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NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND  
EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S  
SELF-HELP GROUPS IN INDIA

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A thesis submitted for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy  
of the Australian National University

October 2003

## DECLARATION

Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own original work carried out as a PhD student at the Australian National University from November 1999 to September 2002.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick Kilby', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Patrick James Kilby

October 2003

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis examines the nature of empowerment for poor women in India, and the factors that influence empowerment outcomes arising from NGO interventions. Specifically the thesis looks at the role of accountability of the NGO to the people with whom it is working as a factor for empowerment. Empowerment of the poor and marginalised is becoming important a part of poverty alleviation strategies in development practice and it is recognised that the unequal power relations in the lives of the poor has denied them access to many development benefits. NGOs are seen to be important agents in empowerment as they are generally regarded as being closer to the communities with which they are working, than other development agencies, and being public-benefit organisation the goals in much of their work generally support empowerment outcomes.

The research was concerned with how the accountability relationship an NGO has to the people it is working with affects the empowerment outcomes they experience. The thesis contends that NGOs are generally not ideal facilitators for empowerment as they are not membership organisations and as a consequence the people with whom they work do not have a direct or mandated accountability relationship with the NGO.

This thesis defines empowerment as both the expansion of choice of an individual, and their capacity to act on those choices. The thesis looked at 15 NGOs in Karnataka and Maharashtra in India, and interviewed 77 self-help groups of poor women who were served by these NGOs. The results of the study show that women closely respond to the notion of changes in their agency as being key to what they see as empowering. The greater expansion of choice an action then

enabled them to take greater control of their lives, and they were able to gain other development outcomes and resources that were available to them.

The research found that accountability of the NGO to the groups, together with the period for which the group had been together and the decision-making of the groups, were correlated with empowerment. The research focused on the accountability of the NGOs to the groups and found that this was an area that many NGOs had some difficulty with. First they had competing accountability relationships to other stakeholders, namely their donors and the regulators; and secondly, as public benefit organisations they were hesitant to hand high levels of control over to a beneficiary constituency

These findings have important implications for development practice, which in recent years has focused on more on efficient program management practices (including accountability to the donor) for effective programs. These findings point to a stronger focus on formalised participatory processes which hold the development agency to account to the beneficiary constituents as a powerful empowerment process in its own right.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASA	Association for Social Advancement
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
BGSS	Bharatiya Grameena Seva Sangh
CAPART	Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology
CSWB	Central Social Welfare Board
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
FCRA	Foreign Contributions Regulation Act
IDS	International Development Service
KIDS	Karnataka Integrated Development Service
NABARD	National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SHG	Self-help Group
SIDBI	Small Industries Development Bank of India
SNDT	Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey (Women's University – Centre for Adult and Continuing Education, Pune campus)
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
YUVA	Youth for Voluntary Action