farm labourer: "As a paaho you live like a Hindustani wife...look after everyone in the family before you. It's like I marry whole family not only my husband", Sukh Dai said.

The strenuous farm work adds to the already increased responsibilities of becoming a married woman, having children and running her own household. With marriage, Muniamma's life changed dramatically. She shifted to her husband's family home and there she had to negotiate with other family members as well as the new work routine. Muniamma's in-laws cultivated both sugarcane and rice and she used to engage herself in farm-related tasks throughout the year:

I plant, harvest and mill the rice, hoe the sugarcane farms, look after goats and cows-taking them to their grazing grounds and giving them water from time to time, milk cows and get water from far away places. Also do house work - get firewood from the bush, chop logs of wood with an axe and then bring the bundle of firewood home carrying them on my head. I get enough for a week's cooking so I save time and can work in the farm.

The combination of a young woman's status within her new home and the rigours of farm life could be daunting, particularly if they had not been brought up on farms. If, as daughter-in-laws and wives, women did not live up to the expectations of their new family, arguments could ensue. Muniamma explains what could happen:

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106 A major difference is having to grow and process much of the food rather than buying it. This concurs with Bolobola's (1983) paper, which explores the substantial differences between rural and urban lifestyles in regards to the demands on women's work. Although this is intersected with regional and class differences, women in rural areas generally spend more of their time in producing and procuring food and have to work harder at this than women in town. This is because they do not have the same access to better cooking facilities, food preservation and storage, piped water and convenience foods that many urban dwellers have (Bololoba, 1983: 66-67). Yet, for the urban poor a major disadvantage for them is that they have limited resources to grow and process their own food, see Fiji Poverty Report (1996).
I cannot say I don’t want to do this work – just do it. In the past women face many hardships. If I don’t do any work…my mother-in-law complain to my husband, he then hit me. I did not go to school so I keep quiet.

However, in recent times the expiry of land leases and the move towards nuclear establishments has meant that Indo-Fijian women tend to have greater autonomy in the daily organisation of the household. For instance, younger participants who lived in a separate household remarked on the relative freedom of no one telling them what to do in their own house. Savita mentioned: “when I got married my saas [mother-in-law] made a separate house for us. She did not want to have any fight between saas, pathos [daughters-in-law], and sons. In this way me and my saas have good relation”.

Some of the participants who continue to live with their in-laws have experienced problems between their mother-in-laws and sister-in-laws. In some situations this has resulted in psychological and physical violence, with the daughter-in-laws being abused and beaten. For example, Tara told me that: “I suffer a lot…..because my mother-in-law was very strict and when I don’t do anything or say something she told my husband. When my husband gets home, he hits me always. He always listen to his mother”. As a new bride, life with a husband and his family can be exciting but also challenging. For some, it is not only relationships with new people that have to be negotiated but also a different lifestyle and the learning of skills and routines; and tensions can arise when expectations on both sides are not met. Since women move at marriage, the diverse origins of wives precluded any strong sense of shared interest between women within the same household. While women are central to collective regeneration, their interests as women were still mediated through relations of kinship. They were daughter-in-laws, mothers, wives, sister-in-laws, rather than simply ‘women’ in groups. Therefore, ‘sisters’ and ‘daughters’ of a patrilineal clan had a very different relation to patriarchy than women related as ‘mothers’ and ‘wives’. This draws attention to the different basis of claims women have on resources which prevail within a household and between households of an extended family.
Introducing the Eighteen Women

The aim of this section is to outline that material conditions alone do not provide complete explanations of poverty within the household. In particular, Paaru’s story reflects how gender relations and gender ideologies are crucial for understanding patterns of resource flows and distribution of resources and opportunities between individuals within a household. Household income *per se* does not guarantee equal standards of living for all members of the household. Her story will highlight that consumption within the household is not equally shared because of gender and seniority protocols. Indo-Fijian women’s bargaining strength within the family vis-à-vis their subsistence needs depends on a variety of factors such as social perceptions about needs, contribution and deservedness, social norms embodying division of labour and ownership of property, access to employment and income-earning means, and access to extra-household support systems like kinship groups, community, religious groups, NGOs and the state. The following story will also highlight the complex nature of women’s impoverishment and is aimed at recognizing the multidimensional nature of poverty. It recognizes that male and females within the household are not equal in terms of accessibility to and the utilization of resources, just as it underlines the fact that households do not share the burden of poverty equally.

Seeing Poverty from the Perspectives of my Participants

This section will outline a detailed story of one research participant named Paaru as it unfolded in my daily conversations with her.\(^{107}\) The point here is not to describe every aspect of her daily life but to suggest a way of knowing from the meanings women give to their daily experiences.\(^{108}\) The following narrative will highlight whether or not

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\(^{107}\) Even though this section outlines a detailed story of Paaru, other sections of this chapter and later chapters use a combination of excerpts from the conversations I had with all my eighteen participants.

\(^{108}\) The major editorial work I did was to compose the women’s stories into narratives about gender inequality, gender identity, domestic violence, marriage, *purdah* and women’s seclusion, gendered division of labour and vulnerability of women within marriage to name a few. No less important was the minor work required to make these stories readable, even after I had translated them. However much one might want to preserve the actual words and narrative structures of the Indo-Fijian women’s stories to give a more vivid sense of the way these women live, one is confronted with the most basic problems of translatability. It is not just a matter of what is lost in the transformation from oral to written language, although this is a serious issue that others (see, Tedlock 1987) have explored with insight. Nor is the problem simply that inevitable shift of meaning occur when one moves between languages in which expressions have no precise equivalents and words have varying connotations. Rather, it seemed to me
women's poverty is associated with unequal access to productive resources and control of assets within the household.

Paaru, aged 33, is a wife and mother of four children and she has been married for 14 years. She has three daughters and a son; all of them attend elementary (primary) school in the local settlement. Her husband is the breadwinner of the family and he normally fishes with his friends to support Paaru and their kids. She is the only participant who has had 10 years of schooling and regularly keeps in touch with me through letters. She said: “I was smart at school but you know...when my father stopped my school, then my teacher helped me. They paid for my school fees, books and uniform”. Because she was the eldest in the family, Paaru’s father withdrew her from school when her mother committed suicide so that she could take care of her younger siblings. After staying home for a while she moved to Suva city where she started working in a garment factory. While in Suva she met her husband. They got married and moved to the settlement in Labasa. According to Paaru:

My father stopped my school because he was poor and I had to look after my younger brothers and sisters when my mother died. I know why my mother hanged herself...may be because we were very poor. I was young and my father brings our second mother to home. I thought things will be good because we had a mother to look after us at home. But it was not good. I was doing more work at home...all the time. After some time I left home and I started working in Suva city. That time I met my husband and we got married in Suva. My father and relatives were not there in my wedding.

When I asked about her dreams of attending school and getting a job, Paaru replied:

I can do tailoring, office work, and be a supermarket cashier but I don’t look for jobs in town because of high bus fares. You know, it’s too late to start my school now because I do not have money to buy food and clothes for my family. I want my children to do well in school.

In her letter dated 14th October, 2003 Paaru mentioned that:

I tell my elder daughter that I want her to work hard in school. I really want some support from overseas. I want my children to go to overseas for their studies. I always tell my daughters about you and your education.

When I first met Paaru, her family had been living in squalid housing conditions- a one-room house with one bed and a workbench; but she did not give up hope about building a new house for her family. According to Paaru:

This is only a squatter I put it up with the help of other women when my house was damaged in cyclone Amy (2003). For a week, we did not have any house because you know my husband was so lazy to build the house from the bits and pieces of timber and corrugated iron. I used to tell my husband to clean around the compound but he never do it

that a number of essential qualities of everyday conversation and narrative just could not gracefully be carried over into English.
until today. I was the one who got help from other women and I built a small kitchen for cooking. When my husband saw me build the kitchen, then he helped me build this squat shelter in which we are living now.

Paaru’s prayers of living in a good house have been answered and in one of her letters, I came to know that she and her family got some financial help from the local community to build her house. Paaru mentioned that “Priya, my house will start built from 15th of June, 2003. As soon as I complete built my house I will host Ramayana recital first at my house. Then we will stay in the house”. In another letter, she said:

We all are very very happy because I already built my house. We are staying in the house. The day the carpenters started my house it was 8th of September, I was very happy. In 4 days they finished building my house. 13th of November, 2003 I will have pooja\(^{109}\) at my place. I want to tell your parents about pooja at my house. Dear, you know I always thinking about you as my real sister. I want you to come again at my place to visit me. You know I got some help from Muslim people and some from our Sangam people. When you will come to Fiji, you will see me in a new house.

Despite all the adversities in life, Paaru never lost hope and took initiative to secure help and finance to build a new house. In her own words:

I ran to every organisation and government departments in Labasa like social welfare, Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre, Red Cross, Bayliss Welfare. When I got no help from them I discussed my problem with my distant relative and I call him brother. He works in a bank. I told him about my house and how difficult it was for my children. Especially when they study at night and they have to eat and sleep in small place.

Paaru’s distant brother then directed her to a contact person at a hardware store who donated about 5-6 corrugated iron sheets while the manager of the shop himself donated 6 iron sheets and a European person at the hardware store also gave help in terms of household renovation supplies including a few iron sheets, nails and a $30 donation. In the meantime she saw the Advisory Councilor of the village requesting a letter of support from him to seek money donations from the general public and then she saw the District Officer of Labasa who gave her the letter. Having done this, she could not recruit her husband’s help. Even when Paaru used to unload donations of housing material at home “he will not help me an inch”. Using the letters from the Advisory Councilor and District Officer Paaru sought donations and financial help in some of the villages around Labasa town and she collected about F$1000. In all these villages she targeted rich/middle class households.

\(^{109}\) Pooja refers to daily worship at home or a religious gathering.
someone at the restaurant. Paaru stated: “if my husband not a good father to his children, I am not willing to listen to him all the time because I also want to enjoy time with my friends”. Defying her husband’s commands Paaru visits other women in the village because:

When my husband is with his friends he only spends his money on alcohol and cigarettes. He makes a credit at the local store. But I sit and talk with other women and I get $3-$4 for helping them and they also give me small amounts of rice/flour and sometimes their old clothes. He keeps quiet when I tell him about the help from my friends. I tell him that his friends only use his money and no one helped him when our house was blown in the cyclone.

Paaru having sexual relations with other men seems to preoccupy her husband’s mind and this is also one of the causes of domestic violence in her household. Paaru instead tells her husband that: “I am not that type of woman, blamed for bad actions like some of the other women in the village”. She said, “If I listen to him all time, then my children will starve to death. Because if I work, talk and be friends with other women in the village then they help me in my difficult times. I do what I like”. For example, Paaru sometimes goes to the Save the Children’s Fund office in town despite her husband’s wishes because:

If I am not strong to fight my husband then my children will suffer and I won’t be able to get help from anyone in town. But then my husband becomes suspicious paap lagaye (meaning Paaru having sexual relations with other men). He simply cannot understand how I am able to get help from such charitable organisations on my own.

Paaru had hoped that he would improve after the house was constructed but “my husband has not improved a bit. The same problem of drinking, spending time with his friends, and making credit at local store to buy yaqona (kava) or beer”.

Apart from the state of poverty in which Paaru and her kids are surviving, she is also faced with domestic/marital problems that have been a contributing factor towards her family’s impoverishment. According to Paaru, her husband is least bothered about the welfare of his family because he hardly talks about and shares Paaru’s problems. Paaru mentioned that:

The only time we talk is when we eat in the night. He only asks me ‘where and who gave the food or money’. He is not interested in the problems we have. He is not worried if my children have food to eat tomorrow or not. We have been married for 14 years and he never asks how I feel. When I do domestic duties at someone’s home whole day and I come back home, he never asks if I am tired and how I feel. My husband does not help me an inch to do anything around the house.

Throughout her married life, she has suffered and experienced unhappiness. She said:

I have not enjoyed my married life with my husband because he only makes me unhappy. No happiness in my life, not even for 2-3 months. The way my husband treats me, I don’t
like other men as well. I also cannot leave him or find another man because I married my husband.

In discussing her marital problems, Paaru confessed quite openly about the problems in her married life. After marriage when she was living in Suva she had many means to earn money. For example, she worked in the garment factory, as an office clerk, or selling sweets and lunch parcels (roti and curry) outside a few secondary schools in the Suva area. She managed to earn about $30-40 a day when she was selling these sweets and lunch parcels, which was more than enough to buy groceries, pay bills and the rent: “There was no need to ask for money from my husband because I use to buy everything from my money and pay bills also. Life was easy in Suva because I had no difficulties of money and food”.

However, when she had children, things began to deteriorate because she could not look after the children, work full-time and pay for the living costs in Suva city at the same time. Paaru’s husband’s income was not enough to fully support them. Furthermore, her mother-in-law wanted them to settle in Labasa because her husband had his share of the land for a house site. That was when Paaru and her husband decided to move to Labasa. For Paaru, living in Suva was convenient because she could always have looked for a job once all her children went to school. But still she would have had to pay for the bills and rent. She feels she is better off living in a village in Labasa because they do not have to pay rent for the house, or bills (no electricity, tap water, or telephone). She also fears that if they went back to Suva her husband’s drinking habit would get worse and he would spend more time with his friends. Paaru feels that her husband would become more negligent towards his family’s welfare because the city environment will have more leisure activities for men to spend money on, such as cinema, pubs and clubs.

Since Paaru moved to her husband’s village, she has maintained very close relations with her neighbours and has been active in the village community because she feels “all people in the village are my family since they have been helping me in difficult times and hardships”. She stated that:

When I am at someone’s place in the village, they feel sorry for me and my children. So I never come home empty hand because people always help me…they give me food, old clothes, or pots and pans and sometimes money because I also help them in their house work.

Paaru is also an active member of two local women’s cultural clubs and their social activities (i.e. TIV Mather Sangam and Mahila Ramayan Mandal). At present she is the
president of one of them. She appears a very hardworking and determined woman who would go out of her way to do any work available to be able to support her children. She said:

I have done all kinds of work in my life so far from selling vegetables, making dollies, selling lunch parcels, garment worker (tailoring), cashier and clerk. By now I would have saved about $10,000 to $15,000 if I did not use all my wages.

Furthermore, if Paaru needed some money to buy children’s school uniform she sought help from the local Save the Children’s Fund (SCF) NGO organisation. The organisation provided the required cloth for the uniforms, school bags and some stationary. She even received some financial help from the local radio station, Radio Fiji, because Paaru’s family was severely affected by the cyclone in 2003. She has also been to the Women’s Crisis Centre and Social Welfare Department and talked about her financial difficulties. It seems Paaru’s greatest strength would be her “people skills” and this has helped secure donations from many different villages/settlements in Labasa. In fact, this has been helping her throughout her life. Women friends of Paaru like her because of her “talkative nature”, and they admire her “honesty and courage” because she displays a strong will to do things on her own without the support of her husband.

She always wished something different of her life, especially in her marriage, but finds that religion has performed an important role. For example, she finds herself duty bound to stay and live with her husband no matter what he has done or has been doing. Many times she thought of leaving her husband but then the duties/obligations of a ‘wife and mother’ comes in-between and she decides to stay. According to Paaru, “our Hindu religion teaches us about what a good husband should be but I never see that good part in my husband”. She has shouldered more of a husband’s responsibilities than a wife’s in obtaining finance and helping the carpenters in the construction of her house. She believes that no other men would accept a woman with four children. Even if there was someone kind enough to care, no one would want to become involved in what is always referred to as a ‘husband-wife problem’. Paaru continues to battle through her marriage because she wants to keep her family together. That is when she turns outward for help from women’s religious groups:

You see, Priya when I spend time with other women I always feel happy. When I am among these women, I forget all my problems at home, that is, the fight and quarrels at home.

However, when that help is not forthcoming, she either resigns herself to her situation or starts making plans for a future life that includes only herself and her children.
Chances of getting out of the marriage are good because Paaru feels confident that she can survive on her own without depending on her husband. But she lacks immediate funds to support herself and her children when she leaves home. She would face the problem of supporting four children. Back in 2004 she was thinking of leaving her daughters at a boarding school called Dilkusha Girls home which caters for the needs of disadvantaged children. Paaru does not want to rent a place with her children because it will be too expensive and also because it will be dangerous for the safety of young girls to leave them alone at home while she is at work. Therefore, she thinks that the best option will be hostel accommodation for her two elder daughters. She still has not made the move to Suva and continues with her life in the same village.

The interpretation and analysis of this story provides deeper insights into understandings of poverty that official accounts of poverty in Fiji are unable to obtain. Paaru’s story draws our attention to experiences of women who remain trapped within the values of tradition and dire socio-economic conditions. A critical reading of Paaru’s story suggests that poverty is a burden that is unequally shared by men and women within the household. Gender biases and patriarchal cultural norms do not facilitate the improvement of women’s socio-economic status in rural households. In this case, patriarchal ideology and systematic gender biases have denied Paaru not only equal educational, employment opportunities, but also equal access to and control over resources, adequate health services, housing, social welfare and support. These are important social indicators that have a strong bearing on the incidence and burden of women’s poverty and reflect the different levels at which gender discrimination is produced, justified and perpetuated. What follows is a discussion of major factors that exacerbate women’s vulnerability and reinforce the conditions of their marginalisation and exclusion.

**Marriage and Gendered Identity**

Here I will argue that gender affects multiple social, cultural and economic arenas in which women encounter discrimination. Discussion in the following sections will highlight the ways in which participants’ views of their own poverty are conditioned by gender conventions and norms surrounding the institution of marriage in a Indo-Fijian
society. I will demonstrate how parental and societal expectations representing religio-cultural ideals about female sexual morality, family status and female propriety have remained a dominant constraint in the lives of Indo-Fijian women who participated in this study. I also found that notions of purdah and the control of female sexuality were of central importance to women’s lives and these notions were strongly associated with the religious traditions and values of my research participants.

**Parental and Societal Expectations**

Parental expectations and respect are highly significant in rural Indo-Fijian society. Indo-Fijian women are brought up to cultivate strong attachment to parental ties. “Going against the family/father/husband” is considered “going against the family honour”. Equally limiting are societal expectations about women’s sexuality and appropriate conduct. The kinds of behaviour expected of the women in this study by their parents were in their minds constantly. For Muniamma, this meant being a “docile Indian girl” as far as fitting herself into the description of her father was concerned:

I remember I did not go to school but my brothers- all of them went to school. Me and my sisters did not... because my father said ‘no’ school for girls because they soon get married and so no point in sending them to school.

Similarly, Guddi did not attend school because of her father’s attitudes. He used to say that “…better girls stay home and if they go to school then somebody may grab you in the road and there is a bad name to my family”. In a similar manner, Jai Raji did not attend school because her parents’ home was geographically isolated from the community Indian schools and her father was opposed to allowing his daughters to stay at someone else’s home for schooling. For Tara it meant spending her childhood, growing up and getting married to her husband in the same village. Mindful that within the traditional elements of Indo-Fijian community a “good girl” is not outgoing with men, Santamma’s father was also against the idea of sending girls to school:

My father thought there was no need for girls to go to school…because they get married soon. Good, if they stay home and learn housework and work in farm. When I was only 15 years old, then I got married. Old men in those days careful about their daughters and where they go, especially when we get ‘jawan’ [reach puberty]. When we reach age 12-13, they say, oh time to marry. We never use to go outside the house or compound…never, always with someone, especially my father…all the time we stay at home.

Her chastity is paramount and is an indication not only of her purity but also that she is a dutiful daughter. Parents of some participants wanted their daughters to stay home and learn domestic chores so that they could be targeted as marriage candidates as soon as
they reached puberty, especially around 12-16 years of age. As witnessed in Saam Raji’s case:

My father did not send me and my sisters to school...and he always told us that one day we will get married and go away. No use in school because it’s better we learn work at home from my mother because one day we have to look after our own house.

While participants seemed to have developed a salient identification with the figured world of women’s lives dictated by their parents (that is, to be a “good girl”, a “good daughter”, a “good woman”) they were also developing a sense of gender as entitlement, knowledge of their gendered position and how it limited their access to certain spaces, activities and resources. For example, Kala Wati stated:

During my time when I was young...my father stopped my school because he wanted us to learn all the housework before we got married. He said when he arranged my marriage, the boy’s family will see whether I can cook, clean, wash and help in the farm.

Looking after the family also involved having the right attitude, respecting your husband and in-laws and not answering back, as part of the dutiful behaviour expected from a wife. A woman’s propensity to act in this way can only be gauged from her personal reputation as well as that of her family. Talking about her own encounter with her in-laws, Tara recounts:

My mother-in-law gets angry at me when I don’t do things in right way. She will say, ‘what did I learn at my mother’s house, don’t say I only grazed goats and did not learn any housework’. If I talk back then she complains to my husband and he then hits me. So I always get hit when my mother-in-law complained about me.

From the comments quoted above, we might assume the participants accepted the life path and were committed to its views of marriage and their roles as daughters-in-law and wives, or, at least, that they acquiesced to their fate and silently complied with the dominant ideology.

In fact, female sexual morality still acts as an arbiter for the desirability of a woman. For example, Sangita’s second eldest daughter was only 17 years old when she got married and she was divorced within a year. As soon as Sangita received a marriage offer for her divorced daughter she did not hesitate to agree to her daughter’s second marriage. She feels:

It’s not right to keep a divorced young daughter in the house for long because it will make it difficult for her youngest daughter (who is still schooling) to get marriage proposals in future. Because then people will question ‘why my second eldest daughter who married first and then separated staying in my home. Something must be bad with her and it must also be same with my youngest daughter not married yet.

In a similar manner, Geeta as the eldest daughter of her family was not allowed to go to school because “my father was very strict...I was the eldest and he said ‘if you go to
school and have a bad name' then both me and my younger sisters will have a bad name...we won’t get any marriage offer”. Girls are mostly chaperoned and their behaviour is closely monitored by family and neighbours with a view to attracting future marriage proposals. Girls should be accompanied even when going to a neighbour’s house or farm. Tara cites an example from her childhood:

If my father or brother said no, it’s not a good idea for you to go then you should just stay home; you simply have to accept their decision. Also if the male figure of the household said NO then it’s a final answer that you have to stay home no matter what.

Similarly, as a young girl growing up, Sangita recounts: “I was not allowed to go to town or visit other’s house for no reason. All the time stay home and work in the house”. Women often witnessed and reflected upon scenes from everyday life that centred on female sexuality and social control. Sangita talked about a few cases from her own village where young girls have committed ‘immoral’ acts which embarrassed their families despite the harsh restrictions being placed on these girls. For example, one young girl in the village became pregnant before marriage and another eloped with a man without marriage.

As seen from the above stories, strong parental and societal expectations about gender conventions dictate different roles for women and men. These gendered guidelines have important bearing on how claims, rights, needs and obligations are defined and negotiated within the institution of marriage. As stated by Ram Rati:

I did not attend school and was married young. I come from a family of five sisters and four brothers. My parents were very poor so they stopped my school and my elder daughter. But all my brothers and my younger sisters went to school.

Of importance to this study is how the degree of compliance to gender conventions is directly related to scope and exposure to poverty experienced by rural Indo-Fijian women. Modesty and submissiveness have been the two most emphasised characteristics of ideal female behaviour expected by parents. It is these parental expectations that reinforce Sita’s virtue, chastity, and self-sacrificing qualities in the lives of contemporary rural Indo-Fijian women. The expectations and norms of social control not only imply a constraint to achieving well-being outcomes but coupled with low value placed on female education it also compounds women’s disadvantage and dependence even after marriage in their husband’s family. Savita claimed that “if there is an argument then I keep quiet so that the matter does not grow big into a fight. I normally take on the role of an Indian wife and see my husband as the head of the house”. It is arguable that my participants may lack a notion of personal welfare

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because their gendered identities are too closely tied to the interests of the household and parental social perceptions (see also Chapter Six). Therefore, gender divisions and preferences within the household often act as barriers to seeking a more equitable deal within relations of the household. In terms of the capability approach, such an unequal balance of power affects the intra-household distribution of opportunities and resources and participants' abilities to achieve well-being outcomes. In this case, parental expectations restrict Indo-Fijian women's sets of functionings available for choice within poor households.

**Purdah**

- **A Barrier to Women's Capability**

This section provides the background for understanding the impact of purdah norms and notions of honour and shame on women's socio-economic realities and lived experiences. These notions play varying roles in controlling women and regulating their sexuality before and after marriage. To begin with, an Indian woman's character and chastity may be associated with compliance to purdah norms, so that women who observe the norms are assumed to be chaste and good and those who transgress them to be of questionable moral character. Critical to women's ability to manage their livelihoods and household is the freedom they can exercise in their interaction with men, embodied in the cultural practices which define what sorts of interaction are permissible, with which men, in what contexts, within which spaces and using what modes of conduct. In this section and in the following chapters my use of the word 'mobility' has to do with spatial mobility rather than social mobility. I argue that greater freedom of movement does not necessarily lead to change in the status of women. This

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10 **Purdah**, which literally means 'curtain' or 'veil', is used figuratively to designate what is proper demeanor or behaviour for women, as opposed to what is improper (bepurdah). In its strictest form, purdah involves the seclusion of women within the boundaries of their homes and the veiling of women outside their homes. In a much broader sense, purdah is used to designate what is 'appropriate' or 'respectable' work for women; what has been called 'occupational purdah' (Bardhan, 1985) and this study has employed the term purdah in broader terms as utilised by others (see Agarwal, 1994a; Bardhan, 1985).

11 In broad terms, restrictions on male-female interactions fall into three interrelated categories: the veiling of women, the gender segregation of space, and the gendered specification of behaviour (Agarwal, 1994a: 298). Effectively, the first two implies the physical containments of women and the third implies their social containment. In some regions and communities, strictures relating to all three overlap and reinforce each other, while in others, only the last may come into play (for Pakistan, see Rouse, 1988; for Bangladesh, see Gardner, 1990; and for India, see Vatuk, 1982). **Purdah ideology**, or the ideology of female seclusion, is embodied in all three categories of practices.
becomes clearer in the following discussion where examples from the fieldwork are used to illustrate the significance of purdah in defining the status of women in this settlement.

Common practices embodying purdah in this study are the principles of avoidance in interaction with men. The rationalisation for this avoidance is cloaked in terms of izzat (family and personal honour), female chastity, modesty and the control of female sexuality. For example, Kala points out that:

There are no good jobs in my village but in town I can do a number of jobs like market vendor, garments, housemaid. But I don’t work in town because then my husband is not happy. He does not want me to work in town because I may like other men.

Jai Raji confirmed her subordinate position when she stated that “I don’t say too much but listen to my husband because I am an Indian wife. When I ask my husband if I could go somewhere, he first asks me why and what for. Sometimes he becomes very angry”.

Tara recounted a similar expression when explaining the role of purdah norms in her marriage:

Men do not have to suffer so many hardships like what women have to go through in life. As women we have to think and be careful about our izzat [i.e., personal honour]. When I was small...I stay at home. After marriage I was not allowed to go everywhere...restriction on where I go and where I can’t. I stay home, also look after children but my husband go to town and get things. Husband can go anywhere he wants without his wife. If my husband get angry and say something to me, I don’t say anything back.

In a similar manner, Santamma was not allowed to go anywhere without her husband—not even to a religious gathering in the village. Being the youngest bride in her husband’s family, she used to go to the markets but only in the company of her in-laws. Maintenance of purdah and the values it enforced meant that Santamma could not have access to the world that lay beyond the imposed physical boundaries of her mobility except through intermediaries, such as parents-in-law and husband. Savita also remembered her childhood:

As a young girl I was not allowed to go to town for no reasons but I only went to town with my grandmother. I stayed home most of the time. When visitors come home, all the women and girls in the house run for cover and young girls like me were not allowed to mix and mingle with men.

The assumption that even innocent encounters with men will lead to gossip about her character - something that Geeta as a young widow avoids at all costs - can lead a woman to restrict her own movements: “Being a woman, people see what you do when husband alive and when he die”, Geeta said. According to her, safeguarding her social status is even harder now as a widow. For example, “now I sleep at my in-laws house
with my children in night because it is not safe to stay alone...someone can knock my
door in the night...and I have a bad name in village”, she said. The story of Tara
illustrates a similar predicament. Tara aged 81 has been a widow for a long time and she
did not re-marry due to the associated risks of scorn, censure and excommunication
(disowned) from her husband’s kin:

When my husband die, I did not look for another man because I like my husband very
much and I am not a bad woman...look for other men. If I look for other men then what
will people say. My small farm and this place is my husband’s...if I want another man, I
cannot have this land from my in-laws.

Similarly, the threat of gossip and of being labelled a woman of loose character reduced
the chances of Guddi remarrying when her husband died. Guddi said, “people always
remember me...as pea-selling old lady...people like me because I don’t have any other
men when my husband die”. While speaking about her status in the community,
Santamma told me that: “it’s been 34 years when my husband die and I remain alone for
all these years...no one can point a finger on me for being a bad woman...having
another man”. Karuna also reflected upon how shame is related to izzat and said:

Izzat is a big issue in Indian woman’s life. It is not about yourself, it is about your family, it
involves your relatives and the people you know...especially in the village. So it’s like you
don’t think about yourself, you have to think about what other people are going to think and
say. I think that is the main issue.

Participants agreed that izzat was related to standing within one’s family and the
family’s standing within the community. For instance, Sadhana said, “If you have
honour you have izzat. If you haven’t got izzat where is the honour?” Furthermore, Ram
Rati claimed that “honour of my husband’s family depends on my proper behaviour in
the village community and that I have no honour of my own if I cut myself off from his
family”.

While the codes of honour and shame refer to the behaviour of both men and women,
shame is often associated with women’s morality and chastity. To a large degree the
honour of men is integrally tied to the chastity and seclusion of women. For example,
when Sangita’s husband was injured he allowed her to work at another person’s house
within the community but not outside the village. She said: “when my husband got sick,
I had to find some work...I could not work in town because my husband wanted me to
only work in the village as housemaid. So that he knows where and which house I work
at”. Furthermore,

My husband always worry that I leave him for another man. He always gives me the time to
be at home when I go to town. He also worry what people in the village will say to him
about me...for example, if I stay long in town then people will ask my husband “what is
your wife doing for so long in town...can't be shopping because you people so poor'. My husband say he does not trust other men who have bad thinking to harm me...I am only a woman.

Ensuring that a woman observes these prescribed norms is the responsibility of men, particularly the husband. For Paaru, this means being a victim of a cycle of domestic violence and constant name-calling by her husband:

He does not believe I can get work in town and money on my own...he thinks some men may have given money to me. And he calls me bajadu [bitch] if I am late from a religious meeting. Sometimes he shouts bajadu to me when I get off from the bus...neighbours can hear that.

Here what appears to be the common goal of purdah are the ideas of manliness in the Indian context, translated into providing for a family as part of what it is to be a man. Manliness involves supporting a family and women’s contribution to household welfare may represent a threat to male pretensions to conform to the cultural ideals of male provisioning. Maya emphasised how purdah is associated with male social status:

Myself and my daughter-in-law don’t work outside of home because my husband and son feel it’s not good...when women from the house work and bring money...it does not look good for them...they want to bring money in house for women and children and not women bring money to feed men.

It is through their role as protectors that men’s honour is determined. As Sukh Dai stated, “I don’t talk back to my husband because that is what matters. A man’s honour depends on how his wife behaves in the house and outside”. The key themes to emerge were that izzat is related to issues of family honour and family reputations. One could bring shame to one’s family by behaviours that damage reputations as perceived by the family. Remaining true to one’s culture and maintaining reputations for the family was central to izzat.

Not all households could afford the strict confinement of their women; and economic necessity constantly pushes against the exercise of purdah. In acknowledging the purdah norms embodied by Indian women and seclusion from public or male space, Nirwani stated:

My father was very strict and he never allowed me to move freely in the village or town. But recently, I work in the sugarcane farm...cut cane like a man when my husband left me and my daughters with no money and groceries in the house.

When Urmilla was forced by economic necessity to seek wage work in a garment factory in town, this involved some sacrifice of her social status in the village:

It was difficult time for us...no good job in the village for my husband and we have no land. I always knew a bit of tailoring and when I asked my husband that I want to work in a garment factory...he said yes. And when I started work...it’s good for us. My husband was happy...we have money to buy food. People think I have other men who give me money
and that my husband knows this. That’s all false talk...I leave home early in the morning in a van and come back late afternoon...it’s dark already...people think I am bad because I go with the van driver.\textsuperscript{112}

Hence, the freedom of movement which some women appear to enjoy needs to be weighed against the loss of social status which affects both women and their families. For example, Urmila confirmed that: “Other women in the village think I am bad [loose character]...but I don’t worry about that any more...it is a matter of stomach and feeding my family”. In this rural settlement, women’s purdah norms hinder their economic and personal independence. Rural poor women, who from economic necessity must find outside employment, enjoy a certain degree of economic independence and freedom, which, however, necessitates breaking the purdah norms. By arguing that purdah contributes to the stability of the existing social structure I suggest that in rural Indo-Fijian society most women can hope to gain economic and personal independence only at the cost of social marginality.

Although women who practice purdah norms are economically usually powerless and have little say in major decisions outside the home, they could nonetheless exercise some influence over their own lives and those of other people through networks of friendship and gossip. Participants used this “women-only” space to scrutinise their own and other women’s behaviour. They described themselves, both to themselves and others, in ways that defined them as good daughters-in-law or good women. Karuna described herself as being on a “straight line”. Then she talked about a woman from another village who had run away with her husband’s brother: “It is better to take a straight line than to do such a bad thing. A good wife stays with her husband; a bad one leaves and goes with another”. It appears that these women not only knew the expected life path and the behaviours that counted as those of a good woman but also embraced these concepts and behaviours as ways to define themselves. For instance, Paaru said: “I care about what other people thought of me and I don’t want to dishonour my family”. In self-censoring their actions, participants retreated into attachments to good and valued identities, and developed claims to being good wives and daughter-in-laws. However, this evaluative space not only created an inner voice of censure but also divided women from one another. In Urmila’s story, she finds it is better to stay home

\textsuperscript{112} Elsewhere, Abdullah and Zeidenstein (1982) have also seen that women who travel out in the early mornings and return only when the dusk can render them as invisible as shadows.
on the weekend and do some tailoring instead of visiting other women who talk ill behind her back.

If *purdah* has its dark side, it also has its light one. Within the privacy of a female space and through networks of friendship\(^\text{133}\) and gossip women were also able to develop critical and reflective commentaries on the relative lack of status and privilege of their position as Indian women. At home, some of the participants 'could not say much' and friendship networks with other women provided a separate sphere where women not only could escape the male gaze of their family members to a certain degree but also enact all sorts of defiant behaviour, such as smoke *suki*.\(^\text{134}\) Significant cultural boundaries prevent wives from publicly faulting husbands, even when they do so privately. For instance, my participants often criticised and complained about their husbands to other women and mentioned occasions when they do not obey their husbands. Sukh Dai commented, "my husband hardly helps me around the house and with the children. He just likes to spend time with his friends in the village. Sometimes I don't cook food for him when he wants me to". Sexual jokes and stories about male impotency undermining the notions of male superiority are a well-developed genre amongst young women in this study. As Paaru mentioned:

> I hear stories that some women in my village sleep with young boys and men because the husband drink too much *yaqona*. So the wives not happy because husband drink *yaqona* and they come home really late, sometimes 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning.

This form of resistance is what Abu-Lughod (1990: 45) called “sexually irreverent discourse”. These are instances when women make fun of men and manhood even though official ideology glorifies them and women respect and sometimes fear them. Therefore, open challenge of a dominant ideology is not always possible and in contexts like this, where meanings can be altered, covert critiques of domination may develop instead (Scott, 1990). Furthermore, women's participation and interactions in friendship based networks provided them with opportunities for self-expressions and sharing

\(^{133}\) The pivotal role fulfilled by women in the formation of such inter-household networks raises the question whether these networks may be regarded as part of the 'domestic' or 'public' domains (cf. Yanagisako, 1977; Werbner, 1988). I prefer to regard such networks as constituting the nexus of the public and domestic, mediating between the more formal context of public activity and the privacy and affectivity of domestic household life. In this case, women-centered networks refer to those networks which operate outside the household such as kinship, informal networks between individuals, families and religious forums.

\(^{134}\) *Suki* refers to dry pandanus leaves mostly used by Indo-Fijian rural men in place of cigarettes. I found that mature aged women comfortably smoked *suki* in the presence of other women while they may not be able to when men are around.
information, which may have both favourable and unfavourable implications on their well-being. Participants like Sadhana, Nirwani, and Paaru shared the personal struggles of their marriage with other women, enabling them to form closer bonds. This experience of sharing also developed new loyalties and often translated into small gestures of help and emotional support from one woman to another (see also Chapter Seven).

This section explored the themes of shame and honour entailing the institution of purdah. I found that the concept of family and personal izzat played a powerful role in Indian women’s lived experiences. The stories offer rich insights into the nature of these processes and their complex interdependencies. For instance, the fear of bringing shame to others, which has been called ‘reflected shame’ (Gilbert, 2002), was linked to socially defined rules and prescriptions for reputation enhancement and maintenance through culturally transmitted systems of honour (izzat). To lose honour or to bring dishonour is to be externally shamed, lose status in the eyes of others or even disowned by the family and community. Participant’s sexual purity is still seen to be of utmost importance to safeguard their family’s honour. Greater physical mobility accordingly leads to female sexual impurity and hence to the family’s dishonour.

The long-term effect of the mobility of women on normative expectations remains to be seen. At present, spatial mobility is only enjoyed by a few women through their employment in the town centre while the rest continue to observe the norms of purdah. But there is still dissonance between the economic role and the social status of impoverished women because increased freedom of movement of some women in the village has not affected the normative structure. In traditional societies like this one, we need to be clear that while a few participants have good “reasons to value” increased mobility over purdah norms, some participants also have good reasons to disvalue their freedom of movement. Hence prioritization of purdah norms over positive notions of freedom (for eg, personal independence, autonomy and freedom of movement) might have to be rooted in the social perceptions and norms of an Indo-Fijian society. Being respected (that is personal honour and dignity) is a significant factor in rural Indo-Fijian women’s success in growing out of poverty, and respect in turn involves and affects the capabilities of self-esteem and confidence. Self-esteem appears frequently in my conversations with the participants and therefore capabilities relating to shame and
'self-respect' are quite relevant for further discussion and analysis. The notion of *izzat* translated as 'honour' or 'dignity' needs to be closely analysed when applying the capability approach in the context of gender relations in traditional societies (see Chapter Six).

**Religious Influences**

Growing up in rural Indo-Fijian society, all eighteen women were exposed to religious beliefs throughout their lives. The enormous influence religion has had in the shaping of the concept of womanhood and the duties of a wife can hardly be stressed enough. Dominant religious beliefs have been historically stifling for Indo-Fijian women and their sexuality (as seen in Chapter Four). It leaves these women with very limited chances of autonomy outside of marriage. For example, Paaru continues to battle through her marriage and her abusive husband because she has strong religious values. Sadhana was also a victim of repeated domestic violence but she continues to live with her unfaithful husband because of her marriage vows:

> There were several times when I decided to leave my husband for good...because he was involved with other women many times. But I stayed with him because of my children and I married this man also. I know if he sees me with another man in bed, then he will leave me the same time. But I have to stay with him.

Other women in the village admire Sadhana for her courage and strong willpower to stay with her husband after all that he has done to her. Sadhana reported that these women say to her: "if we were in your place we would leave our husbands long time ago; if the husband cheated on us". But the question still remaining is that: "how many of these women would actually do what they say"? For example, Tara's daughter is still maintaining her marriage because:

> I tell my daughter that your father also hit me but I stayed with him so she also has to suffer...we Indian wives cannot leave our husband or break our marriage unless we become widows because then what will the people say?

Furthermore, in a Hindu marriage Indo-Fijian women's unquestioning religious beliefs signify a commitment on their part as Hindu wives to live by the ideals of *dharma* and wifely duties/obligations. Overshadowed by these social rules and conventional perceptions, each of these women found that the ideals attached to the 'Sita' image and societal expectations can never be fully achievable in reality. In keeping up this image, Sangita said: "I cannot leave my husband but am happy with him...then *izzat bhi bana rohi*, [i.e. more social status and honour in the community for not leaving her husband's house]". But she further stated:
Ramayana is a very big thing because it tells us about a wife and husband. Sita was a typical Indian wife who followed duties of a good wife and Ram was a responsible husband and no man in this world could become like Ram not even my husband. Ramayana tell us about Sita’s sacrifice and how she sticks by her aural dharma [i.e., wifely duties] and she didn’t leave her husband in difficult times.

Sangita thinks that one cannot find a person like Sita in real life, nor Ram (who was known for his principles of a good husband): "For this reason, I did not leave my husband when we face so much poverty after he become injured. I could have left him for another man but I am an Indian wife because I married my husband". Maya also identified herself as a loyal and obedient wife: "I am an Indian wife who always follows what Sita did...she always listens to her husband Ram and not argue with him". She also stated: “it feels right to listen to my husband and what he say...then I have more respect if I listen to him and not argue with him". For Karuna marital obedience has always meant that her husband has ‘more say’ in the house than her because “he is the husband and I am only the wife...as in our Hindu dharma I always have to follow my duties as an Indian wife...this is what pundit (priest) say in my marriage ceremony”. Hesitantly, she said “if it wasn’t for the Hindu dharma of marriage I would have left my husband long time ago...but as an Indian wife I have to live according to my dharma”.

Hence the image of Sita presents Hindu women’s own idealised perceptions of themselves and the problems they experience. For example, Sukh Dai stated “I had to work hard on the farm with my husband, like Sita did when she followed her husband Rama during their hard times in the forests”. Though Sita or Parvati are less overtly powerful protectresses than Durga, Sita is much closer to village women in this study. As claimed by Ram Rati,

As a woman of the household, I am expected to manage all the tasks at once, i.e. cook and clean the house, look after the children and work on the farm. Even when I was weak when I was pregnant, I had to work and not complain. Indian women have to keep quiet and accept hard life like Sita did.

Religious culture plays a leading role in the way it constructs patrilineral ideology and gendered identities. Similarly, Savita commented that “I got married into a poor family—no matter what, I have to stay with my husband even though he is poor. Indian women have to be like Sita, i.e., live with their husbands in good and bad times”. Maya also stated that “if you compare Ramayana to my life, then the hardships of my life are more than what Sita had to go through. I had a hard life after marriage. At my mother’s house I was loved by all but at my in-laws house I have only suffered in poverty and had bad names”. While Sita is the impossibly perfect model embodying the contradictory values of Hinduism, women in this study were still involved with rituals and texts concerning
Sita and other gentle forms of the goddess. For instance, participants took active role in women's religious forums and when it comes to hosting Ramayana gathering at their homes, they would take an extra initiative and effort. Hence, by appealing to a divine and therefore unquestionable rationale, these women try to make sense of their exclusionary and subordinated world in terms that are compatible with their own culture.

In applying the capability approach, we can see how religion acts as a barrier to rural Indo-Fijian women’s well-being outcomes and gender equality. On one hand, religion in traditional societies decreases the range of choices, opportunities and well-being functionings that women could have and on the other hand, religion needs to be embedded in a broader picture of human values and my participants’ notions of personhood. I argue in this thesis that using Sen’s language of capability as positive freedom is only one relevant space for evaluations of well-being outcomes but in traditional societies, freedom is not enough because we also need to measure religio-cultural values of importance to my participants. There is a need to measure functionings associated with religion and culture if we are to evaluate human development and well-being adequately. I will illustrate this in the subsequent chapters, with reference to the values of personal honour, dignity and self-respect and the role of religion in providing a space where my participants could realise their well-being outcomes.

Conclusion

The chapter provided a glimpse into how the institutional structures of marriage and religio-cultural discourses reinforce the notions of 'ideal' wife through the concepts of female modesty and chastity in contemporary rural households. It also established that kinship protocols in regard to hierarchy can produce asymmetrical differentiation between households as well as within them. Patrilinearity largely determined the social axes of gender and generation whereby the male head of household[s] was and is still predominantly the main point of contact for household welfare, distribution of resources/work and opportunities. Chapters Four and Five have outlined dominant social discourses and the institutional structures that inform the social norms and
perceptions about Indo-Fijian women in the household and society. This reflects male dominance within the formalised structures of household relations which constrain women far more than men.

This chapter also discussed the predicaments faced by rural Indo-Fijian women involving traditional cultural barriers to their equal participation and autonomy in the household and outside. Poverty and economic necessity do not override the influence of purdah in women's lives. Even when veiling was not strictly practiced, women's primary responsibility for childcare and housework restricted their mobility within and/or from village to town centre. Often this entailed retaining their status as financial dependents, even when male support is precarious and unreliable. I have attempted to draw together various aspects of the institution of marriage that influences women's social relations within the household and their living standards. Both social relations and material conditions interrelate in influencing a woman's working life as well as their access to resources. Young girls learn very early in their lives to recognize and accept the prior claims of their brothers and father on household resources. However, female dependence is premised on the cohesiveness of the family unit, particularly the conjugal unit, since it is the one in which they are expected to spend a major part of their lives. These discussions now serve as a springboard for understanding gender inequality in capabilities and bargaining/negotiation outcomes and disentangling choice and power relationships within the household.
Chapter Six

Gendered Dynamics of Inequality and Survival within the Household

Paaru’s husband beats her and uses his income to get drunk, while Nirwanti’s husband contributed very little to household income, since he used most of his own wages on drink and meals out for himself. Geeta’s brothers got some education and the opportunity to take over their father’s house and land, while she was married off young, with no education or skills to fall back on in hard times. In Tara’s house, it was standard for females to get less food than males, and much less protein; and the question of schooling for girls did not even arise (Fieldnotes, 15th April 2003).

Introduction

The discussions in the previous chapter concerning household relations, expected and experienced behaviour in terms of gender, age, kinship and seniority have provided a context within which to explore the dynamics of poverty and intra-household relations in this study. Here, I will explore and analyze the relationship between the experiences of the participants and gendered dynamics of survival within the household. The preceding discussions on marriage and hierarchy within the household and between extended family households provide an indication of authority and control over resources. What makes the household distinct as an institution is the close intertwining of economic and personal in intra-household relationships. As Moore (1988: 56) noted:

The control and allocation of resources within the household is a complex process which always has to be seen in relation to a web of rights and obligations. The management of labour, income, and resources is something which is crucially bound up with household organisation and the sexual division of labour.

This chapter uses the capability framework to indicate a space within which intra-household comparisons of well-being are made. A glimpse of how households are socio-culturally situated in relation to gender and generation gives a more comprehensive picture of how poor households operate on a daily basis. The evidence on gender inequality against the capabilities listing (see Chapter Two) presented here is illustrative and not meant to provide a complete assessment of gender inequality within households.
Gender Inequality in Capabilities and Intra-Household Negotiations

This section begins by highlighting some of the negotiations that take place within the participants’ households. Using empirical evidence, I will justify why the proposed list of capabilities (see Chapter Two) are important for gender inequality and household analysis.\textsuperscript{115} I emphasize the allocations within households from the perspective of socio-cultural entitlements to resource shares expressed in the norms governing ‘who gets what and why’. As used here, the term ‘entitlement’ refers to the socially and culturally recognized rights of specific categories of persons to particular resource shares within the household.\textsuperscript{116} The concept of socio-cultural entitlements to resource shares developed here is consistent with Sen’s approach. I share his conviction that conflict and cooperation coexist in domestic groups and that individual self-interests are not necessarily submerged by the concern for the domestic group as a whole. My emphasis on social and cultural elements of entitlement leads directly to consideration of the way in which connotations of gender, age and kinship generate inequality and mediate opportunities to achieve well-being among household members. It is important to point out that the evidence presented below against the proposed list of capabilities (physical health, shelter and environment, domestic work and non-market care, paid work and autonomy in household spending, time-autonomy and leisure activities, mobility and social relations, education and knowledge, bodily integrity and safety, being respected and treated with dignity and religion\textsuperscript{117}) is specific to the context of this study though the framework could be replicated elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{115} Some capabilities described below could also be interpreted as a resource for other capabilities. For example, Robeyns (2003: 76) noted that belonging to a supportive community or family is a valuable state of being in itself, but it can also be seen as an important resource for mental health. However, as long as a capability is important in its own right, it does not matter if it is also simultaneously a resource for other capabilities. In addition, most of the evidence presented here will be about achieved functioning and not about capabilities.

\textsuperscript{116} These rights are expressed in common statements, such as “husband needs more food than a wife because...”or “a girl does not have to be well educated as boy because...” The resources available to be shared include material resources, such as food, clothing, shelter, as well as resources devoted to the development of individual capacities, which result from adequate health care, education, and other ways of developing skills. In the sense in which I use the concept of entitlements, social consensus and implementation within the household are the main focus rather than the legal aspects emphasised in other studies (see for example, Sen, 1981; 1983a; 1987b).

\textsuperscript{117} Religion is also one of the capabilities in my list but this forms part of my discussion in Chapter Seven under the sub-heading Religious Forum (as these constitute part of the extra-household relations that women have access to outside the household).
**Physical Health**

The capability of life and physical health has two dimensions: (1) being able to be born and (2) once born, being able to live a long life of normal length in good health.\(^{114}\) This discussion will concentrate on the second dimension. Gender-based differences in mortality and morbidity, for instance, must be seen as representing systematic differences in health care and nutritional intake (see for example, Kynch and Sen, 1983; McKee, 1984). These differences are often related to socio-economic and cultural factors that affect nutrition, lifestyle, access to health services and the overall health risks that women and men face throughout their lives. Here, I will only be concentrating on two dimensions of health, i.e., food allocation and distribution and access to health services. The questions raised in this section are whether allocation of food and health appears to favour adults and especially male household heads (husband) and whether women are explicitly and implicitly discriminated against in food consumption and allocation of health services.

The most direct association between poverty and health is through food access and allocation. Food intake needs between household members are culturally constructed and partly understood in relation to beliefs about work (its intensity and perceived value) and well-being. In this case, I was only able to ascertain people’s perception about the relationship between work intensity and intra-household allocations of food consumption using my ethnographic evidence. For example, Maya said “my husband and son work hard in the farm...so I serve good food to them first before children and women eat”. This may go some way to rationalizing higher consumption of food by men than women whereby male members of the household (son, husband, and son-in-law) have preference in food ‘proportions and portions’ over female members and small children. In addition, the needs of other household members’ influence the level of consumption of any individual. For example, Paaru said, “my husband does not think about our children...sometimes he brings fish...cleans and cooks it and eat the whole

\(^{114}\) This raises the issue of abortion, which lies beyond the scope of this study. Elsewhere, discrimination against girls is increasing and occurs across a wide range of economic and socio-political contexts in East and South Asia where the net economic benefits of having a son might exceed those of having a daughter has led to sex-selective abortion (Sen 1990b: 61-66). Amartya Sen has claimed that women were “missing” in millions from the population totals of Asian countries, in particular. On the basis of various assumptions, he calculated that excessive female mortality accounted for a 6-11% deficiency in the total number of women, thus revealing what he called a “terrible story of inequality and neglect” (Sen, 1990b: 61-66).
fish”. In fact, the differential distribution of food reflects social divisions and conveys hierarchies of power and status within the household. Practices which lead to inequitable distribution of food in the family include feeding males first, particularly adult males, and giving them the choicest and largest servings. Sangita mentioned that “I serve big portions of food to my husband and children...and I think about them first. Sometimes I have little or nothing to eat...so I sleep with an empty stomach”. On a similar note, Maya stated “when my gharwala (husband) is not at home for any meal, then I make sure I leave a special plate of food for him”. These are part of the ‘expectations’ of being a good wife, mother and daughter-in-law.19

The norms and values justifying such dietary practices are subscribed to by both men and women and reflect cultural beliefs about the relative needs and contributions of different household members, fears about the consequences of violating accepted practices, and ideologies of female altruism and self-sacrifice:

When I can, I give my husband and sons more. Men don’t understand if food runs short, so I wait till they have eaten. (Kala Wat)  
A good wife is one who makes sure her husband has enough to eat and not having to listen to his complaints about food. (Savita)  
If there is less, I eat less. You have to feed the men more because they work hard. (Jai Raj)  
How can you explain to children that there is not enough food...? When my small daughter cries, I feed her. And I sleep with an empty stomach. (Paaru)

While it is difficult to know how widespread this is, it is common for the women of the household to hold off eating until the men have had their fill. These protocols around serving and eating a meal enact ideas about social relations such as seniority, hierarchy, femininity and masculinity. In between female members of the household, age and seniority protocols determine who eats first and who eats last in the family, for example; mother-in-law eats first followed by daughter-in-law and small children. But the outcome of giving male members the choicest and largest servings of food has already been noted. On some occasions this was revealed through direct observation of food distribution during my interviews. Not only there was a clear disparity in the amount of rice served to male and female members, but male members were also privileged in the

19 Ideas about entitlements to food, as in this instance, are not only culturally sanctioned but also sanctified in spiritual terms, a frequent occurrence in Indian societies where women are charged with greater responsibilities for maintaining a family’s social and religious status. In its turn, the care relationship is linked to ideas of female self-sacrifice and abnegation as a necessary part of nurturance in some cultures. In her discussion of high mortality among female infants in some parts of India, an anthropologist Barbara Miller speaks about a “culture against females” (1981: 15) but I think it might be more accurate to speak of a “culture of female-sacrifice” (Papanek, 1984: 145).
distribution of the accompanying items, such as vegetables and lentils. Women and young girls make do with pickles and chutney.

The impact of poor nutrition on health and the gendered allocation of health services is particularly clear-cut in this study. For many women participants, poverty meant 'going without' food in order to provide for others whilst men do not reciprocate. A local health centre nurse confirmed that Indian women in the village have health problems including being underweight, anaemic, diabetes, hypertension and the increasing prevalence of non-communicable disease (Personal communication, March 2003). Prevailing ideas about self-sacrifice and self-restraint by women also play an important role. Jai Raji said: "I am an Indian wife and I think about my husband first...sometimes when I get sick, I don’t go to hospital because my husband is sick and wants to see doctor. I don’t go because of little money and so my husband can go". As a result, women like Karuna are less able to take time off in response to ill-health, and try to keep going, sometimes with the help of medicine for her asthma, rather than take time out of her housemaid duties to get better. It should be noted that women have no clearly recognized entitlement to necessary health care and women themselves bolster this value system by ignoring their own ill-health, seeing it as their role to continue to work as long as they are physically able to. This clearly shows how gender hierarchies based on a patriarchal system affect entitlements within the household.

It seems paradoxical that while gender ideologies express bias in food access and health services (for example, in the commonly reported pattern of women eating last after the men and children and sacrificing their visits to the hospital in favour of their husbands), I found that in terms of outcomes, i.e., longevity and physique, the evidence for discrimination against women is patchy and women in this case may not infrequently fare better than men. 120 Is gender discrimination partly a consequence of too ready an acceptance of articulated nutritional norms reflecting actual food access without any interrogation of how women’s agency subvert norms, e.g., by snack food consumption,

120 On average, eight women have a good health status and the rest (ten participants) either suffer from old age and weakness or illnesses like diabetes, mild stroke and asthma. And on average eight men have equally good health status while three either suffer from heart disease or old age; and seven have died at an average age of 55. Please note that the health status measured here is using participant’s perceptions on the scale of intensity: Poor health- means physically weak and nearing death; Average- mild illness like asthma, stroke, diabetes and weakness from old age and good health status means without any illness.
by eating during food preparation and by consumption of 'left-overs' or is it because of men's personal social lifestyle activities (like smoking and drinking) that they tend to have shorter lives? All women participants stated they consume some kind of snack in-between meals, for example, afternoon tea, eating at a friend's place over a chat, or eating at workplace.\(^{121}\)

However, the life expectancy disadvantage of men suggests that in addition to their 'gendered' advantage in food consumption, there are social lifestyle activities (like drinking and smoking) that affect their health status. Geeta's husband died recently and she said: "I always told my husband that too much yaqona and eating hot curry is not good for your health... and he died of a heart attack". A local health nurse also confirmed that "Indian men normally suffer from diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and liver failure because they drink too much kava, beer and smoke often" (Personal communication, March 2003). What gender differences in life expectancy tell us is not that most men are discriminated against, but that men and women experience different age-specific mortality risks related to both different physiologies and nutrition and to different divisions of labour, as well as leisure broadly defined. The above discussion suggests that quantity of life is not a good measure of well-being. Thus, the life expectancy advantages of women do not cancel out the processes of disadvantages and deprivation in other capabilities as we will see below.

\(^{121}\) It is important to highlight local definitions of 'good food' and whether it is healthy enough. When I asked my participants what their definitions were for good food, most of them said "being able to eat generous amounts of vegetables, rice, roti and meat in a week, but it is not healthy because they are not able to eat meat and all kinds of vegetables in a week". While some of the participants were able to snack in between meals or during preparations it did not actually count as good food or nutritious because it mostly consists of tea and local savories like bara, lakri mithai, fried peas, etc.
Shelter and Environment

Being sheltered and enjoying a safe and pleasant environment can be conceptualised as functionings and capabilities, although we would probably think of shelter and environment as resources. At the instrumental level, good housing is positively related to good mental health and physical health. But housing also counts intrinsically as "the physical space that is most intimately associated with one's identity" (Bratt, 2002: 19), and thereby has a substantial impact on how one feels about oneself and even about one's personal empowerment and security. The questions to be considered here are whether housing poverty has a gendered aspect, and in what ways, women are disadvantaged in relation to men in their access to living space. To fully assess gender inequality in shelter, we have to investigate aspects such as the extent to which men and women have ownership/tenancy rights to the house or land, equal decision-making power over construction or furnishing of a house, or whether outside help is provided in its construction and whether 'home' is a place of security or of abuse.

Poverty is often defined commonly in terms of household assets and resource access (for example, land and livestock) but since patriliney is common in Fiji, women have widely different property relations to men. Both Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian societies are patriarchal, meaning that women's access to ownership of property in practice is subordinate. Prasad and Kumar (1998: 50) noted that this subordination arises from the fact that females do not inherit their share in the family property on equal footing with the male progeny. This includes share in land ownership, leased land for farming and ownership of house site. The families of the participants in this study strongly adhere to customary practices and only provide gifts, other household valuables and the immediate needs of the newly wed at the time of their marriage.122 The custom of kanyadaan is still practised today at Hindu marriages which further reduces the status of women through their lack of rights over parental properties (land, house etc). For example, Geeta and Savita were reluctant to demand their share from their parent's properties due to the fear of creating enmity with their brothers because they are regarded as their protectors in bad times (Fieldnotes, 13th August 2004). In Indo-

122 Gifts are provided in the form of household essentials where marriage is arranged and sanctioned by the family. This is usually the case in rural areas. This practice, however, has faded in the urban areas due to economic and social reasons. Prasad and Kumar (1998: 51) noted that such practice of matrimonial obligations is a serious burden on the families of the female and the money value of these obligations sometimes runs into thousands of dollars.
Fijian society, inheritance is passed through male children, denying women ownership rights and forcing women to be dependent on males for access to land. Women's experience of poverty is different from that of men as a result of this asymmetry in entitlement systems. In fact, women's claims to shelter and support consequently tend to be normative, embedded to a large extent in socially ascribed obligations associated with marriage, family and kinship. There is, therefore, a fundamental asymmetry in the distribution of material and normative entitlements within the household.

Rural Indo-Fijian women are disadvantaged in two ways through discriminatory land inheritance practices. Firstly, they lose the right of inheritance once married. My participants stated that they had to move into their husband's house and farmland after marriage and as a result they lose out completely on any form of inheritance from the family wealth, unless the daughter is the sole inheritor. For example, Nirwani as an only child inherited her father's house and a small piece of land after her marriage, while Geeta, Muniamma, Tara and Sukh Dai inherited their husband's house and farmland only after his death. When women like Tara or Nirwani become land lease titleholders of the farm and house site, it is largely by default, as widows or sole inheritors. For married women, strong moral sanctions as well as post-marital residence tend to prevent further claims to joint family property and to the parental home if occupied by a married brother. As noted by Carswell (2003: 141) the institutional structures and dominant social discourses do not encourage women to either inherit farms as their brothers or husbands do, or become registered cane growers in rural Indo-Fijian settlements. A number of participants commented that it would be 'shameful' to ask for share when large amounts had been spent on their marriages and they were living in their husband's house.

Secondly, rural Indo-Fijian women are mostly married to landless cane-cutters who only have an ownership to the house-site because access to land in Fiji has an ethnic dimension. In Fiji, the land property rights of majority ethnic Fijians are protected by

122 Indeed _purdah_ is one manifestation of a much more general control exercised over rural Indo-Fijian women's inheritance rights to their husband's house and land after his death. For example, one of the reasons why widow participants put social emphasis on their chastity after the death of their husbands was to allow them to have moral rights to their husband's property (see also Chapter Seven, section on *Relations with the Natal Family*).

123 Fiji has a unique system of land ownership where the indigenous Fijians own 83% of the land on a communal basis, 7% is freehold owned privately by individuals and 10% is owned by the State (Prasad
the Constitution, thus restricting availability of land as a source of security to other communities. For many participants their house site is owned by Fijian landowners and their greatest fear is that they may be kicked off of this small piece of land anytime. For this reason, they do not build any permanent house structures. Some participants even visited the Fijian landowner to grant them a grace period to stay in their house which had to be reciprocated by these Indo-Fijian families in other ways. Savita told me that:

We got a grace period from the Fijian landowner to stay here. It is a friendly arrangement between the landowner and my husband’s family. So when the landowner was getting late to send cane to the mill... sugarcane crushing season was about to end, my husband and his brothers helped the Fijian landowner in cutting his cane for free. We help to keep the friendly relationship with the landowner.

While the communal nature of land ownership in Fiji protects the rights of native owners as a group, it may restrict land development and women’s access to land (Jalal, 1998: 54). Women of both Fijian and Indian ethnicity suffer from the traditional practices and norms which are inherently discriminatory. Most rural Indo-Fijian women do not have the ownership of the house and live in poor housing conditions whereby the husband’s house provides them with the only source of security and social standing in the community. This is what Paaru had to say: “sometimes I feel like leaving my husband and living somewhere else with my children, but I can’t leave. If I go... where will we live and rent will be expensive. Here at least I have a house”. Vulnerability to domestic violence is an aspect of the gendered nature of poverty because poor women, in particular, are least able to remove themselves from violent situations within households. Women may have to live in abusive households because alternatives to a secured shelter may seem bleak (see also discussion on the capability of bodily integrity and safety). Therefore, women’s independent access to property, particularly housing, is circumscribed by their continuing role as ‘dependents’ of their male kin. As seen from the above discussion, there is considerable intra-household inequality and women tend to be the ones who suffer the inequality in shelter and property inheritance. The ownership of land and property by male counterparts leaves little room for women like Paaru to bargain for equality within the household.

and Kumar, 1998: 46) Currently, the issue of land leases in Fiji is a matter of national concern since the bulk of the leases are expiring on native land and there is a pressing demand by the landowners not to renew the leases. For more details on land ownership in Fiji, see Duratalo (1985) and Ward (1995). Currently about 28 percent of the native land is leased out for use, the bulk of which is held by non-Fijian sugarcane farmers who pay rent to the Native Lands Trust Board (NLTB) on an annual basis. Most of these leases are on a 30 year basis which may or may not be renewed after the lease time expires. Most Fijian landowners are native Fijians, but most lease holders are Indo-Fijians. So the conflict between landowners and leaseholders has an ethnic dimension.
This also has implications for distribution of matrimonial property in divorce settlements as the distribution is based on a monetary notion of 'economic' contribution to marriage. Jalal (1997: 92) has noted that wives who have spent years raising children, looking after the home and working on the farm are disqualified from any claim to a share of property if the marriage ends. In Fiji, and indeed in most Pacific Island countries, there are no legal barriers to women owning a property as individuals or as part of a family but the interpretation of the customary law governing the control and management of land gives power over land and property mainly to men (Jalal, 1998: 56). Therefore, property rights and entitlements over housing and environment including land have important implications for gender inequality, bargaining and empowerment issues. Agarwal (1994a: 252) points out that land rights for women in the rural areas are vital for women's welfare, efficiency, equality and empowerment.\textsuperscript{123}

From the capability perspective, inequality in the ownership and entitlement to housing and other assets provide women with limited control on the household resources, making it difficult for them to secure credit for investment and is likely to lead to unequal power relations and bargaining both at the household and national levels (see also Chapter Seven).

\textbf{Domestic Work and Non-Market Care}

Domestic household chores and taking care of dependents (especially raising children) is highly gendered: women do more non-market care for children as well as for the frail, the elderly and the sick. However, the largest inequality is in household work. Is domestic work and non-market care an important capability? Obviously these activities are crucially important for the receivers; they affect their functionings of life and health, education and knowledge, bodily integrity and safety, paid work, social relations and leisure activities. But how do non-market care and domestic work affect the caregiver - in this case my participants?

\textsuperscript{123} The welfare argument relates to the inequality and poverty in the household that could be avoided if women have independent rights over resources and particularly land in the rural areas. Various studies in South Asian countries point out the basis in the allocation of resources in the family and inequality between men and women [see for example, Agarwal (1986); Dreze and Sen (1990); Harris (1990)]. Agarwal (1989: 72-73) noted that land also serves as a security against poverty and as a means to basic needs in both direct and indirect ways. For example, women are strongly disadvantaged without land titles in getting credit from institutional sources or money lenders.
As noted by Sen (1990a: 129), divisions between sexes in general, and specifically those within the household, may be deeply influenced by the pattern of the gender division of work. In this study, the organisation of work within the household is primarily based around the conjugal couple who negotiate tasks that are often separate but also shared. Participants generally talk about two spheres of activity, ‘house work’ and ‘farm/outside work’. The husband as the head of the household delegates responsibility to his wife to organize the work; women, girls and younger boys are expected to do (Jayawardena, 1975; Carswell, 1998). This primarily involves deciding what is ‘women’s work’, involving all the ‘house work’. Generally, in most rural Indo-Fijian households there is a fairly fixed gender division of labour. For example, women work up to 15 hours a day with responsibility for work considered ‘domestic’: preparing food and serving, processing coconut oil, spices and preserving, washing clothes, dishes, cleaning, carrying water, fetching firewood, providing child care and animal care and doing vegetable gardening. Women also plant and weed in the family farm, if available. Sukh Dai’s double shift of farm and domestic work confirmed such multiplicity of women’s tasks:

3am-4am: wake up, wash face and hands and then enter the kitchen to prepare breakfast;
4am-5am: clean the kitchen area, milk cows and tie herd (goats and cows) in their grazing grounds. Have little bit of breakfast i.e. tea and roti only and leave for the farm;
5.30am-10am: have to be in the farm before dawn and work there till 10am;
10.30am to 12noon-reach home, do remainder of the household chores, look after children and prepare lunch;
12.30-3.30pm-take lunch for the male members of the family working in the farm. Work in the farm till afternoon;
4pm-6pm: prepare dinner, bathe the kids, and wash clothes, do the remainder of cleaning and have bath last in the family when all the work has been done.

Women did most of the housework and men either worked on their own farm or farm-related tasks on other’s farms. Women and unmarried girls would presumably only be doing work in their own family farm alongside other members of their family because of tabu relating to gender segregation.

126 Sen (1990a: 129) further argues that the members of the household face two different types of problems simultaneously, one involving cooperation (adding to total availabilities) and the other conflict (dividing the total availabilities among the members of the household). Social arrangements regarding who does what, who gets to consume what, and who takes what decisions can be seen as responses to this combined problem of cooperation and conflict. The sexual division of labour is one part of such a social arrangement, and it is important to see it in the context of poverty and capability framework.

127 See Slatter (1984) for a general overview on the gendered division of agriculture labour in Fiji from colonial through to contemporary times.
Along with gender, kinship-based seniority plays a major role in determining tasks and responsibilities (as seen in the previous chapter). Mothers-in-law, except when very elderly, elder sister-in-laws and elder daughters generally have heavier responsibilities than younger women, particularly in relation to cooking and to overall supervision. However, in Muniamma’s opinion, changes in both gender and seniority are happening:

When I compare women’s work in old days to now... I feel Indian women work very hard in the farm and house... it takes a lot of effort for young brides today to do all this work now. My mother-in-law never helped me in housework but I help my daughter-in-laws.

With the expiry of landleases and the move towards nuclear homesteads, participants agreed that individual households responded according to their circumstances and inclinations as to who does what in the house and outside. It is expected that men do not generally participate in the daily cooking, food processing, cleaning the house, washing dishes and clothes, and providing child-care. However, this needs to be further qualified by age and situation. Men may help women in some of these activities. For example, Tara’s eldest son (unmarried and living with Tara) fetches water and firewood and carries the washing from the creek to the house because she feels weak and it is hard at the age of 81 to carry heavy loads. Similarly, Savita commented that:

My husband cooks for the family, looks after children when they are back from school... and does other housework too because I am busy with my tailoring deadlines. At other times he loves to cook on his own because he likes a variety of food... he always makes fresh curry in his meals.

In regards to childcare, older children including boys may look after younger siblings and older men and women spend a lot of time with their grandchildren.

A discussion on child-care can cover a vast range of activities and theoretical perspectives, but here I will focus on two issues: firstly, family expectations of motherhood and secondly, changes in the domestic life after having children. Previous sections have already incorporated some of the participants’ answers, such as their desire for good marriages and expectations regarding the proper attributes and behaviour of young women and men. It is interesting to go back to the wedding ceremonies and remember the emphasis put on fertility and a bride’s role as a future mother. A woman’s status in the family changes considerably depending on her child-bearing capacity. For example, Jai Raji said:

124 During fieldwork the questions that I felt were important to ask my participants were: ‘Did your in-laws have any expectations of you becoming a mother as a young bride? How does domestic life change for you after you have children? These are, needless to say, very broad questions which gave me an idea of women’s experiences of caring for children as well as their hopes and expectations for them.
I am a mother of six children...I had to look after the children but it was good. My mother-in-law was very happy I had three sons. She allowed my husband to farm the 10-acre land. She owns the land after my father-in-law died. When we had the farm, it was good money for us and we build a good house...with cement floor, corrugated iron walls and more rooms in the house now.

Santamma commented that “my mother-in-law got angry because I was not able to become a mother soon after marriage. She wanted to get another wife for my husband but I become pregnant after five years”. On a similar account, Sadhana said: “I know my mother-in-law does not like me and she did not want me to get pregnant. So she can get another wife for my husband...but I became pregnant with my first child after 4 months. After my first child we moved in a separate house”. The work load also increased considerably for women after their children were born. For Muniamma, even when her children were crying, she could not attend to them if she was in the middle of any task because her mother-in-law wanted the task to be completed first. It is women who predominantly take the responsibility in caring for children, which not only includes physical work but also much of the mental and emotional work that goes towards teaching children and ensuring their health and welfare. Men occasionally help with child-care, particularly with teaching their sons, and they participate in major decision making processes concerning their children at the village level.129

The ideology of the gendered roles is still predominant in the organisation of daily life. Empirical evidence shows that men’s primary role is breadwinner and decision-maker, and women’s primary role is family caretaker. Women are identified and identify themselves as the keepers of the family; they are responsible for the health, education and well-being of their children and husbands. In this way concepts of identity influence how power and work are organised in households through gender divisions of labour. Gendered patterns of activities within the household reflect culturally-defined gender roles and expectations and my evidence suggests that the division of labour serves as a proxy for family power relations and inequalities in other capabilities as well, like paid work, time-autonomy and leisure activities. This will be discussed below.

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129 It is interesting to note that it is the men who ran the local primary and secondary school committees as far as the management decisions are concerned. Women were not allowed to attend such meetings except when their domestic help is needed for any events at the school, for example, preparing lunch for the school children.
husbands made sure they worked within the confines of the house or village community. While Guddi sold home-made savouries to school children from a roadside stall opposite her house, Sangita undertook housemaid duties or provided casual labour on neighbouring farms. If women cannot find house-based work, their husbands prefer employment inside a building in an all-female environment. As Urmila said, “my husband allowed me to work in a garment factory…in the factory there were all women tailors and also there was no good work with money in the village”. Similarly, Savita's husband was happy when she decided to operate a tailoring enterprise from home. Where work increases exposure to males and public visibility it reduces the likelihood of women participating. As seen in Paaru's story she could not work for long hours in the evening because her husband started creating tension in the house by saying that 'Paaru had an affair with someone at the restaurant'.

A desire for security and the fear of harming their reputations are also determining factors in husbands' refusal to allow their wives to work overtime after sunset even if such work is substantially better paid. The men of the households see female employment as pointing to their own failure to provide for family needs, and as a direct affront to male honour. Unwilling to be classed amongst those who 'live off their women', male members of these households frequently refuse women permission to work outside. Maya emphasised that:

> Myself and my daughter-in-law do not work outside of home because my husband and son feel it's not good...when women work and bring money...it does not look good...they want to bring money into the house and not women bringing money to feed men.

Instead, when confronted with the necessity or expressed desire of women to work, husbands normally reacted in a manner that served to underscore their greater household authority and control over women. Thus male honour and prestige is saved at the expense of women's earning capacity. Women from these families are the worst victims of the purdah system, and when economic pressures become unbearable many are obliged to seek a compromise, namely working from home like Guddi and Savita did.

These reactions reflect two distinct though inter-related behaviour patterns associated with the concepts of shame and honour embodied in purdah ideology and social control.

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111 Public space being ‘male’ causes women to seek employment in establishments/occupations that provide a semblance of purdah's prescribed “chandewari” (Shahed, 1989: 21). A popular concept of purdah is the sanctity of ‘chaddar and chandewari’, the veil and the four walls of the house.
(see Chapters Four and Five). For example, honour and prestige are very easily and immediately threatened if it becomes general knowledge that women have been ‘reduced’ to working outside. Asked what the male response to their working had been, women consistently replied that initial objections voiced related to the loss of honour and prestige, particularly within the community and the family. The equating of female work with family disgrace and a fall in social standing also leaves women like Sangita and Urmila open to accusations of sexual immorality. Most continue to work even when husbands disapprove and over time some of them like Paaru have become the main breadwinner of their households. In one of her recent letters, Paaru said, “Priya, my husband not working anywhere now he only staying home. I am working for Countdown supermarket”. A clear majority expressed a preference for working outside, specifically because they could earn more through regular jobs in town like housemaid duties, kitchen hand in a restaurant or tea shop. Non-economic considerations of working outside the home and how it provides an avenue for women to develop self-perceptions also entered into this analysis. For many, working outside was seen as the only means of breaking the isolation of purdah and overcoming the sense of claustrophobia they felt at being at home and in the village day after day. Jai Raji, who has never worked outside, in admiring the local Hindi radio station announcer (Ms Veena Bhatnagar) said, “she has courage to talk about women’s issues over the national radio...she is so knowledgeable and can do the work she likes”.

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132 Firstly, the heavy emphasis placed on women’s behaviour as a key element in a family’s (i.e. male’s) reputation and honour creates a felt need to control the interaction of female relatives with unknown males. Secondly, within a community, men’s prestige and honour are frequently measured by their ability to provide for the family economically.

133 The desire to have greater contact with and experience of the world beyond the charadiwari was frequently and variously expressed: ‘working outside is more interesting’; ‘one gets to know about the world’; ‘to be able to talk to other women’; ‘it is good to have a change of environment’; ‘I feel suffocated staying at home all the time’. Participants who had never worked outside often felt that this would increase their confidence and ability to deal and cope with the inside and outside issues of the household. Those who had worked outside felt this even more strongly.

134 The favorite pass time for many of these women is listening to their favorite radio program called Ghar Sansaar. It is a Hindi radio program hosted by an Indian woman about women and their day to day issues and problems. It has now become a daily ritual for some of my participants who listen to the program daily and the reason they love it is because “it has lots to offer in terms of advice and tips for women on issues like women’s health problems, body image, appearance and care, personal hygiene, herbal medicine, recipes for Indian cooking”. Some even find the program to be very knowledgeable and it seems to have improved their dictionary of Hindi words and meanings.
Women's participation in paid work appears to have wider potential besides enhancing their well-being. In terms of the capability approach, women's paid work may expand the vectors of functioning available to them, for example; it may lead to (a) financial functionings such as being financially independent and (b) psychological functionings (like self-esteem) (Robeyns, 2001: 23). I argue using my evidence that enhancement in well-being comes mainly through two distinct but related ways. First, participation in paid work may both make women's economic contribution to the household visible and reduce their economic dependency on other members of the household. Karuna stated that "I earn money on a weekly basis and am in charge of my family's needs in terms of getting groceries and other needs of my children". Recounting her experience, Urmila said, "because I work in a garment factory...there is food and light in my house...otherwise both stove and light would have gone off long time ago". Apart from increasing their ability to provide for the household, women's earnings had made a definable difference to household's well-being.

Some suggested that their earnings had increased the household standard of living: allowing the family to eat meat and fish more frequently, offering better hospitality to guests, improving the quality of housing, and purchasing semi-durable items, such as clothes for the children, food items, and even durable goods like sewing machine, rice cooker, electric jug, TV, VCR, kerosene stove and sofa. Others suggested that their earnings had put their household on a more secure footing: short-term debts had been paid off or could be avoided in the future, and money was set aside for emergencies. Women also felt that their ability to make such purchases, with the cash that they controlled, raised their self-esteem. When I asked Savita about her feelings of having an income of her own, she said: "I feel good...because I can save some money for my

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135 This is especially so in many of the South Asian countries including India, where social norms constrain women's access to economic resources and their participation in social spheres. Besides providing some access to an independent income, women's participation in paid work may also serve as a source of their self-worth and dignity (Chen, 1995: 54; Kabeer, 2000: 189), and become a major influence for social change in general (Sen, 1999: 201). The question that needs to be asked in this context is how does rural Indo-Fijian women's participation in paid work enhance their well-being?

136 In this locality I found that women do not necessarily see it as their right to work, or to get work of their choice. Women's working lives were controlled as far as possible depending on the level of economic deprivation, number of children, husband's consent, husband's income, nature of the household (nuclear or extended) and so on. But often these women expressed a desire for different kinds of work. They were discontented with the kind of work they did, but nevertheless extracted a tremendous sense of self-worth from the fact that they aspired to work, they Liked to work, and had found work of one kind or another. Hence they were able to contribute to family income, to the education, health and nutrition of their children, and were aware of this as a major achievement.
hard times. I can sew clothes so that I can make good money from home. Better than just sitting at home doing nothing”. It has also allowed Savita to spend money on household items like utensils, help her husband with grocery bills and children’s clothing and other school needs. On a similar note, Nirwani mentioned that “when my husband went to jail I saved some money from welfare allowance and build a good house, bought some utensils and a 2-burner gas stove”.

Second, women who were either the main providers or who contributed a substantial proportion of the household income were more likely to have gained not only higher self-esteem but also greater participation in decision-making within the family. Budgeting is a key area of decision-making since it relates to the way in which the resources of the household are used and controlled (Omari, 1995: 205). The type of budgeting and allocation system that a household uses is an important indicator of the balance of power between members and it also influences decision-making. It is argued that independent earning would give women resources and confidence to use these as means for better well-being. However, the arrangements in regard to the management and control of money varied between the households in this study. Karuna explained the arrangement between herself and her husband as follows:

I get groceries from town because I cannot trust my husband. If I allow him to get groceries, he spends money on cigarettes and yaguna. I work as a housemaid for the past 16 years and the reason I started work outside was because of my husband’s smoking and drinking habits. I never stop him for drinking or anything. If he wants the money he can take it but only when he gets his pay he gives to me to run the family.

Some of the other participants who were not living with their in-laws also took care of the household budget. However, the situation in households where there are no employed women is quite different. As Maya stated:

I discuss with my husband what food we need in the house and he normally gets groceries from town, pays water and electricity bills…nothing is in my hands. Whatever food he gets, I have to manage with that…if I and my daughter-in-law need money to buy our things (undergarments) then I ask for money from my husband. I don’t keep money but my husband is boss of the house so he keeps all the money.

137 Starting from the premise that there is considerable variation in income management at the household level by culture and class, Dwyer and Bruce (1988) review the existing literature and conclude in general, women’s incomes (however small) are critical to the survival of poor households; that pooling of incomes is not the norm in many societies and that both obligations to the household and priorities for it may differ systematically by gender. They also point out that women’s contributions are often culturally evaluated as less important than those of men and that this may produce conflict rather than unity in decision making (for examples and discussion see also Harris, 1981; Moser, 1993; Whitehead, 1981).
Hence, major decisions over finances and spending were still primarily in the control of their husbands. Jai Raji believed that women’s earning capacity made a difference to their relationship with their husbands:

“Of course, a woman’s value goes up when she earns. For instance, suppose I ask my husband to buy me a sari, but he tells me that he can’t afford. So I cannot say much because I am not contributing any income. If I also earn, then I can turn around and tell my husband, what about the income I am contributing? So when one earns, one’s value goes up.”

According to Sadhana, “I have to speak to my husband in soft and pleasing voice so that there is no argument about money. If I want to get something for my children, I normally ask my husband in a polite manner”. Similarly, Kala Wati noted:

“I stay home and look after the family’s needs. My husband and son get money for our daily needs. My husband buys groceries from town. Suppose my husband tell me something, I cannot reply back because I don’t earn money. So I keep quiet because I have to eat from my husband’s wages.”

Women’s wages affected the balance of power within marriage and had significant influence on the decision-making processes within the household.

Styles of management and their implications for decision-making are thus quite varied and for all the participants how much negotiation over financial decisions there was depended on the circumstances of the household itself. In this context, nearly all the women negotiate with their husband/son to obtain money for expenditure on personal items and children’s school needs. The nature of this negotiation depends on the age, status and earning power of the two individuals. Savita, a home-based tailoring worker, explained how finances were organised in her household,

“My husband earns about $70-80 in three weeks and he gives money to me after paying off small amount of credit at local store. From the tailoring I earn about $50-$60 and sometimes $100. My husband gives me his money but takes out some for his kava and suki. He wants me to look after the money...how much for food, bills and emergency but he does the food shopping...because of the transport problem and he always looks for discount and then shops at the cheap supermarket. I only do shopping for children’s books and clothes. I have to see everything inside the house...that’s my work and his is if there is no more flour or sugar I have to tell him when he goes to town. We only spend on items that we urgently need. I see it’s better for us, if I keep the money, otherwise my husband can spend all the money on kava.”

While some of the women managed the household budget and identified the needs of the family, their husbands had control over the money and had more disposable income to spend on themselves. Most women claimed that wealth should not make one disrespectful to one’s husband, because men are ‘head of the household’. Whatever a

138 Suki refers to dry pandanus leaves used mostly by Indo-Fijian rural men in place of cigarettes because suki is a much cheaper substitute to cigarettes.
married woman does, she should have the consent of her husband. Some women admitted even giving men the money to purchase food at the market or to spend on cigarettes and yaqona. Perhaps it is because of the hard reality and public censure that women want to avoid giving the impression that they may wield authority in their families or have sidelined their husbands. In such way, the public status quo is maintained by appearing as the subservient one in all situations.

Unequal power can lead to inequalities in access to money, and one potential inequality is that of personal spending money. Generally speaking, where essential daily expenditure is put into the common fund, women earners are usually in the same position as non-earners, and any inequalities in their rights to call upon the common fund derive from their position as women rather than as inferior wage earners. On the whole, women in this study have less personal expenditure than men. Evidence on this point is, however, more anecdotal than systematic, as amounts fluctuate widely for different individuals, and women’s and men’s assessments of what counts as personal expenditure also differ. For women, home-related expenses, such as ‘clothes for children’, ‘books and stationery for children’, ‘pots and pans for house’, and ‘medicine’ often appear as personal expenditure. However, most men were much more likely than women to engage regularly in forms of expenditure of which they were individual beneficiaries and usually their personal expenditure bias was in favour of their own friends rather than family. For example, visits to the local store or friend’s house, eating outside, money spent on hobbies like drinking and smoking all count as men’s personal expenditure. Men’s greater personal expenditures partly reflected gender-specific values and possibilities: it is culture rather than economics that explains why Indo-Fijian men in rural Fiji smoke and drink more frequently than women do. Men could engage in these individual forms of consumption with greater ease because that is what masculinity entails. Being a man also entails maintaining a public profile with other men and keeping up with the socially mandated role of the breadwinner. As Savita’s husband explained:

In recent times...there are lesser jobs available for men in this village. When men are not able to find a job, they feel bad and embarrassed. He starts to see himself...that he has failed in his duty as a father and head-of-household, and this makes him drink and smoke. When I don’t know how my children are going to eat tomorrow, I tend to drink yaqona whenever I can with my friends. It helps me forget my problems.

Hence, the tie between men’s self-worth, earning capacity and personal spending is quite strong in explaining male identity in this settlement.
Women, on the other hand, rarely reported forms of expenditure from which they were the direct and personal beneficiaries. The interests of these women are subordinated along with those of their dependents. Paaru, now working as a supermarket cashier, reported that:

I use my money to buy groceries...rice, flour and potatoes for my children. If my children need pocket money I am the one who gives...not my husband. It’s been a long time since I bought clothes for myself...I don’t have money to buy $2 cloth material because I have to think of the children first. The jewellery and clothes that I wear, mostly I get donations from other people...I am not able to buy anything for myself.

The extent to which women earners have access to their wages for personal expenditure depends both on the degree of household poverty and participant’s age. For example, participants like Santamma, Saam Raji, and Guddi have full entitlement to the social welfare assistance they receive and yet they spend it on sweets for grandchildren and occasionally help in household groceries during financial hardships. Displays of ‘maternal altruism’ (Whitehead, 1981: 54) have often been part and parcel of women’s obligations to the family and frequently women in this study have subordinated their own needs and choices in fulfillment of what is expected of them as a mother and wife. Even where personal expenditures were reported, they tended to rationalise these in terms of work requirements. For example, Karuna pointed out that her clothing requirements have increased since beginning work as a housemaid because she needed to maintain a decent appearance and could not go to work wearing torn clothes.

Women’s greater tendency to subordinate their personal well-being reflected the same patriarchal ideologies which underpinned men’s greater tendency to make personal claims on household resources. Asking women about their own individual well-being as separate from that of their families was sometimes treated with bemusement. Women often went without new clothes on a regular basis to ensure that their children and working members of the family are well clothed. Men, on the other hand, are often under less social and cultural pressure to subordinate their basic needs to those of other

139 In effect, the needs of women are assumed to be, if not less than those of men, certainly of less importance; self-denial is still seen as ‘women’s special share of poverty’ (Land and Rose, 1985: 86). Male roles tend to be more independently constituted than female roles, and men are often able to make choices that lie outside any obligations to family and household welfare (Henn, 1983; Whitehead, 1981). Thus, the burden of poverty—of doing without and trying to make ends meet falls mainly upon women (see also Graham, 1987; Parker, 1987).

140 Some other scholars elsewhere argue that women are on average more altruistic than men because they have a less “separatist” self, or are socialized such that they are less willing than men to drive hard bargains (see literature reviewed in England, 1989); or that women are more oriented towards fulfilling collective (especially children’s) needs and men more oriented toward personal goods (Beneria and Roldan, 1987).
family members. Some of the participants have stated that their power vis-à-vis their husbands may decrease when they earn incomes of their own because husbands tend to keep more of their own incomes for personal expenditure while the women’s earnings go into paying for collective family needs. As Karuna stated:

My husband always used to spend his money on kava and tobacco...so I started work as a housemaid. And now he takes out some amount from his money then gives me the rest for food expenses. It is not good because...with that money I can buy more food for everyone.

Women have also been shown to worry more than their husbands about the everyday problems of managing food in the household, and are more prepared to ask for help, and to consider trading their activities that could generate income to buy food for the household. In my study Paaru reported, “when my husband stopped my work in town...I did a housemaid job in village. I got paid $7 cash and some groceries. Another time there was no food in the house and I sold a goat for $50...at that time my husband was fishing in the sea”. In such explanations of women’s desire to make life better for their children that we can see the complex and inseparable interweaving of love, altruism, tenderness, and self-sacrifice.

It is clear that women do exercise considerable agency as far as meeting the needs of their household members are concerned, but it is generally a defensive form of agency which leaves untouched the broader structures of constraint imposed by intra-household gender relations. In the words of Siez (1991: 26) ‘this is itself in part a result of unequal bargaining power; but it is also a product of social norms concerning rights and duties which may be internalized’.14 Urnila feels that “my husband should be more responsible as far as household’s welfare is concerned; and ever since I started working full-time my husband seems to have lost the initiative to do something around the house. Sometimes he even likes to stay home and not work for weeks”. Under these circumstances, instead of changing the social order, the experience of working may actually end up convincing women of the desirability of the ‘natural order of things’ (Shaheed, 1989: 37) where men provide for the family and women remain housewives. Ironically enough, it was Karuna being paid weekly wages for housemaid duties who said:

14 And when household members negotiate over work and consumption, they argue about what each deserves, which depends crucially upon social norms and perceptions concerning women’s and men’s contribution to household well-being and their entitlements or needs. For further discussion on these issues, see also, Agarwal (1992) and Sen (1985c).
I work too hard, my health is not good... I have asthma. I am fed up with my husband's irresponsibility... I run the home alone... he spends money on yagura and sometime he's too lazy to find work when the crushing season is over. But this is not the way things should be. A women's place is in the house... I need time for rest and for club activities.

Like their counterparts in South Asia, here too women do not view themselves as the primary or long-term breadwinners in their families, but expect to be supported by their husbands after marriage. They are subject to the same 'ideological assumptions about differences in male and female work capabilities which structure the labour market into sex-segregated categories' (Afshar and Agarwal, 1989: 11-12). Consequently, as a form of self-fulfilling prophecy, the constraints and social environment created by purdah and social norms help perpetuate and sometimes magnify its hold as an all-pervasive patriarchal ideology. The low level of outside work by these women is typical of their limited survival options, not lucrative enough to pull them out of poverty, nor sufficiently different in their context to seriously challenge existing ideological constructs. This also demonstrates that the sexual division of labour disadvantages women in 'bargaining within marriage by leaving them with little (or no) earnings to take with them if they left the relationship' (England and Kilbourne, 1990: 163-88). In the context of rural Indo-Fijian households, a striking feature of gender subordination is the extent to which women rely on male protection as much as they rely on male provision. Consequently, there is a social as well as an economic dimension to female dependence. It is therefore in most of my participant's perceived interests to retain intact their familial networks, but most of all, to retain some forms of male guardianship. This gives them a strong stake in cooperation rather than conflict as the basis of intra-household relations.

**Time-Awtonomy and Leisure Activities**

The list of capabilities proposed in this chapter includes the three main activities on which rural people spend their time (paid employment, domestic work and non-market care, and leisure activities). But I contended in Chapter Two that the core of gender inequality is the gender division of labour, in other words the gender division of time and responsibilities for paid employment, non-market work and leisure. The allocation of time within the household is usually a collective and not an individual decision and is influenced by individual, household and community characteristics (Agarwal, 1997; Robeyns, 2001). Feminist scholars such as Folbre (1994) have argued that the gender
division of labour is unjust and generally works against women’s advantage. Elsewhere, others have also drawn attention to gender differentials in time-use patterns, especially female concentration in unpaid household work, by arguing that a properly comprehensive measure, one incorporating valuation of household members time use, would reveal the gender inequalities starkly (Jenkins, 1991: 461)\textsuperscript{142}.

As seen in my previous discussions, notices of appropriate place and the proper activities of women and men in Indo-Fijian society, together with low formal female labour-participation rates, have resulted in a clear division of labour and separate male and female ‘spaces’, which associate men particularly with activities ‘outside’ the home and women with activities within it. Carswell (1998: 241) noted that a differentiating characteristic of the way rural women and men’s work is organised involves the fact that much of men’s work can be clearly located and temporalised as farm work. She further noted that men finished harvesting or working on the farm for the day and then relaxed in the evenings while women continued on into the night processing and cooking food, as well as caring for children and other household members. This is not to say that men were not involved in other tasks, but generally they had much more time to pursue leisure activities such as sport, or grog-sessions. I also found that men’s spare-time activities are often located outside the home in places such as village store and male grog sessions during social-get-togethers at other’s place. As Savita noted, “men like to relax with village friends by drinking grog...and they say because they work hard. It’s not good because they get drunk on house-money”. Jackson (1999: 103) noted that alcohol consumption appears in labourer’s words as necessary to numb the exhaustion of extremely hard work rather than an idling away of the housekeeping money (see also, Breman, 1996). Yagona drinking amongst the rural men is a very common problem in this area as discussed below.

\textsuperscript{142} On time use and poverty, see also Piachaud (1987a, 1987b). Elsewhere, another aspect of the quality of time spent on an activity is the way people experience that activity. Phipps et.al. (2001: 1-21) have shown that women in dual-career households face more time-pressure than their husbands. Even if their total work hours (paid and unpaid) are equal, the fact that women are more often responsible for domestic work that cannot be postponed generates more stress for them. The authors also argue that women’s time stress tends to increase because they have to cope with different sets of responsibilities and are subject to social norms that lay more responsibilities on them for the way the household is run or family members are publicly presented. This aspect of time-pressure was clearly seen in the section Domestic work and non-market care of this chapter.
Men on the whole have far more leisure time than women because their work hours do not have the same demarcations as women's. For example, Savita's husband outlined a man's routine when he was not harvesting cane; he also stated how hard women work:

Women's work is very hard, cane-cutting not easy life... man has to be up by 5 or 6 o'clock... reach farm around 6.30. Cut cane and load the trucks with cane. Have breakfast in the cane-fields. Reach home around midday, have lunch and rest. If no other work elsewhere... like weeding or planting on other's farm then I visit my friend's house for a grog-session... most afternoon and evenings.

Nonetheless, the activities of men should not be oversimplified and are dependent on age, status and responsibilities. Some of the grog sessions in the evenings were also meetings of cane harvesting gang committees, school committees and religious meetings. The younger males, especially those who were unmarried and therefore with fewer responsibilities, tended to have more time and inclination to play a game of soccer after harvesting. Religious activities such as weekly Ramayan recital and other festivals (see Chapter Four) could take up several evenings a week, in addition to the usual prayer gatherings. These are attended by both men and women and were very popular amongst Indo-Fijian men in the present study. Issues such as mobility and reputation discussed in previous chapters are relevant, as it is much easier for males to attend different activities and walk freely at night time. It is considered dangerous for girls and women to be out at night unaccompanied and only appropriate if there is a specific purpose such as a wedding or Ramayan recital. For these reasons, rural Indo-Fijian women find it more convenient to attend the weekly religious meetings of the women's club during the day.

Moreover, visiting friends in the evening is a common form of relaxation amongst men and often involved a few drinks.\(^{143}\) It was also a cause of tension as far husband's responsibility within the household was concerned. I found that yaqona has become a daily part of many rural Indo-Fijian men's lives and it is worth making a few observations here. On one hand, yaqona provides the sedative effect of relaxation after a day's work and some men will drink it by themselves for this reason. As with any 'substance', over-indulgence has its price and combined with late nights, grog induces people to sleep late and feel lethargic the next day. Paaru expanded on why women do not want a lazy man who drinks grog whole day:

\(^{143}\) The drinks were yaqona, daru (locally brewed rice whisky) or methylated spirits. These drinks are readily available and relatively cheap. Men would buy beer or what they referred to as 'hot stuff' that is spirits, from town if they could afford to.
My husband is a fisherman... when he is not fishing he spends the whole day with his friends... drinking yaqona, daru and smoking cigarettes. I don’t like this because he does not think about us... especially his children. He is always lazy and does not help me in the house... even when I built the new house. When he’s not fishing he does not find job somewhere... just drinks yaqona and sleeps.

This means the workload falls on other household members, especially women. Karuna notes the contrast in work routines in her experience:

I mean a woman does a lot of the work... like me, my day starts early and ends in the night... no rest during weekdays because I work as a housemaid all week... I do cooking early morning, and leave for work at 7 o’clock and come back 5 o’clock in afternoon... then I do washing, cleaning and cooking. When I have my bath, sometimes I’m too tired to eat at night and I sleep. My husband cuts cane for few hours in the morning and the rest of the time he is free... he grogs the whole day and goes here and there. He does not help me around the house.

It may also lead to increasing tension in the household, as grog-drinking habits become a contentious issue, particularly between wife and husband. In this area, it was not customary to eat before a grog session so a man may want his dinner at midnight and many of them expected their wives to get up and serve their food regardless of the hour. Providing daily meals and serving them to her husband was perceived as part of a wife’s duty, but not all wives were happy with the continual late nights and broken sleep. For example, Geeta whose husband died recently stated:

My husband drank too much kava and ate hot curry in the night after the grog session... with lot of chillies. When I use to stop him from drinking kava he got angry on me and said to me, ‘it’s not your money or your father’s money’ so he can spend it on kava as much as he likes.

But the amount of leisure time a woman had depended on her status and responsibilities within the household. An older woman can delegate tasks to her daughters and daughters-in-laws and is freer to go visiting. Maya mentioned this advantage when her two sons got married. Her daughters-in-law were able to take over some of her tasks, giving her more time to do vegetable gardening, take part in women’s club activities and also gave her greater mobility, as she was not so tied to the regimes of the household such as meal times. Kala Wati, on the other hand, with all her daughters married, an ailing mother-in-law, her husband cutting cane and working fulltime on the farm and no one else to help her is overwhelmed with work.

Women in this situation tended to work longer hours, from when they got up to the time they went to bed. I often observed that girls and women were constantly doing some form of work when it appeared they were sitting or relaxing, such as sorting through home grown rice for small stones and un-husked rice, sorting bundles of beans for sale, mending, making doilies for sale and so on. The actual number of hours women worked
was taken from the time diaries five participants kept, interviews and my own participant observation; and sixteen hours a day was common. There were rest times, usually after lunch in the hottest part of the day, and there were also occasions to visit neighbours and have a pyala (bowl) of tea. A lot of women’s socialising was done while doing tasks, particularly down at the creek washing, during preparations for religious festivals, wedding ceremonies or during school bazaars. In reply to questions about what they enjoyed doing, participants mentioned a range of activities such as listening to the local Hindi radio station, watching Hindi movies if they have access to VCR, taking part in women’s religious club activities, talking to other women, looking after grandchildren and tailoring.

There is a clear indication amongst these women that their spare-time activities are an extension of domestic routines, such as cooking, sewing, and gardening, embodying a ‘culture of domesticity’ (Pahl, R., 1980; 1984) in which the home is, for most women, both the location and focus of leisure activities such as ‘do-it-yourself’ repairs, decorating and refurbishment. Also indicative of the constant nature of women’s labour is the lack of clear delineation between one task and the next, and consequently the tendency to do simultaneous tasking. This is in contrast to the work that men do which generally focuses on one thing at a time and the freedom they have in controlling their own use of time. As Sangita’s commented:

Women do so much work but sometimes when I want to do something like take part in women’s religious club...my husband says no. He says I have to do so much work at home and that I should not waste time outside. One time my husband was very sick so I did most of the work. Men work hard but they do one job at one time but us women we like to do more tasks at once from the time when we get up until we go to bed.

Another classic example is when a woman is looking after her children, answering their questions and teaching them skills while she is working in the vegetable garden, tailoring and during preparation and cooking of food. There are also difficulties married women have in controlling their own use of time. For example, Paaru may decide to spend extra labour time helping other women in the village in their domestic chores for which she gets paid in cash or kind, but if her husband decides this activity is compromising her ability to cook him satisfying meals or that her additional cash and time spent with other women are making her too independent, he can deny her the permission to be mobile. The fact remains that asymmetry in time-autonomy and distribution of leisure activities within the household favours men and has some important analytical consequences for the following capability, discussed below.

152
Mobility and Social Relations

Relative to other capabilities, being mobile is an instrumental capability. But it can also be valuable in itself, since it enables movement between geographical locations. The earlier discussions have indicated that this capability has a gendered dimension. The institution of *purdah* is the lynchpin of a complex system of arrangements to ensure pre-marital chastity and post-marital fidelity of Indo-Fijian women. It minimises their contact with men outside the immediate family by its division of the world into sexually-segregated spheres. This section is structured around the patterns and linkages that emerged from listening to the voices of women about unequal power relations that limit women’s mobility, choice and also reinforce dependency on men.

The community norms and family pressures that continue to serve as a strong barrier to women’s mobility, visibility and autonomy are evident in this study as well. In the village settlement, the fear of gossip and of being labelled as sexually promiscuous serves as a strong deterrent to transgressing social norms and conventions. For example, Sangita stated:

> At my mother’s home I have so much love and care but after marriage at my in-laws I got a bad name and poverty. My father-in-law used to call me bad names...he said to my husband that I should not work because I am not doing usual work but maybe I had relations with other men. But despite bad names I had to work... when my husband got injured.

In some of these circumstances, however, earning a living may itself require breaking from socially favoured or accepted notions of femininity. Earlier accounts of my participants have shown that women are looked down upon by their husbands when they take up the provisioner roles upon the failure of their husbands. It makes these women morally responsible for the well-being and survival of their family. Again, rather than pay the high social price for transgressing the norms of chastity, these women adapt their method of functioning within the social boundaries of their marriage. For instance, Karuna continues to work outside her home despite initial hesitations from her husband and she said, “now my husband knows that I do not have an interest in other men but I want to work for family. And my husband makes sure I work in a house as housemaid where there are more women than men”. Any attempts to have contacts with male members of the community other than close family relations leaves these women open to accusations of sexual immorality.
On the other hand, forming, nurturing and enjoying social relations are an important capability in the context of mobility. Social relations, in the limited way I am using the term, concerns two main aspects: “social networks and social support” (Robeyns, 2003: 79). The social networks dimension relates to the number of people in one’s network, the frequency of contacts, group membership and so forth. The social support dimension focuses on the type and amount of support that one receives. Here I found that men had more extensive networks in the political and economic arenas, which they used to perpetuate their advantages in economic and public life. As noted earlier, men rather than women participate and hold positions in village committees (like temple and local school) and whenever a government official visits the local village it is the men who are the immediate contact points while women remain in the background providing hospitality services like tea, snacks or elaborate meals.

However, I also noted that women tend to have better ‘informal networks and social support’ (Fuhrer, et.al., 1999; Munch, et.al., 1997) though within the ‘female public sphere’. For example, women in this area commented that they have been helped by other women in the village in times of their difficulty by providing them with donations of food, cash, used clothes, pots and pans and also their emotional support. As Nirwani stated, “one woman...my good friend gave me a job as cane-cutter when my husband left. Other women in the gang also taught me how to cut-cane”. Similarly, Sangita noted that “friendship and talks with other women helped me locate casual work in the village”. For Paaru finding solace in the company of other women at the weekly religious meetings or otherwise meant she was able to forget about her domestic problems at home and have light moments in the company of her friends. Almost all these women managed to get some kind of support and help from outside their household. For some it has been their sole effort while for a few it was the efforts or social standing of their husbands in the community that made such help or support possible. Furthermore, getting help from outside the household in the male public sphere was much easier for elderly participants because of their age and seniority status within the community. As Santamma stated:

I am an old woman now so I go to places and visit my family without any problem. In the village, people know me as dai [midwife] and give me a lot of respect. I don’t have to worry about my izaur because I am old and there is little risk when I travel to different villages.

144 For further discussion on the kinds of help the participants get from their community see also Chapter Seven.
Therefore, age is also associated with greater spatial and social freedom as post-
menopausal women are no longer seen as an object of sexual desire and as such cannot
bring shame upon their families by appearing in public places. All of these ideas about
feminine roles coupled with differences in entitlements are another form of social
construction of physical realities that perpetuate gender inequality and limit
opportunities for women and their children, such as capability of education and
knowledge.

Education“a and Knowledge

Girls and boys have equal access to formal education, but gendered social norms and
traditions continue to make it more difficult for girls in this area to acquire knowledge
and have equal educational attainment.146 The gender gap in educational attainment
amongst the participants is largely a reflection of the underlying traditional gender roles
in rural Fiji, but it is also necessary to consider the way these gender roles are mediated
by economic and social factors. In this section, I will argue that socially sanctioned
rights, norms and expectations are extremely important in determining educational
outcomes and intra-household negotiations.

During the colonial period, Indo-Fijian girls were especially disadvantaged in access to
schooling. Education was, and still is, not compulsory and is costly for families in Fiji
(Leckie, 2000: 82). Economic pressures and gender stereotypes limit girls’ educational
opportunities. Indo-Fijian women had much lower literacy rates than indigenous women
and Indian men until the 1950s (Shameem, 1990: 411).147 Indo-Fijian parents’

145 Education is connected to the capability approach in a number of ways (Draze and Sen, 1990: 261-
262; Sen, 1990d: 55). First education can contribute directly to functioning through broadening a person’s
horizon of perception and thought. Second, it improves employability and can contribute to a better
distribution of income. Third, it can help in the conversion of incomes and resources into various
functionings and ways of living. Fourth, it can help in the intelligent choice between different ways that a
person can live. Fifth, it can increase a person’s ability to influence public policy and provision through
informed criticism and more articulate demands. Finally, education can contribute to the breakdown of
prejudice and discrimination that exists both within household and communities, partly by increasing the
bargaining power of the disadvantaged and deprived.

146 As discussed previously educational attainment is strongly correlated with gender and this section
further reveals that educational exclusion is related to a range of economic, spatial, social and cultural
structures and processes.

147 Shameem (1990) explored how Indo-Fijian women’s low status rooted in patriarchal family systems
has been utilised by the capitalist institutions via sugar plantation and industry during the colonial era in
preference to marry daughters by the age of fifteen continues to impede women’s education. Leckie (2000: 82) noted that in 1936, 84 percent of Indian women aged nineteen were married compared to 10 percent of indigenous women. Sixty years later participants like Savita observed little change in her vicinity:

My father said to me...girls would only be in school up to class eight (age thirteen) then stay home for two to three years, just learn cooking food and how to clean the house and other work. And when I turned seventeen, I got married.

Leckie (ibid.) further stated that the average age of marriage for Indo-Fijian women in 1989 was twenty, still lower than Indo-Fijian men (twenty-four) and indigenous Fijians (twenty-three for women and twenty-seven for men). Indo-Fijian women’s educational levels have risen markedly during past decades. For example, adult literacy rate for Indo-Fijian females in 1996 was 85.8 percent (Chandra and Lewai, 2005: 18), but as Savita and other participants have stated this may not necessarily translate into attaining a career. It is among the poor rural Indo-Fijian families that traditional gender roles are most likely to be maintained. Boys often help out in the fields before they reach the age of ten whereas girls take care of domestic responsibilities when they are slightly older. Participants have stated that as young girls they were the ones who took care of the livestock, collected firewood, fetched water, looked after younger siblings, prepared food and cleaned the house. As discussed earlier, there is little incentive for the family to invest in a girl’s education beyond achieving basic literacy because of patrilineality and the fact that girls marry outside the family.

Where a choice had to be made between educating the daughter or the son at the post-primary level it was the latter that were invariably the preferred choice. Parents of some participants were less likely to encourage their daughters to do well at school and at higher education compared with sons, as many think that a good job is more important for men than for women, and a good education can help young men secure better jobs because girls are married young. In these instances, households with few resources to

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Fiji. She argued that capitalism in turn took advantage of the sexual hierarchies the family created, using Indo-Fijian women’s greater docility, lower skill levels, temporary labour force status, and the like to offer them dead-end, and low-paying jobs.

148 There are sharp differences between urban and rural areas throughout Fiji in this respect, and these differences reflect not only class distinctions but also differences in family strategies of survival and mobility. For example, educational attainment numbers in secondary and post secondary studies for rural and urban Indians were as follows: rural secondary- 87, 011; rural post-secondary- 5597; urban secondary- 88, 751; and urban post-secondary- 17, 262 (1996 Census of Fiji, 1998: 201-202). In towns and urban centers it might be an investment for daughters to continue their academic studies because high school, college and university certification opens up wider employment opportunities and results in a reduction in the financial burden of marriage, but these factors rarely apply in rural villages in Fiji.
allocate to education and great need for the labour power of children strongly prefer to educate sons rather than daughters. Here, participants left school earlier than their brothers for a variety of reasons; either they were not doing well or they and/or their parents wished them to stay at home. Transport and financial difficulties restricted which schools girls could go to. Earlier accounts of my participants have also shown that their education was stopped because their fathers/elder brothers perceived them as both sexually vulnerable and impulsive, thus needing protection. Moreover, in this rural settlement girls were required to travel with chaperones or else risk violating social norms. Fear of sexual harassment of girls and women travelling independently reinforce such gender norms. For example, Muniamma stated that “my father feared that girls would be teased or harassed on the route to school and this was a constraint for my household because my father could not spare an adult to accompany girls to school”. Restriction on Indian women’s mobility in the public space also has an ethnic dimension as far as their safety and reputation is concerned. For example, sexual violence against Indian women was used as a weapon of terrorism in the aftermath of the coup in 2000. As Leckie (2002: 173) noted, the coups accentuated a chilling fear of ethnic violence which greatly restricted Indo-Fijian women’s spatial mobility.

While the women in the case study have not had the opportunity to pursue career ambitions, it still remains to be seen if their daughters will have more options. Parents’ aspirations for their children’s future work appeared to be based on a combination of the child’s academic achievements and the child’s own ambitions along with some projections from parents. When I asked women if they had any ambitions to have a career when they were at school, most of them said that they did and they either wanted to be teachers or nurses. Other popular choices for girls were clerical and retail

\[149\] All the participants in this study have lesser education than their brothers, except for Paaru but her having more years of schooling is attributable to the financial help from her teachers and not her father. Therefore, the fact remains that family’s gender structure in itself is a major obstacle to equality of opportunity.

\[150\] The Indo-Fijian farming families have been systemically terrorized, starting on the day of the coup, May 2000. Their houses had been looted, nearly all of their belongings taken and there had also been beatings and sexual assaults against women (FWCC, 2001: 10-12). A research report of the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre highlighted that teenage girls in rural areas were kept home from school out of fear for their safety and Indo-Fijian women were the target of rapes (mainly gang rapes) by Fijian men (ibid.). Though this report highlights that there were several cases of such rapes there is no statistics available on the number reported as crime. There is still a tremendous social stigma attached to women who have been raped and many women did not report the attacks because they did not want their families especially their husbands to know that it had happened (ibid.).
Jai Raji also pointed out that “when we have more poverty, my husband stopped school for my daughters...that time I did not say much...because he told me, daughters will marry soon and school is of no use for them”. Regretting all the missed opportunities in life, Savita mentioned that:

I cried a lot when my father stopped my school...I wanted to become a teacher after finishing my school. My father was very poor and also there was a transport problem to school. I also had to look after my sick mother and grandmother. But my brothers go to secondary school because you know; they are boys and could stay at my relative’s place in Labasa town.

Education was a major financial burden for all the families in this study and parents expected the girls to drop out of schools first when the family’s poverty situation worsened. Karuna commented that “my parents were very poor and the secondary school was far. When I finished Grade 8 my father did not want to send me to secondary school and he said I have to walk a long road alone...but my brothers went to school...up to Grade 10”. Therefore, when they were young, the participants’ parents invested more in their brother’s education as a source of old age security and these participants are doing the same.\(^{153}\) Perceiving that their future well-being depended on their sons - after all, their daughters would marry out – they responded by using the opportunities to improve their sons’ human capital in order to ultimately improve their own long-run security.

The results of this strategy of denying daughters to elevate sons were twofold. First, it increased the gap between participants and their brothers in their degree of personal autonomy. While parents gave their sons increasing freedom to develop the knowledge, skills and contacts to enhance their future earning potential, they sought to increase their control over daughters. The second result was increased inequality between participants and their brothers in access to strategic socio-economic resources - that is, education, a good occupation, income and property. Therefore, asymmetrical entitlements to education produce important differences in the trajectories by which different categories of household members become poorer. The gender dimension in poverty processes stems from women’s limited access to education and knowledge and their

\(^{153}\) Six out of eighteen participants are solely dependent on their sons for their old age support and security, while nine of these women are dependent on their husbands of whom two are dependent on both their son and husband. At least one participant is now solely dependent on social welfare allowance after the death of her husband recently. However, the most interesting case in this study was two participants who happen to have invested more in their son’s education are now dependent on their daughter and son-in-law.
disproportionate dependence on social norms. The failure to make a successful transition from the status of daughter to wife to mother, each status bearing specific claims on a male guardian and breadwinner, entails a specific diminution of women’s economic and social well-being. Securing education is usually a precursor to effective participation in active and economic life. Yet access to education is highly gender-biased. In this study it is evident that girls’ labour in the household is typically more valuable than boys’ labour and also it has to do with the family’s “investment strategy” for its own future security. Hence, the culturally determined gender roles affect what women can actually do and cannot do within the household.

**Bodily Integrity and Safety**

The capability of bodily integrity and safety is adversely affected when people experience personal violence, such as attacks on the street, domestic violence, rape, sexual assault or stalking. This capability also has a gender dimension: studies suggest that women bear a greater incidence of, and more severe sexual violence, than men, while men experience more physical violence of other kinds (FWCC, 1998a). Here I will only explore the dynamics of physical violence against women within the household and its manifestation of control, experienced and reproduced in the everyday relations of family life. For women in Fiji, the most common place of violent attacks is their home and most likely offender is their husband or partner (FWCC, 1998a; Fiji Police Crime Statistics Report, 1998). Quite a few of my participants have been either subjected to or threatened with violence at some time in their lives. I noted that married women in this area were beaten for a variety of reasons (i.e., not demonstrating

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154 Focusing on capability and not on achieved functionings implies that we do not need to be concerned about persons who have this capability but deliberately put their achieved functioning at risk. Boxers or rugby players are cases in point.

155 Violence against women and children in Fiji and the Pacific continues to be a tremendous problem. Fiji Police Force statistics show that domestic violence cases increased by 149% over a five year period from 1992-1996, at an average rate of 30% per annum (FWCC, 1998b: 1). Similarly, FWCC statistics show that 2799 women assessed the FWCC services in 1997 alone for problems of domestic violence in their homes (ibid). Domestic violence is not confined to any particular racial group and is quite prevalent amongst both Fijians and Indians. However, FWCC reports indicated that Indian women sought counseling and assistance more than indigenous Fijian women (FWCC, 1998a iii).

156 This is not to claim that all women are equally threatened by or subjected to physical violence throughout their different life stages. Lateef (1990: 48) noted that older women, that is, women with adult children are rarely subjected to physical violence. Rather, violence pervades the lives of young women, married, unmarried, and sometimes older women who have yet to consolidate their position in the household (ibid).
the required deference toward husband, not adequately performing their wifely duties, mothers-in-law inciting their sons to beat their wives).

The following case studies illustrate some of the reasons, context and nature of violence imposed on Indo-Fijian women. According to Sadhana the main precipitating factor in the violence was that: “When I ask my husband too many questions about other women and his affairs, he beats me”. On one occasion, Sadhana discovered from a few women in the village that her husband flirted with school girls and when she confronted him and demanded to know why he was doing that he started hitting her. For Paaru, whenever she worked in town her husband use to suspect that she was having an affair with someone and then he use to beat her. On another occasion Paaru said:

I got this money, donation of about $100 after the cyclone and my husband wanted this money. He always asks for money and when I said no he hit me hard and I fell against the wall and then he kicked me.

Furthermore, Tara and Muniamma were beaten by their husbands for not listening to their mother-in-law and speaking back or avoiding housework. From these case studies we can see that the precipitating factors for wife abuse are varied. Wives can be beaten by husbands for “talking too much”, for arguing with husbands or mother-in-laws, for not showing sufficient deference to husbands and in-laws, or for being suspected of adultery. Violence is also used by husbands to demonstrate anger and frustration, to keep women in their place and in control, and, most importantly, to assert and display their power and dominant status in the household.157

An explanation for wife beating rests in the nature of gender relations and the fundamental inequalities between husbands and wives that give males the power and privilege to beat wives. Quite a few of my participants explained their compliance with and lack of resistance to unpopular restrictions and constraints in terms of the fear of being subjected to physical violence by their husband. Statements like “keep quiet or get beatings, keep quiet to avoid further fight and don’t argue much to avoid fights” are common amongst wives in this area (Fieldnotes, 5th September 2004). The control of women through the use of physical violence is accepted, seldom questioned and even

157 Lateef (1990: 51) notes that if wives “talk too much” as defined by husbands or argue they are likely to receive a few slaps. The oft quoted threat of “buth bahth nikli ek japedh de ga” (if you talk too much I’ll give you a slap) frequently becomes a reality.
positively sanctioned by both males and females in Indo-Fijian society. Lateef (1990: 55) also noted that:

Small doses of violence are sometimes considered mandatory, especially for wives if they are to be kept in line and properly controlled. Both men and women believe that once wives experience the power of the husband’s hand all their future behaviour will be influenced by this experience. Without some violence wives are likely to get out of hand, misbehave, and develop mistaken ideas regarding “who is boss”. Men and women are often heard making remarks that women whose husbands treat them too easily have become spoiled.

Therefore, men who do not beat their wives, especially if their wives are perceived to be deviant in some way, are ridiculed by both men and women. In one case, where the wife had more freedom as far as paid work and mobility in public space was concerned, I found that her husband was ridiculed by other women as being ‘weak’. By recommending, accepting, and condoning physical violence, women are actively perpetuating the system of patriarchy. Women’s acquiescence and contribution to their own subordination clearly demonstrates the power and persuasiveness of traditional gender norms as well as the lack of socio-economic security women have outside their marriage. As Tara told her eldest daughter, “if I have suffered, then you also have to suffer just like an Indian wife...because you cannot leave your husband unless you become a widow like me”.

Children are one of the reasons for women’s reluctance to leave violent husbands, but there are also other reasons. Increasing unemployment, lack of job opportunities and the absence of an adequate state welfare system mean women are dependent on the family-based household system for their livelihood (see also Chapter Seven). The economic support provided by husbands is a powerful mechanism that ensures women confirm and actively work to perpetuate the system. Without this financial support women could easily be rendered destitute. Most of my participants have stated that they have nowhere to go since they are economically dependent on their husbands, and their families prefer that they remain married. Hence, women are often locked into violent relationships by lack of alternatives and a patriarchal ideology that stresses the permanency of marriage. Returning to their families of origin is seldom a viable option. Parents may have died or become economically dependent on their sons and brothers cannot be expected to support the additional burden of maintaining married sisters and their children. The

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158 Women regard men who do not occasionally slap their wives as being “under the wife’s thumb”. The English phrase “petticoat government” is particularly popular among middle-class men and women to refer to relationships in which the wife is assumed to be dominant and the male never subjects her to any violence (cf. Lateef, 1990: 55-56).
most commonly used quote amongst these women was “brother will support his sister for two good meals only and by the third one she will be kicked out by his wife” (Fieldnotes, 10\textsuperscript{th} September 2004). However, this does not mean that families never support women who desire to leave a violent marriage. Occasionally, women do return for a short period if their marriages are exceptionally violent, as was the case for Sadhana and Paaru. But along with social opprobrium which was attached to divorced or abandoned women, there was always financial considerations which constrained women’s ability to return to their natal homes permanently in the vent of marital disputes and breakdowns (see also Chapter Seven).

Hence, marriage is meant to be permanent and women’s suffering within marriage is part of the taken-for-granted world. As noted by Chandra and Lewai (2005: 141) women tolerate violence and often regarded it as acceptable behaviour. Additionally, most women fail to report violence against them as they lack the courage and support to report any case of abuse for the fear of loss of economic support, desertion and further violence. Participant’s material well-being and survival needs imply that they have to put up with their husband’s assaults over a period of time. Such choices represented an attempt by the women involved to re-assert some autonomy over their lives, often choosing to sacrifice their security over conformity of patriarchal norms, conventions and constraints. Another major reason for their decision to stay in violent marriages is the enduring influence of a powerful familial ideology that discourages divorce and praises women’s devotion and perseverance (see discussion in the next section).\textsuperscript{159} Women may choose to accept humiliating forms of dependence rather than seek compromises which might jeopardise their sense of dignity, well-being and self-respect.

\textsuperscript{159} Lateef (1990: 59-60) also notes that women who are divorced are regarded with suspicion and they receive little support from their families because divorce is viewed as shameful. The lack of support divorced Indo-Fijian women receive from their families is evident in the proportion of Indo-Fijian females, as compared with ethnic Fijian women, who receive welfare support from the Bayly Trust and Housing Authority Relief Trust (HART). HART villages around Suva city accommodate many divorced and deserted Indo-Fijian women whose destitute situation makes them eligible for housing (ibid.).
Being Respected and Treated with Dignity

Another capability included on my list is being respected and treated with dignity. Some feminists have argued that women are systematically devalued and not considered fully human (MacKinnon, 1982; Nussbaum, 1995). Earlier discussions have shown that an Indo-Fijian woman’s salvation lies in uncomplaining service to her husband and children irrespective of her husband’s character, failure to provide adequate economic support, or maltreatment. Total devotion, respect, obedience and service to husbands are viewed as the main functions of wives (Wadley, 1977: 124). In this section I will examine how the issue of “subservience” (women’s total deference and self-effacement) can be addressed by invoking functionings such as self-respect and dignity. However, it is important to understand gendered cultural and religious identities as more than mere effects of patriarchal power. It would be a mistake to see religious and cultural norms, practices and identities as nothing more than expressions of oppressive power, discounting the meaning that these phenomena have for women who enact them. Here I will argue that cultural and religious identities are also basic to how rural Indo-Fijian women articulate their ideas of a good life.

In Indian patriarchal discourses, the Indo-Fijian woman is constantly exposed to notions of femininity that replicate the characteristics of idolized Hindu goddesses such as Sita and Savitri of ancient mythologies and which are, in the modern age, reproduced in countless films, songs, television, everyday social practices and cultural traditions. Images of passive feminine identities such as the pure virgin, obedient wife, dutiful daughter, the chaste woman, unselfish and self-sacrificing (the ongoing production of ‘docile’ bodies) are reproductions of traditional repressive discourses of femininity (as discussed in Chapters Four and Five). Participants in this study are highly conscious of the images of womanhood that Indo-Fijian women are required to portray if they are to ‘protect their family honour’. As Urmila explains: “Indian women are looked badly upon if they have too much freedom...like me, I work in town and people think I have bad character”. For Urmila, Indian women are required to be highly orthodox in their behaviour and mobility in order to gain respect. Conscious of the double standard of sexual behaviour in Indo-Fijian culture and the stigma attached to women who have contacts with other men apart from husband, Geeta says that such women face being labelled as “bajada”[bitch, or as loose]. The notion of honour (izzat) and the potential to

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react in defence of one’s honour emphasise the shared aspect of the self. Thus ‘to lose face’ means to be no longer able to live with an image of the self in harmony with others in the community. For Tara, social expectations border on being “perfect” and “decent” and this image of women is encapsulated in this quote of hers: “not talk too much, not talk loudly to husband and in-laws, not go anywhere without asking for husband’s permission, always stay home and look after children”. From these descriptions, it is apparent that women in this study are not only conscious of the images and norms of femininity that their culture promotes but are also aware of the restrictions that this repressive notion of femininity impinges upon them.

I also found that participants seldom neglected the many norms associated with attributes of their personal identity as a good “Hindu wife” that structure paramount social relations in the household and in the community. For example, Paaru continues to live with her abusive and irresponsible husband because she feels she is socio-economically secure in her marriage and in the community. There were a number of occasions when the participants mentioned why it was better for them to stay with their husband and his kin and not leave him to stay with their natal family or other men because of the respect and well-being attached to their marital status not just in the husband’s community but also in their natal kin. Hence, deeply-entrenched rules, norms and practices which shape social relations within the household and outside influence women’s behaviour, define values and shape choices. Participants were given greater respect within their community for conforming to its norms of a ‘dutiful’ wife and ‘self-sacrificing’ mother, and were penalised if they failed to conform. Indo-Fijian women’s honour is not only about providing their husbands with the freedom to move around and hold their heads high, but also about the need for code of servility to rule their lives. Hence, the source of dignity for women in traditional societies like this study is based on the perception that women are qualitatively different from men and each other. Here the issue of women’s ‘servility’ can be addressed by invoking the functionings of self-respect and dignity.

Women in this study thus achieve a form of social status or prestige by becoming less like men physically, sexually and socially. Indian women’s honour and dignity is related both to conformity to prevailing social norms and to the realisation of social ideals. *Sārīvīta* embedded in religio-cultural notions of femininity is, in fact, deployed by
these women to halt losses, as a way of trying to generate some value. As Radner commented:

Feminine culture emphasizes a process of investment and return, of negotiation, in which the value of a given articulation of pleasure is always measured against its costs, the inevitable price of an invitation that is never extended freely, never absolutely, the terms of which change from day to day, from place to place (1995: 178).

Therefore, women's investments in sativta (femininity) via the institution of marriage and their religio-cultural role of a subservient wife and mother may allow them to accrue some profit whilst being simultaneously devalued in other arenas like the labour market and education system. Earlier discussions in the chapter suggest that women involved in these practices often are disadvantaged in functionings of health, education, paid employment and leisure activities. However, these women nonetheless possess knowledge concerning how practices such as sativta fit into their cultural values, aspirations, and ideas of the good life. What is interesting about my research participants is that despite their disadvantaged positions within the household, women continue to hold religio-cultural values of sativta with an understanding that a portrayal of outright personal independence from their family and community may further disadvantage their well-being in the long run. This means that women may have a capability set that offers them considerable opportunity while still being 'servile', because women are dependent on their family and community to realise these opportunities.

Some feminists have pointed out that the choices that women make as an individual person are often shaped by their group identities in the family and/or community; and the household/family relations subsume these choices under duty, obligation, responsibility, self-respect, altruism as well as love and emotional attachment (see also Agarwal, 1994a; Iversen, 2003; Kabeer, 1999). For instance, women in this study have commented that their social status at their in-laws was always about the obsession with motherhood. Even though they may not be happy or content in their lives as married women, they attain respectability and status through marriage and childbirth. As Thapan (2003: 77) noted, marriage is essential to women's "sense of self-worth, and having a fully functioning body is essential to their role as wife and mother": Infertility, or failure to bear sons, both of which are often blamed on women, frequently provide grounds for men to leave their wives and many women dreaded this fate. The fate of a divorced young woman is hard as it is difficult for a 'used' (non-virginal) woman to remarry. And the family's needs to protect her honour while unattached means that she
will probably have to return to live as an appendage in her paternal home. Lateef (1990: 47) noted that familial ideology is reinforced by the higher status of married women over unmarried women, women with children over childless women, women with sons over those without sons, and older women over younger women. As Sukh Dai stated: “women who cannot bear children at all, or who do not bear a family that includes boys, feel incomplete and unfulfilled”. In this sense, a woman’s body fulfilling the cultural duties of a mother and wife becomes an important source of pride, self-esteem, and honour for many Indian women in Fiji.\textsuperscript{160} As seen above, participants have little education and fewer opportunities for economic independence but the only form of resistance open to them may be self-sacrifice (see also Liddle and Joshi, 1986). Hale (1989: 376) noted that:

> Women live these contradictions in their everyday lives and so maintain the illusions of male superiority. They “put on a helpless act” to reduce male opposition and so to gain some cooperation. They hold themselves back so as not to outdo their husbands; they sacrifice their own needs so that their husband’s needs come first. Women literally become two-faced, maintaining the pretence of subordination so that the myth of their husbands’ superiority can be sustained.

The principle of sacrifice can make a ‘wasted life’ seem worthwhile and through self-sacrifice women passively resist their oppressors by withholding themselves. Hence in explaining why these women accept the ideologies which in fact legitimise subordination, I concur with Abu-Lughod’s (1986: 104) argument that voluntary deference to those in authority is the ‘honourable mode of dependency’. These examples explain that religious and cultural identities are not only forms of constraint and exclusionary power but also positive sources of meaning and affiliation. Total resistance entailing the rejection of marriage and family structure may be the last option that women in this study adopt but self-sacrifice involving a more overt form of struggle does offer capacity for compromise, negotiation and bargaining.

In applying the capability approach we need to incorporate other values and needs that are important to the well-being of rural women, apart from freedom. The above

\\textsuperscript{160} As one older woman put it to me: “Education is good, but women are weak. No matter how much money they have, no matter their education, they cannot manage without men. You have to start your own family”. This statement accurately reflects the dependence of women on men, a dependence that also correlates with their segregation from public life. The pursuit of my PhD degree and an academic career further heightened the personal war that I have been trying to struggle with since I got married. I remember visiting my in-laws home en-route my second fieldwork in Fiji (2004) which turned out to be the most emotionally challenging encounter for me during my PhD journey. Here, I realized that my pursuit of the PhD degree had no significance in their lives and was always pushed to the background when compared to the motherhood status of my sister-in-law.
discussion shows that Indo-Fijian women’s explicit stress on religious and cultural values are as important as freedom, values that are also means and ends to their well-being outcomes. This requires recognition of different capabilities as valuable in their own right, not simply as examples of freedom. Women avoid resisting restrictive constructions of womanhood partly on the basis of the competing aim to secure recognition for religious and cultural identities and commitments that provide them with moral, spiritual and aesthetic meaning (see also Chapter Seven). The challenge for the capabilities approach, then, is to appreciate the meaning and significance of people’s religious and cultural identities and to analyse how these identities are intertwined with social processes and unequal power relationships that often oppress women within the household and outside. It is this conceptualisation of women as agents in the context of family and community relations that not only offers options and strategies to women but also has implications for their well-being. Therefore, to explain women’s struggles concerning such things as “proper” gender norms, we need to grasp the cultural underpinnings of their assumptions and convictions about gender, including how their ideas about gender are bound up with their religious and cultural identities. We also need to comprehend theoretically how women’s religious and cultural identities are themselves shaped by the social arrangements, power relations and structures of domination outside the household.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I examined the capability approach and how it applies in the context of individuals and families, living together on unequal terms. The above analysis of intrahousehold negotiations and gender inequality explored how householders negotiated resources and opportunities and envisioned strategies. The households were internally differentiated in access, control and allocation of resources and opportunities. Throughout this discussion, participants’ experiences and comments on the intrahousehold negotiations provided glimpses of ‘who gets what and why’, and ‘who does what in the house and outside’. In other words, as I observed inequalities in the capability list of outcomes between men and women, it became apparent that they did not have equal opportunities in the first place. In effect, domestic power imbalances restricted opportunities for women more than men. The analysis also showed how
domestic power imbalances generated inequality in achieved well-being indicators highlighted in Chapter Two.

In the light of the prevailing discussion, it is important to note that traditional patriarchal ideologies and sexual division of labour persists and it sustains a gendered distribution of resources, opportunities and social power that favour men at the expense of women. Women caught in the poverty trap are faced with conflicting choices between survival needs and their social status and acceptability within the community. As a result, we see there have been trade-offs between acceptances of religio-cultural identities and developing other capabilities that women might value, such as having freedom of mobility, undertaking paid work, pursuing education and having more bodily integrity and safety. My analysis so far indicates how certain cultural patterns of valuation perpetuate women’s subordination through broader social structures and power asymmetries within the household. But my case studies also demonstrate that the gendered norms and practices embedded in religious and cultural traditions and identities are not reducible to, or merely expressive of, gender inequality. As Ruth Bloch (1993: 95) says, such gendered norms and practices are simultaneously expressive of such things as “demands for spiritual fulfilment, aesthetic pleasure, identities of dignity”. Therefore, the challenge for a social evaluation of women’s well-being underlying the capability approach is to register and take seriously the interpretations and evaluations of these women as agents in the context of family and extra-household relations. The next chapter broadens out from intra-household relations in this respect to look at how such ‘outside’ parameters entail further complexities in women’s daily struggles of survival and poverty.
Chapter Seven

Women’s Capabilities: Bargaining Options beyond the Household

Sangita: “We come from our father’s house to live in our husband’s house. If we mention our name in this house, they say, ‘oh, that is another family’. Yet when it comes to working, they say, ‘What you earn is ours, because you are in this family’s house’, or ‘because you are working on this family’s land’. In our husband’s family, we are known as the wife of our husband, daughter-in-law, and mother to our children. All these years we have known ourselves as no more than that” (Comments by participant, 22nd August 2004).

Introduction

Notwithstanding the attractive properties of the capability framework, a central tenet of my argument in this chapter is that, in interpersonal comparisons, it is necessary to recognize that capabilities often have a distinctly interdependent dimension. Such interdependencies are pronounced not only within the realm of the household, where extensive conflict often coexists with pervasive cooperation but also outside the household. While sharing and caring distinguishes the domestic from other arenas of exchange, the focus of this chapter will be on how domestic (intra-household) power imbalances generate inequality and constrain women’s opportunities outside the household. In Chapter Six I highlighted the use of the capability approach (through a capability list) which facilitated inter-personal comparisons of opportunities and well-being among individuals and families. But this chapter sheds light on why and how women’s intra-household capabilities are interconnected with their position and options outside the household.

The purpose of this chapter is to firstly, examine the validity of the positive relationship between female agency and women’s well-being. Secondly, explore the factors that influence women’s life choices and their position, such as their personal attributes (human capital), personal property, interpersonal skills in bargaining and negotiation, social norms and perceptions about gender identity, social support and network (social capital), societal and parental expectations and religious values. I have noted at various points in the previous chapters that women’s bargaining power within the household is
associated with their situation outside it. Although, as mentioned earlier, some discussions of household bargaining recognize that the ‘extra-household environmental parameters’ (McElroy, 1990) impinge on intra-household bargaining power, we need to go beyond mere recognition to examine how such parameters can themselves be bargained over.\footnote{Folbre (1997), in her discussion of ‘gender-specific environmental parameters’ and Agarwal (1994a) appear to be among the few who, in different ways, have engaged with this question.} Outside the household, gender interactions take place in several arenas, of which four are especially important, natal family, community, religious forum and other extra-household parameters (via the state and NGOs). The bargaining perspective outlined in Chapter Two can usefully be extended to characterise gender interactions in these arenas as well and as a backdrop for discussion of the capability approach.

\textit{Property Inheritance and Relations with the Natal Family}

Chapter Two discussed in detail how individuals are endowed with well-defined commodity entitlements and that individual and social characteristics influence the conversion of these commodities into functionings. This is particularly important in the context of poverty and capability deprivation where households or families are largely dependent on their physical assets, especially arable land, to convert into well-being functionings. The key factor which appears to determine women’s relative bargaining power within households is their access to resources. In this section I will shift the focus from the property involved to the specific position women take up or find themselves in and from property as a material resource to property as a social relation. In order to do so, I will examine the strategies women adopt with respect to inheriting property which vary from renouncing their rights to actively claiming their share in the natal kin. The material presented here indicates that in order to understand women’s inheritance strategies it is important to focus on a complex web of gendered social relations: position with respect to kin, marital status and division of labour.

As discussed in Chapter Six, women clearly have much lower access to productive resources than men. This is often culturally justified by the claim that women acquire property through husbands while men directly inherit from their natal families. In Indo-
Fijian society land tenure was, and remains, predominantly patrilineal; women's access to land is accomplished primarily through activating use rights to her husbands' land. However, empirical evidence in Chapter Six showed that while men routinely inherit family property, women do not always succeed to their husbands'/in-laws' property either formally or informally. Women's best chances of owning property were as owners of the house or as widows and as daughters in sonless families. For example, participants like Tara, Muniamma, Santamma, Sukh Dai, Geeta and Guddi inherited their husband's farm and/or house in their capacity as widows. As daughters, women's claims appear to enjoy little social legitimacy, and the greatest likelihood of daughters inheriting is still in sonless families, usually involving post-marital residence as witnessed in Nirwani's case. In fact, as widows, women's claims enjoy somewhat greater social legitimacy than their claims as daughters. For instance, the perception that an Indo-Fijian widow has a right to a share in the deceased husband’s land appears to be fairly widespread.

However, the extent and nature of rights that a widow enjoys in her husband's land and house are contingent in practice on a variety of factors, such as whether or not she remains single and chaste; whether she has sons and her sons (if any) are minors or adults; whether the deceased husband has partitioned the joint family farm before his death, and the support from their natal family. Under traditional Hindu law, a widow usually loses her right if she remarries, is unchaste or leaves her husband's village on his death. As seen in the accounts of Geeta, Tara and Santamma (see Chapter Five), purdah is one manifestation of a much more general control exercised over women's sexuality so that these participants could still maintain inheritance links with their deceased husband's kin. Geeta, with a minor son, is usually allowed the use of her husband's house and the surrounding land as a trustee on behalf of her son till he grows to adulthood, after which she is expected to live with him. In such cases, a widow whose husband had not separated from the joint farm before his death is likely to be given only user rights to a part of his share without any legal ownership to that parcel of land. In this case, she would still have a relatively independent position through de-facto control of her husband's land. For widows, even more than in the case of daughters, it is social relations rather than access to property that really count.
Against this backdrop, it is necessary to emphasise that the widespread disinheritance of Indian women as daughters is a critical gender disadvantage which cannot be made up even if women's rights as widows are fully recognized. Unlike men whose rights to property are mostly affected by class, age, or birth order, women's ownership and access to property is strongly mediated by their gender and marital status. Through marriage Indo-Fijian women are able to enjoy and even inherit affinal family resources, which is the usual path for women to acquire property. However, because of patrilineal customary land tenure system under which conjugal contracts are negotiated, women forfeit claims to natal family property when they marry. Hence, once disinherited as daughters, most rural women for the major part of their lives would have no land of their own, while males, whose inheritance claims as sons are well recognized, would. This places women in significantly weaker bargaining position vis-à-vis men, both within and outside the family. Therefore, these participants had nothing but doubtful security of their temporary huts or a farm in these rural settlements, and perhaps token control over small parcels of rural land only as widows.

In contrast, some women were able to have land-use rights of their current house-site through direct negotiation with the landowner. Women like Guddi and Santamma have deliberately sought individual ownership because of their own responsibility for taking care of family needs upon the death of their husbands. When Guddi's husband became ill, she became a victim of foul play by a rich farmer from the village who took her husband's farm by fraud. After her farm had been taken, Guddi was left with nothing, not even a small area for vegetable gardening. Guddi told me that: "I am a strong woman with my will and I don't accept things that easy. I also don't give hope easily. If I give up then we have no house to live in today". Through the support and encouragement of other villagers, Guddi refused to move from her land. The farmer ultimately lost hope and could not compete with Guddi's strong willpower to save her family from becoming homeless. Similarly, when Santamma's husband died, she lost her farm and house-site because of some foul play by a farmer in her village. She said:

I was in so much worry and pain after my husband died. And I also lost my house and farm. I cried for days and I was not feeling good for a while. There was no one I could turn to or rely on because my parents had already died and my brothers were not willing to help because they had their own families to look after.

Santamma had to move from one place to another looking for temporary shelter and then finally she managed to negotiate a piece of land for her children through a village elder. Furthermore, participants like Tara, Paaru and Sangita struggled to have a semi-
permanent place to stay. When their land lease expired, these women made sure that they personally paid a visit to the Fijian landowner to negotiate with him for continued occupancy of their present house and land on a temporary basis. In hindsight, this friendly gesture had to be reciprocated by these women in other ways. Tara told me that: “I talked to the owner and so I can now stay here. But sometimes I also have to give chicken and duck in return”. Paaru also spoke to her landowner so that her husband’s threats of physical violence and his ownership claim of the house could not constantly be used to frighten Paaru and her efforts to build a new house. For these women who were unlikely to inherit family property directly, even the relatively insecure ownership signified by the negotiation with the landowners constituted an enduring step in safeguarding their families’ living conditions. These apparently different ways of distributing property all had one thing in common: the safeguarding of property for male heirs. Thus, Indo-Fijian women’s best chances of having control over property were to have informal rights to stay or de facto power over joint property as temporary residents or widows. However, these possibilities throw a different light on the issue of women’s agency and distribution of economic resources. I have cited evidence that individual women can, and do, act against the norm, by making strategic choices which determine their inheritance rights.

Renegotiation of power relations, particularly within the family, is often a common route by which some of my participants were able to acquire land. In sharing the family farm between sons, the issue of managing the mother’s farm was dependent on the negotiating strength of the daughters-in-law and this played a major role in the distribution of household resources in an extended family. Jai Raji recounted:

Being a mother of six children was a good thing for me despite the burden of childcare and household chores because in those days, my mother-in-law used to be so happy with me. She allowed my husband, as the eldest son, to manage the 10-acre land which she owned after the death of my father-in-law.

When Jai Raji’s husband managed the farm, it was a good source of money for her household and they managed to build a better house with a cement floor and corrugated iron walls. Jai Raji capitalised on her ‘motherhood’ status in getting favours from her mother-in-law, which increased the poverty of other daughters-in-law of the family (in this case, Kala Wati and Ram Rati). Having said that, Jai Raji’s mother-in-law has been quite argumentative in the past and she has been moving from one son’s house to another along with the transfer of her farm management. For example, when Jai Raji experienced some rough times with her mother-in-law, the situation was capitalised by
Kala Wati (youngest daughter-in-law), who quickly came forward to support her mother-in-law. Since then Kala Wati maintained good relations with her mother-in-law and she looked after her mother-in-law as an obedient daughter-in-law. Kala stated that:

I am willing to look after my old mother-in-law till she is alive because she is quite old now. I have always been good to her. Being good to her helped in the end because now my husband has the ownership of the 10-acre farmland. When we moved our house to this farm at the end of last year, I insisted that mother-in-law come with us because I don’t want to have a title of a cruel daughter-in-law who took the land and now is not willing to look after her mother-in-law.

While such de-facto ownership was not the predominant means of property devolution, women’s rights to property as widows did represent their best opportunities to secure old-age support and resources. The significance of this mode of property access for women is that it represents a culturally sanctioned space of agency for women that far exceed their legal entitlements. Hence, a widow’s inheritance rights are socially recognized, as she is not condemned for claiming her share, while a daughter’s claim in her father’s land is often censured.

What then prevents women from claiming their shares, especially as daughters? Typically, Indo-Fijian women give up their claims in parental land in favour of their brothers, for a complex mix of reasons. Participants’ explanations for this have a common refrain across the settlement. As Savita says:

If a brother and sister are on good terms then...it’s good for me. When my father died my brothers looked after me and my sisters. They looked after the family farm...it’s good. When they visit me they bring food and vegetables. I don’t ask them for money because once I married...I am on my own with my husband. But my brothers help me when I have problems...one time I wanted to buy a rice cooker so they gave me money...but I had to pay back the money borrowed.

Other participants expressed very similar views:

A sister gives up her claim to keep the passage to her parents’ home open. After all, brothers also have family. If sister claims the land, then she will only have land. But if she

162 As seen earlier (see Chapter Six), for participants like Gudli and Santamma land inheritance in their capacity as widows did not guarantee them the support of their sons in old age. Instead we saw that these women currently cohabit within their youngest daughter’s household.

163 An Indian woman, right from her childhood, has been and continues to be brought up in the tradition of being ‘paraya dhan’ (someone else’s property or wealth). In the context of this study, generally married off young, women never look upon their natal home as their own, nor their father’s property as anything but their brother’s; their descent group is not that of their father, but their husband’s. Indian women are considered and consider themselves as belonging to another descent group, so intrinsically no rights to their natal family are accepted. Women’s paraya status is made clear in the marriage rituals. For example, the entire concept of *kanyadan* (gift of a virgin) is an intrinsic part of the wedding ceremony among Hindus in Fiji. The *kanya* is gifted to her husband and thereafter the entire responsibility of her is transferred from the father to the husband and his family. The father then has no further rights on her, only duties. This cultural ideology therefore reinforces the severance of woman from her natal home and inheritance claims.
maintains good relations with her brothers, she will have a constant flow of gifts each time she visits them or they visit her. Also if a woman takes her claim, her brother’s wife will refuse to invite her home or speak to her (Fieldnotes, 24th April, 2003).

The crucial importance these women place on their relationships with brothers and on access to their natal homes can only be understood in the context of their overall life situations: patrilocal residence, economic, social and physical vulnerability in case of marital discord, ill-treatment, and marriage break-up or widowhood. Access to the natal home can be a significant element in women’s economic security as a fall-back position, and brothers are a critical link to the natal home when the parents are alive, but especially after their deaths.164 Then a brother’s home becomes the woman’s natal home. For example, Savita stated that: “my brothers were responsible for arranging my marriage when my father died and for maintaining the tradition of gift-giving to the married sister and her children when I visit them or on ceremonial occasions”. In fact, Indo-Fijian woman’s access to her brother’s home is seen as a right, and women normally exchange their inheritance in land for a continuation of this right. Deferring their claims, as White (1992:131) notes, allows women to keep some material stake in their natal family without souring relations there. While brothers have a duty to look after their sisters, the waiving of land rights by sisters in favour of brothers gives a material basis to a moral entitlement. The necessity for such an exchange reflects women’s subordinate status within the community. However, disinherition also gives them a resource to bargain with in a situation in which they have few other resources.

Agarwal (1994a: 264) notes that emotional and ritual ties apart, a brother is expected to provide economic and social support. Brothers (even younger ones), and natal kin in general, are seen as women’s potential protectors. In Indo-Fijian society, this is ritualised in festivals such as raksiha-bandhan (literally the knot of protection) and this is symbolised by sisters tying a rakhi (thread/knot) on the brother’s right wrist. The parental home (and after the parents’ death the brother’s home) often offers the only possibility of a temporary or longer-term support in case of divorce, misfortune (physical injuries), desertion and even widowhood, especially but not only for a woman without adult sons. Her dependence on this support is directly related to her economic and social vulnerability. Economically, limited access to personal property (especially in the form of productive assets), illiteracy, limited training in income-earning skills,

164 These factors vary in strength across communities and regions (which is not the scope of this study), and with them the criticality of the brother’s support in a woman’s life, the situation described below being especially applicable to rural Indo-Fijian settlements.
restricted employment and other income-earning opportunities, and low wages for available work, can all constrain women’s access to earnings and potential for independent economic survival. Socially, women’s vulnerability is associated partly with the strength of the prevailing ideology of female seclusion (see discussion in Chapters Four and Five), and partly with the extent to which social stigma is attached to widowhood or divorce. Both these factors vary in strength by class, community and individual circumstances of women (as discussed below). Although a woman may be somewhat less vulnerable if she has adult sons, a brother’s home can be a social and physical refuge if she has none. Sadhana presented an account of her brother coming to her rescue in times of social crisis in her marriage:

When my husband fights and hits me my brother always comes to help me. I am always welcome at my brother’s place for a short while, but not for long periods…after some time I go back because of my children. One time with my brother’s help I also reported to police when my husband hit me. And from that time all the fight between me and my husband have stopped. I am happy now.

Often, a sister whose marriage has dissolved, or who has been widowed, may be welcome in her brother’s home for a short while, but usually not for extended periods.

As discussed earlier, where status considerations and female seclusion practices preclude women’s active labour contribution, and/or where widowhood and divorce carry a strong social stigma, the returning sister is viewed as an economic burden at the brother’s residence. Her presence is also a source of potential conflict with the sister-in-law over household management and in the decision-making process. Common sentiments were expressed by participants to illustrate this:

While short visits...are sweet...long or permanent stays can become bad for the relationships at brother’s home. (Paaru)

Happy meal available for the first few days but not welcome for subsequent meals that follow. (Sangita)

I can stay in my eldest brother’s house for some time but his wife will not like this. I will not be treated good in his house for long. (Sukh Dai)

When I was not married, my mother used to tell me...you have to marry soon, otherwise when your bhabhi [sister-in-law] come into the house, you will be like a servant to your brother’s wife. (Tara)

Although brothers are morally obliged to take sisters in should she be forced to leave her husband’s home, these women often felt unwelcome and pressured to leave at the earliest. Such strategies reflect a certain degree of caution on the part of women – a strategic virtue in situations where they may have as much to lose from the disruption of social relationships as they have to gain. Thus, marriage functions as one of the few viable (if indirect) ways to get both immoveable property and social approbation, while
being outside the marriage is both materially and ideologically an extremely vulnerable position for most of these women.

Claiming a share in parent’s land in itself presents a crucial means of economic security for women in poor households. But claiming or not claiming poses a painful dilemma. In such circumstances, the disinheriting of a daughter and the consolidation of wealth in the son’s hands also had substantial economic consequences, the most obvious being marked disparity in living standards between brothers’ and sisters’ families in addition to the gap in assets among individuals. Participants noted that their brothers tend to have the ownership of the family house and land. Not receiving natal family property appeared disadvantageous for the woman because of her resultant dependence on the husband, a dependence exacerbated by the statistical likelihood of her earning less or no income of her own than the men in the paid workforce. Indo-Fijian women’s feelings about natal property revealed a complex mix of fears and strengths, pragmatic indifference and generous assistance, love and alienation. For example:

A brother can protect and always help in time of need. After all, a husband is only a garment which a woman puts on or throws off again, or she can be “thrown off”. But brother is one who is always there. (Sadhana)

My brothers need the land because they have to take care of their wives and children. Women themselves can do without, as our husbands provide for us. (Kala Wati)

I think it is a shame for a woman to ask about her share in the family land. People say a woman is not thinking about her brother(s). So I remain silent and I am too shy to ask. (Savita)

Most participants expressed similar sentiments underlining that a daughter reaffirms and strengthens her ties with her brother by leaving her share to them, ties that are of great importance to women. Women themselves point out that it is not the nature of the (landed) property, but rather that of kin relations which is relevant. After marriage women continually tend to identify with their own kin and feel a special closeness to their natal household, as well as being dependent on their male kin for their economic security. By not claiming her share, a woman enhances the status of her brothers and by implication he owns and accentuates their obligations towards her. A woman’s inheritance rights are widely recognized and refraining from claiming these rights places a brother in a position of obligation vis-à-vis his sister. If, on the other hand, a woman demands her share in the family land, her kinship ties with her brothers may well be disrupted and she may no longer be able to invoke their help and support. While claiming one’s property rights is not always an indication of power, neither does refraining from claiming one’s share necessarily mean giving up all rights of ownership.
As daughters/sisters, participants adopt the latter strategy as they identify emotionally with their kin. Being ultimately dependent on them for their socio-economic security, it may actually make sense for women to do so in order to highlight their kin’s obligations towards them. Not claiming one’s inheritance rights can, in fact, be seen as an optimising strategy. In considering the connections between inheritance and factors like long-term financial help, women in this study demonstrated a process of cultural sense-making in which they weighed their realistic possibilities of intervention against financial options. Gifts from natal home along with the ‘protection’ promised through marriage were the safest economic route, whereas radically different actions could leave them too vulnerable. For example, Geeta said:

When my husband die it has become more difficult because even a short visit by male relatives to my house mean bad name for me in the village. We women become bad and no one will blame the men. People may think I call men to my house when my husband died, so that’s why I spend the night with my children at my in-laws house.

The high moral tone of Geeta and other widow participants underlines women’s self-assertion and attempt to re-establish their self-esteem and identity so that the material links in both their husband’s and natal kin and community could be maintained for good.

Admittedly, women in this study argue that they do not claim their inheritance share as their brothers have to provide for their own households. Yet they also point out that they prefer to do so since it enables them to still call upon the support of their kin vis-à-vis their husbands. If women had really opted for conjugality they would have taken their share in their father’s land and handed it over to their husbands whose marital power would be enhanced. In this sense, holding on to the strategy of refraining from claiming one’s inheritance may be seen a the best option available in a delicate balancing act where women try to optimise the room for manoeuvre which exists in this particular gender and kinship system. It does, however, leave women dependent on their male kin, who may in the end not be very dependable, and increasingly less so with changing forms of livelihood which encourage greater reliance on marital status. Shifting the focus from property as a material resource to property as a gendered social relation thus helps to gain insight into the complexities of the relations between property, power, gender and women’s agency.
Fighting for Respect and Resources in the Community

An important aspect of women's bargaining power in a rural community is that the outcome of negotiations may be affected by intra-local discourses of entitlement and competition between households of 'who gets what through what sorts of help'. There can be conflict between individual women and the community over community norms which dictate social behaviour. Like gender relations within the household (see Chapters Five and Six), relations within a community can also be characterized as relations of cooperative conflict within a bargaining framework of analysis. I will argue that implicit or explicit bargaining can occur between individuals within a community over the rules governing social behaviour and over enforcement of those rules. In the following discussions, I explain how local understandings of entitlement get translated into individual politics of bargaining for community's limited socio-economic resources.

Participants stated that community membership provided them with a range of economic support (jobs, credit, help in a crisis), and social support (for marriages, illnesses, death) which are denied to non-members. For example, some of the participants noted that they have been helped by other women from the village with donations of food items and used clothes during their hard times. In Savita's case, local women provide her with a network to locate new customers for her home-based tailoring enterprise. She said: "I work from home and a lot of women come to my place to sew their clothes ... and they like me because I have cheap charges". While for Sangita when her brothers and her in-laws failed to provide economic and social support for the marriage of her two elder daughters, it was her neighbours and village people who combined their efforts to help her arrange a simple and cheap wedding. Karuna is also thankful to her neighbours and villagers when they got together and collected the housing materials to build a new house for her family after the cyclone in January 2003.

165 A community here is defined in terms of a shared identity based on location (e.g., rural settlement) and/or social grouping based on race, ethnicity and religion (see fieldwork discussions about this settlement and community in Chapter Five). In this section we explore how membership in particular social groups can be appropriated by women's "strategic use of social relations" in order to improve one's position (Joppke, 1987: 59-60).
These women find that they are economically and socially better off as a part of the community than outside it. We saw earlier in Paaru’s story (see Chapter Five) how she sought the help and support of not just her neighbours but also her village community and other neighbouring villages to build a decent house for her family after the devastation of the cyclone. Paaru has very close ties with her neighbours and the overall community in the village because she feels “all the people in the village are my family since they have been helping me in difficult times and hardships”. She also stated: “whenever I am at someone’s place in the village, they help me and my children and I never come home empty-handed because people always help me with food, old clothes, pots and pans and money for the help I provide at their homes”. Furthermore, Sadhana said:

My village friends give me comfort and support all the time when my husband beats me and fights with me or when my mother-in-law is not good to me. In this village I have some good friends like Paaru who always have time to comfort and listen to me.

Nirwani also maintains good relations with other women in the village. For example, a farmer’s wife who is a good friend of Nirwani arranged Nirwani’s work when she most needed it. The women who were members of the female cane-cutting squad also helped Nirwani by teaching her the skills of cane-cutting.

Agarwal (1997: 30) noted that the cooperation of an individual with the community could imply her/him following the established rules or bargaining to change the rules by discussion, protest etc, while non-cooperation would mean withdrawing from particular community activities or opting out of the community altogether. A person could opt out of a local community altogether in a variety of ways with varying implications. For example, when Sangita’s husband was injured she had been getting welfare allowance to support her family and as he got better he started doing some

166 Noncompliance with community rules could be seen as a form of implicit bargaining. But sanctions for some forms of noncompliance could be severe, even involving ostracisation, in effect exclusion from the community, as noted by Agarwal (1994a) in cases of women breaking sexual taboos in parts of India, and by McKeen (1992) in cases of people breaking rules governing the use of common property resources in Tokugawa, Japan.

167 For some interesting parallels, see Hirshman’s (1970): Exit, Voice and Loyalty, which argues that individuals can express dissatisfaction with an organisation (a firm, political party etc) in two ways: exit and voice. That is, the person can opt out of the organisation altogether, or give voice to dissatisfaction by protesting to the authorities. Organisations which have a high price associated with the exit option- loss of life long association, defamation, deprivation of livelihood, and so on (as could also happen in relation to a community)- could repress the use of voice option as well: “Obviously, if exit is followed by severe sanctions the very idea of exit is going to be repressed and the threat will not be uttered for fear that the sanction will apply to the threat as well as to the act itself” (1970: 96-97). In my formulation, voice would constitute a form of bargaining; and the effectiveness of a person’s voice, as well as her/his ability to pay the price of exit, would depend especially on her/his fall-back position.
casual work on other's farm to support the family income. But Sangita's husband had to relocate temporarily to another village for economic reasons and for greater social freedom. Sangita stated that: "my husband did not work for some time because some of the villagers complain that I should not get money from welfare office because my husband has started work". There had been about eight complaints made against Sangita's family so her husband decided to take up casual employment in a distant village and be on a safe side as far as complaints to the welfare department were concerned.

Opting out of the community would not be an option available to all, and for many participants it may be their last resort. For instance, Paaru's chances of getting out of her marriage are good because she is confident that she can manage on her own without depending on her husband. However, she lacks immediate funds to support herself and her children if she leaves home and settles in another village or town. She said: "It's good for me that I stay here because I got a house and I don't have to pay rent. I also get help from village people all the time". The local school manager has also been helping Paaru's children with their school fees. When Paaru could not pay school fees for her children, he waived their school fees for 3-4 years. For Karuna, forging friendships with other women in the village has helped her in the long term because they provide groceries during her hard times. Women stated that they have been supported by their community in numerous ways, such as receiving donations, being able to network with other women for domestic and agricultural tasks and receiving help in arranging marriages for sons and daughters when assistance from in-laws and natal kin failed.

However, communal expectations about the roles of Indian women may often conflict with women's practical strategies of survival. For instance, when Urmila started working at the garment factory in the local town to support her family, she realized she had to pay a social price as far as her standing in the community was concerned. She said:

Other women say I am a bad woman [i.e., woman with loose character]. They speak ill of me saying that I am the head of my family and my husband is not man enough because he allowed me to work in garment factory and may be I have relations with other men and I get money. And my husband says yes to all these...as long as I get money into the house.

The bargaining and negotiation strategies of women go beyond their households as far as maintaining the well-being of their family is concerned. According to Geeta, "being a
woman what I do, who comes to my house is always seen and talked about by people in this village and it is hard now when my husband died”. Being a widow can be an emotionally tormenting experience for Geeta. However, she capitalized on her widow status and got help and support from the community and social welfare department. The earlier accounts of Sangita also suggested how malicious ‘village gossip’ affects the lives of these Indo-Fijian women and their families.

The ability of an Indo-Fijian woman to ‘bargain’ with the community for greater social freedom would be more limited than that of a man, for two reasons. Firstly, most of the participants suggested that they often had to fight for respect and admiration in the community and being an Indian woman made it even tougher for them. For instance, Sangita was seen as a typical example of a “good wife and mother” by other women in the village because despite her suffering and bad naming by her in-laws she did not leave her husband’s house and her children. She said:

Other women admire me as a “tolerant wife”... because there were times when we had little to eat, my husband’s income was so little and we had to go to sleep empty stomach. These women say to me that I have so many problems but I still don’t leave my house, my husband and children.

Sangita told me that she could have left her husband and run away with another man or simply pack her clothes and leave her husband’s house to live with her parents or other relatives. But she did not leave her husband because of the ‘marriage vows’. She said, “no relatives of mine helped me but my neighbours helped me because they said I am a good wife and mother to my children”. Similarly, Paaru finds herself duty bound to stay and live with her husband no matter what her husband has done. Many times she thought of leaving him but the duties and the role expectations of a faithful wife/mother prohibited her from leaving the house. Here we see how identities of ideal womanhood based on religion and social norms affect women’s motivations and actions. As Karuna reflected: “the reason why other women like me because I don’t have any bad name in all these years I have been working at someone’s house”. Karuna feels that staying in her marriage despite her husband’s lower income has helped her gain respect in the community and local women have always been forthcoming with help and support during her hardships.

Secondly, patrilocal marriage means Indo-Fijian women usually do not have as much support from their kin coalitions than men have, leaving them with limited bargaining
power within the village community. For this reason, participants in this study tended to place a lot of emphasis on the importance of their marital relationship to their sense of well-being, status and power. This notion of *satyva* entailing material benefits in the community is quite similar to Rozario’s (1992: 11) notion of purity used in the context of rural Bangladesh as a form of ‘symbolic capital’. The majority of rural Indo-Fijian women would rather not openly challenge the traditional patterns of power relations in their households and society. Participants have also stated they are unlikely to receive any support from their husbands and kin if they step outside these culturally-defined boundaries, as this would risk their image and social standing. For example, Sadhana knows she will be better off by leaving her abusive husband, thus making her eligible for dependency allowance from the Social Welfare Department. But on many occasions she recounted why she was not willing to take that chance because it was in her best interest to stay with her husband whilst gaining respect and continued support from her community. It is this inextricable link between the system of honour and the relations of economic benefit that explains why, despite the poverty-stricken situation of many rural women, notions of the ideal Indian wife are still successful as a legitimating mechanism of gender relations. Therefore, women’s ability to deal with other women outside the household (community) is just as important as bargaining within the household.169

Struggling for autonomy and acceptance of her self-worth, Urmila tends to have a weaker bargaining position than Paaru because her full-time employment limits the time she spends in the ‘female public sphere’. As seen in Chapter Four, Indian cultural lore is taken from the spiritual tradition of female figures who have risen to destroy evil on earth, all of them manifestations of *Shakti*. These Goddesses like *Durga* and *Chandi*.

168 Bourdieu emphasises the undifferentiatedness of economic and symbolic capital in that in ‘good faith’ economies these are perfectly convertible. That is, symbolic capital, “in the form of the prestige and renown attached to a family name and a name is readily convertible back into capital is itself reconvertible into material capital” (Bourdieu, 1977: 179: 80). Such conversions are clearly witnessed in this study, where women who can maintain their status and honour in turn use their symbolic capital to enhance their material position, and vice versa.

169 Elsewhere Agarwal (1994a, 1994b) distinguishes between four forms of resistance to the social order: individual-covert, individual-overt, group-covert and group-overt. Some forms of individual-covert and overt resistance were portrayed by the participants in this study when I discussed the nature of women’s resistance within the dynamics of intra-household relations in Chapter Six. My argument here is that group-overt resistance requiring feminist consciousness would usually be most effective but in reality Indo-Fijian women were quite resistant taking such a collective position. This is because, as we will see later, women as categories of agents are being disadvantaged by the symbolic order of things and the legitimacy of power structures both within and outside the household. While on the surface it may seem irrational on the part of rural women refusing to form alliance for the fear of losing their honour, on close examination it becomes clear that maintenance of honour ultimately helps their families to gain economic benefit.
descend on earth in times of crises, when human beings are in despair, and restore faith. Responding to this model, we saw how Paaru rises beyond her traditional role of a subservient wife in times of economic crisis to act with the courage of her convictions only to withdraw later into her socially defined role. Paaru was also seen as a role model by local women when she performed such acts of perseverance, courage, and tolerance. But here, too, once these moments have passed, she is expected to return to the roles prescribed by community’s value system. Therefore, the transient and aggressive roles taken by women are designed only for moments of crisis. While these models permit new responses, they are not meant to become continuing realities for women. If they do, then the community has its own sanctions to deal with women who locate themselves outside of its prescriptions.

Furthermore, the interests of a few socially powerful members of women’s communal group can work against other women in the community. As Kaushik Basu and Lois Lopez-Calva (1999) argue, the actions or decisions of one individual might limit the options available to others. Earlier we discussed how competition for social status and jealousy towards other women was detrimental towards Urmila’s bargaining position in the community. We also saw how villagers maintained the status quo through malicious gossip and complaints against Sangita’s family so that her family failed to materially increase its standard of well-being. This has important practical implications for this study because some women might, for instance, be “harder bargainers than others based on personal (and gender-specific) attributes such as ‘boldness’ and lack of fear of disagreement” (Katz, 1997: 32). Paaru’s story clearly supports this point because she seemed determined and resourceful as she went about accessing the help and support from her community. For elderly participants like Tara and Santamma negotiating with the landowner was much easier because of their age and seniority status within the community. Thus, people of different ages and genders may have different abilities to convert their disadvantaged positions into their bargaining power. Inter-household political dynamics in the village could leave some women as harder bargainers than the others.

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179 Here, age is also associated with greater spatial and social freedom whereby post-menopausal women are no longer an object of sexual desire and as such cannot bring shame upon their families by appearing in public places (see earlier discussions on purdah and mobility in Chapter Five).
The above examples demonstrate that participants do benefit from moral conformity and in large part the notions of honour represent their negotiating strength to bargain within the community. Kandiyoti (1988) introduced this idea of 'patriarchal bargain' to explain why women collude in gender subordination. They know that even if they suffer within their household, their conformity will be rewarded by gaining some power in the community. Therefore, opting out of the local community altogether may be even less of an option for these Indo-Fijian women than men. Here, rural Indo-Fijian women require a series of moral capabilities to be able to interact with others in the community, and then commit to and act on these capabilities that are of value to their well-being. Women's dignity is often based on the social foundations of self-respect which corresponds to self-presentation in terms of cultural ideals of the community. The sense of honour is enacted in front of other people which lead women to defend, at all costs, a certain self-image intended for others. In terms of the capability approach, women's well-being consists of fulfilment of those purposes they have reason to value, for example, affiliations with family and involvements within the community. Empirical evidence suggests that the concept of well-being and women's personhood very much depends on the quality of communal relationships that they develop.

Hence, participants in this study are deeply ambivalent about transgressing the social norms of the community and the kinds of well-being outcomes that they could achieve through their personal autonomy and exercising freedom by being outside of the community. Therein lies a major conflict: the demand to meet traditional socio-cultural expectations against the desire for freedom to concentrate on improving their lives and their families. This conundrum also presents the potential for conflict both within individual women and among different women, and also inside and outside the household. While the competition for acceptance of socio-cultural roles by women in their community gives them a certain dignity, it also binds them to oppressive behaviour patterns. Therefore, in applying the capability approach one needs to pay close attention to other well-being outcomes and motivations that women in traditional societies have reason to accommodate. Sometimes, women may place a higher value on community and family life than on acquiring material possessions. Women's way of life in the midst of poverty and their daily struggles of survival is more than a set of autonomous choices, whereby constraints set by socially constructed meaning systems may constitute a social grounding for women's well-being as well.
Women's Religious Forum

Though religious practices are highly gendered and restrictive towards women's freedom and choice, rural Indo-Fijian women continue to attach themselves to religious ideals and prescriptions. Men and women do not have the same freedom to debate and determine how religion develops and to shape religious practices. While men could make religious statements in the male public sphere, like Ramayan mandalies, Hindu temples, and other religious gatherings, women were only allowed to read and interpret Ramayana in women's only religious clubs. In this section I will explore how weekly religious meetings provided my participants with not only an opportunity to appropriate religious values of respect and obedience to their own advantage but also provided a "female public forum" where women could realise their self-worth independently of their relations to their husband and kin. In the field, I witnessed the immense enjoyment participants derived from a sense of self-esteem, competency, moral and social worth conferred on them by attending these gatherings.

Firstly, Mahila Mandal\textsuperscript{171} provided an avenue for women to perform religious practices and activities while formulating assessments of not only their own worth, character and competence but also that of their husbands and men in general. For example, the mythological character of Rama as a responsible husband and provider is always used to ridicule their own men, especially with regards to alcohol abuse, extra-marital affairs and domestic violence. The way women used the formation and participation in Mahila Mandal falls into the category of "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1985).\textsuperscript{172} At times, men were present at women's gatherings to distribute food or as invitees to the celebrations of important Hindu festivals like Ram Naumi and Krishn Janmastmi. However, women's informal friendship networks that I have described in earlier chapters are the sexually segregated women's world where rural Indo-Fijian women collude to hide knowledge from men. For example, they cover for each other in minor matters, like secret trips to town, visits to friends and relatives and their manifest behaviour takes a

\textsuperscript{171} Mahila Mandal literally means women's group but in this context the term is used for describing women's religious and cultural group in a rural Indo-Fijian community. Membership is exclusive to women and children.

\textsuperscript{172} One such weapon is the 'hidden transcript'. According to Scott, a hidden transcript characterizes "discourse that takes place 'offstage', beyond direct conversation by power holders" (1990: 4). He also recognizes that the case of persons in a situation of gender-based subordination differs somewhat from others (Scott, 1990: 22). The alternative transcripts drafted for wielding in gender-based altercation take on a somewhat different guise in this study as well and it will be discussed further below.
very different form where a lot of joking and ridiculing against men takes place. In fact, participants carried out the expected and approved ritual routines like reading and interpreting the *Ramayana* with hymns and songs but added to them their own emphasis and meanings, thus redefining both their sense of self and their understandings of the religious discourse.173

Second, religiosity in this context takes a new form, in that, participation in *Mahila Mandal* and its associated activities become matters of respect, honour and recognition in the community. Through these gatherings, some women cultivate unique talents and gain fame as performers. For example, Sangita feels proud of the fact that with little education she is able to keep good relations with other women in the village through her skills in “preaching” about Hindu religion and *Ramayana* during the weekly meetings of their *Mahila Mandal* club. Sangita told me that: “when I read and tell the story from *Ramayana* women in the village respect me”. Similarly, Karuna feels proud of the fact that she is known among local women as “a devotional singer and preacher” of the club. In her capacity as the president of one of the clubs, Paaru feels more empowered because she is able to inform other women about issues and also manage the day-to-day running of the organisation itself. Individuals and groups of young women vied with each other to perform as a preacher or singer, often striving for prestige by displaying one’s broader knowledge and skills in interpretation of *Ramayana*. Women contended to be the best and most dedicated singers, preachers, committee members, hostesses and donors. Even within the confines of religion and religious practices, women found creative opportunities. For instance, women took responsibilities in the organisation of tasks, preparation and cooking of meals at weddings, funerals and in men’s religious meetings. My participants experienced tremendous advantages in meeting women from the village and accumulating a sense of shared worth as mothers and wives. The very act of travelling to meetings and learning to speak out at such gatherings encouraged a sense of dignity and a desire for religious literacy.

173 In this context, it is also interesting to take note of Mirabai’s resistance. A Rajasthani poet-saint of the fifteenth century, she resisted the authority of her husband and in-laws on ground of religious faith. Born a Rajput princess and married into a royal family, she refused to comply with the norms of married life, proclaiming herself already married to the God Krishna, and writing devotional songs of her love. Later she left home altogether to become ascetic. Today her songs, which have come down to us through the oral tradition, are enshrined in the religious-classical and folk music traditions of the country. Indeed women’s resistant thinking in this study via religious forum may be interpreted as a space where participants legitimately ‘let off steam’ and acquire a breathing space whilst upholding culturally sanctioned values of *sativa*. 

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The forum also provided a means by which village women were able to negotiate and bargain for social standing and status in the community. For instance, women organised fundraising events of the club via cooking stalls and sale of handicrafts at the local school bazaars, not only promoting their visibility and recognition in the community but also allowing them to move into a phase of network building, bargaining and negotiation. Geeta feels her participation in activities of Mahila Mandal secured much help and assistance from the school committee when her husband died. Similarly, Paaru received financial assistance from the Sangam temple committee, which is the district-level male counterpart of women's group called Mathar Sangam. For Savita, mingling with other women during the club activities presented a chance to network and advertise her tailoring enterprise and in the process more women came to see her for their tailoring needs. Similarly, Karuna feels:

The friendships formed at the meeting have helped me in my difficult times because when I borrowed money or food items from other women they trusted me and they knew that I will return whatever was borrowed because they know I am very religious.

In addition, these meetings provided women with some time-off for themselves where women personally felt themselves, forgetting all the miseries of their daily struggles against poverty. For instance, Sadhana said:

It is these times which I spend in the company of other women that I feel happy. I also forget about all my problems at home and spend some peaceful time thinking about God without any kind of tension and fights with my husband.

Kala Wati also mentioned:

I look forward to every Sunday because I meet other women and spend time with them. I don't worry about my house during this time. It is here that I get a chance to talk and make friends with other women in the village. It feels good when I talk with them. I also think at this meeting I am free and I don't worry what my husband will think or say.

Similarly, Sangita expressed an increased sense of self-esteem when she managed to host Ramayana Mandal at her house and was able to provide sufficient hospitality to women invitees. Confidence in religion, as a source of feeling of empowerment and its use as a strategy to keep in the face of constraint was evident in my conversations with women in some of these meetings. On the day of these meetings and at festivals women put on their best saries, preferably red or pink (colours associated with auspiciousness and fertility), and adorned themselves with jewellery and make-up. The married women wear all the markers of that status: the red vermillion powder in the part of their hair, red dot on their forehead, red glass bangles and a style of necklace worn only by married women.
The influence of religion in shaping the lives of rural women is pertinent to my discussion. Such an analysis is important for the capability approach because it moves away from an exclusive focus on the language of freedom towards a greater emphasis on an interlocking set of values, reflected in a diversity of capabilities. For women, Nussbaum (2000: 289) notes, this offers a way out of the dichotomy between exclusive individual freedom, on one hand, and traditional women’s roles, on the other. In this context, values of friendship and respect have instrumental significance because poverty is not only a lack of money or material resources but equally a lack of respect and friendship networks (Sen, 1984: 325). Being respected is a significant factor in rural Indo-Fijian women’s ability to access the socio-economic resources of other women, and respect in turn affects their capabilities of self-esteem and confidence. The self-esteem and respect that women gain through their participation in these religious forums appear frequently as a vital step for women to improve their well-being. For example, the majority spoke of the pleasure and sense of well-being they gained from their beliefs and how this transferred into their everyday lives. Here, friendship appears as another important value having its own set of skill-capabilities that rural women try hard to secure and sustain in their own ‘female public sphere’, because friendship enhances a sense of belonging within the community. Therefore, religion plays an important role in my participants’ lives and helps them develop their potential outside the household.

In this case, the women’s religious forum could ideally meet both the practical and strategic interests of its members. Molyneux (1985: 227-54) formulates a useful distinction between practical and strategic gender interests:

Strategic gender issues are about changing structural power relationships, in contrast to practical gender issues, which are concerned simply with improving the daily life of a particular group of women within the limits of an established social system.

To many of my participants, these forums offer a reprieve from the everyday drudgery of demanding household and farm tasks. For example, participants expressed concern that the religious forum provided a space where they could vent their feelings or simply socialise and escape briefly from their chores, without harassment from their spouses and in-laws. At other times it offers space where they can sit and exchange ideas with other women in the village. In other ways it offers them psychological relief in the belief that they will be blessed in heaven for their loyalty to their religion. Although some of the participants were devalued in the male public arena, they felt empowered within women’s public space through their participation in religious practices and
belief. This underscores my argument that women are, striving for autonomy and self-expression within the constraints of culturally prescribed values and practices. As such women’s responses can be seen as addressing their practical gender interests: they avoid making open choices and instead were seeking compromises with patriarchal norms and constraints which enhanced their sense of dignity, well-being and self-respect.

Therefore, we need to locate women’s disadvantage and discrimination or subordination in the wider socio-economic context and identify their practical and strategic needs within this context. To examine women’s well-being in traditional societies we need to evaluate what individual women continue to do, and with what resources, despite their disadvantages. It is argued that a religio-cultural meaning system that restricts women’s capability achievement considerably narrows the scope for an analysis of women’s capability, their well-being outcomes and notions of personhood. An alternative understanding of capabilities that incorporates cultural practices, meanings and values of my participants would help to better acknowledge women’s agency in their struggle against poverty and gender inequality in traditional societies like this study.

**Accessing Extra-Household Parameters (via the State and NGOs)**

The framework of cooperation-conflict and bargaining is also useful in characterising women’s relationships with the state and NGOs. Here, I will argue that rural Indo-Fijian women’s ability to bargain with the state and NGOs is mediated by gendered norms and practices and is important towards understanding the interdependencies between women’s position within and outside the household.

Agarwal (1997: 32) notes that the state has the power to enact laws and formulate policies and programs in women’s favour; to increase women’s access to productive resources, employment, information, education and health; to provide protection from gender violence; to influence discourse on gender relations in the media and educational institutions and so on. Fiji, like many other developing countries, is coming to grips with the need to include women-related issues in its mainstream development policies. This is demonstrated by the action taken by governments in the past two decades in formulating its policies towards addressing women’s issues. In 1995, the government
became party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in Beijing. The Fijian government declared its commitment by pledging to adhere to the five-point efforts to address women's issues: (1) that it would mainstream women's concerns in the planning process and all policy areas; (2) that it would review laws that disadvantage women; (3) that it would allocate resources to develop women's micro-enterprises through policy implementations in financial institutions; (4) that it would seek to involve women in decision making and assign fifty percent representations in participation, appointments, training and promotions at all levels of government; and (5) that it would campaign to promote a sound and stable environment that is free of violence, especially domestic violence, sexual harassment and child abuse (Ministry of Women and Culture, 1998: 3-5).

However, women in Fiji society are positioned through a variety of different dimensions: class, ethnicity and religion and the interests they have as a group are similarly shaped in complex and sometimes conflicting ways (see also Leckie, 2002). This has important implications for policies relating to poverty alleviation among women. Using my fieldwork evidence and secondary data, I now discuss how Fiji government's discriminatory policy system based on race can create disparity in women's access to state support and representation by favouring one group of women over another. In this case, it has disadvantaged rural Indo-Fijian women and their capability achievements. In the context of this study, the government promoting the capabilities of one group over another not only serves as instruments of domination but also perpetuates the dependency of one group of poor people on state programs rather than seek to eliminate such dependency.

A case in point is the effort by the Government of Fiji to extend financial assistance through loans for women's participation in commerce. The Ministry of Fijian Affairs under its Small Business Equity Scheme provides interest free loans to indigenous Fijians for micro-enterprise projects. This scheme is well placed to help indigenous Fijian women in business. However, the motive of this scheme is more geared towards ethnic balancing rather than gender balancing, as it sets the condition that the applicant be an indigenous Fijian (Ministry of Women and Culture, 1998: 58-9). The Women’s
Social and Economic Development Programme (WOSED)\textsuperscript{174} is another institution that provides loan facilities for women in commerce mostly in rural areas. In a duration of six years, this scheme expanded from 27 loans in 1993 to 393 loans in 1997 (ibid.). This financial scheme also functioned more on the premise of ethnic balancing in commerce than as a loan provider for women. Of all the loans provided, 93 percent went to indigenous Fijian women despite the 1996 poverty report indicating that more Indo-Fijian households fell in the poorest sections of the society (Ministry of Women and Culture, 1998: 60).\textsuperscript{175} Furthermore, the National Microfinance Unit’s lending program (under Ministry of Finance and National Planning) implemented through the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS) showed a similar disparity in the percentages of microfinance loans given to indigenous Fijian women and Indo-Fijian women. For example, in 2002 on average 97 percent of loans were given to Fijian women and only 3 percent went to Indo-Fijian women (Waqanicakau, Personal Communication, February 2003).

While the category ‘women’ is accorded constitutional and legal lip service as an equal and integral component of national politics, in practice it is marked by profound racial imbalance and marginalisation of poor Indo-Fijian women. Kala Wati commented:

No government official or leaders in the parliament ever stop by in the village to listen to us and our problems.

Most of the participants admitted that they applied for welfare services but they expressed profound frustration about the distrust of the social welfare services in Labasa. Jai Raji attributed her frustration with welfare officers to their apparent inability to provide assistance, stating, "I talk, talk, talk and she just looks at me...I don’t know why I still go there anymore". Furthermore, a few participants voiced disappointment and anger concerning what some described as a lack of comprehensive responsibility in social services. These participants depicted social welfare services as a highly fragmented and disconnected set of functions and units with no overall accountability. Some of the participants voiced the opinion that social services failed to help Indo-

\textsuperscript{174} WOSDEN is funded by the Pacific Community and New Zealand Overseas Development Agency while the Ministry of Women and Culture supervises its operations to ensure that funds are properly used. The WOSDEN programme is similar to the Grammeen Bank model used in Bangladesh whereby rural women are assisted with funding so that they can venture into self-financing business activities and pay off the initial funding advance. However the funding for this scheme has stopped after the political coups in May, 2000.

\textsuperscript{175} The distribution of WOSDEN funding in overall Labasa (study area) was also skewed in favour of indigenous Fijian women. For example, total WOSDEN members in Macuata Province- 45 (all Fijian women), in Cakaudrove Province- 121 (majority Fijian women), and in Bua Province- 9 (all Fijian women) (Waqanicakau, Personal Communication, August 2004).
Fijians families with material needs because their application sits in the office, accumulating dust and dirt. Others reported that the welfare officers lack cultural competence necessary to understand the needs of Indo-Fijian families and their community because most of the welfare officers are indigenous Fijian. Guddi expressed a sense of lost hope towards getting any support from the government:

I try and get help from social welfare but no luck. I go there to ask for help many times but still no help. The officers tell me that I am an Indian so I should live with my son...he should look after you and why you ask for welfare money. I tried many times for assistance but now I am old and I lost hope and strength in going to the office anymore.

An important issue affecting Indo-Fijian women is that the state benefit systems reinforce the assumption that married women are economic dependants of men and cannot have independent claims to state welfare funding. For example, participants like Santamma, Guddi, Saam Raji and Geeta were only able to establish their rights to claim Social Welfare assistance in their status as widows. In contrast, indigenous Fijian women had independent support and funding through the state’s affirmative action policies and the complexities of the benefit system. An element of racism has been the main barrier against rural Indo-Fijian women’s claim to such benefits. In this process rural Indo-Fijian women’s bargaining strength with the state is weaker than their Fijian sisters because of their de-facto claims to benefit systems is limited to widows or injuries to the breadwinner.

In terms of the capability approach, what is of concern in this debate is the nature of institutionalised power which determines the distribution of power and activities affecting the well-being and freedoms of certain groups of people in a society. Until 1987, women kept a low profile in politics but this has changed since the coups, with Fijian women coming forward to assume leadership roles in politics. Recently, the Fijian government’s policy on affirmative action for increasing women’s membership of boards/committees/councils to at least 30-50 percent has led to some improvement in women’s membership. For example, by 1998 women’s overall membership of such institutions stood at 17.2 percent compared to 10.8 percent in 1996 (Ministry of Women and Culture, 1998: 14). But there has been only one Indo-Fijian woman in parliament

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176 Social Welfare Assistance in Fiji is aimed at helping the most needy individuals and families with no or minimal income. This scheme has outlined six eligibility criteria which include: (1) people of 60 years and over; (2) dependents of people who are in jail; (3) breadwinners who are chronically ill; (4) breadwinners who are severely disabled (mentally and physically); (5) widows with dependents; and (6) women who have been deserted by their spouses (Department of Social Welfare, 2002: 2). In general women, particularly married women, are defined as the dependants of men in such benefit systems of the state.
since the 1987 coups and she was elected in the 1999 elections. In the name of affirmative action policies for the indigenous community, more Fijian women been promoted in the civil service and most non-government organisations promoting women in politics and donor-funded political education bodies comprise mostly indigenous women (FWRM, 2000: 15). While my participants had accessible rights to voting, it did not necessarily enhance women’s social mobilisation as a group against patriarchal values of gender relations in their society. This is because Indo-Fijian and indigenous women do not share common experiences but are mostly divided by race at the level of state representation, support, and policies.

As discussed earlier, Indo-Fijian women are disproportionately affected when the state uses its resources to reinforce existing gender-retrogressive biases on the basis of race, constituting a situation of conflict between communities. Both gender and race complicate Indo-Fijian women’s relationship to poverty. The poverty experienced by rural Indo-Fijian participants in this study is partly a result of their own position in the labour market and partly the result of their dependent position as wives/mothers of landless Indo-Fijian cane-cutters through marriage or other kinship ties. In Indo-Fijian women’s negotiations with the state, the paramountcy of Fijian interests as a protective principle continues to apply to ensure that the interests of the Fijian community are not subordinated to the interests of the other communities. These differing and yet discriminatory policies of the state continue to perpetuate power relationships and affect differing bargaining outcomes between groups on the basis of race, gender and class.

Another important aspect of bargaining that needs to be analysed is the extent to which non-government organisations (NGOs) brought women’s issues to the public notice and whether these organisations meet the needs and priorities of rural Indo-Fijian women. Many NGOs in recent years have focussed on enhancing women’s possibilities by helping people to challenge biases in state laws, policies and their implementation.177

177 Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS) made successful negotiations for grants to expand the outreach activities of financing small enterprises to mainly urban poor women through the national initiative of Microfinance Finance Unit (MFU). While other NGOs like Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education & Advocacy (ECREA), FeniLINK Pacific, Fiji Women’s Rights Movement (FWRM), Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre (FWCC), National Council of Women and Fiji Human Rights Commission (FHRC) for the past 2 decades have extensively worked towards advocating human rights and social justice issues with particular emphasis on women’s rights. FWRM (2002) should be commended for the recent submissions made to the parliament about the patriarchal ideology behind the Family Bill in Fiji, which works against poor women at large and how it should change to benefit all women in Fiji. Thus,
For example, members of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) in consultation with members of Fiji Women's Action for Change (FWAC), Fem'Link Pacific (FemLink), National Council for Women (NCW), Stri Sewa Sabha (SSS) and the Ecumenical Centre for Research and Advocacy (ECREA) have been actively lobbying for CEDAW, demanding incorporation of the Convention's principles and provisions into state policy and programs, and providing training and raising public awareness on the Convention. For over 30 years, women's NGOs in Fiji have been working together to promote the advancement of women and campaigning towards legislation that improves the lives of women by directly lobbying local authorities and government.  

Although NGOs in Fiji have been largely responsible for bringing about gender and human rights awareness and have also attempted through their education programs to encourage women from relatively vulnerable groups to understand and generate interest in CEDAW, distinctions must be made between women who live in urban and rural areas. Colawai (Personal Communication, April 2003) has stated that some level of gender awareness was brought about amongst women in rural areas through television and radio programming conducted in vernacular languages. Such actions range from information offered on legal and health issues, counselling and assistance in the development of income-generating activities and generating awareness of human rights (especially women's rights). Participants also stated that local Hindi radio program provided them with a good source of information about women's issues and places like FWCC from where they could seek help and support. In the recent years, FWRM in conjunction with FWCC through the Legal Rights Project have continued to hold workshops in the vernacular language for women in isolated areas of Labasa, Sigatoka,

gender-progressive organisations like these women's groups can play an important role in directing state policies and laws in favour of women.

Working closely with local NGOs and NGO coalitions and receiving financial support from international partners, FWRM has made significant contributions to improving the status of women in Fiji. The role of FWRM in many hard won victories is often that of co-ordination, lobbying, making detailed submissions to government ministries and providing background and technical support. In many ways, FWRM is not an entity in itself but part of a collaborative effort to bring about systematic, legislative and attitudinal changes that improve the status of women and defend human rights. A close reflection of the milestone victories of women's movements in Fiji include: Anti-Rape Campaign (1986-94), Sexual Offenses Draft Legislation Project (1995-96), Women’s Employment and Economic Rights (1993-97), Family Law Legal Literacy Campaign (1993-94), Lobbying Fiji Government to Ratify CEDAW (1993-95), and Women's Coalition for Women's Citizenship Rights Project (1996-2000) (FWRM: 2001: 4).
Ba and Tavua, raising awareness amongst rural women of their legal rights in the areas of Family Law and domestic violence (FWRM, 2000: 9). However, there are areas in Fiji, such as the study settlements, where it is not possible for many women to seek participation in such awareness programs without undergoing hardship because of the distance in location. Barriers that prevent my participants from taking steps towards addressing their rights and bringing about action, include illiteracy and difficulties with understanding law and procedure, and lack of field visits by women's NGOs to rural settlements and training workshops conducted in vernacular. As noted by Leckie (2002: 163), although women's multiple roles through kinship relations within the household and participation in local women's club activities may be a strength of their activism, this can lead to being overcommitted to several causes with ensuing problems of insufficient time and resources. For example, participants stated that the workshops on women's issues are normally held in Labasa town and it is not cheap to go to town for such meetings.

The social and economic situation of rural Indo-Fijian women is a factor which prevents their access to justice in equal footing compared with women in urban centers. Rural Indo-Fijian women seem particularly disadvantaged because of the lack of socio-economic means towards achieving their social mobilisation. As Harrington (2004: 504) notes, many feminist movements and women's organisations in Fiji not only operate on funds from international NGOs but the membership is predominately made up of middle-class women. While the FWRM and FWCC claim to speak for Fiji's 'poor women' as their constituency (George, 2004: 17), these groups often tend to overlook the fact that poverty levels may function as an obstacle which denies the poor access to the much-touted laws designed to improve economic status. It is easy for such groups to overlook the fact that women relate to a totality of existential conditions, and to poor rural women, issues of daily survival and strategies related to this are of as much importance and are as real as issues of family violence. For poor rural women empowerment from within - getting out of the house -- is necessary for strengthening their bargaining strategies outside the household because it allows them to create alliances and work with others toward other improvements. As long as rural women remain in an extreme state of economic and social insecurity, the prospect of mobilising them as an assertive force is rather dim unless they have trusted allies to connect them to organisations outside the household.
However, this is not to deny that women can act as singular agents, in their own self-interest, especially in the socio-economic contexts of my participants. For example, gender awareness through the daily radio programme called Ghar Sansaar broadcast in local Hindi has strengthened the position of many individual rural Indo-Fijian women who now have the ability, knowledge and personal qualities to take advantage of it. As Paaru stated:

I ran and knocked the doors of important organisations and departments like social welfare, Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre, Red Cross, Bayliss Welfare to get help and money to build my house. I have been to Women’s Crisis Centre (Labasa Branch) and talk to one of the persons there. I only talk about my financial difficulty and did not say a word about my marital problems because I not want to make it public about my husband-wife problem.

As discussed earlier, rural Indo-Fijian women like Sadhana and Paaru have little reason to use their awareness about women’s human rights to contest cultural norms such as purdah or izzat because of the ensuing self-worth and respectability from the community. For example, when a participant’s husband was serving his jail term, she used to get government support as a “prisoner’s wife” but when her husband came home somebody from her village reported that he was back and the allowance was stopped immediately. However, she kept a secret about additional financial assistance she was getting from a local non-profit organisation so that no one in the village knew about it and she continues to get assistance of about F$15/month till this day. Here, we witness how rural Indo-Fijian women’s individualised perception of her social reality intensifies separation and competitiveness among women and destroys what solidarity may exist between them within the community as a whole.\(^{179}\) These women therefore lack a conceptual understanding of the structures of patriarchy because their concern is mainly with the experiences on the ground. It is true that there is a danger of women in these situations getting caught up in the daily struggles of survival and often of being unable, for reasons of time and space, to talk and have analytical discussion as much as they would like to. The removal of extreme insecurities might not only enhance women’s collective mobilisation but also go a long way towards empowering women.

In terms of the capability approach, here again the common heritage of unequal gender relations (which includes patriarchal kinship systems, male-dominated property rights,

\(^{179}\) As Rozario (2002: 69) discussed in the case of Bangladeshi women and how micro-credit programmes in rural setting may imply a limited and individualised form of empowerment and such short-term financing programmes may not necessarily be sustainable in the long run. Hence, there is also a major problem of solidarity among rural Indo-Fijian women as seen from the stories of women in my research.
and a lesser prominence of women in influential economic, social and political activities) cutting across race relations appear to be a causal factor that affects rural Indo-Fijian women's well-being. The inter-related nature of bargaining within and outside the household, the embeddedness of households within a wider institutional environment, and the role of groups/coalitions all play important roles in setting limits to and/or increasing the bargaining power of an individual. My argument is that an intense focus on the language of freedom (defined as personal independence) and autonomy embodying the capability approach may neglect evaluations of well-being in terms of social relations and personal relationships, which are important sources of rural Indo-Fijian women's well-being and their non-material notions of power and status in the society. While some capability theorists, like Sen (1999, 2002), have a great deal of belief in people’s abilities to be rational and to resist social and moral pressure stemming from groups, this thesis concurs with other writers on the capability approach who pay much more attention to the influence of social norms and other group-based processes on choices and ultimately on well-being (for example, Alkire, 2002; Nussbaum, 2000; Iversen, 2003; Robeyns, 2003). My data suggests that Indo-Fijian women's individual characteristics, attributes and bargaining skills can also affect how their agency is expressed as well as their well-being outcomes. Therefore, when analysing Indo-Fijian women's choices both within and outside the household, we need to consider not only the choices themselves, but also the underlying values that lead to a certain choice, and whether that choice translates into well-being for women.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on some of the features of extra-household dynamics that have received inadequate attention in the formulation of household models of poverty or in discussions of the bargaining framework and gender relations. The embeddedness of households within a wider institutional environment of natal kin, community, women’s religious forum, the state and NGOs also determine women’s bargaining power and negotiation strategies available to them. Empirical evidence suggests that gender difference in intra-household bargaining power not only limits rural Indo-Fijian women’s options but also weakens their position outside the household. Self-interest and altruism on the part of women is affected by a complex mix of gender, age, and identities based on their race, religion and marriage. It is through the processes of
investment among women that they gain community’s respect and resources. Rural Indo-Fijian women’s forays into the values of sativta were immensely contradictory: they offered a space for hedonism, autonomy, and dignity whilst simultaneously regulating their subordination and maintaining insecurities of dependence.

Using the capability approach, this chapter has argued that rural Indo-Fijian women’s choice is embedded in their individual social networks like the family and community, and the “capabilities are an interlocking set, they support one another, and an impediment to one impedes others” (Nussbaum, 2000: 294). This approach to capabilities is particularly important in traditional societies like Indo-Fijian society, where community and family relations are essential spheres to rural women’s socio-economic security and well-being. My empirical evidence shows that women’s capabilities are highly dependent on the diversity of their social and inter-personal relationships in the community and society. The notion of freedom in the capability approach needs to be augmented with other human values equally important to women in traditional societies. Sen’s concept of capability as freedom can be elaborated to distinguish between personal independence and the variety of values that may be promoted through such autonomy. Hence, the capability approach can also incorporate divergent views on social realities and interpersonal relations that are equally important for women’s well being. The next chapter will further highlight the need for a theoretical revisioning of the capability approach within a general feminist framework.
Chapter Eight


I sometimes wonder, in the case of my participants, as to what makes them happy and satisfied with their lives and what do they value as worthwhile to their well-being. More specifically, I wonder whether Urmila, who works full-time enabling her to pursue goals relating to financial prosperity, freedom, and autonomy tends to have a more satisfying notion of well-being; or Paaru who stays home, tolerates an abusive husband and continues to pursue goals relating to community’s acceptance, service and relationships. Do autonomous women perceive their lives as better than women dependent on their family and community and its socio-cultural values? What is worthwhile: having more freedom and autonomy as a stronger predictor of well-being or having quality relationships with others? (Fieldnotes, 30th August 2005).

Introduction

This thesis has examined the capability approach from a feminist perspective and its adequacy in evaluating gendered dynamics of well-being, poverty and agency. I have attempted to do this by exploring the relationship between rural Indo-Fijian women’s lived experiences of poverty and their perceptions of well-being. In doing so, this study has sought to situate the perceptions of poverty within the socio-economic and cultural processes of the Indo-Fijian households. The perceptions of Indo-Fijian women’s poverty were also found to be (inter)dependent on other socio-economic processes and institutions outside the household. Furthermore, the thesis has explored how social relations and power structures (specifically gender, generation and ethnicity) inform the socio-economic conditions of the participants. A feminist methodology embedded in ethnographic research undertaken during 2003 and 2004 with eighteen rural Indo-Fijian women provided the foundations of this study.

The purpose of this chapter is to make some theorisations about gender relations, poverty, agency and women’s well-being evaluations and how it could better inform the capability approach and its applications in traditional societies. The chapter draws together the theoretical threads developed throughout the thesis and summaries the findings of this study. This chapter begins by exploring how rural Indo-Fijian women’s
agency is brought to bear on the study of poverty and gender inequality. The theoretical challenge facing this thesis was to make explicit the nature of cultural practices, meanings and values of my participants in evaluations of agency and notions of well-being; and to better inform our understandings of the capability approach in traditional societies like this study. The second section then examines the implications of a reconceptualised notion of agency for understanding participants “gender consciousness”, both as an analytical and political project, and making further observations regarding women’s representation and empowerment.

*Conceptual Conundrums of Agency and Well-Being: Theorising My Findings*

In exploring the complex nature and forms of women’s agency that merit attention in well-being evaluations and analyses of poverty, empirical examples of what constitutes agency for rural Indo-Fijian women in different socio-economic contexts are discussed in the first section. The purpose of this is twofold: first, to provide insight into the different strategies used by women to pursue satisfying lives and improve their chances of well-being and, second, to problematise the notion of agency in the capability approach and consider it as a contextually located and relational concept in evaluations of well-being. In the second section, the implications of this for developing a culturally-sensitive framework with which to examine women’s agency and gender inequality are considered.

*Women’s Ambivalent Agency, Social Relations and Well-Being*

This section examines the complex nature of women’s agency in the operationalisation of their well-being and how this inevitably rests upon the ‘messy realities’ (Chhaclachi and Pittin, 1996: 101) of rural Indo-Fijian women’s experiences of poverty. My goal, however, is more than to provide an anthropological account of women’s lived experiences; it is also to make this material speak back to notions of freedom and agency embedded in the capability approach. The examples given below are illustrative and relate primarily to women’s efforts, either individually or collectively, in pursuing creative ways and seeking multiple strategies against their subordination and inequality of both inside and outside the household so as to strengthen their position and to guard
against their vulnerability. Women's lived experiences will highlight how the dominant patriarchal discourses and women's capacities can co-exist and how the contextual play between these conflicting manifestations of personhood constantly challenged, but also reinstated, the established order. This play entails different aspects of women's subjectivity developed within the socio-economic and structural constraints of an Indian society, and women in this account may emerge as rational beings with a developed sense of where their best interests lie.

In Fiji, as in other contexts, gender norms are ideological constructions (Kabeer, 1997) and therefore the observance of these norms grant status and prestige (Amin, 1995; White, 1992). Among the poor in this rural Indo-Fijian settlement, it is clear that women's work participation continues to be considered a sign of poverty and incurs a loss of family prestige. Paid work involves not only contravening of gender identities by the woman, but also on the part of her husband, since it implies his inability to provide for the family. This picture is supported by the findings discussed in Chapters Five and Six, whereby if women in the household did work, their participation was often defined as temporary or supplementary and as an extension of their usual familial role. Perhaps the most important factor that limits the impact women's work has on gender identities is the fact that economic independence does not bring with it social independence. Thus, marriage remains the only socially acceptable option for most rural Indo-Fijian women and working for an income does not alter the fact that a woman's primary source of security is the family, marital entitlements and social recognition within society. One reason why women take up such subject positions rather than another is a vested interest in being, for instance, a good mother and wife who conforms to male-defined injunctions (see also Hollway, 1984; Kandiyoti, 1988; Moore, 1994) as this may be more useful as far as bargaining strategies within the family and community is concerned. Hence, compliance is often the result of a rational assessment of the situation and its viable alternatives and can be seen as women's strategic needs if it is converted to one's advantage. Indeed, compliance and maintaining respectability was one strategy used by some of these women to marshal slender resources from more economically active men and women in the community to their advantage (see Chapter Seven).
Deeper commitment to the structure of religious practices ushered rural Indo-Fijian women into a larger field of action and opportunity, but this gain came with its shortcomings that women must confine themselves to religious, sex-segregated, and patriarchy-approved activity. Their talents and proclivities were bent to fit into authorised forms. However, rural Indo-Fijian women’s unspoken resistance as confining and compromising needs to be analysed and understood in the context of their socio-economic realities and personal choices. The appearance of compliance can reflect a survival strategy stemming from the constraints on their ability to act overtly in pursuit of those interests. This paradox of women’s unspoken resistance as confining also “raises questions about the limits to personal agency in the exercising of choice” (Brenner, 1996: 684) because participants do resist patriarchal demands when and if they feel the costs will not be too high. Of particular analytical interest to this study is taking account of such complexities and trade-offs in evaluations of women’s well-being and their agential processes, which may represent tactical choices made by participants between different material, psychological, and symbolic aspects of well-being that are of value to them.  

There are two contrasting standpoints of women who circumvent their vulnerability by envisaging a positive stance towards bringing change. In my analysis, I explore the distinct narratives of selfhood invoked by two of my research participants, Paaru and Urmila. In analysing these two narratives, I argue that practicing virtues of suffering and endurance which might not sit well with positive notions of freedom are nonetheless constitutive of women’s agential capacities in important ways. For Urmila, a woman needed to have a “strong personality” and “free will” in order to deal with their poverty circumstance. For her, this meant acquiring self-esteem or self-confidence from her paid employment and her ability to feed her children. As she explained:

180 Chambers (1988), for instance, has pointed out that for the very poor there is likely to be a hierarchy of priorities: basic survival needs in terms of food, water, clothing and shelter; security in the sense of minimising fluctuations in a household’s capacity to meet its basic needs over time; and finally, what he calls self-respect, but which in this context might also be reformulated as some of the other intangible goals to which people aspire, such as autonomy, social status and standing in their community. While all three may be equally valued in principle, in practice, poverty imposes trade-offs so that pressing survival and security needs can sometimes only be met by sacrificing the more intangible benefits of social status or self-esteem. What is unknown is how far and in what circumstances poor people place a value on respect in comparison with more material goods such as food and shelter. It is a difficult subject to research. The picture has been complicated because one widely-cited study of this issue, by Tony Beck (1994), has made exaggerated claims—that poor people value respect much more than food. As we explain in the following discussions, these claims are not credible, and certainly not generalisable.
My work makes me independent and I don’t have to think what other people think of me. I think of my worth through my work and not in terms of marriage and men. I am good at tailoring and I am proud of my work at the garment factory. Where does sabr [roughly meaning to persevere in the face of difficulty without complaint] take you? Instead of helping you to improve your situation, it just makes you accept it as fate.

In contrast, Paaru’s advocacy lay in the cultivation of the virtue of sabr embodying sativita by living within the socio-cultural boundaries of the family and community.¹¹¹ For Paaru, the practice of sabr does not necessarily empower one to be immune from other’s opinions but according to her, one undertakes the practice of sabr, first and foremost, because it is an essential attribute of a dutiful wife, an attribute to be practiced regardless of the situation one faces. Rather than alleviating suffering, sabr allowed Paaru to bear and live hardship and to be rewarded with admiration and socio-economic support of the entire community. Therefore, sabr in the sense described by Paaru represents not reluctance to act but a site of considerable investment, struggle and achievement.

Although Paaru and Urmila share similar poverty conditions as evaluated against the capability list (see Chapter Six), they differ markedly in their respective engagements and pursued choices; each enacting a different modality of agency in the face of their poverty situation (see Chapter Seven). Compared to previous poverty approaches used in Fiji, such as the income and expenditure approaches, the capability framework offers an alternative framework for the analysis of the effects of poverty and gender inequality (Sen, 1985b).¹¹² In the language of positive freedom embodied in the capability approach, Urmila may be understood to be a “free agent” insofar as she is capable of formulating her projects in accordance with her desires, values and goals and not those of others. A positive notion of freedom understood as the agential capacity to realise autonomous will unencumbered by the weight of custom and tradition is inadequate for this study because rural Indo-Fijian women can be seen as active subjects whilst operating within the conditions of subordination. In the excerpts from Paaru’s narrative, her agency cannot easily be interpreted as ‘positive freedoms’ such as those that Urmila

¹¹¹ Insofar as sabr entails the capacity to endure in the face of hardship without complaint, it involves in the minds of many, the passivity women are often encouraged to cultivate in the face of injustice. I have retained the use of sabr in this thesis rather than its common English translation ‘patience’ because sabr communicates a sense not quite captured by the latter: one of perseverance, endurance of hardship without complaints and steadfastness.

¹¹² Sen (1985b) rejects the exclusive focus on well-being, no matter how it is measured. In particular, he suggests that beyond information on well-being, information on people’s agency should also be taken into account because agency pays attention to the specific motivations and constraints under which people act (1985b: 205). The capability approach then brings to bear these features lacking in utility-based evaluations of poverty, like the income/consumption approach.
enjoys, yet it reveals how a woman working within the patriarchal ideology and discourse is imbued with more subtle strategies of resistance, bargaining and/or negotiation and self-expression.

The positive notions of freedom in the capability approach do not quite square with my feminist conceptualisations of agency because women's compliance to their religio-cultural values may also provide a realm of negotiation over gender power and control underlying the distribution and access to resources within the household and beyond. A few women might break out of confining expectations and suffer the consequences, serving as a warning to other women. Urmila overtly resisted the values of her community and she was labelled as shameless and sexually immoral. In this case, resistance as a form of positive freedom can lead to more suppression: to "punishment, discreditation, loss of honour, and confinement rather than more freedom, choice or autonomy" (Friedl, 1994: 152). For this reason, Paaru felt it was in her best interest to keep the "patriarchal bargain" (Kandiyoti, 1988) of accepting compliance and dependence in exchange for protection, social legitimacy, and economic and social support. Therefore, if the notion of agency could reflect the particular set of choices which the women in question value, it may become possible to reconcile my findings with my theoretical dispositions. In this case many of my participants who subscribed strictly to the values of sabr embodying sativa were also some of the most successful entrepreneurs in my sample because embracing such values meant more recognition and social support of their family and community.

In delineating these differences my point is not to assert the superiority of one notion of agency over another. Rather, it is to point out that evaluations of well-being have historical and socio-cultural moorings, and when these are brought to bear on traditional societies like the one I am discussing, it is worth reflecting on the notion of agency used in the capability approach. As the above discussion highlights, rural Indo-Fijian women operate within a 'situational' context and each uses different strategies to pursue active lives in the midst of their poverty situation. They are actively involved in a variety of activities to improve their situation and influence in the community and it is in this situational context that women define the parameters of their choice and achieved functionings. This also raises questions about the interplay of culture, gender and structural inequalities and suggests a need to rethink and reconceptualise the notion of
agency in the capability approach to take account of an embodied feminist perspective which recognizes the contextual, locational, multi-dimensional and complex nature of agency as witnessed in women's situated engagements with the patriarchal discourses of power. Such a socio-culturally mediated conception of agency is discussed below.

Reconceptualising Agency and the Capability Approach

This section explores the notion of situatedness that underpins the complex and mutually sustaining relationship between the individual and social structure to explain women's agency and well-being. In the light of discussions above, theorizing agency as multidimensional offers an understanding about women's creative capacity where women's experiences do not necessarily contest the dominant discourses. Rather, they appropriate and transcend them through particular constructions and evaluations of well-being. Such an approach is evident in the works of Lois McNay (2000: 161) where she argues that agency and empowerment be understood as generative and variable. She further calls for a dynamic approach to agency that is based on the creativity and unpredictability of individuals and their ability to adapt to constraint in imaginative ways.

Approaches to rural Indo-Fijian women's agency emerging from constraint or autonomous action are problematic because it does not explain the unanticipated and innovative actions of women when faced with material and/or cultural constraints. In contrast to liberal feminist traditions, I conceptualise participants' agency as creative and generative with multifaceted motivations, which I call 'situated agency', insofar as the process of realising the desires of one's will signify opposition and/or alliance with the dominant discourses. It also encompasses different levels of situatedness in relation to the principle of 'shakti' that rural Indo-Fijian women develop as either in

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115 Here I would like to steer away from Fabienne Peter's (2003: 24) notion of situated agency which she uses to explain individual's relational autonomy in the context of social choice theory and participatory social evaluations. Peter uses a gender perspective to suggest that social choice theory and related fields could investigate avenues that make social choice and social evaluations more responsive to situated agency and thus to issues of participation and inclusion. While her work provides necessary foundations for exploring gender issues in democratic policy evaluation, I have used the concept of 'situated agency' in this study, as an analytical and political project of feminism to examine the situational contexts within which women interpret and transform dominant constructs of gender. My basic premise is that in lived experiences, individuals are multiply constituted because they constantly interpret and implement gendered identities according to context and socio-economic constraints.
opposition to or in collusion with patriarchal discourses underlying family and gender relations. However, this is not to argue for an approach to agency that falls into the trap of cultural relativism. Rather, it is proposed as a generative and multi-level conceptualisation of agency, able to account for the interplay of cultural and structural power relations across ethnic differences. To explain rural Indo-Fijian women's agency situatedness to such power relations, I have utilised interdependent analysis highlighting the social structures and relations of power in the society. This has allowed me to incorporate the interplay of various material and cultural factors sensitive to evaluations of women's lived experiences of poverty and of (dis)empowerment.

Indeed, when we come to understand women's experience of poverty, we need to place the particular and responsive individual at the centre of the variety of orientations, dispositions and reactions that set my participants apart from one another even when they participate in a shared Indo-Fijian society and its religio-cultural values. These situations were characterized by unfinishable processes of adapting to cultural constraints, which contribute to making culture and self and also give a very particular texture to different instances of compliance or conformity, resistance, bargaining and/or negotiation and self-expressions. For the purpose of agency conceptualisation that I have developed in this study, the multi-layered or multi-voiced self is pivotal because it accommodates cultural and individual dynamics in a self that both appropriates aspects of the culture in which she/he lives and reacts to that very appropriation. For example, Ortner (1989) also recognizes the asymmetry and domination in particular historical and cultural settings, along with an awareness of the cultural schemes and constraints within which individuals operate. Given the forms of power rural Indo-Fijian women are embedded in - parental authority, structures of deference, gender ideologies and strict control of women's sexuality - the forms of protest and actions of change adopted by these women are “loosely structured” (Ortner, 1989: 198) and each woman is working within a socio-cultural and historical 'context'. Rural Indo-Fijian women are finding “multiple ways of thinking, speaking and acting ... operating stealthily in the interstices

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184 Departing from the claims of both Bourdieu (1977) and Sahlins (1981), Ortner emphasises the existence of inherent structural contradictions that keep a simple reproduction of the hegemonic social order from being a foregone conclusion. Because of the tensions and contradictions inherent in the habitus, actors are neither free agents nor completely socially determined products. Instead Ortner (1989: 198) suggest that they are "loosely structured" and women in this study interpret and reconstruct their agency in a continuous process, picking and choosing from the available markers, although not necessarily in any conscious or manipulative way.
of power" (Martin, 1987: 182) of Indian culture, to create spaces for their well-being and family's welfare (cf. Figure 2).

As seen in Figure 2, the degree and ways in which my participants negotiate the norms and rules of patriarchy depends very much on their personal circumstances and hence the actual outcomes in terms of individual resources and opportunities. Discussion in the previous section showed that Urmila and Paaru seek their well-being and security through different agency orientations and dispositions. For instance, while Urmila emphasised individual autonomy, Paaru developed a more relational sense of autonomy—maintaining good relations with the community. While different social and political circumstances give my participants unequal human capabilities, women develop different agentic capacities in their fight against poverty and gender inequality. My empirical evidence suggests that while some women comply with societal norms to have more acceptance in the community, a few resist and they tend to have less acceptance for exercising autonomy. However, there were also those participants who complied with their religio-cultural values and also practised bargaining and negotiation strategies not only within the household but also outside. In an Indo-Fijian traditional community, societal norms of female modesty, deference, obedience and self-sacrifice construct values of what constitutes flourishing lives for women. Participants who had the 'choice' to go to school simply could not do so because the economic circumstances of their lives made this impossible. Women who could have economic independence were prevented to do so because of traditional norms governing their lives. However, this is not to suggest that Indo-Fijian women's voices are subsumed by internalised patriarchal ideology. Stories of my participants suggest that they managed to employ their agentic skillfulness in different forms such as compliance, resistance, bargaining and/or negotiation and self-expression to fight against their poverty and a patriarchal world.

185 In her discussion of cultural and ethnic difference, Brah (1996) defines agency as relational. She notes individual agency as modalities of multi-locality continually marked by everyday cultural and political practices (1996: 117). Hence, what constitutes as women's situated agency changes continuously within the shifting cultural and political spaces of my participants, and it cannot be assumed that experiences of agency are somehow fixed and unmarked by diversity.
Figure 2: Rural Indo-Fijian Women’s Situated Agency

- More self-confidence
- More opportunities to promote self

Self-Expression:
- Religious forum
- Intra and extra-household relations
- More sense of self

Bargaining and/or Negotiation:
- Intra and extra-household relations
- Mahila Mandal
- Friendship/kinship networks

Situated Agency

Resistance:
- Overt and covert means
- Intra and extra-household relations
- Strong minded and progressive autonomy
- Independent freewill

Compliance/Submissiveness:
- Dependent
- Devoted to family and community
- High moral and sexual virtues
- Relational autonomy (interdependence)
- Less sense of self

Less acceptance
More acceptance
In fact participants’ lived experiences reflect the ambivalence of either compliance or resistance and involve their acceptance and/or rejection of the following kinds of gender identities available to them within the patriarchal discourses of power and gender relations: Sita/Kali, impure/pure, dutiful/disobedient, and so on. Hence, to counter their poverty situation these women break out of naturalised or traditional gender identities by shifting between various available categories. The ambivalent gender identities of my participants empower them to explore ‘un-named’ identities more relevant to their own lived stories and this gives us a sense of an individual making moral choices in their messy realities; choices that depend not so much on their place in a system but also on the possibilities inherent in concrete moments. Therefore, an effective strategy exercised by these women was their refusal to be confined to any available categories of gender identities which usually operate in terms of binaries or dichotomies (Hess, 1990).

I argue that processes of interpretation and re-construction of gender provide scope for change but this does not necessarily imply organised protest and overt resistance over relations of domination. For example, highly prescriptive forms of femininity in patriarchal discourses resisted by these women by their refusal to collaborate with their ‘oppressors’ such as when parents, husband, in-laws and community in general expect certain kinds of feminine behaviour from them. Or they bargain and/or negotiate relationships within the household which slightly disrupts gender hierarchy as in cases of Sangita, Karuna, and Paaru. These women re-negotiate the terms of their mobility outside the household with their husband by framing their paid work as supporting the family. In this case, they could not afford to alienate their husbands, families and neighbours because their low wages would not allow self-sufficiency, and they could not face loss of social ties and status. Such acts of resistance are therefore conceptually complex, because although these Indo-Fijian women have some form of agential capacities in their situational contexts, they are positioned unequally to men.

As a way of understanding rural Indo-Fijian women’s situatedness it is helpful to turn to Alcoff’s (1997: 346) notion of “women as positionality” and Young’s notion of “gender

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186 Of course, this relationship between individual and cultural has been an area of some debate in socio-cultural approaches to agency in recent times (e.g., Goddard, 2000; Hogland, 1995; Wray, 2003) and such debates has provided some useful insights to this study as well.
as seriality” (1995:187). In defining women by a particular position or relation, Alcoff argues that:

The internal characteristics of the person thus identified are not denoted so much as the external context within which that person is situated. The external situation determines the person’s relative position. The positional definition ... makes her identity relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies and so on. (1997: 349)

By recognising and understanding the social position they were in, women actively utilised this recognition; and while not being able to transcend it, they could contest new meanings and practices to their own individual advantage. My ethnographic evidence highlights a variety of situations in which Indo-Fijian women accept dominant cultural versions of gender yet also speak and behave in ways that contest them. Furthermore, while acknowledging one’s positionality with the established cultural models, women in this study develop a more individualistic understanding of their world which then forms a realm of contention and negotiation over gender power, control, and change. Herein lies the complexities of evaluating women’s agency and well-being and how heterogeneity of other identities, such as class, ideology, status, tradition, age, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion may present strengths and/or weaknesses for alliances between women (see also Chhachhi and Pittin, 1996; Leckie, 2002; Yeatman, 1993; Yuval-Davis, 1994).

In explaining rural Indo-Fijian women’s varied subjectivities, Young’s concept of ‘social series’ is useful because it refers to a collective which does not necessarily have shared attributes or cohesive identity but does have a loose unity, described as a shared passive relationship to a material milieu (see also Leckie, 2002:156-80). Young claims that:

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187 Concerned with the postmodern challenge to the essentialist idea of self and the political dangers of rejecting the category of ‘women’, Linda Alcoff and Iris Marion Young separately propose novel and facilitating accounts of gender and self that complements each other. For Alcoff (1997), understanding subjectivity begins with ontology- not in the sense of biology but rather in the sense of lived experience. Specifically accentuating practices, habits and discourses that are historical, fluid, contingent and revisable, Alcoff construes the category ‘women’ as positionality (as the social context in which one is situated and as a political point of departure). However, Young’s (1997) notion of seriality takes Alcoff’s analysis one step further, where she locates individuals in behaviour-directing and meaning-defining environments. The usefulness of these two models towards understanding women’s situated agency is discussed in the following paragraphs.

188 Here, Leckie (2000: 156-80) uses Young’s (1995) theorisation of gender as seriality to explain women’s activism in Fiji. She argues that feminist and mainstream political groups in Fiji, as well as organisations like unions, mobilise according to consciousness of common constraints of women, but often this can at best only be a series due to the continued prominence of ethnicity and tradition and fractures along class lines.
The notion of seriality not only depicts the external constraints that women experience but also the behaviour-directing and meaning-defining environment in which they are situated. In other words, assigned identity compels certain practices and performances on series members (1997: 25). However, an individual is differently positioned to social collectives like gender, race and class ... they can relate to these social positioning in different ways; the same person may relate to them in different ways in different social contexts or at different times in their lives. (1995: 207)

The concept of seriality is pertinent to my discussion of rural Indo-Fijian women’s situated agency and their well-being evaluations because it implies that women are not wholly predetermined by structure, but utilise a situated capacity to act effectively on their lives, minimising the vulnerability associated with extreme poverty. Such a way of thinking about women, I argue, allows us to see women as a collective without identifying common attributes that all women have or implying that all women have a common identity or a common situation.

In order to explore women’s situated agency informing the capability approach, it is useful to go back to how agency is conceptualised in the capability approach. According to Sen (1985b: 203) agency is “what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important”. Here, Sen’s notion of agency invokes positive freedom and it focuses on what a person is actually able to do and achieve.189 On one hand, the capability approach proved useful to gender-aware analysis and evaluations of well-being in this study. Using the capability approach, I was able to assess how women’s freedom to live the lives that they value is restricted/constrained within the context of intra-household relations: participants had lower levels of education, they suffered from domestic violence, their behaviour in the public domain was often restricted by gender norms, and they suffered from labour market discrimination and discriminatory policies of the state. These are a few of the many gendered ‘unfreedoms’ that women in this study face. On the other hand, the increased emphasis on an umbrella conception of freedom as autonomous will does not fully explain gender relations, power configurations and women’s agency in the context of traditional societies.

189 Various discussions of dimensions of capability suggest that distinct theoretical and empirical exercises likewise recognize the value of agency, for example, references on agency occurred under titles such as practical reason (Nussbaum, 1995), participation (Max-Neef, 1992), self-direction (Schwartz, 1997), self-expression (Inglehart, 1997), and autonomy and self-determination (Doyal and Gough, 1991; Qizilbash, 1996).
As discussed above, it is important to deliberate on the pluralistic aspects of agency that merit attention in women's well-being evaluations in traditional societies (see also Gasper and Staveren, 2003; Hill, 2003; Iversen, 2003). Common understandings of freedom as "self-reflective, self-determining and autonomous will" underlying the capability approach has so far neglected contributions to well-being that are not part of one's reified autonomy and independence but rather of the negotiations over constraints as witnessed in the case-studies of my participants. In this study, the focus on freedom neglects evaluations of well-being in terms of social relations and personal relationships beyond the household, which are important sources of women's well-being. For example, women's decision to comply and conform to the social norms and values, as an indicator of their dignity and self-respect, were also means and ends of their well-being outcomes. Although feelings of acceptance and moral virtues of self-respect may not matter for some questions concerning agency as freedom, they do matter for some other questions, especially those concerned with rural Indo-Fijian women's dignity in traditional and community based societies where women often develop a critical sense of their personhood by reacting to the attitudes/actions of others.

All these points suggest the need for a stronger account of agency than the notion of freedom which is provided in the capability approach. My ethnographic evidence and feminist explorations on power and gender relations makes the concept of situated agency particularly attractive as a backdrop for a discussion of the capability approach. In recognising the different values and motivations of my participants, not simply as examples of freedom, I suggest that women's situatedness in employing different forms of agency represents a subset of 'choice' as shown in Figure 1 (see Chapter 2). I have sought to understand the ways in which rural Indo-Fijian women have differing experiences and perceptions from those differently situated. Even though these women's capabilities have been constrained by similar patriarchal relations, as individuals they relate to their social positionings in different ways. For example, if Kala Wati finds comfort in owning the family farm by keeping good relations with her mother-in-law, Karura and her family survives on the goodwill of her neighbours and community members.

Therefore, the notion of situated agency used in this study presents an alternative to the unified language of freedom embodying the capability approach. My participants may
find their family, neighbourhood, or religious forums important for their well-being in different kinds of circumstances and contexts. What appears to be salient here is that an individual develops a sense of one’s well-being within different socio-economic contexts. It is important to maintain the analytical distinction between women as a subordinate category and women as a highly diverse group of individuals, and to recognize that how individual women experience inequality and act upon accessing opportunities reflect some combination of their structural positioning and their own unique personal histories, bargaining and/or negotiation skills, and motivations. Beyond this point, this thesis has shown the implications of such notions of female agency discussed in this study for feminist analytical frameworks and how we think about issues of power, politics and subjectivity. These are discussed further in the next section.

**Self-Politics of Gender: Embracing 'Shakti' Consciousness**

The everyday forms of rural Indo-Fijian women’s situated agency described above posed a number of analytic dilemmas for this study. First, how might we develop theories that give these women credit for resisting the power of those who control so much of their lives? Second, how might we account for the fact that rural Indo-Fijian women both resist and support the existing system of power in a variety of creative ways? Third, how would one imagine the politics of gender equality when situated within particular life worlds? In some ways, these questions outlines the tension that attends the dual character of feminism as both analytical and political project insomuch as no analytical undertaking is considered enough in and of itself unless it takes a position vis-à-vis the subordination of women.\(^{190}\) The argument I offer here has repercussions for the way we think about feminist politics. I have clearly not offered answers to the above questions, but simply suggested some of the directions that are necessary to pursue in order to formulate a more insightful political judgement.

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\(^{190}\) Marilyn Struthern (1987) observed as much when she wrote about the “awkward relationship” between feminism and anthropology. She argued, “Insofar as the feminist debate is necessarily a politicised one, our common ground or field is thus conceived as the practical contribution that feminist scholarship makes to the solution or dissolution of the problem of women...To present an ethnographic account as authentic cannot avoid being judged for the position it occupies in this particular debate. By failing to take up an explicit feminist position, I have, on occasion, been regarded as not being a feminist” (1987: 282).
This study suggests that the liberatory goals of feminism should be re-thought in the light of the fact that the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in the light of other desires, aspirations and capacities inherent of a culturally and historically located subject. As witnessed in the preceding discussions, my participants’ responses to their local situations and their survival strategies were as diverse as their realities of poverty. Their strategies ranged from practical interpretations of religion to subtle rejection of religion, from individual strategies of personal assertion and self-development to collective struggle through women’s Mahila Mandal. What follows from this, I would contend, is that in analysing the question of politics, we must begin with a set of fundamental questions about the conceptual relationship between the self and moral agency as constituted in different socio-cultural and political locations, and not hold one particular model to be axiomatic. The assertion of commonality, indeed of the universality and primacy of gender inequality, denies the diverse socio-economic conditions and cultural heritages that affect the lives of many women. My participants’ personal lives were bound up in their everyday problems of daily survival and poverty together with multiple jeopardies of kinship, race, religion and gender. Whether or not my participant’s cultural practices and relationships were actually oppressive or unjust was dependent on their self-understandings concerning their practices.

I found that while my participants lacked the theoretical tools of overall feminist consciousness to resist systematic power dynamics and constraints that they faced, as individuals they were self-critical of gender relations of domination. In fact, a participant’s own ideas of good life differed from those of other participants. Taking seriously such differences among women implies that feminism “must stop conceiving itself as a natural political destination for all women” (Ang, 1995: 57). I found that women’s own understanding of their situation reflected a “self-politics” of gender rather than feminism per se because differently situated women had conflicting interests. In fact my participants interpreted their gendered identities and responded in relation to their existing kinship relations, religio-cultural identities and socio-economic conditions.

191 Here, I steer away from the fact that rural Indo-Fijian women in this study have overall feminist consciousness and I argue that my participants use self-politics of gender instead (Blouw, Personal Communication, June 2005). By this I mean that my participants have actively struggled (as either individuals or as a group) against traditional gender restrictions, but they have usually been obliged by circumstances to carry out their struggles in isolation. As discussed in the previous chapters, each of them formulates priorities and strategies based on their own understanding of their particular circumstances; hence it is a more individualised consciousness than a collective struggle.
conditions. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge “limit case” situations in which the self-understandings of women’s cultural and situational standpoints provide the horizon of meaning through which they make sense of their lives. The concept of self-politics of gender can bring to light epistemic advantages of the self-understandings that my participants derived from their religious and cultural identities that may conflict with feminist commitments and theorisation. Thus, how do we settle the issue of how feminists should respond to women who draw on such identities to resist feminist accounts of their situation? These disjunctions in feminist theorising confront us with occasions that elude rational arguments since they leave us with no shared basis for agreement or disagreement.

As a way of explaining self-politics of gender among rural women in this study, I draw parallels between the discourse of feminism and the Hindu principle of shakti (discussed earlier in Chapter Four). Notwithstanding the Brahmin-imposed restrictions on women through repressive sexual ideologies over centuries and its implication on the social control, subordination and subsequent seclusion of Indo-Fijian women, Hinduism has also provided women with a discourse of countervailing power implicit in the shakti principle. In Hinduism, femaleness is shakti (power/energy) and the shakti principle outlines the immense power of females implicit in Hindu goddesses like Kali and Durga who are bestowed with infinite power. Like feminism, elements of the Shakti principle also generate an insight into the possibilities of subversions and resistance by women as well as the possibility of salvaging control of their lives through conformity and compliance. The Hindu goddesses Kali (the Black One), Durga, Lakshmi (the Goddess of Fortune) and Chandi who symbolise the shakti principle could be taken as role models by Hindu women instead of embracing the ‘Sita’ image. All women in this study identify themselves as being religious and acknowledge that religious influences have been important in their lives.

While my participants were conscious of the lack of power in patriarchal constructions of their femininity, they subconsciously drew on the notion of shakti to modify and redefine a notion of femininity being consistent with their personal needs and beliefs. For example, a great majority of my participants remained tethered to men, dependent on them for economic support, social propriety and physical protection. They did not feel able enough to openly question dominant gender constructions as compliance
meant socio-economic and cultural support of the family and community. As such, the commonality of feminist politics is tempered by an understanding that individual women in this study have different strategies and priorities when challenging their subordination; that the choice made by one may not be the best choice for another or even a choice at all. Some may comply, while others decide to resist or simultaneously engage in both. My empirical data suggests that women are alienated from a form of collective action because of their differing priorities, struggles and socio-economic contexts. Their daily struggles of poverty and gender inequality remain *individual* in form and therefore their effectiveness in engaging in collective actions to bring about gender equality is likely to be limited. Rural Indo-Fijian women in this study are yet to see, organise and imagine as a group with collective interest because as individuals they self-critically engage in their own struggles with structural relations of gender, religion, kinship and race. Hence, self-politics of gender brings together women who define their struggle in exclusively secular terms as well as those who prefer to work from within the framework of religion and socio-cultural moorings, to share and learn from each other despite their differences.

In other words, my argument is that for us to be able to evaluate and interpret, in a morally and politically informed way, even those practices we consider objectionable, it is important to take into consideration the desires, motivations, commitments and aspirations of the people to whom these practices and values are important. In order to explore the kinds of gender inequality, poverty and well-being evaluations specific to women located in particular historical and cultural situations, it is simply not enough to point, for example, that a tradition of female piety or modesty serves to give legitimacy to women’s subordination and gender inequality in intra and extra household relations. Rather, it is only by exploring these traditions in relation to the practical engagements and forms of life in which they are embedded that this study was able to understand the significance of that compliance to rural Indo-Fijian women who embody it. In summary, then, I propose that using the concept “self-politics of gender” can help solve the conundrums about women as a group in which feminist theory has recently found itself. Such politics appreciates that differently situated women will have conflicting interests and that gender needs to understood in terms of women’s lived social practices and the material contingencies of their lives.
Self-politics of gender might be more appropriate than feminism per se as a concept and collective value for coalition amongst my participants because femininity is not the only thing that brings them together. There are other concrete details of their lives that give them affinity, such as their kinship relations, their neighbourhood and their religious affiliation. Such a politics appreciates that differently situated women will sometimes have conflicting interests and that women will occasionally consider identities other than "womanhood" most salient. "Woman" is a serial collective defined neither by any common identity nor by a common set of attributes that all the individuals in a group share, but, rather, it names a set of structural constraints and relations that condition action and its meaning (Young, 1995: 212). Self-politics of gender, then, will appreciate that women interpret their gender identities and respond to feminist theories and proposals in relation to their existing religious and cultural identities. Therefore, feminist theorising should refer beyond itself to conditions and experiences that have not been reflected on, and to women whose lives are conditioned by unequal gender relations who are not feminist and are not part of any feminist groups. Acknowledging such incommensurabilities, however, need not result in political paralysis for feminists. It can sustain concerted political action by feminists as long as we give up the expectation that such action requires a homogenous "we". This requires feminists to acknowledge self-politics of their own cultural standpoints and the potential limitations of feminism as an identity for all women at any given time. None of this, however, precludes feminist theorists and activists from developing creative ways to promote feminist ideas and theories cross-culturally. It is my hope that this thesis will contribute to the ongoing development of feminist theorising which embraces rather than avoids dilemmas and tensions as a welcome opportunity for further inquiry.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I placed rural Indo-Fijian women's experiences at the centre of rethinking and reconceptualising the notion of agency and it is my contention that such a focus on lived experiences can enrich existing understandings of women's agency and well-being evaluations embodying the capability framework. I have attempted to do this by exploring the notions of well-being and agency and how these are played out in the daily struggles of survival and lived realities of my participants. While contesting
gender relations in their everyday practices and struggles, my participants employed a combination of transformative thoughts and actions, such as resistance, self-expression, bargaining and/or negotiations and compliance. The way my participants played out their agentic capacities in the midst of their poverty situation and other structural constraints like kinship, gender and race relations and religio-cultural heritages have an important bearing on the way we conceptualise the notion of agency and well-being in ‘traditional’ societies. This chapter also aimed to illuminate the more far-reaching contributions that this research on gender inequality and poverty can make to feminist theory and research about the importance of women’s situated engagements in understanding women’s empowerment and their notions of personhood. I proposed a stance which acknowledges women’s opportunities, recognition of their social and religious worth and ability to control their own lives even as agents of patriarchal control themselves. This is not simply an analytical point, but reflects a political imperative born out of realisation that feminists can longer presume that secular reason and morality exhaust the forms of valuable human flourishing and capabilities.
Chapter Nine

Conclusion

The way in which we choose to ‘know’ and measure poverty has implications for how we deal with it. This study has been influenced by feminist theories on gender relations and the conceptualisation and measurement of poverty from a gender-differentiated framework. To situate my own theoretical analysis, I took on feminist constructivist concerns while retaining a legacy from Sen’s capability approach, and challenged the gender blindness of conventional poverty measurement and analysis in Fiji in three ways. First, my analysis involved a shift from a focus on incomes and consumption, to recognition of poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon, which, in addition to aspects of ‘physical deprivation’, encompasses non-material factors pertaining to ‘social deprivation’ such as self-esteem, respect and vulnerability. Second, it fueled the idea of breaking with the convention of using the ‘household’ as the unit of measurement in income-based poverty profiles in favour of concentrating on individuals within domestic groupings. Third, it has stressed how poverty can be meaningfully evaluated if people’s own views on their ‘condition’ are brought into the picture.

This gender perspective on poverty highlighted that household income cannot be equated with individual well-being. Here, the capability approach has been very influential in the context of evaluating poverty, intra (extra) household relations and gender inequality. By concentrating on eighteen rural Indo-Fijian women, the capability approach allowed me to assess the well-being of individual women and their ability to be active participants in Fiji society. This study illustrated that households are neither homogenous nor autonomous groupings, but rather are internally differentiated and interactive with social and economic institutions outside the household. Familial relations expressed in terms of gender and generation were explored to show their impact on wider institutional structures, which in turn influence intra (extra) household relations. Using the capability approach, this study highlighted that social structures and institutions can (and generally do) have important effects on rural Indo-Fijian women’s capability sets and this was further revealed in my discussions of empirical evidence. For example, being able to live long, escape avoidable morbidity, be well-nourished, be
able to read, write and communicate and take part in literacy pursuits, and being treated equally with respect and dignity and so forth were all examples of valuable capabilities that my participants lacked. In this framework rural Indo-Fijian women’s poverty is construed as ‘basic capability failure’. Hence, the capability approach offered this research an informational basis for social evaluations of gender inequality that accommodates both well-being and agency considerations in different ‘spaces’, such as the household, communal institutions, labour market, state institutions, and NGO networks.

The aim of this study was to examine rural Indo-Fijian women’s position in the Fiji society and evaluate their vulnerability to poverty by analyzing the socio-economic structures in which these women live. The institution of marriage provided a way of examining the ideology and practice influencing the formation, maintenance and changes surrounding gender relations within the family and outside. Present day gender relations are influenced by a myriad of factors and the historical development, particularly the impact of colonialism and indenture and religious discourses, was discussed to contextualise gender constructions within Indo-Fijian households. Of particular interest to the present study was the emphasis on the appropriate treatment and moral behaviour of girmit women which significantly contributed to the demise of indenture and promised the virtues of Indian womanhood epitomised by Sita, the devoted wife of Lord Rama. Here, I have avoided an analysis which relies purely on religious values and sexuality on the one hand, and on economic relations on the other. Instead I have argued that an understanding of women’s poverty must take all of these variables into consideration, and therefore, I have analysed how women’s position is influenced by the socio-economic environment in which they live and its implications for gender constructions within the Indo-Fijian society. This allowed me to better understand the patterns of allocation, distribution, ownership and control of household resources and opportunities.

The capability approach thus provided the philosophical foundation for a broad concept and measure of poverty and well-being in this study. The framework helped me address why there is differentiation in social and material status between Indo-Fijian women and men within household and how social structures legitimate and enact such rules of allocations and distribution. This thesis illustrated how social constructions of gender
and kinship relations were negotiated by participants’ within the household and highlighted the complexity of their socio-economic positions. This formed a critical backdrop against which rural Indo-Fijian women’s well-being and agency were evaluated. Furthermore, in adopting a feminist perspective this research has contributed to a multidimensional approach to poverty analysis and how conceptualisations of women’s well-being rest upon implicit assumptions about personhood, agency, and subjectivity. Incorporating feminist analysis with the capability approach, this research was able to analyze the gendered dynamics of poverty among different groups of people living together in a household. Gender-based barriers affect all aspects of poor women’s lives in rural Indo-Fijian settlements and undermine their ability to improve their own and their families’ well-being.

While the capability approach provides a strong conceptual background for poverty analysis and human development, there are some difficulties in terms of well-being evaluations and operationalising the notion of agency in traditional societies. A poverty focus misses a range of interconnected gender issues such as women’s changing economic roles and the strains this place on gender relations within the household and outside. Despite women’s changing roles, gender inequity within the household and society remains deeply ingrained with religio-cultural discourses and results in women’s heightened insecurity. The most important factor that limits the impact women’s work has on gender identities is the fact that economic independence does not bring with it social independence. Rural Indo-Fijian women’s self-respect and self-confidence are closely tied to the ability to belong to their family, community and society. A deep sense of belonging not only affirmed my participants’ gendered identity but also created bonds of trust and reciprocity. For my participants’, to live a dignified life meant complying with the values and norms of the community and society. Therefore, rural Indo-Fijian women’s choices about their well-being had to be evaluated in the light of their social relations and personal relationships within and beyond the household. This suggested a need to reconceptualise the notion of agency in the capability approach from an embodied feminist perspective which recognizes the situational contexts within which women define the parameters of their choice and achieved functionings.
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Appendices:
Appendix 1: Map of Fiji Islands, showing my Study Area
Appendix 2: Focused Conversation Schedule for Participants

Research Title: A Study on Rural Indo-Fijian Women and Poverty

All information obtained will be kept strictly confidential and will be used to formulate a Doctoral thesis focusing on a gendered understanding of poverty and intra-household relations.
I propose to lead the session of focused conversation with the following questions with 18 Indo-Fijian women in two rural settlements in Fiji. What follows is a guide to the areas to be covered in the conversations. The questions were not necessarily put in the language or order indicated below. The actual conversations were carried out in local Hindi.

Section 1: Opening Questions (family and housing details)

After establishing rapport with my participants, I would start identifying my participants by providing a brief introduction of myself and the purpose, aims and outcomes of the research. This will also involve gaining the participant's informed consent for taking part in this research.

(1) A brief introduction of yourself and tell me a bit about your family background:

Place of birth, age, marital status, how along have you been married, school leaving age, qualifications, position in the household, how many members in the family, number of children and details of each.

(2) Tell me a bit about your educational background:

- How long did you go to school for?
- What were the reasons for leaving school?
- Did you ever have dreams about your schooling and ambition in life?
- How about your brothers' and sisters' education during your childhood?
- Have your daughters dropped out of school earlier than your sons, and if so, at what level and why?
- As a young girl did you drop out of school earlier than your brothers? If yes why?
- How about your brothers- how far did they go in the school? And what are they doing now?
- Do your brothers visit you often or do they help you in your difficult and hard times? If not why? If yes, how?
- Month or year each of your brothers has visited you or phoned?
(3) Details of Family Members:

- What sort of work does your husband do?
- Is it tiring?
- Is he helpful with the children or about the house?
- Has he been in work all year?
- What months was he off?
- What about any of your teenage child(ren) in work?
- Are they helpful around the house or with children?
- Have you done any paid work during the year?
- When? For how long? What sort of work?
- Did you like it?
- Did it make you feel tired?

(4) Housing and Transport Conditions:

- The structure and condition of the house?
- Do you like this house?
- Number of rooms?
- Is there enough space: well arranged, enough rooms, garden, space for you and your husband, space for children,
- Kinds of furniture and appliances?
- Do you feel well-equipped?
- Have you got the decorating the way you like it?
- Who does it? How do you pay for it?
- Access to water?
- Access to energy sources?
- Sanitation facilities?
- Means of transport? Do you often use public transport?
- What degree of access do you have to infrastructure (e.g. portable water systems and sanitation facilities, public transportation, electricity)?
- What are the major obstacles for expanding access to infrastructure?
- How do you cope with the problems of living here?
Section 2: Family Income, Expenses and Allocation System, and Health

(5) Patterns of income and allocation in the household:

- Who is the breadwinner in the family?
- Are there additional working members in the family?
- What are their contributions to the house?
- Apart from cash income, what are the other sources of your livelihood, for example subsistence home production, remittances from distant relatives, or gifts and donations in cash & kind, sale of crops in local village market/road side stall?
- Do you or your husband own a farm? What about this house-site?
- What is the approximate monthly income of your family? And expenses?
- During the year do you receive money from elsewhere like social welfare assistance, school fees assistance for children, etc?
- Who collects this allowance or assistance?
- Who ‘controls’ the money in your family?
- Who ‘manages’ the money in your family, i.e. who gets what and why?
- Who is responsible for the household budgeting, i.e. what to buy, when to buy and for whom, and what not to buy?
- What do you feel responsible for as far as money is concerned?
- How would you describe your arrangements? All shared, some shared, all his, all mine, all separate?
- How did this arrangement come about? Have you always done it like this? Did you discuss it?
- Were there any changes when you stopped working or went back to work?
- How do you feel about having an income of your own?

(6) Patterns of Expenditure in the household:

- What are the weekly or monthly expenses for?
- Who pays, by what method and from what money?
- Is it always the way you have said or do you do it differently sometimes?
- Have any of the bills caused special problems?
• How much money do you have for housekeeping and food each week/month?
• Who contributes to it – you, husband, teenage children, or others? Is it always the same or does it vary?
• If you haven’t enough what do you do?
• Does that happen often? Do you mind?
• How do you shop? Do you do any bulk buying?
• Who carries the heavy shopping?
• Do you have to buy special foods or medicines for anyone?
• What would you do if you have $50 more to spend on food each week?
• What would you give up first if you were hard up?
• What do you do about clothes for yourself?
• When did you last but smoothing for yourself? What was it?
• How did you pay for it? Is that usual?
• What about clothes for the children? Do you buy them regularly? Can you get second-hand clothes? Who from?
• Does you husband buy his own clothes? Do you go with him? Who pays?
• Who pays for: and how much and with what money for e.g., on cigarettes, medicine, alcohol, school needs for children, and pocket money for the children?
• Would you say you do anything to economize or make sure there is enough money to go around? Like what?
• What do you do about saving? Who does it? How?
• Is it regular? How much?
• If you don’t save, does it worry you?
• Have you borrowed any money? From where and how much?
• Are you paying it off? How?
• If you want something and your husband isn’t too keen, how do you go about getting it?
• Is there anything you’d like that you haven’t got?
• Do you discuss big buys with him?
• Does he just go out and buy thins? Or do you?
• How does he get his spending money? What does he spend it on, for e.g., meals out, drinks, hobbies, other?
• What does he do if he runs out?
• Does he pay it back?
• Do you think he should spend more or less on himself?
• How does it compare with what you spend on yourself?
• Do you spend on anything your husband doesn’t approve of?
• Does he spend anything that you don’t approve of?
• Has your spending changed since you had the child(ren)?
• What would you buy if you had $10 more a week to spend on yourself?

(7) Food Consumption and Health Status of the Family:

• What sort of food do you buy?
• Who buys food in the house?
• What are the foods available from subsistence home production?
• What are the staple foods consumed by your household?
• Who all are involved in the process of food preparation and cooking?
• What meals do you cook? Breakfast, mid-day, evening?
• Do you do any cooking between meals, like snacks, cakes, other?
• Is it different at weekends? Or in the school holidays?
• How many plates of cooked food do you provide in the week (normally)?
• Do you cook separate meals or dishes for anyone?
• Does anyone help with the cooking? Husband? Children? Anyone else? Regularly or occasionally?
• Does your husband need a meal when he comes in?
• What do you and you family eat for breakfast, mid-day and in the evening?
• Do you keep going on cups of tea/coffee? Or snacks?
• Does your family like your cooking?
• So when it comes to servings of food at meal times, i.e. who eats first and last and what amount?
• Do small children/infants have different meal times than adults? If yes, what are the feeding times during a day?
• In your opinion do you think your husband has sacrificed anything for the family? If yes, what and when?
• Over the past year have you felt ill at any time? What was it? For how long? When? What did you do?
• Were you ill at any other time? Or any other members of your family?
• Have you or any one in the family got any chronic illness or conditions for e.g., diabetes or asthma?
• Have you had any help? Why not?
• Do you smoke or drink? Anyone else in the family?
• Is there anything that slows you down, for e.g. headaches or menstrual pains?
• What sort of family planning do you use? Why? Where do you go for it?
• How do you feel about it? Has it worked so far?
• If you are not well or worried about something would you talk to anyone about it? Your husband? Friends? Other?
• In a sudden emergency is there someone who would help you?
• Has such a thing happened? What did you do?

Section 3: Daily Life & Leisure

(8) Daily Responsibilities within the household:

• What sort of tasks do you do around the house? Do you supervise others in the house?
• Do you divide up the responsibilities for keeping the family going? Does anyone help you?
• Who irons? When? How often?
• Are there any labor savers you’d like? Do you think you will get it/them?
• Do you feel tired?
• Do you do the housework at any particular time? Or fit it in?
• Would you say you and your husband have the same standards in housework? Do you ever argue about it? Or talk about it?
• Are you happy with what gets done? Do you ever feel guilty about the way things are? Or angry that you have to do so much? Or fed up?
• If you are responsible for such activities, do you have a choice in this, i.e., do you have a ‘say’ in its organisation?
• Husband’s contribution to housework (washing up, cleaning, shopping, cooking, ironing, garden etc): does it sometimes, or sometimes last week or never?
• If you need something done about the house do you employ tradesmen? Or family? Or friends?
• What does your husband do when he is around in the house? Can you hand over child/children or any other tasks? What do you do then?
• What do you find most time consuming about children?
• Husband’s help with the children, for e.g., dressing, bathing, giving meals, ply, help with homework, etc?
• What decides how much your husband does in the way of housework or childcare? Or the others?
• Are there things you don’t like him to do? Or things he won’t do? Or the things you’d rather not do when he’s there?
• Who is responsible for what in the household? Is the person ‘responsible’ the one who decides what to do?
• What is your expectation of your husband? And his or you?
• In your opinion, do you think your husband has reasonable expectations of you?
• And what is your expectation of yourself? What makes you a good wife, a good mother, and daughter-in-law?
• Do you think your age plays an important role in terms of what you do in the house?
• When you were growing as a child, have you ever been forbidden from doing certain tasks within your household? If yes, what were they?
• Does your husband ask your opinion or respect what you have to say?
• Can you think of something that you have done secretly or are still doing it without the knowledge of your husband or in-laws?

(9) Leisure Activities and Hobbies:

• Have you done any voluntary work during the year? What and when? And how about your husband?
• What does your husband think of it? Do you do any regular activities like a religious club or make regular visits to relatives?
• What do you usually do in the evenings? In the week? At weekends?
• What about other leisure? You, your husband or together?
• Do you find you can make time for yourself? Would you like more? What for?
• Does your husband belong to any clubs or organisations?
• Do you go to temple or mosque? And what is the level of your participation in religious activities?

• Apart from the people in your house, who do you mainly see in your spare time? Mainly friends? Relatives? Both? Neither?

• Are there any that your husband doesn’t approve of your seeing? What do you do about that?

• Does he see anyone you don’t approve of? What do you do?

• Do you know your husband’s friends? Does he know yours?

• What do you do especially well?

• Do you think you are able to use these skills whenever you want? If not, explain why?

• Have you ever found some of these skills helpful to you and your family? If yes, in what ways?

• To what extent have you been helped by or helped other women in the community?

• What do your friends like about you? How about your family, husband and children?

• What is your favorite radio programme and why?

• Have you recently seen a movie? If yes, which one?

• Is there anything particular about the movie that interested you most? If yes, what and why?

• Do you find you can relax? What do you do?

Section 4: Life Events and Expectations

(10) Personal Life Events:

• Did you make any close new friends?

• Had any problems in your marriage or someone in your household like your daughter or son?

• Any recent births, deaths or miscarriages?

• Any accidents that may have affected you and your family?

• Had any changes in employment? Unemployment?

• Have there been any difficulties within your family?
• Has anything that you think important happened? Have you had to make any big decisions?
• Have you ever wished for something different in your life?
• Can you relate experiences of difficulty that you may have had since your childhood in your own terms, for example, in terms of your educations and aspirations in life?
• Can you please enlighten me about realities and experiences of your life, activities and your feelings as a young girl and a woman? What are your personal stories that you want to tell others especially women of this era?
• Hypothetically speaking, how would you think your life would differ, in terms of living standards, if you lived in a town or city rather than a small rural settlement like this village?

(11) Regrets, Expectations and Dreams in Life:

• Talk about your regrets in life?
• What were your expectations in life? Did you achieve all those expectations? If not, please explain the reasons?
• If you were to live your life once again, how would you see your life today?
• How about the expectations that you have for your daughters?
• What are the qualities that you think are important for your daughter(s)? And how is it different when you were a ‘daughter’ in your natal family?
• Do your husband, friends, family and children listen to what you have to say?
• Do you feel you are supported by your husband? Do you mind?
• What has been the greatest fear in your life?
• What do you think has the greatest restraint in your life?
• What role does religion play in shaping your views on your roles as a wife and woman in the society?
• What kind of behavior is expected of you by your husband, family and community? Do you see yourself as fitting into this portrait?
• What makes you a good wife, a good mother and daughter-in-law?
• What does your husband expect of you as a good wife, mother and daughter-in-law?
• In your opinion, do you think your husband has reasonable expectations of you?
• What do you expect your husband to be? And do you think he fits in the role that you expect of him or your family?
• What would be your three wishes in life now?
• If nothing unexpected happened, what do you think you will be doing in 5 to 10 years time?

Section 5: Relations beyond the household or family

(12) Community, State and Market

• Do your relatives help you in any way? Or friends?
• Does your husband do anything for relatives? Or friends?
• How about your brothers? Have they been helpful?
• Have your neighbors been helpful in your difficult days? And how?
• Have you or your husband helped your neighbors in the past year?
• Do you ever feel angry or resentful that other people’s children can have things that your’s can’t?
• Have you seen a social worker, counselor or anyone like that in the past year? What for? Did they help? How did you find about them?
• Have any of the government officials visited you and your family for help in the past year or so?
• How would you like the government to help you and your community?

Many thanks for your time and cooperation!

Note: This focused conversation schedule entails the encounters that I had with my participants in both first and second fieldwork in 2003 and 2004.
Appendix 3: Interview Schedule for Informants

Research Title: A Study on Rural Indo-Fijian Women and Poverty

All information obtained will be kept strictly confidential and will be used to formulate a Doctoral thesis focusing on a gendered understanding of poverty and intra-household relations.
I propose to lead the interviews with the following questions. Because I would be interviewing various ministries (government departments) and NGOs not all the questions would be relevant to every department and NGO interviewed. However, some questions may be similar to few organisations and ministries.

1. **A brief introduction** of myself and my purpose and aims of the research. This will also involve gaining the personnel’s informed consent for participating in this research.

2. **Organisation/Ministerial Details:**
   - Name of the organisation or ministry-
   - Position of the key informant-
   - Location (Headquarters and branches)-
   - Role of the organisation/ministry-
   - What are the mission/goals of your ministry or organisation?

3. **Government Ministries at National & Local Level:**
   - What level of involvement does the Ministry have in women’s development issues, their rights and advocacy at both national and local level?
   - How does the Ministry coordinate such development programs of women at both national and local level?
   - Who decides on the kinds of development programs for disadvantaged women in Fiji?
• Is there a research unit within the ministry that carries out feasibility studies of the development programs according to the needs and priorities of the disadvantaged women?

• If yes, how is this unit organized and funded and whom is it responsible to?

• Are there any special formulae or criteria for distribution of development programs and funds for the disadvantaged women in Fiji in terms of their spatial location, district and ethnicity?

• What are the plan of action and policies available to deal with women’s development issues and problems like poverty and unemployment?

• How does your involvement impact upon the women in rural and urban areas?

• How does the organisation/ministry ensure that there is gender and racial equality in its policies/projects/practices?

• Since my research area is in Labasa, what are the policies and funding programs currently in place for upgrading the development and empowerment needs of rural Indo-Fijian women in Labasa?

• Is there any long-term plan of action of the Ministry for alleviating poverty and/or implementing strategies for empowerment of disadvantaged women in Fiji? What are they?

• Availability of recent studies or statistics of the Ministry on women and poverty and development programs distribution across Fiji.

(4) Microfinance Projects:

• What are the kinds of microfinance projects that the Ministry implements?

• What are the distribution criteria for such projects?
• How does the Ministry ensure that there is equity in terms gender, ethnicity and geographical location of the projects distribution and implementation?

• What has been the success rate for such projects and what could be the plausible reasons for the failure (if any) of these projects across Fiji?

• What are the Ministry’s long-term plans for microfinance and alleviation of poverty in Fiji?

• Availability of statistics on the kinds of microfinance projects, and its distributions across the west and northern regions of Fiji?

(5) Social Welfare Department:

• What is the severity of women’s poverty situation in Fiji as seen and documented by your Ministry?

• How does the Social Welfare Ministry deal with women’s issues and their poverty situation both at national and local level?

• Availability of statistics on women and poverty (individual cases would be interesting and the types of assistance they receive from the social welfare ministry). Particularly interested in the distribution by gender, ethnicity and location across Fiji.

(6) NGOS dealing with Women and Poverty Issues, for e.g., FC OSS, DAWN, FWRM, FWCC, ECREA, FHRC, FemLink Pacific, National Council of Women, UNIFEM, and UNDP:

• What are the poverty alleviation projects in the country?

• What is the nature of these projects?

• How are these projects funded and implemented?
• What has been the success or failure rate of these poverty alleviation projects in Fiji?

• Are there any gender development (women in development) projects that are funded by your organisation?

• If yes, how are they funded, implemented and what is the distribution criteria of such projects?

• How does the organisation ensure that its advocacy roles and funding projects reach all the disadvantaged women or rather women at grassroots level?

• What are the advocacy roles of your organisation in terms of gender and development issues in Fiji?

• What does your organisation have to say about ethnic conflict in Fiji and its impact on women’s economic position and their poverty situation?

• What kinds of international support does your organisation have? And how does your organisation ensure that such kinds of international support do reach the women at grassroots level?

• How does FWCC (Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre) reach victims of domestic violence across the nation regardless of their class and ethnic relations?

• What are the Centre’s empowerment and advocacy roles for its victims?

• Availability of reports, newsletters, poverty alleviation projects/documents, organisation’s documentation on poverty and women in Fiji, documentation on gender and development issues in Fiji, poverty and gender profile in Fiji, etc.

(7) Lands Department (NLTB) & Bureau of Statistics:

• Statistical Information on land issue in Fiji: availability of statistics on the type and distribution of land in Fiji.
• Statistics on current leased land, expired leases, and evicted farmers according to districts/provinces in Fiji (particularly interested in the Northern division and the research area).

• What are the land policies of Native Land Trust Board (NLTB) in terms of the distribution of land according to ethnicity and gender?

• What are the long-term policies of NLTB to resolve the land issue in Fiji?

• What are the recent statistics available on poverty in Fiji?

• Is there any gender disaggregated statistics available on poverty? Or rather gender profile of poverty in Fiji?

Many thanks for your Time & Cooperation
Appendix 4: Informed Consent Form

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research project which explores rural women’s understanding and their views of poverty in their day-to-day living. I understand that Priya Chattier is conducting this research project as a basis for her research degree at ANU and will be interviewing rural Indo-Fijian women and key personnel from NGO’s and government ministries dealing with women and poverty issues. I understand that the research project methods that may involve me are:

- Being selected as a voluntary participant and informant to be part of the research.
- Introducing the researcher to participants and informants.
- The researcher’s recorded observations of my interactions and/or daily activities within my family and the rural settlement.
- Participation in multiple 30-60 minute interviews and/or 2 hours of focused conversations.
- Participation (NGOs and Government Ministries) in a prearranged interview.
- Researcher’s participation, observation and recording of participants’ daily lives and activities.
- The researcher’s recorded and transcribing of data which will be treated confidentially.
- The use of excerpts of my conversation and participation with the researcher in the thesis.

I grant permission for the interview and the conversations to be tape recorded and transcribed, and to be used by Priya Chattier for the analysis of interview data. I grant permission for the evaluation of data generated from the above methods to be published in the dissertation and future publication(s). I understand that any identifiable information in regard to my name and/or organisation will be encoded and not identifiable in the research or any future publication(s), unless, in the case of participants, where I have voluntarily given permission to use excerpts of my interviews/conversations in their original form (given that confidentiality would be preserved through the use of ‘false name’ which I have been requested to choose myself). Researcher would be seeking my verbal and signed consent before she could present the information in the form of excerpts in the research itself.

I understand that at any stage of the interview process I can withdraw my participation and contribution.

__________________________________________

Research Participant/Informant:

__________________________________________

Date:
Note: If there are any ethics concerns about the research they can be addressed to the Human Ethics Officer, Research Services Office: Ms S. Deutsch, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200 Australia. Tel: (0561) 26125 2900; Fax: (0561) 261254807; Email: Sylvia.Deutsch@anu.edu.au

Researcher: Priya Chattier, The Australian National University, Faculty of Arts, School of Social Sciences, Copland Building, Canberra ACT 0200 Australia. Tel: (0561) 26125 2756; Fax: (0561) 26125 2222; Email: privachattier@yahoo.com or Priya.Chattier@anu.edu.au.
Appendix 5A: Schematic Map of My First Study Settlement
Appendix 5B: Schematic Map of My Second Study Settlement
Appendix 6A: Layout of a Farmer's House
Appendix 6B: Layout of a Landless Cane-Cutter's House