

# **Questioning Modernity and Development:**

**A qualitative inquiry on Women's emancipation in Kerala, India**

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*Susanne Bygnes*

## **Chapter one: Introduction**

### **Thematic**

This thesis explores the relationship between women's situation in the so-called 'Third World' and challenges concerning women's rights in the so-called 'West'. This relationship encompasses issues regarding what a 'good society' and a 'good life' consist in. The exploration of these themes are based on a field study in India's southernmost state; Kerala. Kerala's high ranking in human and gender development will play an important role in the approach and analysis of this thematic.

The population in Kerala is frequently displayed as more literate, more educated, healthier and less poverty struck than those of other Indian states. Women's high development scores are particularly often brought to the forefront when general information about Kerala is distributed. Kerala thus, might seem like a perfect display of social development, a success story for women's emancipation in an 'underdeveloped' part of the world. This thesis explores to what degree Kerala is perceived as an ideal of emancipation by women living in the state, as well as some reflexive tendencies regarding the 'gender-equality project' in the 'West'.

### **Case**

The starting point for this project was an urge to learn something about the relationship between women's issues in the 'First' and 'Third' worlds. In this respect Kerala seemed to be an interesting case, as its social-, and particularly gender-, development indexes in many respects matched those of 'developed nations'. Statistics taken from the official web-portal of the government of Kerala for instance, reveals high levels of literacy and higher education both amongst women and men, compared to India as a whole; when the female literacy rate in India went from 7.93% to 54.16 from 1951 to 2001, the rate for women in the state of Kerala went from 36.43% to an impressive 87.86%. In Kerala a woman is expected to live more than eight years longer than a woman living elsewhere in India. When the fertility rate fell from 2.08 to 2.0 in China from 1979 to 1993, it fell from 3.0 to 1.8 in Kerala during these thirteen years<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics from the official web portal of Government of Kerala. Planning and Economic affairs Department. Economic review, Chapter 18: Gender and Development.

What truly intrigued me about the case of Kerala, though, was an article (Devi 2004) written by a feminist social scientist and author living in Kerala, in which she questioned modernity's potential for liberating women:

Patriarchy and capitalism have been exposed as villains in enslaving women, but the illusions created by modernism have not received sufficient attention. We need to investigate whether modernism has liberated women<sup>2</sup>.

It seemed interesting that a woman in this successfully developed state, high-ranking on most of the indicators of social and gender development, would question modernity and its consequences. The above mentioned article led me to believe that what was displayed as a success-story of development and women's emancipation, might perhaps have another side to it. What such an 'other side' might consist in was not at all clear before leaving to conduct the fieldwork in Kerala. –But, as the analysis to come will indicate, the relationship between women's situation in Kerala and the 'West', which was the starting point of exploration, would turn out to play a significant role in the understanding of what was indicated by this author's critique of modernity.

The above mentioned thematic will be explored mainly through an analysis of eight in-depth interviews of women activists currently living in Trivandrum, the state capital of Kerala. In addition, information about the field collected through less formalized channels, such as informal conversations, contributes to the overall understanding and analytical takes.

### **Delimitating note**

During the conduction of the analysis I will address women's issues generally, i.e. without paying much attention to the social and structural division lines that exist among women in Kerala, such as class and caste. The reason for this is first of all that the informants themselves addressed these division lines to a very small degree. Secondly, due to the vast amount of possible focuses, I have chosen to focus on the gendered aspects of society in Kerala and the relationship between the 'West' and the 'Third World', instead of class, religious community or caste. However, I do not rule out that the class and caste background of the informants have influenced the accounts given about women's situation, hardships and

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<sup>2</sup> Quote taken from an unpublished working-paper (Devi 2004).

possibilities in the society they live in, or that taking such information into account could have broadened the understandings reached.

## **Background**

Kerala is a narrow strip of land on the south-western coast of the Indian subcontinent, a state that can be said to have a very unique contemporary history, which has resulted in widespread consequences both socially and politically. One year after the formation of the state of Kerala in 1956 and nine years after India's independence, the first state elections were held in Kerala; resulting in the victory of the communist party of India (CPI). The election was the first ever to result in a democratically elected communist government. As head of the state's new government, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, introduced revolutionary land reform changes, limiting the amount of land one person could own, and a comprehensive education bill, which laid the foundation for a political and social model that would later be known as 'The Kerala model'. In the section to come an introductory overview of this model will be provided. In broad terms, the state's politics has since 1957 been dominated by two different political alliances led by the 'Indian national congress' and the 'Communist party of India'<sup>3</sup>.

### *The Kerala model for development*

Before leaving for Kerala to conduct the fieldwork in November 2004, I did not know what parts of Kerala's history or political background would be the most relevant in understanding the accounts given by the informants I was going to interview during my stay there. As mentioned above, I did know about the high levels of development in Kerala and I had heard the expression Kerala model mentioned, but I did not know what role this model would come to play in the accounts and criticisms made by the informants. But, already shortly after the initiation of the interviewing-process I came to understand that the, until then blurry concept of the Kerala model, was a key to understanding the explanations given by the interviewees. The Kerala model can be said to represent an all-important part of the framework upon which the explanatory logics of the attained emancipation of women in Kerala, is built. As an illustration, it is possible to claim a definite similarity between the ways in which the Scandinavian welfare model and the Kerala model is drawn upon to explain and justify an

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<sup>3</sup> The data on Kerala's political history is taken from <http://www.kerala.gov.in/> and <http://www.wikipedia.org/>

alleged level of gender equality in Norway and in Kerala<sup>4</sup>. Thus, I would like to emphasize the enormous weight and credit the Kerala model is given when assessing the level of gender equality or ‘gender development’ in Kerala, and that this model represents an all important framework in the analysis to come<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, I will give a short introduction to what has come to be labelled ‘the Kerala model’ based on a working-paper written by Ramji (2000) and statistics published by the Planning and Economics affair Department<sup>6</sup> of Kerala.

According to Ramji, the Kerala model has led Kerala to be renowned for its high scores on developmental indicators such as poverty alleviation, literacy and health across lines geography, gender and community. Although Kerala’s economic growth remained relatively low compared to the rest of India, the state has scored comparatively higher on all the suggested indicators of development, compared to other Indian states. These scores include higher poverty alleviation, better health and nutrition levels and higher literacy rates than those of all- India. According to Ramji:

The most meaningful feature of the Kerala model is the expansion of literacy. In particular, expansion of female literacy is heeded as the main facilitator of achievements in health and demographics (2000:6).

This part of Ramji’s report provides information about the importance of literacy, but it also indicates an additional and prominent feature of the Kerala model, namely the high levels of ‘gender development’. The report provides promising statistics on the situation of women and girls in Kerala, pointing to enhanced life expectancy for women, better nutrition, low infant and maternal mortality rates as well as the already mentioned high literacy and educational level. Ramji concludes this part of the paper by saying:

The superior position of women in Kerala offers two insights. Women in Kerala have made significant gains in education and health and are thereby more equal partners in development than men. (...)

The Kerala model would never have been actuated without female literacy and tolerant social attitudes towards women (2000:12).

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<sup>4</sup> Although, the population of Kerala (above 30 000 000) constitutes considerably more weight than the three Scandinavian countries put together.

<sup>5</sup> Like the Scandinavian welfare model, the Kerala model is not only a scheme to enhance gender equality, but a program which aim is to redistribute many of societies key benefits and create a more equal society in terms of power and other important resources.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.kerala.gov.in/dept\\_planning/er/chapter18.pdf](http://www.kerala.gov.in/dept_planning/er/chapter18.pdf)



This quote, taken from Ramji's paper, represents a highly important part of the backdrop for the discussions to come in this thesis.

The statistics and emphasized material presented at the official web portal of the government of Kerala<sup>7</sup>, to a large degree coincides with that presented in Ramji's paper. Gender is widely focused upon in the government's presentation of the state and it is not necessary to be actively looking in order to understand that the gender-variable constitutes a substantial part of the state's self image. The link 'Kerala at a glance', for instance, provides general information about Kerala, but the favourable sex-ratios<sup>8</sup> and small gender gap in the generally high literacy rate of the state, are amongst the very first facts presented. The 'Economic Review 2003', presented by the Planning and Economics affair Department of Kerala, is one of the many additional links provided which gives the reader the impression that Kerala has taken the question of women's emancipation very seriously. This review contains an extensive chapter which provides a statistical overview of the situation of women in Kerala called *Gender and development* (chapter 18)<sup>9</sup>. This chapter, like Ramji's paper, stresses the excellent literacy rate, health situation and life expectancy of women as well as very low infant and maternal mortality rate compared to the all-India levels.

Upon examining the chapter *Gender and Development* slightly closer, a less flattering uniqueness emerges in areas such as the work participation rate of women and their overall measured decision-making power. Ramji (2000) also points to low levels of public sphere and labour market participation for women in Kerala, however, this part of the provided statistics, forms a minuscule part of the general impression communicated regarding the situation for women in Kerala today and the influence of the Kerala model of development.

As the coming analysis will show it is precisely the not so emphasized parts of women's development in Kerala that point into the direction which the discussions in this thesis will take. Additionally, the span between the eager display of the success of a model for social reform and the problems hidden between the lines of such an account will be investigated in light of a potential comparison between the Scandinavian and the Keralite model.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.kerala.gov.in/](http://www.kerala.gov.in/)

<sup>8</sup> Sex ratio/ female: 1058

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.kerala.gov.in/dept\\_planning/er/chapter18.pdf](http://www.kerala.gov.in/dept_planning/er/chapter18.pdf)

### *'The Indo-Norwegian pilot project'*

Before the design of the Kerala model, Norway initiated a development initiative in Kerala, a project that in this thesis will serve as one of the many examples of relationships between the 'West' and the 'Third World'.

The design of the project, that was to become the very first Norwegian development initiative, was designed in 1952, four years before the formation of the state of Kerala. One year later, in 1953, the Norwegian Government introduced technical and economical support to fisheries in two coastal villages in Kerala through a bilateral project. Ten years later the aid program was extended to more villages in Kerala as well as two additional South-Indian states (Klausen 1968). The development project has later been exposed to harsh critique for harming the ecology and social structure of the affected communities (Eriksen 2003; Hanssen 2003). The Norwegian development project can be said to serve as an important background variable in the discussions and thematic to be approached in this thesis.

### **Theoretical and philosophical influence**

This thesis is written in light of feminist and post-colonial authors theorizing the 'West'- 'Third World' relationship, in light of modernity, development and gender. Authors writing within this 'genre', such as Said (1978); Tvedt (1990); Spivak (in Harasym 1990); Mies (1980, 1986); Narayan (1997, 2000) and Shiva (1989) are concerned with the historical and contemporary connotations surrounding the relationship between the 'Third World' and the 'First World'. Further, I have made use of the ideas presented in the sociological classics by Berger and Luckmann's (1966) and Mills (1959) as well as authors theorizing gender and the role of women such as Beauviour (1949) and Hochschild (1989).

Methodologically I have drawn upon feminist thinkers', such as Fox-Keller's (1985) rejection of objectivity as an ideal in science and the importance of gender as a central and important variable in research. I have also found the introductory volumes written by Kvale (1994) and Silverman (1993) useful, particularly so in the phase of fieldwork- preparation. In addition, I have used ideas deriving from Glaser and Strauss (1967) in an attempt to engage in the making of grounded theory. Lastly, the Tacit dimension (Polanyi 1966) and Sociological imagination (Mills 1959) have influenced and inspired both the methodological and analytical decisions made, and emphasis laid, throughout this project.

The work with this thesis can be said to be strongly influenced by currents found in the above mentioned books; therefore they do not merely constitute the main theoretical backdrop but have also served the purpose of analytical tools and sources of inspiration.

The above mentioned theories and authors are presented to give an introductory overview of the analytical and theoretical framework in which I have been manoeuvring throughout the process of shaping this thesis. As the following chapters and list of references will prove, however, several additional authors, concepts and ideas have been of importance, inspiration and help throughout the analysis and discussions conducted.

### **Structure**

The content of this thesis is build into six chapters, the first of which is this introductory chapter. In chapter two, *Methods*, an overview of the methodological theories used, and decisions made, before and during the field work as well as during the analysis, is provided. Further, central themes will be discussed and examples given in light of important takes and concepts provided by key-authors. In chapter three, *Analysis of empirical material*, the first part of the analysis of the gathered material will be presented. In this chapter a number of key concepts and categories will be suggested and empirical examples provided in order to present and shape the interviews and additional material. In accordance with Christensen (1998), this chapter is highly 'grounded' and unfolds in close dialogue with the investigated field. Chapter four *Linking empirical findings with theoretical suggestions* specify some of the findings made in chapter three in order to engage in central discussions. A few central theoretical perspectives will be provided in order to broaden the cope of the discussions, a take which is meant to involve the leap from mere analysing to the suggestion of a grounded theory deriving from the findings. In chapter five, *Discussing theoretical suggestions*, a fuller presentation of the most central theoretical perspectives will be provided and discussed in light of the main thematic. Chapter six aims to summarize and discuss the main findings in light of practical, theoretical and philosophical implications deriving from the analysis and will conclude by suggesting further topical research questions.

## **Chapter two: Methods**

In this chapter I would like to reflect upon some methodological thoughts, experiences, and challenges made through the preparation, collecting and analysis of empirical data. The intention is to demonstrate the leaps taken when moving from the design of the ‘research problem’ to the processes of collecting and analysing the empirical material. The first part of this chapter serves to explain the choice of qualitative interviews as the main method of collecting data. In this part a presentation of the methodological theory upon which many of the analytical choices were made, along with an overview and discussion of the selection and accessibility to the field, will be provided. In the second part, I will show how the additional information I got through talking to people around me and living in the very milieu I was studying, has come to play a part in my overall understanding of the field. I will draw upon examples to show how the less formalized ways of gathering information can serve to increase the understanding of a particular field as well as adding to, and enriching, the empirical material obtained through the interviews.

### **Part one: Defining and deciding**

The main basis for the analysis is eight interviews recorded digitally, the duration of the interviews differs between thirty and a hundred minutes. The interviews were conducted in the homes and workplaces of the interviewees, with the exception of one which was done in the guest house where I was staying. An additional interview was unintentionally not recorded and will therefore not be made use of during the analysis as anything but an informal conversation. Only one interview per informant was conducted, although I met some of the interviewees both before and after the actual interview took place.

#### *The qualitative method: approaching the field as a traveller.*

In the process leading up to the fieldwork in Kerala, the decision was made to approach the field by the usage of qualitative methods. This choice was influenced by both explicit and implicit takes of theoretical character, some of which will be looked into in the section *Methodological backdrop*. In the following, some general thoughts and assumptions, leading up to the choice of qualitative methods, based mainly on Silverman (1993) and Kvale (1994), will be presented.

The most important reasons for choosing a qualitative approach to collect data for this project can be summed by two interconnected key words; closeness and flexibility. By closeness, I refer to the possibility of listening to the respondents' answer as they give it and being able to ask additional questions individually adjusted to the takes of the different informants. As a result, closeness also concerns the credibility of the conducted research due to the ability to confirm or alter the interpretations that are made during the course of the interview (Kvale 1996:237). By flexibility I mean the possibility to let the informants put the emphasis on themes that are important to them, and in this way being able to influence the direction the interview is taking. Flexibility is closely tied to this possibility of letting the research-project grow in accordance with the field in order to discover what *the research is really about* (Hammersley and Atkinson in Silverman 2001: 70). The need for flexibility seemed clear as the issue I came to India to explore was of a rather open and unresolved character. Further, due to the intention of working inductively, thus creating the limits of the project through contact with the field, the possibility of evoking profound/ in-depth answers seemed of great importance.

Lastly, the closeness and flexibility that this approach offers, allowed the questions asked as well as the emphasis of the answers given, to vary according to where the informants indicated core issues of concern. -Issues which I would have had great difficulties understanding the importance of, had it not been for the closeness and flexibility offered by such a qualitative approach.

In his book *Interviews* Kvale (1996) introduces the idea that a researcher can approach the field either as a *miner* or as a *traveller*:

In the *miner metaphor* knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal. Some miners seek objective facts to be quantified; others seek nuggets of essential meaning. In both conceptions the knowledge is waiting in the subject's interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner (1996:3-4).

The traveller, on the other hand, attempts to engage in a conversation with the field, which might lead the traveller and field to change as well as to the arising of new knowledge.

As I started designing this research project thus my intention was to approach the field of research with a traveller's mind, in order to hopefully let the cultural meeting between the informants and myself, represent and illustrate the very theme of the thesis. I hoped to experience a challenging of my own believes and perception of the world and to engage with

the field in a process of mutual learning. Because the interviews were to be conducted in Kerala, I did not leave the research field at the end of the day; I was hoping that this would create a nearness that would enhance my understanding. In trying to understand a small part of the thoughts and lives of a group of individuals and the society they displayed for me, a society of which I had very limited knowledge upon arrival, I found the closeness and depth of the qualitative interview the most logical choice.

### *Methodical and Methodological backdrop*

In this section I intend to give an overview of some of the methodological theories which I have based this project on. I will provide specific examples in order to illustrate the actual process through which theory of methods is made practical use of.

The methodical decisions made during the design and conduction of the data-collection, as well as in the analysis of the collected material are coloured mainly by *grounded theory*, sociological classics such as Mills (1959) and Polanyi (1966) as well as certain feminist takes on science represented by for instance Spivak (in Harasym 1990) and Fox- Keller (1985). Fox-Keller argues strongly against the idea of objectivity as an ideal in science and engages herself in questions regarding objectivity and its gendered effects. She claims a clear and present historical association between that which is viewed as masculine and so-called objectivity, and asks for instance whether a new and better science would be created if increasingly coloured by the presence of women. Fox Keller thus, is calling upon researchers to acknowledge their effect on the research 'object' and to be conscious of the interplay between researcher and 'object' that scientific enquiries constitute. Feminist epistemology, represented by Fox Keller (1985), have inspired me to look beyond notions of objectivity as well as attempting to incorporate an awareness of the gendered effects of different processes, both during the collection and the analysis of data. Notions concerning *intersubjectivity*<sup>10</sup> (Kvale 1996<sup>11</sup>) as an ideal in social science as well the need to use a *quality of mind* (Mills 1959) in order to analyse what is going on in the field one is attempting to study, will be shed further light on in part two of this chapter, as will some of the suggestions made by Michael Polanyi (1966).

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<sup>10</sup> J.fr Fox Keller (1985)

<sup>11</sup> *In conclusion, the interview is neither an objective nor a subjective method, its essence is intersubjective interaction. The issue of the objectivity of knowledge gained through an interview is linked to the pervasive dichotomy of objectivism and subjectivism in Western thought* (1996:66)

To show some of the ways in which I have made practical use of a *grounded* approach to methodology, I will start by referring to an essay collection called *Prosess og metode* (1998). In *Prosess og metode*, scholars at the department of sociology at the University of Bergen draw upon experiences from the field as well as theories presented by, amongst others, Blumer (1954) and Glaser and Strauss (1967). Through looking into the mentioned classics in order to understand more about the background for ideas presented in *Prosess og metode*. I have found that, in particular Glaser and Strauss' groundbreaking book *The discovery of grounded theory; strategies for qualitative research* (1999), represent an inspiring take on qualitative research which have been of great help in the attempt to engage in the making of *grounded theory* for the first time.

To exemplify how some theories of method have influenced the decisions made through the course of this project, I will give an example from one specific essay published in *Prosess og metode* written by Christensen (1998). In her essay, Christensen suggests the advantages of doing research with an empirical 'nearness'. By this she refers to the process in which both fieldwork and analysis is conducted through a 'dialogue' with the field one is attempting to investigate. Such ideas are clearly inspired by the notion of a 'grounded theory' first suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1999). This part of Christensen's article served to inspire me in the writing of this thesis. -Especially so, when approaching the vastness of the gathered interview-material after returning home from Kerala. In this situation, I made practical use of Christensen suggestion to 'go into dialogue with the field' as a starting point for the analysis as I attempted to let the informants' own emphasis decide where to start and what to focus on. Upon doing so, I felt very grateful to my informants for speaking so clearly, even though I might not have understood this at the time of the conduction of the interviews. As was the case at the initiation of my project, Christensen's project was indeed coloured by the openness of an inductive approach, as the only decision made beforehand was who was to become her door-opener in the field. Inspired by Christensen, I manoeuvred from a high degree of openness and confusion to, with the help of the informants, being able to find a vantage point through the categorizing of a main concept. Christensen insisted in her article, inspired by Blumer (1954) that it is in the making of concepts that the possibility of transferring empirical material into theory is realized. Thus, in the midst of the confusing reality of having to start an analysis on the base of a vast field material, I was inspired to conceptualize two categories which would form the basis for the entire analysis to come. Through following this technique of manoeuvring; actively using and going into 'dialogue' with the empirical material, I was

able to present a *grounded* vantage point for the analysis by making use of suggestions made by the informants.

Similarly, although perhaps less consciously, I stumbled my way through the process of conducting the fieldwork by hoping that listening carefully enough to what the field had to say would lead me into a fruitful direction. A few examples of the challenges and difficulties I met during this process will be presented, in light of the above mentioned methodological takes, in the section to come.

### *The challenges and solutions of methodical conceptualizing*

Now, I will return to the actual data-collection in Kerala to continue the illustration of how theory of methods in many instances has been made use of through a process of practical problem-solving.

As I started out forming the thematic for this project, I had only the vague idea that I wanted to ask women outside of the ‘West’ if and how they related to the ‘West’. I also wanted to look into what sort of local/regional alternatives existed related to what was seen as ‘a good society’. I was aware that the dichotomy ‘the West’ versus ‘the rest’ could potentially be limiting, as the dichotomy itself was part of what I wished to discuss, and hopefully, move beyond. However, to be able to speak in general terms about something not yet fully defined or certain, I saw the problematic categories as useful for serving a preliminary purpose.

During the conduction of the interviews it seemed increasingly clear that my informants thought me a lesson concerning my concentration on the ‘Western’ and the ‘West’. Through asking what the interviewees’ main interests were and what sort of organizational work they were involved in I got information about *their* main focus. –A focus that was certainly not concentrated on fending off the ‘West’, in fact, the informants did not seem very busy relating to ‘Western influence’ at all.

During the interviews, the informants were first and foremost concerned with their own daily lives and the problems or challenges that surrounded them in their communities or region.

Through talking to them and listening to their answers, I soon felt that my focus should be slightly turned. I believe this realization to change the focus according to the informants’ was very much due to the open character of the interview guide. In the preparation for the fieldwork in Kerala, the formulation of interview questions felt a bit problematic. Even though I only partly knew what it was I wanted to investigate, I had a persistent feeling that the questions I designed were somehow leading. To prevent this, I ended up with very broad



and general questions<sup>12</sup>, hoping that the interviewees themselves could indicate in which direction to look. Through this approach I understood something more about my own preconceptions and why the questions so easily had looked leading; I had simply assumed that what I had decided to look into was of importance to the informants. It was not until this realization that I understood why designing the appropriate questions had seemed so difficult; the questions seemed leading because I had not been able to distance myself enough from my initial purpose when attempting to design them.

After this realization, I kept a part of the interview-guide which asked what the 'West' and 'East' can learn from each other, but felt convinced that all in all issues of modernity rather than the 'West' seemed a more appropriate focus. The reason for this change of focus is quite uncomplicated; virtually all the eight informants, and several other people I talked to, brought up questions of modernity without being specifically asked for it. When I tried to bring up questions of 'westernization' and 'Western influence', I did not get the answers I was 'hoping for'. The 'West' did not seem to be something they felt particularly inspired by or needed to defend themselves against; the West seemed, with few exceptions, to be just another part of the world, far away from their own reality. The move from 'Western' to 'modernity' might not seem like a giant leap, but it was of great importance to make my intentions with the project be in tune with what the informants expressed. It also shows how a 'grounded' qualitative approach, through its continuous dialogue with the field, can help an inexperienced researcher make adjustments and correct mistakes along the way.

### *Selection criteria and access to the field*

In this section I will go into the ways in which the research- field was defined and how access to the field was made possible.

The selected informants are all women living in Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala, although several were originally from other parts of Kerala or other states in India. Contact with the field was first established, through a scholar at the University of Bergen, with a key informant

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<sup>12</sup> The specific questions found in the interview guide are:

1. Can you tell me something about what organizational activities you are involved in and what the main concerns of these organizations are?
2. What is your particular reason/ background for choosing this/these particular organization(s)?
3. What are your reasons for not working in organizations working with related issues?...
4. What are the differences and similarities between the 'West' and 'India'? What do you think 'West'- India can learn from each other?

in Trivandrum<sup>13</sup>. Through this key informant, who is to be labelled informant number one, contact with the additional informants was established. Informant number one, thus, not only holds the status of interviewee in this project, but also an all-important door-opener and welcoming host. The seven women she proposed as informants were her friends, colleagues, or more distant acquaintances made through for instance organizational work.

The informants selected to be interviewed for this thesis are women who have engagement or interest in women's issues or women's studies. My aim when approaching questions of selection was to establish contact with informants who had knowledge and engagements regarding women's position in Kerala. All eight interviewees had some knowledge of feminist theory or discourse, which enabled them to discuss women's issues from an angle through which thoughts on a structural level was shared, rather than mere personal accounts. Due to the high educational level of all eight informants and their proficiency in English, the language barrier present during the interviews was minimal. This was in fact, a very important selection-criterion, as being dependent upon an interpreter was thought to represent an additional obstacle in the communication-flow between the interviewees and I. One of the informants initially suggested by the key-informant, in spite of her high educational level proved to speak very little English, , because of which another informant representing similar criteria was selected in order to facilitate the interview-situation.

The eight informants can roughly be divided into three groups. The first consist of the four members of a discussions group, they are all middle aged or older with strong ties to either academia or a women's organization, they have all been engaged in women's issues of some sort and they are all PhD holders. The second group of three relatively young informants consists of two PhD holders in their thirties who are both working as researchers and lecturers in an academic institution; the third interviewee is in her twenties and is a PhD student. All three of them have done research related to gender studies and have been involved in different women's organizations more or less actively. Lastly, one informant in her late fifties works full-time for women's organization's network and thereby has extensive experience with women's issues through working with women at grass root- level.

Her educational level was not accounted for, but this informant too clearly seemed to have an overview of feminist literature and discourse. A high educational level thus, does not separate

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<sup>13</sup> The key-informant has a central position in this thesis as all contacts in Kerala were made through her. Due to this it might be discussed weather her large involvement has affected the representativity of the empirical findings to be pointed to in this thesis. Without her involvement however, establishing contact with the field would probably have proved too time-consuming and this project could not have been realized. In spite of the key informants position as door-opener thus, it becomes clear through the interview material that the eight interviewees far from consist a homogeneous group.

the informants from each other, it does however come off as important background information as to what takes the interviewees have on gender in Kerala. The main variables to be used as a tool to separate the informants from each other are age<sup>14</sup> and working title. The reason for doing so is the possibly incriminating character of the themes discussed by the informants in the interviews, because of which I am obliged to protect the identities of the informants. Throughout the analysis to come the informants will be addressed by a number of characteristics and a number given to each informant according to the order in which they were interviewed. Thus, to be looked upon as an overview, I will provide a short presentation of each informant:

- Informant number *one* is referred to as a *social scientist in her fifties*. She has taught and done research in Kerala and India as well as in the USA and Sweden. She has been engaged in women's organizations and is very much engaged in questions concerning modernity, globalization and gender. She is unmarried and lives with a maid.
- Informant number *two* is referred to as a *senior professor in her fifties*. She works at an academic institution in Kerala, where she initiated a women's forum initiative. This informant shares her opinions during the interview both as an academic and an activist. Informant number two lives with her husband.
- Informant number *three* is a scholar and an activist in her thirties, but will be referred to as *one of the few women intellectuals around*, as this is how she labels herself during the interview. She has a research position and takes care of two daughters; she has never been formally married, but has cohabitated with, and left, two men.
- Informant number *four* is *in her sixties and the leader of a women's organizations network*, and will be referred to accordingly. She supplied very little information about her personal life or experience during the interview, but came off as updated on global women's issues and feminist discourse, alongside having vast experience from the grass-rot level.
- Informant number *five* will be referred to as *a scholar in her thirties*. She works as a researcher, has done a PhD on matrilineality in Kerala and has been involved in some organizational work. She has no children, is unmarried and lives alone.

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<sup>14</sup> Age will occasionally be used as a tool of categorization during the analysis, however, it is not meant as an ascribed variable as such, as the ages are based on loose estimations and are therefore inaccurate variables.

- Informant number *six* will be referred to as *a retired statistics professor in her seventies*. She has been involved in organizational activities, but refers to herself as *first and foremost an academic*; her academic work is her politics. She has published several books related to women's issues. She is a widow and lives with her daughter.
- Informant number *seven* will be referred to as *a PhD student in her twenties*. She has been involved in several grass-root level women's organizations, and is personally engaged in changing the situation of women in Kerala. She cohabits with a man with whom she is not married.
- Informant number *eight* will be referred to as *a trade- unionist in her sixties*. In addition, she is a representative of the communist party of India. Through these engagements she has worked for the rights of women in Kerala and India. She has participated in organizational activities on the all-India level as well as at an international level.

This presentation of the eight informants is meant as a reader's directory for the chapters of analysis, in order to prevent uncertainties regarding exactly which informant is being referred to. I have chosen not to label the informants represented in this project by the use of fictive names, but instead use loose characteristics to keep the interviewees apart and prevent possible misunderstandings or confusion.

### *Generalizability*

Through the above mentioned selection criteria I left out a considerable part of the women in Kerala, and I will have to take into account that my interviewees might be far from representative in many respects. Thus, the aim of the selection was not to talk to the most representative people, but perhaps rather to those who may have the ability to analyze the society they are apart of exactly because they have the privilege to be critical due to their fortunate positions. In addition to obvious dimensions like those of higher education, memberships and engagements in organizations and academia, it became clear during the course of the interviews that many of the interviewees had led what they expressed as, unusual lives. Some of them had chosen unusual living-arrangements like living with partners without getting married, getting divorced or living alone, others reported on unusually liberal upbringings in terms of gender roles and expectations. Perhaps with one exception, all of the interviewees came from seemingly economically well-off families. Such similarities between the eight informants might be simple effects of the selection criteria; women who choose

higher education and an engagement in gender-focused work and organizational activities might be more prone to choosing ‘alternative’ forms of living arrangements in addition to being able to look at society from a different ‘angle’.

Another explanation for such similarities between the informants might be a methodical one; as all the informants are friends, colleagues or contacts of the key informant, this might have played a significant role for the outcome. The informants are not simply in the selection on basis of the selection criteria, they are also there because the key informant selected them, perhaps because she agreed with them or perhaps simply because she assumed they would contribute with something of interest to my project. This point will also have to be remembered in the course of the analysis of the interview material.

Having said this, it is important to underline that I do not at all see either the influence of the key informant nor the informants’ untraditional (and perhaps privileged) choices and interests merely as limitations. Rather, these are first and foremost resources that will influence and contribute to the outcome of this thesis and the analysis to come.

## **Part two: Attaching importance to imagination and the unsaid**

In this part of chapter two I intend to give an overview of the empirical material collected through less formalized, and partly less ‘conscious’, channels than the eight interviews referred to in this chapter’s first half. In light of the above mentioned feminist thinkers’ resisting of objective ideals in science, I will move on to demonstrate some of the ways in which the use of *tacit knowledge* (Polanyi 2000) and a *sociological imagination* (Mills 1967; Glaser and Strauss 1999) allowed me to gain additional information about the field of study or, according to Mills; *grasp what is going on in the world*.

According to Mills (1967), the personal experiences of a researcher are integrated into her professional work. Through such integration the researcher develops an ability to actively use her experiences in her conduction of research through which her work becomes *intellectual craftsmanship*. Such intellectual crafts(wo)manship is part of the ability which Mills referred to as a *sociological imagination*; a capacity to see the innate connections between *private troubles* and *public issues*<sup>15</sup>. Mills thus, attaches importance to the researcher’s previous life-experiences as well as her ability to integrate these into her experience of the field.

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<sup>15</sup> These labels are used by Mills to denote the connection between personally experienced difficulties (one women’s unemployment) and the structural societal problems (an unemployment rate of 20%) that can be seen on the macro-level. I will return to give a more profound account of Mills theory in chapter five.

Polanyi (1966) too advocates the importance of looking beyond ideals of objectivity in science in order to make use of a *tacit knowledge*:

Men sett at taus kunnskap utgjør en nødvendig del av all kunnskap, da vil målet om å eliminere alle personlige elementer i kunnskapen faktisk sikte mot ødeleggelsen av all kunnskap. Idealet om eksakt vitenskap ville vise seg å være fundamentalt villedende og muligens en kilde til katastrofale villfarelser. (Polanyi 2000:29)

Drawing upon Mills, Glaser and Strauss and Polanyi, I will in the following demonstrate some of the ways in which I have attached importance to less formalized ways of gaining knowledge about the field. The type of information I am referring to, was obtained through talking to people on the buss or in the university cafeteria, but perhaps more importantly, through *being* with and around people, placing myself in the midst of the social reality I came to study. I have chosen to label the processes through which I obtained such knowledge; *incorporation*<sup>16</sup>, *informal conversations* and *field notes*<sup>17</sup>. In the coming section I will demonstrate the meanings attached to these labels through examples and experiences. Thus, by emphasizing social signals and information that can not easily be methodologically accounted for, I hope to show how it is possible to provide information which derives from the attempt to use ones sociological imagination.

### *Living with the field*

As I prepared for the fieldtrip to Kerala I thought of it as a trip to be made mainly in order to meet the interviewees face to face. However, I would soon discover that living for several weeks in the very milieu I was studying, was a source of many types of information, all of which, in different ways, helped broadening my understanding. Although these different types of information- gathering are of course interconnected, I would like to divide them into the following three bulks: *incorporation*, *informal conversations* and *field notes*.

By *incorporation* I refer to the process of cultural sensitivity that occur more consciously when circumstances change, as they do when for instance travelling from Bergen, Norway to Trivandrum, Kerala. One of the things that perhaps illustrate this most clearly, is clothing and gender. Because of having spent several months living in Turkey and travelling in countries

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<sup>16</sup> A concept inspired by Polanyi's (2000) concept *tacit knowledge*.

<sup>17</sup> Amongst others Mills (1967) recommends to actively use notes from the field as a part of the overall understanding and investigation.

such as Morocco and Algeria, I was familiar with the urge to conform to local dress codes in order to feel comfortable. I knew that although on a hot summer day in Europe I would find it very 'natural' to wear clothing that exposes quite a lot of skin, dressing similarly in for instance Turkey, would make me feel uncomfortable and naked.

Although being accustomed to such cultural sensitivity, I was not prepared for feeling similarly uncomfortable wearing pants and t-shirts in India.

Before leaving to Kerala, I interpreted for instance the Sari as a piece of clothing which reveal quite a lot of skin, on parts of the body like the belly, that in Norway has much stronger connotations of nakedness than for example the legs. Dressing in a Sari in Ankara would make me feel naked, and by doing so in Algiers I would risk being assassinated for revealing too much skin.

It did, however, take a remarkably short while (we are talking minutes) on Kerala's soil before understanding some of the do's and don'ts of a woman wanting to be perceived as fairly respectable. Covering the legs and avoiding anything with a tight fit, such as the pair of jeans I was wearing upon arrival, made me feel less stared at and more accepted by people. Covering up, far more than I would have felt the need to in urban Turkey, for instance, gave me the feeling of being able to move around more freely. As for the men, it seemed, dress codes involving a very high degree of skin exposure applied; from the taxi taking me from the airport, I observed men digging drenches in nothing but what looked like a miniskirt. Most men however wore 'western' style pants and shirts.

During the stay in Kerala, I felt the need to comply with some of the gender-specific dress-codes, especially those which I interpreted as having to do with shame and respectability of women in society. By such incorporation of more or less subtle social signals, through looking around and comparing behaviour and presence with the surrounding crowd, I understood a little bit more about the gender-roles present in Kerala. This source of information can perhaps be said to be that which is most strongly connected to what Polanyi (2000) refers to as *tacit knowledge*.

Another source of information through which I learned a lot about issues that never came up in the more formal and structured interviews, was *informal conversation*. Through these conversations I would get little bits of information that sometimes served to give something I had already heard a completely different meaning or make me notice certain things I had not particularly paid attention to when approached in the interviews. These conversations also gave me insights into daily lives and routines of the students I lived along side or people I met on the bus. By talking to people, I got to know something about what issues concerned young

women my age and what their expectations and hopes were<sup>18</sup>. I learned for example that a sandal wood marking in the splitting of the hair meant that a girl was married. Another woman later made a joke about this being a Freudian-style symbol to indicate which women had been penetrated and not, a joke I only understood because of the initial explanation I had been given (Glaser and Strauss 1999:161-162). At other times I was asked astonished questions about my life in Norway, like when a male postgraduate student in the sociology department asked: ‘Do you drink beer?!’ with eyes filled with disbelief. This question and the young man’s obvious astonishment, along with other questions and reactions regarding my behaviour or lifestyle, gave me useful information about what people would normally expect from a young woman. I made sure to write down in a small note book all such little details that might come to play an importance. Although, I did not always know at the time what, if anything, would play a role to my understanding. Perhaps it is actually never clear exactly what information is used for what purpose, I do however strongly believe that such informal conversations played an important part of my overall understanding of the situation of women and girls in Kerala<sup>19</sup>.

In addition to the incorporation and informal conversations I have chosen to label yet another information-gathering technique, namely *field notes*. Mills (1967) stresses the importance of making notes when conducting fieldwork:

By keeping an adequate file and thus developing self-reflective habits, you can learn to keep your inner world awake. (1967:197)

Field notes is meant to include notes made after informal conversations as well as the notes on incorporating culture, in addition to this, the field notes are filled with little observations about things I noticed in the milieu around me. An example of this is how watching television supplied interesting input about the huge span between youth culture I observed around me in Trivandrum and the youth culture displayed on the TV- programs, where show-hosts and women in videos were dressed just as ‘porn-like’ as on MTV in Europe. The contrast between watching women on TV and the strong clothing restrictions on the streets in Trivandrum appeared to me as quite extraordinary. Another contrast which was difficult to overlook was the appearing reality of most people in Trivandrum and the commercials on TV. It is not that product commercials are normally a realistic display of people’s everyday life, but it

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<sup>18</sup> J.fr Mills’s (1967) notion *personal troubles*

<sup>19</sup> J.fr Glaser and Strauss’ notion *The discovery of accidents* (1999:174-175)



somehow seemed strange that the two products dominating TV commercials were the most technologically advanced cell-phones and white (sic.), happy nuclear families with their dogs selling insurance and pension plans. To me, TV seemed extremely disassociated from the everyday lives of people, in relation to both gender roles and material situation.

I have intended, by presenting these three different paths to information and understanding, to illustrate how important the actual stay in Kerala turned out to be, an importance I didn't at all foresee. In the last part of this chapter I will illustrate how the attempt to make use of the *sociological imagination* and acquired social skills in order to interpret *what is going on in the world* (Mills 1967), can come to use when a novice leaves the library and enters the research field.

#### *A clarifying leap from theory to practice*

Before embarking upon the journey that a field work truly is, I attempted to make sure to prepare for problems and controversies that might arise, as the least thing I wanted to experience was stepping on peoples toes. One of the things that I read about before leaving was the interview- interviewee relation, which I looked upon as particularly vulnerable due to the painful colonial past and present, wherein the colonized have been studied in an all but decent manner. Many authors, from Said (1979) to Spivak (in Harasym1990) have criticized 'Western' scientist for *constructing the other simply as an object of knowledge* (Harasym 1990:63). Because of this, when arriving in Kerala I was extremely aware of the danger to give the impression of being a 'Western' researcher who enters the field with the notion of somehow being 'of greater importance' than the informants. This weariness, however, was not entirely based on theoretical conceptions. Some years ago, I spent a year at a university in Madrid, Spain. During my time there I was often awed by the way I was sometimes positively discriminated against, both by professors at the university and in the line at the neighbourhoods' fruit and vegetable *mercado*. I often got the impression that I was ascribed abilities such as intelligence, technical insight, theoretical overview and thereby the right to be treated better than others due to my appearance clear indication of Nordic origin. In one class at the university, for instance, I was asked to get up and talk to the other students (in Spanish) about the greatness (sic!) of the Scandinavian Welfare model and its theoretical implications, as though I had more knowledge about this than the professor teaching the subject. Another incident involved a Philippine woman being asked to go to the back of the line at the fruit

stall, apparently due to her darker skin shade, while I was attempted given the privilege of taking her place in the front of the line, apparently due to the lighter tone of my skin and hair. My experience in Spain, thus, gave me the preconception that a similar role- dynamic could potentially come to colour the fieldwork in Kerala. Along with post-colonial and feminist literature about the danger to *Other* 'Third World women' as research subjects as well as 'Third World women' to *Other* themselves (Harasym 1990), I left for Kerala attempting to be as aware of this as humanly possible.

As a result, confronting the reality which met me through the interview- situations seemed rather unexpected somehow. The eight women I interviewed seemed very sure of their own integrity as researchers and people of resource to their community and to me. I often felt that I was indeed treated as a novice by the informants, although with support and respect. The inferiority- complex I anticipated having to fight against was seemingly found in the young, Norwegian sociology student rather than in the interviewees. In my opinion, the interviewer- interviewee relation was, for the most part, coloured by the latter's higher educational level, experience and ability to teach and explain the interviewer about things which she clearly had limited knowledge.

The channels through which the above mentioned information was obtained were mainly unspoken and not something which would have been possible to learn from a textbook or article of methods<sup>20</sup>. I do consider the presence of relational intersubjectivity (Kvale 1996) for such information to surface to be of great importance, as it provides crucial information about the much debated power relation between the interviewer and the interviewed. The intention of giving all of the above mentioned examples and reflections has been to demonstrate some of the ways in which the use of a *sociological imagination* (Mills 1967) allowed me to gain additional information about the field I came to study as well as the circumstances under which I was studying.

In chapter two I have intended to give an overview of some of the most important reflections made before, during and after the fieldwork in Kerala. The first part of the chapter treated formalized takes and decisions, such as which main method to use and what main methodological theories have influenced me throughout the preparing and conduction of the fieldwork as well as the analysis of the gathered material. In the second part of chapter two, although influenced by theories and decisions presented in part one, I have attempted to

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<sup>20</sup> J.fr Polanyi (2000)

explain how less formalized gathering-techniques such as incorporation of culture and being aware of unspoken information has contributed to the overall understanding of what is to be treated in the chapters to come.

## Chapter Three: Analysis of empirical material

The basis for this analysis is, as mentioned, eight interviews conducted in the state capital of Kerala, India over a period of three weeks. In addition, I will draw upon conversations and experiences I had during the stay in India. Even though the interviews differ in length and scope I begin with the assumption that they may all potentially contribute equally to the analysis.

At the initiation of this project, the main focus was how a selection of Indian feminists related to ‘Westernization’. My interest was mainly to explore to what degree the cultural influence from the ‘West’, such as the emphasis on individual freedom, was synthesized into feminist alternatives and notions of the common good. During the fieldwork and through the conduction of the interviews, the focus slightly changed. ‘Westernization’ itself did not seem to be a core concern, neither for the informants nor for the people that I met during the fieldwork. As the analysis of the collected material is conducted, however, ideas culturally embedded in the ‘West’ will reappear as an issue of importance. This being said, I choose to concentrate on issues of modernity, which were clearly labelled and brought up in merely all the interviews, as a starting point for the analysis. Based on the ideas elaborated upon by Christensen (1998)<sup>21</sup>, I choose to use this focus found in the interviews in order to let the field ‘lead’ me in the search for central and important matters in the collected material. I will do this by looking into how the modern and modernity is approached and described by the informants in relation to women’s situations, as well as by providing attention to how modernity is connected to other issues widely focused upon by the informants. I will initiate by looking into what parts of modernity the different informants choose to focus on, embrace and reject in their accounts. As the analysis continues, several subcategories will derive from the discussion, as the informants often link their experiences to modernity in several different manners. These subcategories will be introduced in the sections and chapters to follow.

### *Categorizing modernity*

I will start the enquiry by providing a brief conceptualization of the broadly used expression *modernity*.

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<sup>21</sup> Christensen suggests, as treated in Chapter two, that it is recommendable to ‘go into dialogue’ with the field when analysing gathered material in order to let the informants ‘decide’ what is relevant to focus upon.

Modernity is a widely used concept within both the social sciences and most probably in the daily lives of many people. Partly because of this, it is not an entirely unproblematic category, since what is meant by it differs not only from one theory to the next, but also between laypersons. I will not discuss here whether the different informants label modernity based on their positions as academics or as laypersons.

It is impossible to, with just a few sentences, describe what modernity 'is' or consist in. Many suggest that modernity and modernization refers to the epoch of political and cultural change in the 'Western world' at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; a process which involved nation building and democratization. However, by many sociologists, modernity is a label used for a whole range of social processes and changes that take place also in contemporary societies. An example of this can be taken from one of the key issues in the analysis to come, namely the close linkage between the concept *modernity* and the concept *development*. Here commented upon in Oxford's 'A dictionary of Sociology':

'Based largely on the theoretical premises of structural functionalism, modernization theory conceptualized development as a staged transition from tradition to modernity, to be brought about at the economic level by the operations of the market and foreign investment; at the social level by the adaptation of appropriate western institutions, values and behaviours; and at the political level by the implementation of parliamentary democracy.' (Marshall 1998:155)

Some of implications surrounding the linkage between modernity and development will be thoroughly handled and connected to both modernity's and development's cultural embeddedness in 'Western' culture. A discussion which will be continued in chapter four *Linking empirical findings with theoretical suggestions*. It is important to underline that neither modernity nor development will be dealt with, in this thesis, as homogeneous categories with a single 'Western' expression, but rather as heterogeneous categories heavily influenced by processes such as colonialism and globalization.

To demonstrate the heterogeneous character attributed to the concept of modernity through the interviews I will, based on the collected material, create two main categories of modernity to be used as tools of analysis. The two main aims of such a categorization are first of all to show the fragmented nature of modernity, its many faces so to say, through some of the descriptions made by the interviewees<sup>22</sup>. Secondly, it is an attempt to create a relevant starting point for analysis from the vastness and complexity of the collected material.

The idea and inspiration for the making of the two categories derives directly from the

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<sup>22</sup> J.fr. Berger and Luckmann 1966

material, more specifically from interviewee number three. This academic in her thirties, during the interview suggested the existence of a Malayalee<sup>23</sup> modernity as apposed to, and different from, the *ideal model of modernity*. In short, she talks of the ‘Malayalee modernity’ as something which has brought about a lot of betterment in terms of societal changes, but the focus on the many improvements society has gone through in terms of social development, she claims, also serves to cover up a lot of its inadequacies.

I will draw upon this way of categorizing modernity, using her suggested ‘Malayalee modernity’ and adding another; ‘Western modernity’. Although the idea was taken from the informant’s mentioned distinction, the use of Western modernity here is not meant to say ideal modernity. This would prove impossible since, as the analysis will show, virtually none of the informants seem to view western modernity as an ideal at all. A third reason for making this distinction between two different forms of modernity is to try to make the categories as ‘grounded’<sup>24</sup> as possible. Grounded categories are, hopefully, relevant categories and therefore also fit to describe and analyse the empirical material that they, at least in part, derive from.

I will begin with an enquiry of the different meanings attached to ‘Malayalee’ and ‘Western’ modernity in the interviewing material. ‘Malayalee’ and ‘Western’ modernity are constructed categories, and apart from the mentioned interviewee, the informants do not themselves use these concepts to label their descriptions. Rather, I have based the meanings attached to the categories on the informants’ descriptions of, and experiences in, contemporary Kerala and their experiences with, or perception of, societies in the ‘West’.

After the presentation of modernity in the interviewing material I will proceed by using the two categories as a base to build upon in the further analysis of the interviews and the additional field material. It is quite probable that the categories will sometimes be intermixed and that some of the informant’s notions will not at all be captured through them. This will serve to remind me that these and other categories are merely tools and dimensions along which to look, entirely different from the heterogeneous reality I am trying to describe. Thus, I will use categorization as a tool to reach one, out of many possible understandings.

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<sup>23</sup> Malayalee means ‘from Kerala’, Malayalam is the official language of Kerala.

<sup>24</sup> As discussed in chapter three, Glaser and Strauss (1967) pioneered a ‘grounded’ methodical approach, based on inductive theory-building wherein theories are developed by close observations of data. Christensen (1998) uses Glaser and Strauss to stress the importance of maintaining ‘nearness’ to the field when categories and theories are constructed.

### *Malayalee modernity depicted*

Trough the interviews many versions of Malayalee contemporary society is displayed and suggested, this will be shown through demonstrating some of the accounts made by four of the informants, a young PhD student, a retired statistics professor and a two scholars in their thirties.

Firstly, the youngest of the informants, a PhD student and activist in her twenties, focuses throughout the interview on what she misses in society to live a fulfilling life as a young woman. When talking of Kerala today, the situation and freedom for women seems to be her main concern. She claims that many women in Kerala live in slave like situations and that the personal freedom of girls is very much restricted. She points for instance to the area of sexuality as problematic; women being suspected of prostitution after having been victims of harassment or rape:

And sometimes if there is some issue, like some women are harassed by some local people, or some other men and something like that. And if there is no one else to support her, then maybe these women's group people, some women they will go and talk to her, give her some emotional kind of support. And if there is some case involved with police station or court and if she doesn't have any person to, any family people or some other friends to go with her, supporting, then may be we would go with her. (...) Otherwise what we can do socially, maybe we can organize a public meeting there, in that locality, such issues were there some. Women were, people told they were having eh, eh they were prostitutes, such and such issues. And they were totally alienated from society, such and such issues. And also rape- cases were there, and rape and making pregnant and after leaving the girl like that. Such issues were there.

Partly because of this concern for the situation of women, she has worked for several women's organizations where part of the agenda has been to support women who found themselves in such unfortunate situations. Not everyone has been as lucky as her, she claims; for many women in Kerala it is difficult to find the time and space for personal activities such as organizational work. To increase such possibilities, she says, Malayalee women must gain greater access to the public arena.

The issue of women's accessibility to the public sphere is an aspect of 'Malayalee modernity' which is pointed to in different ways by most of the informants in the collected data. Thus, due to the importance of this aspect, an importance suggested here by the youngest of the informants, it will be a reoccurring theme throughout the analysis of the interviews.

To continue the depiction of ‘Malayalee modernity’, I will turn to another informant; a retired statistics professor who tends to emphasize quite differently in her description of contemporary India. Even though she too concerns herself with the fact that, contrary to her hopes for the future, she finds that women rather seem to withdraw more and more from the participation in the public sphere. Her main focus however, is rather on how Kerala has moved in the wrong direction in many additional respects. -Either in comparison to the situation as she was growing up or the times when Kerala looked to the Soviet block for a social and economical model. One example of this is how she discredits the school system:

(...) see now for example, the heavy toll of education is making the children, in fact they lose their childhood, they don't enjoy their childhood. They don't play around and laugh; they don't do any of this. They carry huge amounts of books on the back and they go to the place and they come back and again do the homework and go to the tuition and.

Interestingly, one part of the ‘Malayalee modernity’ that is often displayed as a great success story<sup>25</sup>, namely the high literacy rate and educational level, is here criticized for limiting the childhoods of today's children and youth. The retired professor is not alone in her emphasis on the negative aspects of education, and other developmental factors, in the ‘Malayalee modernity’; many of the informants choose this theme when describing today's Kerala. Because of this, I will return to the questioning of the role of education in Kerala at a later stage of the analysis.

Another regret expressed by the retired statistics professor is that the earlier focus in Indian politics on striving towards equal opportunities for everyone, across class, cast and gender divisions, has diminished. She is generally concerned about the changing world order and how this affects the lives of people in Kerala where, in her opinion, many things are changing for the worse. This informant reveals different stages of ‘Malayalee modernity’ as she portrays some of the historical changes that she has witnessed in her time, such as alterations in the school system and the current adaptation to the globalized economy. By doing so, she shows how the changes that modernity constitutes are not static, but part of history's ever altering nature. In addition, through her age and experience with the many versions of modernity that the inhabitants of Kerala have witnessed, this informant contributes to the demonstration of the complexity of ‘Malayalee modernity’.

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<sup>25</sup> As noted in the introductory chapter, the female literacy rate in Kerala was 88% in 2001, compared to only 54% on the all India level. The general literacy rate for Kerala (91%) is also remarkably higher than the all India rate (65%) ([http://www.kerala.gov.in/vitalstatistics/w\\_education.htm](http://www.kerala.gov.in/vitalstatistics/w_education.htm)).



Several other informants are also concerned with displaying historical developments in Kerala. One researcher in her thirties, for example, has studied the gendered aspects of land and family reform in an upper-cast community<sup>26</sup> in one of the northern provinces of today's Kerala<sup>27</sup>. Her thoughts on how the Malayalee modernity has developed, and how this development influences contemporary Kerala, supplies an interesting comment to what is seen as 'Malayalee' and 'Western' modernity. In this extract, for instance, she is talking about matrilineal Nair-societies in the Malabar-area during the late colonial period:

Informant: Divorce was the simplest thing under the sun, you know, you just had to, we had a few indicators that signalled that you didn't want to see that man anymore. So, those kind of things, and one of the factors that I think it is so big is that we had a long time, a long history of missionary-engagement, Western missionary-engagement. And, the missionaries were really gashed with these kind of practises. So they have really been trying to bring this forward and saying that you people don't have family relations or proper womanhood, this is just promiscuity and it must be put an end to...

Interviewer: So in a way there's a kind of historical dynamic that begins with a kind of society with few strict rules about this and then the Christians came and sort of influenced the rules to become stricter and, and then now you're seeing a sort of conservatism because of this shameful past?

Informant: Well, not, yeah, I mean that's part of it. What I am trying to say is, yes, one of the earliest voices against these practises were certainly from the missionaries, the earliest and the strongest. But the missionaries were not the key to change. The key to change was the community. You know, the voice from within the community, the Western, modern English educated voice from the community, that wanted change and change towards institutions of family built around conjugality, that they recognized as correct and as modern.

Interviewer: Mhm. As modern?

Informant: As modern, yes. And implicated in that was a norm of gender-relations, where you have the woman who identifies completely with the man, who is treasured most importantly as a mother and a wife. You know whose place is the home and whose task is modern domesticity.

Another scholar, also in her thirties, turns my attention to more contemporary history when underlining that the celebrated effects of the so-called 'Kerala model'<sup>28</sup> must, and have indeed been, questioned as to what degree gender justice has actually been delivered. This informant

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<sup>26</sup> The Nairs is the caste-label for this community, which still exists in today's Kerala, in fact several of the informants interviewed for this project themselves were Nairs.

<sup>27</sup> The Malabar area.

<sup>28</sup> Elaborated upon in the introductory chapter.

too claims that even though women are receiving education, even if they are entering the labour market, even though infant mortality is low and reproductive health is very good, the Kerala model has, in broad terms, in her opinion been based on exploitation of women. She strongly emphasizes how the mobility of women, both in terms of career and in spatial terms, is very limited and that the divide between the public and the domestic sphere remains unchallenged:

It [Kerala model] has been blind to the fact that eh modernity, so, the Malayalee modernity, not the ideal model of modernity, but the Malayalee modernity has brought a new form of patriarchy, which is much more difficult to identify. Because, you know, it's not so much black and white, because it does grant women a certain kind of agency, which is a highly domestic agency.

Thus, as already mentioned by the young PhD student, domesticity and the lack of mobility is pointed to by this informant as one of the main challenges that women are facing in the Malayalee modernity, in spite of the attention and resources dedicated to 'women and development' in Kerala. Seen in light of the presentation of the Kerala model for development, a very interesting contrast between the model and this depiction of 'Malayalee modernity' is suggested. On the one hand, Kerala is presented, through a number of statistical indicators, as a society where women's rights and agency seems thoroughly addressed. On the other hand, the interviews reveal another and far less positive image of women's situation in Kerala, sometimes through critiquing the very statistical indicators that was meant to demonstrate the high level of gender development. This contrast will not be left unexplored in the continuance of the analysis.

By this short presentation of the descriptions of contemporary Kerala displayed in the interviews, I have attempted to demonstrate some important differences and tendencies as to how 'Malayalee modernity' is depicted by the informants. The controversy between the informants' negative displays of modernity, especially regarding women's status in Kerala, and the overall positive image given through Kerala's statistics of social development, is a tendency which will be thoroughly explored. To do this, and to develop the analysis further, I will at a later stage make use of an additional tool of analysis based on a focus suggested in the interviews, namely the challenges facing women's status and agency in Kerala. This process will be started by looking into what notions of gender equality are displayed by the informants in the eight interviews and the additional field material. My reason for choosing to focus on gender equality is its potential to capture an important part of the issues of modernity

suggested by the informants, issues such as work, education, domesticity, mobility and familial conservatism. Before this part of the analysis is continued, however, additional light will be shed on the concept of modernity through the descriptions of 'Western modernity'.

*'Western modernity'*

To shed additional light on how concepts of modernity, and thereby the concepts of a 'good society' and a 'good life', is displayed in the interviewing material, I will continue by giving a presentation of 'Western modernity'. Firstly, this category serves as a comparison; through the description of 'Western modernity' the interviewees often expresses opinions that can be seen in relation to what they see as desirable and not, for the society they themselves live in. Secondly, at a later stage of the analysis 'Western modernity' will serve the purpose of a base from which the relationship between the 'West' and the 'Third world' will be discussed. The presentation of 'Western modernity' as I find it described in the material, will mainly be made through the accounts of four informants; a social scientist in her fifties, a trade union leader in her sixties and two previously presented informants; the young PhD student and the scholar in her thirties.

Informant number one, a vibrant social scientist in her fifties, focuses a great part of the interview on her critique of modernity. She suggests that through importing the ideals of modernity, Indian society has been blind to its many shortcomings. Through discussing what should be met with scepticism and what she does not wish for her own society, she also shares with us her perception of 'Western modernity'. She displays 'Western modernity' as lacking warmth and human feeling, she talks of the lack of social independence in quite negative terms and claims that something is lost once people stop depending on each other. She indirectly criticises 'Western modernity' for the large emphasis put on freedom and individual rights and claims that human feeling has been undermined to make way for more goods and consumption, a tendency she does not wish for Kerala:

And then objects and things become more important than people and human relationships. Main- thing is this individualism, the way freedom is understood... There is no social dependence, or what you call mutual dependence, now this is the characteristic of non-modern societies. (...)

An Indian thing, where they talk of a way of life which is in harmony with the environment and where there is value... So then we will, can't go by the modern industrial production. Production will have to be geared in a different way, home- based production, you know, where there is much more personal relationship. But you may not have as many goods, you will have less goods. You have less goods but

more human feelings. (...) So modernity, industrialism and what do you call...eh... capitalism. These three are a package, so all the three are quite oppressive, but modernity is taken to liberate you...

Apart from pointing to such shortcomings of modernity, this informant also underlines the democratic tradition and strong civil society as characteristics of this modernity. It might be said that even though this informant does choose to emphasize the shortcomings of 'Western modernity' and questioning its potential for liberation, her picture of this version of modernity does not seem to be based solely on rejection.

The interviewee in the last interview, a trade union leader and an activist in her sixties, shares the above cited informant's concern about the lack of social and emotional bonds in 'Western modernity'. This trade-unionist has visited Europe to participate in conferences and meetings due to her work in a trade union and in this connection she offers some of her views on European society and conduct. When talking about the protection and sharing often present in the family in India, for example, she turned my attention to what she perceived to be a weakness in 'Western modernity', namely the lack of familial ties. She expressed concern about the situation of young people in Europe and was afraid that the excess freedom given to youth might harm them. She describes her surprise and concern when talking to co-patients in a hospital in Germany about the situation of the youth there:

Eh... I asked a question when I was in hospital, my co-patients eh... they, I asked, in European society your girls go out eh? Late nights. These are only young innocent girls and boys, why do you allow them, I asked. (...) she said: you see, there becomes our family ties, you see, because we give our children, we say that after seventeen or eighteen you are independent, I will not take any responsibility of bringing you up. That's a very wrong thing you see!

This informant emphasizes the importance of freedom being linked with maturity and responsibility, something both families and societies in for instance Europe according to her, fails to acknowledge the importance of. This in turn, represents a weakness in 'Western modernity', a trait which she does not wish her own society to adopt. In addition, this informant delivers a very strong message about the importance of sexuality staying within the borders of an institutionalized marriage. She does not agree with what she calls the lack of sexual taboos in European countries and hopes that this is not something which will be adopted in India. The concerns that this informant points to regarding the situation of young people and the role of the family and community is as mentioned similar to those referred to by informant number one, the social scientist in her fifties. Such concerns can also be linked

to issues constituting the backdrop for this thesis, such as the discussion concerning what constitutes a good society, a good life and good gender equality. I will therefore return to discuss issues concerning family, freedom, youth and sexuality brought up by this and other informants as the analysis proceeds to the next step. Before this, however, ‘Western modernity’ will be further looked into through the reflections of some of the younger informants.

Informant number three, an intellectual in her thirties, brings ‘Western modernity’ into the discussion by pointing to what she sees as a big misunderstanding as to what is perceived as ‘Western’ and not in India. She claims that here, the ‘West’ is often perceived as radical and liberal, but in her opinion this is based on an equivocation. The way she sees it, that which is seen as ‘liberal’ to many is merely strong behavioural norms of a slightly different character, covered up by the fact that we are so programmed to think about short skirts and many partners as liberation and lack of norms. Therefore, she does not see ‘Western modernity’ as especially liberal because, she explains, challenging the way things are done can be just as socially unacceptable there as in India. Through this, informant number three brings us to see a trait of ‘Western modernity’ already pointed to by the trade unionist, namely the ‘looseness’ of sexual moral in ‘Western modernity’, from a fairly different angle. By seeing this ‘looseness’ as a something mandatory and not as a freedom, she offers a new dimension in this shaping of the concept ‘Western modernity’. This dimension will be further emphasized in the chapter four, where meeting points between the analysis and relevant theory will be discussed.

One informant, the young PhD student, is not very concerned with the negative or hidden sides of ‘Western modernity’; she rather focuses on the *freedom* she understands women enjoy in the West. She explains that, even though she has never been outside of India, she has the impression that although women in the West have responsibilities in the home, they have less moral codes to follow. From what she has read and heard, people in the west seem open, especially the women, and she thinks this is due to the possibility of enjoying personal space and freedom. She does acknowledge that women in the West also suffer from familial difficulties, but she more importantly envies their freedom:

(...) for example, there [West] women can easily go to the pub or be free and themselves they can share even such, some sexuality issues are not much important here [East].

(...) even in the case of marriages mhm, many people to self- choice marriage in Western countries and even do multiple relations, having same sex- relations and all.

This informant can be said to clearly stand out in her almost all-encompassing embrace of the freedom she perceives to women enjoy in the West. While most of the young people I talked to outside of the formal interview situations often seemed shocked and awed by many of the answers they got when asking me about my life in Europe and the customs of Norway, this informant expressed hopes to be able to participate in what she perceived as a life containing less restrictions and more joy.

As this short presentation aims to demonstrate, there is a great span in the understanding and emphasis given by the different informants when offering their views on this, as in many other themes and discussions. The concept 'Western modernity' is shaped by the different approaches of all eight interviewees, where one point to the positive trend in Scandinavia as far as gender equality is concerned and others are more concerned with the negative sides of the consumerism of the 'West'. Simultaneously, similar themes and focuses can be identified and general pattern sought out. This will be left unexplored for the time being, although both similarities and differences of many sorts found in the material will be a source for further analysis.

Through these examples I have been trying to demonstrate some of the different ways in which 'Western modernity' –Western contemporary life, is understood and interpreted in the interviews. Before I conclude however, there is an additional point I feel compelled to make. Since part of what I set out to explore at the initiation of this project was how the cultural influence of the 'West' was understood by a selection of women activists in the third world<sup>29</sup>, it is important to note that my overall impression once I arrived in India, was that my informants seemed rather uninterested in talking much about the 'West', or 'Western influence' at all<sup>30</sup>. The 'West', thus, at first seemed a rather irrelevant category when the informants answered questions about their organizational activities or main fields of interest. This is part of the reason why 'Western modernity' itself first and foremost is a category that exists *in relation to* 'Malayalee modernity'; together the two categories constitute ways of looking at, and interpreting, the reality that the informants present through the interviews. The two categories represents a starting point for the continuation of the analysis of the depicted realities and will serve as a base for the development of a further analysis of the informant's portrayals of a 'good life' for themselves and the society they live in.

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<sup>29</sup> The working title of the project when I left for India was: "Third -World feminist views on the influence of Western values. – 'The Western answer' from the perspective of 'the Other'".

<sup>30</sup> Although, as the analysis to come will reveal 'Western influence' will return to be an important concept, although made use of in a slightly more indirect way.

Thus far, I have attempted to show some of the ways in which the women I interviewed chose to describe and valorise the world around them. By using the two categories of modernity to analyze some of their statements I have, as previously mentioned, chosen to take a closer look at a concept that will hopefully encompass several key issues and factors pointed to by the informants, namely *gender equality*. Although the concept 'Malayalee notions of gender equality' has mainly derived from the discussion around 'Malayalee modernity', suggested areas of importance taken from 'Western modernity' will, as already indicated, be integrated into the discussion at a later stage.

### **Malayalee notions of gender equality**

In the following, I will continue the analysis of the empirical material by making use of a focus which I interpret as being suggested by the field, investigating what notions of gender equality is revealed in the interviewing material. The informant's notions of what gender equality is and should be, serves the purpose of a methodological tool which will be used to illustrate highly general concepts such as 'a good life', 'a good society' and 'the common good'. Such concepts represent an important part of what I wish to explore through this work, but as they are methodically inaccurate I will try to find a range of tools through which I can show their relevance. These tools will hopefully help to identify, as clearly as possible, some of the relevant normative currents in the collected data.

When approaching the interview material, it is certainly possible to identify similarities between the informants' ideas of what gender equality should be, but it is the differences between their approaches that seem the most striking at first sight. First of all, the interviewees seldom or never use the term 'gender equality' themselves. When exemplifying what, that which I label gender equality, should be, the interviewees use expressions such as *women's empowerment*, *gender awareness*, *women's rights* and *enhancement of women's status*. Further, it is not only the way in which the interviewees chose to label their notions, but also the meaning they fill these expressions with, which differ between the informants. Through such examples the informants are suggesting some dimensions along which to look, some of these are: freedom, space, mobility, the sharing of household tasks and caring, familial and political decisions-making power, labour market and education, clothing, status and mobility. Further, the interviewees draw upon several comparisons through which parts of their notion of gender equality is revealed; they provide examples from 'Malayalee' and 'Western' modernity, historic Kerala and Cosmopolitan India. Through these comparisons

light is shed on what I have chosen to categorize as *Malayalee notions of gender equality*. Thus, by drawing upon the different ways in which the interviewees express opinions about what Malayalee gender equality should contain, I will try to present an analysis of some of the normative currents identified in the interviewing material.

*Informant nr. 8: '...whatever education, whatever opportunities I got I wish the other sections who are deprived.'*

In her early sixties, this informant seemed a never ending source of experiences and anecdotes taken from her own life and her many encounters along the way. After her MA degree she chose to become a full time communist party member and has now worked for the women's branch of a great trade union for more than twenty years. During the interview she explained to me that one of her main aims in life has been to fight against social inequality. She underlined that she did not take her privileged background for granted and wanted to work towards everyone getting the opportunities she had had. One of these opportunities, as she puts it, was the privilege to grow up in a home with a long tradition for a high degree of gender equality:

I always told you, my father, my father was my great friend, and my mother was the supreme- court in my family. (Laughing) She was our supreme court! ...in our family, you see. So she would decide and she would tell but she had told us one thing: a girl or a boy, they are equal. We never felt that we were unequal.

When talking of gender equality this informant emphasizes a lot of different things, but her main focus seems to be that empowerment and awareness are gained through education, work and mobility. In addition, she underlines the importance of sharing the responsibilities and decision making power between women and men both within the family and in society at large. Education for girls has been a tradition in her family for many generations and it still seems to be a main factor in creating a more gender-equal society, according to this informant. Through education, girls and young women have the chance of gaining a more equal social status in society and in the home. Further, education increases the opportunity for a decently paid job, she says, and through working the women become more economically independent and this furthers the equality of status in the home. This way this informant is hoping for more sharing within the home, sharing of the economical responsibilities, sharing of domestic work and of the decision making process. Through working and knowing their



rights women become increasingly vocal and thereby able to take part in the societal and political decision-making processes in a conscious way. Additionally, she is very much engaged in the fight against gender based wage-discrimination and the difference in status between the work of women and men. Thus far, this informant reveals quite a positive image of the social processes and changes going on in contemporary Kerala, but she also addresses some matters of concern. One of her regrets is that women in Kerala are quite restricted in many ways, for example when it comes to dress codes and spatial mobility. She has herself experienced social sanctions when wearing sleeveless blouses or going out alone after dark, sanctions she has never felt in for instance Delhi. Her concern can perhaps be summed up as *uneasiness* about a certain kind of conservatism that stands in the way of a better life for women in Kerala.

This *uneasiness* is actually shared by virtually all the women I interviewed, although they often attach very different connotations to this label. The view on education and family, for instance, seems to vary quite a lot between the different interviewees. This particular informant, for example, points to the importance of family bonds. As already mentioned, she speaks warmly of her own family, telling stories of how it has influenced her both politically and personally. She sees the family is an all-important factor in the moulding and protection of the children and youth of a society, and as previously mentioned, she expresses great concern about the lack of protection that is a result of the freedom given to young people in the West.

Thus, for this informant, the sharing, protection and closeness of the joint family are important values that should not be underestimated; she thinks it might even create more generous individuals than those growing up in nuclear families:

Indian culture, in the end I must tell you that, Indian culture gives you that education. I wouldn't say education. That a way of living, way of thinking. Maybe the joint family gives you to share things. You see, now, nuclear family they don't like to share, they don't like to share. But we like to share, anything we get, even, I like to, if I go out and I buy some biscuit I will share it with my taxi driver or auto driver, because he is going with me, so I should not deprive.

She further underlines, as previously mentioned, the importance of sexuality staying within the borders of the family; this will ensure a social and personal bondage that is necessary to keep the trustworthiness that families should be build upon. Keeping sexuality within such borders is also a way of protecting young people, although she celebrates liberty as an important value, it should come with maturity. She does, however, regret the strong taboos

surrounding victims of rape, which is eventually, according to her, connected to taboos of sexuality. As I will show, this concern for abused women is also emphasized by several other informants, although there are great differences between them as to what is perceived to increase gender equality in Kerala.

*Informant nr 7: 'I was dreaming of a total, a big social change.*

*That women also can live like a man, with free activities and individualities and all.'*

This PhD student in her mid twenties communicates a radically different way of relating to marriage and family, than the trade unionist more than twice her age. The two informants are similar in the way that they both focus on the family and on sexual relations in the interviews, but the differences between their philosophies are prevalent. As already mentioned during the conceptualization of 'Malayalee modernity', this young woman's main focus throughout the interview is her concern for women's freedom. Although she also draws upon her organizational experience, she often refers to her own personal frustrations when describing the difficulties of contemporary Malayalee women. She tells me, for instance, that the space to share personal feelings is virtually non-existing for a young woman; she misses the freedom of a personal life where she can confide in others about issues such as sexuality. Freedom seems an important notion to her, both the freedom and opportunity of physical mobility and freedom of the mind. Going for outside work and further economical independence is important, but does not necessarily give '*mental freedom*'; it is not until more constraints are broken that a general freedom can arise, she says. This freedom, she claims, will then also apply to men because they will no longer feel as compelled to being in control of everything, nor to being the sole provider. In this informant's view, one of the main restrictions on women's freedom is marriage and family. She claims that many women in Kerala, especially those who are married, are restricted by a hierarchy that inhibits their possibilities of expressing personal opinions. This is also the reason, she says, why she has chosen to live with a man who understands her, outside of the institution of marriage. She continues by saying that the, by many, much appreciated care and concern of the family can conceal considerable emotional exploitation. Based on these concerns, it seems central to this informant's concept of gender equality that women's role in the family and the family's role in society be changed. Because of the strong family bonds, the array of moral codes applying to women and a strict social structure, the freedom and individuality of Malayalee women today is restricted to a much greater degree than this informant would wish for. In direct

opposition to the arguments of the trade unionist above, the freedom of young people in the West seems to be mentioned as a positive contrast to the restrictions she feels in Kerala:

But there are negative points also for this [care and concern of the family], that it is a sort of... clinging mode, that this type of care and emotional exploitation also takes place. With this care and concern. So that people can't go out and be free and can't go out and what do they want. Like thinking about the family people and all, like that. So, I think, but I don't know, I, it's true, whether it's true, but most of the Western country families are like this, that children will go out soon, that they will become independent. Even if they are providing or something, personally they will be free to do what they want (...).

This being said, this PhD student later points to some of the similarities between the challenges in the process towards greater gender equality in Kerala and 'the West'. Such similarities have already been briefly suggested in the section about 'Western modernity', but will be looked into more thoroughly at a later stage of the analysis.

*Informant nr. 3: 'Whatever is normal is something we need to break.'*

This energetic woman in her thirties opens the interview by presenting herself as *one of the few women academics around*. Currently working as a social science researcher, she tells me how she chose to leave the organization where she received her political education, finding it impossible to combine the work there with her feminist standpoint. This informant seems highly engaged in both political and societal matters of many sorts. In approaching issues of gender equality she draws both upon her skills as a researcher and an academic, but often also becomes more personal, pointing to her own choices as political statements in trying to change rigid societal norms:

...gender-freedom would be the freedom to brake the either or binary or mix it up, make the boundaries, or play around with it, basically play around with it and eh, what, make gender into a performance, I mean, make it performative. Make it performative, it is performative of course, but, intervene in that consciously.

Through this, her critique of society seemingly becomes a synthesis of macro processes such as the downsides to Kerala state politics, and micro processes such as deliberately breaking the norms for how to dress at upper caste social events. The strongest emphasis of her account lies perhaps in the latter, namely her personal engagement to challenge that which is seen as normal and unchangeable concerning gender roles and relations. As already mentioned, she

starts the interview by explaining why she is an academic, preceding to emphasize the general importance of women entering the field of academia, not only as teachers, but as researchers and intellectuals independently producing knowledge. Twice divorced, it seems as though she has chosen to lead the life of a highly active working mother, living alone with her children, but at the same time also maintaining good relations with her mother and parents in law. She tells me about some of the closely entangled and rigid gender and social scripts which she has tried to challenge through living her life as independently as she has. To exemplify, she points to the period when she did organizational work; even though she did more intellectual work for the movement than her husband, her basic identity within the organization was always as his wife. Then, choosing to break with him she was seen by the members of the movement as decadent and bourgeoisie, whilst for her this meant being able to follow her own path.

It seems as though this informant considers it important that women in contemporary Kerala have the opportunity to create an identity for themselves through which they are able to challenge what is seen as normal and unchangeable. She often expresses this by giving specific examples of how she has gone against norms and conservative gender- scripts in her own life:

Informant: A! And maybe I don't want be, I don't want to play by the norms which are set.

Interviewer: Mhm

Informant: I don't want those norms, maybe.

Interviewer: So you are travelling under a norm-breaking flag always?

Informant: That's the thing! And if I come down to India and I'm not allowed to use a pair of pants to a music concert, I am going to wear a pair of pants and go to a music concert.

Interviewer: So your ideal society would be somewhere where you could do anything and there would be no strong norms?

Informant: There should not be strong norms. I'm not saying there shouldn't be any norms, there should be no norm that will not be, it's what Jesus says; laws are for men, men are not for laws. Same, norms are for human beings; human beings are not for norms.

Interviewer: Mm

Informant: So there should be a, the problem is that there is so much lesser flexibility, see in these upper- cast concerts, music concerts in Chennai, you are expected to wear a silk sari and possibly nice, expensive jewellery, loads of flowers in your hair and look like a good Brahmin women. I'm not a Brahmin- woman, hm, and possibly, coloured saris, a white sari would indicate widowhood and all that...

Trough these accounts, an impression of her view on conservatism and the role of the family, is implicitly given. Arguing that all her actions are political, she has consciously chosen to both keep in close contact with her parents in law and mother, while at the same time divorcing two men and living alone with her children. -This implicates that she probably does not share the view of someone like the trade unionist on issues such as family and sexuality. – This informant’s main attitude towards the latter seems to be openness and transparency, before following the existing conventions and norms. Although she claims that keeping a secret lover while being married is all but uncommon in Kerala, she has chosen not to, simply because it goes against her principles to hide in order to avoid social sanctions. She expresses that it is just as important to her to be a *‘home loving person’* and a good mother, as an independent academic, in this way she wants to go beyond the binaries of the Malayalee gender script, not having to chose either *‘nurturing’* or *‘masculinist’*<sup>31</sup>. Through this she once again shows how she has chosen to challenge that which is expected of her by many of those living alongside her in Kerala today.

In addition to the challenging of norms and normality, this interviewee stresses the importance of gender equality issues being addressed seriously at the political level; she criticizes politics in Kerala for looking at gender equality only as a secondary issue, always after democracy, health, food and water. She claims that the rosy picture of the gender implications of the Kerala model can be deceiving. Although some gender issues are dealt with politically, this informant does not agree with many of the changes that have occurred. To exemplify, she points to a new form of patriarchy which is more difficult to detect, in a society that *‘grants women a certain kind of agency, which is a highly domestic agency.’* In calling for less domesticity in the agency of Malayalee women, she emphasizes the importance of diminishing the current gender difference in the access to public life and safety in the domestic sphere. She does not, however, give any specific example to illustrate what the practical implications of such a difference would be.

As I have tried to show, this informant’s account of what gender equality should be has a wide span, from alterations on the political level to changes in interpersonal relations and specific gender norms. When sketching her notions of gender equality she draws upon her experiences in different parts of India such as Trivandrum, Delhi and Chennai, but she also uses her knowledge of ‘Western’ gender norms to illustrate some of her ideas:

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<sup>31</sup> J.fr Beauvoir 2000

Informant: (...) see, supposed I studied in an American university I might have draped myself in Saris then....

Interviewer: Mhm, to prove some kind of a point?

Informant: Yes. In the sense that I do not want to conform. In fact I have friends who say that this is actually nonsense because here [USA] Asians are looked down upon because they somehow don't seem to conform to the sexual liberated types. In the sense that in if the university you are not admired by the men you are considered somehow a little less important than everyone else. And certain other things, like if you don't shave your arms, if you don't wear make-up, don't know how to wear make-up, all that is looked down upon, so... They say that they are finding the so- called valorising of sexual liberation, that has become a norm.

Through this, she not only makes yet another point about the importance of challenging gender norms, but perhaps more importantly, comments upon the similarities of such challenges across alleged cultural division lines between 'The West' and 'India'. As I have already briefly mentioned, this is one of the discussions I will return to elaborate upon when attaching the theoretical framework to the analysis of the interviews.

Through the presentation of some of the aspects in which these three informants contribute to what I have chosen to categorize as 'Malayalee notions of gender equality', I have attempted to briefly illustrate some of the main differences and similarities that can be found in the collected empirical material. In spite of obvious differences depicted in the presented material, I choose to continue the analysis by looking at an important similarity. This similarity is one that can be detected both by the examples given and in the interview material as such, namely the general concern about the high degree of *domesticity* attached to the role of Malayalee women. This concern seem to encompass questions of family, conservatism, education, work, organizational activities, mobility and, once taking the analysis a step further, questions of international development and feminism.

In this exploration of three informants in different age groups and occupations, three informants that seem to hold very different notions of gender equality, the analysis of Malayalee women's domesticity has already started. However, the central role this theme appears to be playing in most of the interviews, calls for a more profound analysis, in order to further explore what meaning the different informants attach to it and what theoretical and societal implications it has.

*Domesticity and passivity in Malayalee gender scripts*

Already at an early stage of the interviewing process, it was made clear to me by the informants that somehow all was not right (Mills 1967:11), as far as the role of women in Kerala was concerned. I perceived it as a general feeling that seemed to conflict with the emphasized statistical indicators of women's development in the state. On the one hand, Kerala was the state where gender differences in literacy rates and higher education was minimal compared to the all India levels, on the other hand, one by one the interviewees pointed to an outstandingly high level of conservatism in the gender scripts of Malayalee women. Drawing upon the analysis made so far, I intend to further explore the information and explanations given by the informants on this theme. Through doing so, I aim to gain further knowledge about the content of the proposed conservatism and its effects the Malayalee modernity, according to the interviewees. I will try to shed additional light on statements made by the informants through drawing upon some of the material gathered through informal conversations, field notes and incorporations<sup>32</sup>.

The investigation of Malayalee gender roles will be initiated by reference to some of the information that can be found in interview number five. The informant in this interview is a researcher in her thirties who has occupied herself with gender-related studies and been moderately involved in activist work led by women's organizations. Already during the first minutes of the interview, when talking about her view on activist work and women's enhancement, she brings my attention to a type of 'harassment' that she refers to as difficult talk about and explain. She uses the favourable statistical indicators on women's development to contrast the type of harassment she is pointing to. She labels this process 'conservatism' and Kerala a society of 'strongly restrictive norms' for women, something which according to her, is linked to the middleclass-ness of Malayalee society. Continuing, she provides several examples of how the harassment she is referring to, can be detected and recognized: Even though women are very much present on public arenas, such as on the roads or in the offices of Trivandrum; they do not seem to want to engage themselves in anything outside of their prescribed responsibilities, she says.

And in fact it is something which comes up very, very sharply when you talk with women, when you try to get women's response, even if you just look around you., because women are very much there, they are on the roads , they are going to offices, they're in their offices, but they're never talking, they

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<sup>32</sup> As the presentation made in chapter two unfolds, additional data in the form of spoken and unspoken knowledge was gained through talking to people outside of the interview-situation as well as by living and experiencing in Kerala.

are almost trying to tell you , you know, that we don't ever want to step beyond... we come to office to go to work and then to go back home, we don't do anything beyond that.

According to this informant women do not have much voice in the public sphere in Kerala, despite of their high educational level and even though they are occupying an array of positions, she finds it difficult to '*get women's response*'. One of the reasons for this, she suggests, is that instead of leading to more outspokenness, work and education has become a part of patriarchy. An example of this is how the educational level of a woman, and sometimes also whether she has got a respectable job or not, is used as part of the marriage criteria, a process which according to this informant is also held up by women themselves:

Because women are educated, they probably, on an average put in more years of education than men do. But, somehow this is just not translating, into anything of most conventional kind of things. And eh, there I think we have very, very strong norms in place which is really working, working to socialize women away from that. So women themselves really seem to be keeping it up and supporting the structures and there, yes, I'm mean I would certainly like things moving away from that where I could see, where I could actually see women think that life beyond their domestic circumstances enriching and seeking it actively.

Thus, it seems as though women in the Malayalee modernity have been granted, not only a domestic agency, but also a public agency which is highly passive. To highlight this and some of the indications made by the social researcher, I will use an experience I had during my stay in Trivandrum.

After having conducted three interviews with highly vocal and energetic informants, I was invited by one of them to visit a university campus. After my arrival there my informant, who was a one of the university's senior professors, invited me to 'interact' with four of her postgraduate students. When I entered the room, four students, two girls and two boys, sat on a row at a table, as in a TV-debate panel. I was asked to sit down at the other side of the table, which I did, and we started talking to each other. That is, the two boys asked me questions, while the girls remained quiet. I found the situation quite strange and uncomfortable, but I decided to ask some questions about their lives and opinions in a number of different matters. I was especially interested in the girl's opinions and directed most of my questions to them, but this always resulted in either the boys answering the questions 'for' the girls entirely, or taking over for the girls in the middle of their sentences. Although I did notice the behavioural gender-difference at the time, my confusion about the purpose of our 'interaction' fully



overshadowed the analytical distance I might otherwise have had. However, in light of the analysis of the interviews, it seems as though I got to experience an example of the conservatism present in women's roles, which is referred to in the previous interview. The girls I talked to were both well educated and intelligent, or so the boys told me, and they must have been perfectly capable of answering the questions I directed at them, but in the end, most of the information I got about what they did and what they thought about being a woman in contemporary Kerala, was given by the young men. This is of course just a single instance, but in my opinion it serves as an additional example in shedding light upon what I choose to label a *gender specific norm of passivity in the public sphere*. Because, as informant number five points out, it is not that women do not participate in the public sphere in Kerala, it is not that they are not educated, but still it seems as though most women 'choose' a passive-participating role that serves to protect their main identity as devoted wives and mothers. To elaborate upon this suggestion and to further investigate the content of the gender-role challenges identified by the interviewees, I will continue with a presentation of some of the statements made by informant number two.

The first thing this senior professor in her fifties decided to share with me as the formal interview started, was the failure of an attempt to start a women's group in the university where she is working. The backdrop of this initiative was to make the voices of women heard, and their talents more visible. According to this informant, there was a trend at the university that women who, according to her, was '*supposed to be the intellectuals*', seldom wanted to go beyond their assigned teaching- responsibilities:

I wanted them also to learn these experiences, why women are not able to come to the forefront of any movement. Especially, the professional women, who are supposed to be the intellectuals, however, in the course of this formation what we noticed was that, women were contented only with the regular teaching- assignments and did not want to go beyond that and to tackle and to understand the social issues. For them it became very problematic to examine the other issues, moreover we also found that there were women, in spite of the fact that they were university level, they still were content by not expanding their horizon of learning. Because the assumption of most of the women was that, their place at home were that of a domestic maker and they were not looking at this as a profession, they were looking more as a job, you know, so that they could get the money- packet or whatever it is. But beyond that they did not relate themselves you know, that they had a role to play in society and their voices were very important or pertinent.

The situation described in this extract was part of what she aimed to change through initiating the above mentioned university women's group. Through this initiative she would've liked to

encourage women to be more active, vocal, opposing the '*domestication*' of women in the world of career. This in turn, she hoped, would make the women working at the university more aware of their positions as participatory agents in society. The attempt failed though, among other reasons, because the work of the women's organization conflicted with the organizational and political work of their husband's. She adds that Kerala is a society ruled by caste and religion, something which also made such a process difficult. On account of this, she stresses the continued need for a '*social dialogue regarding women's position in the public sphere*' in Kerala.

Thus far, the process referred to in merely all the collected interview material, has been exemplified by two informants who label it *conservatism*, *hidden harassment* or *domestication*. The two interviewees seem to have a relatively similar concept of what this domestication of women in the public sphere, driven by societal conservatism, is. A clear common ground seem to be that women's education and participation in the labour market does not necessarily lead to the amount of gender equality that the two informants would like to see in the 'Malayalee modernity'. From these examples it seems that what is missing to fulfil such an ideal is a change in the content of Malayalee gender scripts; from what is seen as a highly passive and secondary women's role in the public sphere, to a more active and participatory role. The informants are arguing that instrumental changes in women's lives, such as education and work, although leading to important changes, might also serve to obscure the need for different kind of changes. In chapter four, I intend to connect these suggestions made by the informants to post colonial feminist and development critique's questioning of Western notions of gender equality and gender development. Before this however, I will continue the analysis of challenges in the Malayalee gender scripts, pointed to by the informants. I will make use of the accounts of two different informants, one of whom has already been briefly presented through the section on 'Western modernity'.

The first of these informants is in her sixties and the leader of a women's organization in Trivandrum. She comes off as highly professional and answers my questions as though she has heard them many times before. Although she never relates her answers to personal issues of any kind, she provides a lot of comments on Malayalee society, and its gendered norms. Her emphasis is very much on how to change that which she views as crooked, such as the lack of mobility for women in Kerala. In her opinion, it is important to challenge the patriarchal hierarchy both within the family and society at large. To do this, women must have courage, courage to move beyond their domesticity, to participate in society and to represent themselves. It is also important that men participate in the household tasks, share the

household economy with the women and to give equal opportunity to children, regardless of gender. She further emphasizes the importance of breaking '*this myth of the rosy picture of Kerala that everybody has*', a myth that, according to her, is built upon the promising statistical indexes of gender development in Kerala. She explains that what she sees as the other side of such a rosy picture reveals an educational system which domesticates women:

Because we also feel that the education, the traditional education which all of us go through, is not something which empowers women it just more and more domesticating women into good housewife or good mother. So, even if you receive hundred percent literacy it is not in any way, that in itself is not going to educate the position of women in society.

Thus, it is not the education of women, but rather the changing of women's position in society which will really make the difference for women's emancipation in Kerala today. According to this informant a similar negative side can be detected when further enquiring the low infant and maternal mortality rates of Kerala. To exemplify, she tells me how Malayalee women are required to make nine medical controls during their pregnancy, compared to the customary five in Norway and Sweden. Further, according to her, an incredible 45 percent of all deliveries in Kerala are caesareans, three times the WHO-standards, numbers which, she says, all convey an over-exaggerated control of women's bodies. This informant indicates that the state of Kerala has gone more than over the top when creating its development strategy for women, even more evidently so when comparing the situation with that of the neighbouring states, where women are dying because of the lack of proper medical attention. Through addressing examples of differences between the politics of women's development and the actual life situations of women, this informant adds to the descriptions of the domesticity in women's agency and points to further examples of how development can mean control rather than liberation when seen from a certain perspective. Perhaps surprisingly, education is thus turning out to be one of the factors most frequently pointed to when addressing issues of women's domestication and the conservative and patriarchal norms governing gender roles in Kerala. Additionally, women's reproductive health is being used in a similar way by this particular informant in order to demonstrate yet another such example.

The answer to the question I set out to explore through this investigation of the Malayalee gender scripts, namely the specific content of that which the informants labelled domesticity or conservatism, is getting increasingly comprehensive. I will, however, provide yet another description given by the first informant, before linking the empirical material to theoretical discussions in a more pronounced way.

This informant, a social scientist and activist in her fifties, was another member of the group that initiated the university women's forum. Her reason to engage in such an initiative was to counter the high percentage of men represented in the senate and the syndicate and increase the space for women in such political organs. She tells me that the women's forum has now been turned into a charity, which she strongly regrets, because to her it seems to represent a loss in the fight for strong women coming forward in their own right and not on account of their powerful husbands or male relatives. She, like so many of the other interviewees, explains to me that Kerala is a society coloured by its conservative gender-specific norms. One example of this is that for women, especially women her own age, it is not considered respectable to go to a coffeehouse to discuss, talk and laugh out loudly. –An activity that she and some of her colleagues have taken up through the formation of a 'coffee-house discussion group'. She also points to conservative elements in places like the labour market and she very much questions the potential for liberation in going for '*outside work*', but her main focus when approaching Kerala's conservatism seems to be gender norms in the family and domestic sphere:

And then this is more, you know, that Kerala state has the highest gender development, the women are highly literate unlike the rest of India, they are in many jobs, all jobs, but at the family- level there is a lot of conservatism, very much patriarchy, so with dowry, and the very way the marriage is organized, inequality steps in, the man is the, he is the breadwinner, he is the one who will decide what is to be done. So that norm does not change very much, in fact it is becoming more and more conservative I think, so women's role is this.

Thus, alongside participating in the labour market, women continue to be burdened with most of the care-work, as well as the domestic chores. This represents, according to the interviewee, a parallel process to that happening in the West labelled by, amongst others, Arlie R. Hochschild: '*That's what Arlie talks of, the stalled gender- revolution*'<sup>33</sup>. In this connection, it is repeatedly emphasized by the informant that the modern family-trends seen in the West, and on a much smaller scale in India, where people are for instance cohabiting, will not solve the problems surrounding familial conservatism. She gives examples of how women she knows have entered cohabiting relationships with the anticipation that it would bring greater freedom and fewer restraints on them as women. But

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<sup>33</sup> A.R. Hochschild (2003) points out that women have been burdened with a double load of work after entering the labour market, due men's lack of participation in household tasks and caring, hence the notion of a 'stalled gender revolution'.

rather, in such relationships, the level of exploitation seems to increase due to men taking advantage of this freedom by not taking proper care of the family. It seems as though the new and 'freer' relationships' inability to actually loosen conservative gender norms, can be attributed to that which I chose to label the 'adaptability of patriarchy'<sup>34</sup>. An example of such adaptability in this instance would be how a looser marital structure gains men and their position in society, because of their already privileged status, rather than increasing women's emancipation.

Thus far, I have attempted to explore the domesticity and passivity in the Malayalee gender concepts as pointed to and explained by four different informants. The accounts of these informants have given some insight into what meanings are attached to notions such as domesticity. Some of the informants explicitly use the term domesticity, whilst others refer to 'familial conservatism' or patriarchy. As I have attempted to show though, the similarities between the accounts are remarkable. All four informants bring up the domesticity of the gender scripts, the need to make women's voices heard and to strengthen their position as participatory agents in the public sphere, in one form or another. As can be seen in some of the material presented, for instance under the heading 'Malayalee notions of gender equality', such similarities can be found to some degree in all eight interviews. Thus, in spite of clear differences between the presentations of what gender equality ought to be, a common ground seems to have been found through approaching the domesticity of the roles of women. As this term can be said to symbolize the core of the critique directed at the focus and goal-attainment of the 'Kerala model' as far as gender is concerned, it will play a key role in the analysis of this critique. Before this however, I intend to give a summary of what findings the analysis has led to so far, in order to clarify and emphasize.

### **Visioning the family: three illustrative examples**

As the material presented thus far has shown, clear differences can be found between the interviewees as to how they valorise and emphasize when describing 'Malayalee' and 'Western' modernity. Central factors in the analysis of such differences can be said to be that which the informants *appreciate* and *criticize* in contemporary Kerala and the 'West'. This in turn, has contributed to the understanding of the informants' different approaches to gender equality. On the other hand, definite similarities between the informants accounts have been

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<sup>34</sup> This label is inspired by Bourdieu and Waquant (1993)

presented, in particularly so, through the section on *domesticity and passivity in Malayalee gender scripts*. These similarities will be further analysed in chapter four.

The intention of this section is to concentrate upon, and summarize, the *differences* in the models of modernity and gender equality presented by the informants through the analysis made so far. I choose to approach such a summary by making use of *family* as a category of analysis, as the interviewees very much differs in the way they depict the family and envision an improvement of this important societal institution. I hope that by looking at the family ‘through the eyes’ of the informants, an important assumption can be made about the heterogeneous visions of the ‘good life’ and ‘good society’ generally, and ‘notions of gender equality’ especially.

To illustrate and give an overview of the heterogeneity in the material, I will coarsely divide the informant’s perspectives into three groups: *a family of individuality and freedom*, *a family of cultural negotiation* and lastly; *challenging patriarchy from within*. For each of the three perspectives I will suggest informants upon whose statements the category is based. It is important to underline however, that the typologies are meant as a tool of illustration and not an attempt to categorize all eight interviewees.

*A family of individuality and freedom* is based on the statements made by the youngest informant, in the sections presenting modernity and notions of gender equality. This interviewee centres her discussion of a better life for her as a woman around the concept of *freedom*. Freedom to her seems an important concept both when relating to ‘Western’ and ‘Malayalee modernity’ and when describing her notion of gender equality.

Yeah, that is, yeah, at that time I was thinking of freedom as a person, even day to day life, girls are facing different, you know, slavery sort of situations, eh... For that, yeah, But, I don’t know, I’m not thinking that no, right now I’m not dreaming such a thing because there are so many limitations, even among the organizations, even personally, that people can do. But, having said such friends eh, yeah, maybe we will be able to share things and discuss things and make our own, make ourselves free, mentally at least. And, physically also if people have, depends upon the person, yeah, guts to be free, yeah, that way. And live life, like, be... want. Then maybe we can be free that way.

According to her, the most important agent in restricting and restraining women’s freedom in the ‘Malayalee modernity’, is the family. Trough the strong connection that most women have to their paternal family, and later through marriage, women are denied access to moving around as they please and to sharing their *individualities* with others.

Interviewer: What kind of soc, eh, limitations are you thinking about?

Informant: Yeah, I never thought that, I don't actually want to accept that kind of limitations, but at least for some years work for an organizations or personally living as our own life, you know, like, not depending upon the family and all, not caring for anybody, living like that, eh, personally. That makes, that all the time, we are always facing some or other troubles, confusions and other things.

Trough the family, claims to women's time, labour and caring recourses are laid, claims that inhibit them from living a free and happy life. 'Western modernity', on the other hand, represents freedom, personal space and the possibility of sharing important and difficult issues with others. This in turn, she claims, is due to parents supporting and helping their children as well as setting them free. The approach this informant has to the family does not only provide information about her modernity concepts, but also gives a strong indication of her notion of gender equality. She has claimed her freedom as a woman by going against her family and living with a man outside of the institution of marriage:

Informant: And also, for personal reasons, if somebody gets married, of it is not there, if it is an arrangement, if it is not an arrangement then also, people will be getting into trouble for coming out and doing as they were. Even before married, even if one is not married, even for the family it is very difficult to come out for processions and strikes and sittings sometimes. Such and such limitations are there. But, only very few people are breaking out of such limitations so, the number is less; few, very few people are coming forward.

Interviewer: So, is this one of the reasons why you chose not to live as a married woman?

Informant: Yeah, mm, yeah, I was just thinking that these sort of institutions are against women's freedom... Mm, so ah, I will, I will, I also decided that I will be living with a person who understands me, but that's different, but also around the institutions, if, that institutions also, if we are inside that institution again we wouldn't be so free to express our own opinion, there comes a certain hierarchy.

This way, she says, she is able to avoid the exploitation and restriction that finds place in marriages and to live with a man who understands her. This also led her to a greater extent feel released from the *care and concern of the family*, which in her opinion in many instances conceals emotional exploitation. She has also chosen to live geographically far away from them, to feel less controlled. Thus, moving away from the family and leading an independent and free life seem to be the main content this informant's notion of gender equality. It is only through revolting *against* the family institution as she experience it, and opting for an

alternative way of organizing her life, that she is able to claim some of the freedom she would otherwise feel deprived of as a woman. Freeing herself from the ties of the family makes her able to do more organizational work and having more time to spend on personal reflection. She told me outside the interview situation that she would like to go to the West, where she saw the possibility of living even more openly and freely.

The thematic regarding revolt against the family and challenging what is seen as normal is also an important element in that which I have chosen to label *a family of cultural negotiation*. Informant number three, cited and presented both in the passage concerning ‘Malayalee modernity’ and ‘Malayalee notions of gender equality’, the intellectual in her thirties, is the main inspiration for this perspective. On the one hand this informant has chosen to live as if married twice, being a *home loving person*, taking good care of her two daughters and keeping in close contact with both her own parents and her in-laws. On the other hand however, she has chosen to leave both of her ‘husbands’ and determinately pursuing her career as *one of the few woman intellectuals around*. Thus, although she has consciously broken an array of norms by going against *whatever is normal*, as far as gender specific expectations are concerned, she also acknowledges the importance of keeping good relations with the family:

My family was as concerned as any else, anyone else, but then I have kept up a process of dialogue. I have consistently broken the rules, but I have also consistently kept up a process of dialogue with my family, with my mother, my relatives, my extended family that is, my extended family is also very important to me, my extended family, my cousins and aunts and uncles and so on and my brothers and my mother. So they have at every turn been shocked at what I do, but they have also instead of running away and setting myself up as an isolated individual, I have also consistently talked to them, never allowed the dialogue to cease. With the result that I do have an excellent equation with them, I mean I am still, despite I mean, imagine getting out of two marriages and living on my own...

She underlines the importance of challenging the binaries in the gender expectations of the ‘Malayalee modernity’, and refuses to choose between labels of either the *nurturing* or the *masculinist* woman. She acknowledges and emphasizes patriarchal and hypocritical elements of ‘Malayalee modernity’ and the family institution within this modernity, but instead of rejecting it all together, she chooses to negotiate a position where she is able to critically involve herself. This informant repeatedly and eloquently reminds the Norwegian student who has come to interview her that for her the main aim is to play around with, and challenge,



categories of all kinds, not only those present in the 'Malayalee modernity'. She points out that as long as a strong norm exists, it should be challenged, and a norm telling women to wear revealing clothing can be just as controlling as a norm telling women to cover up. As a result, the notion of gender equality communicated by this informant is linked quite similarly to the two different modernity concepts. She is highly critical to gender specific norms restraining women, but do not think the answer lies in turning to the solutions provided by 'Western modernity'. On the contrary, her notion of gender equality is very much tied up to the constant challenging of 'normality', and just because it is the normality of 'somewhere else' does not make it any less prone to be unfavourable to women than the normality of the 'Malayalee modernity'.

As far as I can see, such an approach to questions around the emancipation of women's status in society is starkly coloured by a cultural negotiation; interacting with and respecting her family and in-laws while simultaneously challenging the dos and don'ts of a woman.

Accordingly, this informant's view and perspective represents a contrast to that presented by the young PhD student. While the first informant positions herself outside the family, and to a certain degree breaks with it to gain her freedom, the latter chooses to stay within the borders of the family in some respects while she continuously challenges the conventions present.

Informant number eight, as I will demonstrate, differs from both of these informants and how they approach and relate to the family institution. The trade union leader is in her sixties and might perhaps be the representative of a different generation than the two women upon which the previous typologies are based. As I will show through the presentation of the perspective labelled *challenging patriarchy from within*, this informant does not by far take as critical a stance to the family as the two younger informants.

One of the most prominent differences between the mentioned informants and this middle-aged woman is that she almost exclusively uses positive terms when talking about the family. According to this informant, the family *moulds* individuals into proper human beings, providing them with a platform from which they are able to make sound judgments. She uses her own family as examples of how the family can be a breeding ground for gender equality, education, morals, sharing and caring. Although she grew up in West Bengal, it seems as though the opinion she offers of the advantages of the shared family is transferable to the family in the 'Malayalee modernity'. Through her accounts of the family as the most important social institution, the advantages of the shared family and the lacks colouring the weak family ties in 'Western modernity', she displays visions of both modernity and gender

equality. The importance of the family in the 'Malayalee modernity' seems to clearly overshadow the negative aspects as far as gender equality and 'the common good' is concerned.

My personal opinion, you see, if you have, this is your sex life, if you have trust to each other and you have a bondage, there's a social bondage also it's a personal bondage. If it is so loose, then marriage doesn't last, you see your argument maybe; marriage cannot be imposed. It can not be you know compulsion. But my question is different, my question is; human relationship is not so futile, it's not so, it's not a glass warehouse, it's an established social organization which is the, family is the main crucial point in the main, in society. It is the family which gives you the whole thing! You see, your family how it moulds you, your family moulding has a big bearing on life. You see, I was told by somebody that: we can understand form your behaviour that you have come from a family which has reared you better. You see, these are the things which you learn in life. How your family behaves with others, you see as I told you, my motto is that if I love people, people will not be able to hate me... This is my motto. And if I am sincere to people, in my small way, I'm not saying I'm a big person, I don't have that ability, I have my constraints, I have my limitations. But I feel if you love and are sincere, you can go anywhere... anywhere.

She does acknowledge the patriarchal element present both in the family and in society at large, but does not advocate a move away from the family in order to gain improvement or change in this field. Sexuality and reproduction, for instance, should be kept within the borders of the family, but where there is unequal distribution of household chores and caring, she would like to see change. Further, parents should teach their sons and daughters that they are equal and provide them with equal possibilities. Such possibilities, however, does not mean that children should be set completely free, as she considers the upholding of norms and certain restrictions an important aspect of the caring of the family. In this way, the trade unionist differs from both the younger informants recently presented as to how the issues of the common good and improvement of gender equality in the 'Malayalee modernity' is best executed.

Another informant whose statements about the family gives an interesting, and somewhat similar, perspective on modernity and gender equality, is the social scientist in her fifties presented through the sections on 'Western modernity' and 'Domesticity and passivity in Malayalee gender scripts'. She too, puts the care and concern of the family on the agenda and emphasizes the need to maintain human feeling's current position as a basic trait of the 'Malayalee modernity'.

[in modern societies] There is no social dependence, or what you call mutual dependence, now this is the characteristic of none-modern societies. But I am not saying non-modern in the way they were just traditional where there was oppression should be taken as a package. You can have a different thing. But then, try to see what tradition did have, try to see what modernity doesn't have, or has. And then, I am not saying as a synthesis, we are our own being, we are trying to work out these two things. How can we have warm human relationships and yet have freedom? How do we understand freedom? So, modernity is explaining this in one way, but that may not be the only way, and that may not be the only way suitable for all societies.

This informant does, however, also point to the important role the family plays in upholding conservative gender specific norms and customs, such as dowry. Still, it seems clear that the two informants both take a stand against the move away from the family and the collective perspective through their accounts of 'Western modernity'. They also both seem to feel that the best way to enhance the rights and status of women in the 'Malayalee modernity' is not by moving away from the family, nor by constantly negotiating gender scripts and social norms. But rather, as the label of this perspective suggests, through a sort of reform process or silent revolution from within the family structure itself.

Through this presentation of the differences between three perspectives of the family, I have intended to illustrate and clarify some of the approaches to modernity and gender equality that can be identified in the material presented in the analysis made so far. One might argue that through such typologies the views of the informants are overly crystallized and that the differences between them are given too much importance. However, I consider the heterogeneity colouring the informants takes on societal improvement to be very important. Such heterogeneity is reflected, for instance, in how informants from different age groups display the family in Kerala as differentiated, both demographically and ideologically. This serves to exemplify how the concept of, both what family *is* and what is *should be* differs according to who you talk to. Something which illustrates the flexibility present in the *social construction of reality* (Berger and Luckmann 1979), as well as the transitional character of social institutions.

Thus, in the next chapter I intend to more profoundly analyse and discuss some of the main issues brought to light so far. I will treat the informants questioning and critique of the Kerala model and it's consequences for the 'Malayalee modernity' as the most central theme. Theoretical questions surrounding what development is and should be, as well as questions regarding the infamous relationship between the 'West' and the 'Third world', will be treated

in light of contemporary feminist writings. As a result, questions of difference and similarity will continue to play an important role.

## Chapter Four: Linking empirical findings with theoretical suggestions

So, gender – perspectives means bringing in the whole issue of gender- power and differential access to public life and safety in private existence, that's it! That's what a gender- perspective is.

(Informant number three)

Through the analysis made so far and in particular through the section on 'Domesticity and passivity in Malayalee gender scripts', a pronounced scepticism of the Kerala model of development can be detected. When approaching issues regarding the 'Malayalee modernity', clear cut criticism is directed at the unwanted results of the development in Kerala. I will therefore present a discussion on how development-issues affect women by making use of some focal points suggested by the interviewees. The issues of concern regarding women's development will mainly be discussed along the lines of education, labour market-participation and health. These categories do not only encompass important aspects of the informants' criticism, but also coincide with statistical indicators frequently used to measure development.

Issues of the cultural embedded-ness of the Kerala model will constitute the other main theme discussed in this chapter, linking the informants' critical assessments of Kerala's development to questions of colonialism and culturally embedded thought- traditions. With the already presented statements and takes of the interviewees as a backdrop, issues concerning 'the good life' and 'the good society' will be handled. Through this, I would like to investigate what similarities can be seen between the challenges women face in the 'Malayalee' and 'Western' modernity, both according to the interviewees and feminist post-colonial writings. Thus, in this chapter I intend to bring theoretical discussions related to the issues of concern into the analysis. I will draw upon Indian feminists' writings, post-colonial and post-development theory to contextualize the debates that have been suggested during the course of the analysis.

### **The critique of the Kerala model**

The analysis made thus far has undisputedly revealed a critical attitude towards the Kerala model of development, particularly as far as gender- related issues are concerned. More specifically, the informants have pointed to some of the shortcomings of this model,

according to a few reoccurring variables. By doing so, the informants reveal their engagement in the dismantling of what some refer to as *the rosy picture of Kerala*. Such a dismantling is displayed as necessary to distract attention, away from the success story of Kerala's social development, and towards the problematic results of the Kerala model. According to the interviewees in this project, many such problematic results and thus also traits of the 'Malayalee modernity', is affecting women's status, roles and overall life situation in contemporary Kerala. It should be mentioned that several of the informants did describe negative outfalls of Kerala's model of development for other groups than women, such as for instance tribal peoples. To limit the amount of questions approached here however, I have chosen to mainly focus on the effects on women and girls as they are displayed through the collected data. I will do this through using three variables focused on by the informants; education, health and labour market participation, variables that will hopefully enable a systematic overview of the main areas criticized.

### *Education*

When seeking information about the development of a society, be it 'Western' or 'Third world', education is often portrayed as the main channel through which development and improvement of people's life-situations can be obtained.<sup>35</sup> This is one of the reasons why the critique of this side of development seems highly interesting to investigate further. Through such an investigation it will be central to seek answers to questions regarding *how* and *why* education is criticized, but also what sociological implications such critique might imply. The latter question will be dealt with more profoundly further on in this chapter.

The informants in the eight interviews on which this thesis is built, criticize the educational side of Kerala's development project in a number of ways. Firstly, education is criticized in the sense that the low literacy rate and high educational level of women in Kerala has not significantly improved their position in society. Here, for instance, informant number three, the academic in her thirties expresses her opinion about the role of education in Kerala's gender- development:

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<sup>35</sup> An example of this is the World Economic Forum's report *Women's Empowerment: measuring the global gender-gap*, which uses five main categories to measure women's empowerment, one of which is *educational attainment*. According to the report *Educational attainment is, without doubt, the most fundamental prerequisite for empowering women in all spheres of society (...)* (2005:5)  
<http://www.weforum.org/site/homepublic.nsf/Content/Interview>.

But, then there are lots of studies showing that women are really, eh, the kind of education which women receive, I mean girls receive, is certainly not helping them to gain jobs and so on. I mean they are in a sense limited in their mobility because society, it happens to be extremely conservative, so they can't make use of their education. And... that's one thing, and how education was justified, education for girls in Kerala is very problematic, it was justified in the sense, as in any way, it was not meant to be subversive of the public –domestic divide in any way.

According to these informants, the statistical data implying an active women's role with great personal freedom and societal influence, is in fact concealing the truth about women's position in the 'Malayalee modernity'. Secondly, the school system itself is accused of inhibiting people's freedom and children's ability to enjoy their childhoods, as too much emphasis is put on formal education. Thirdly, the school system and the importance attributed to white collar work, has contributed to a great status- loss of traditional work such as farming. Because of the social significance attributed to higher education, poor people in Kerala are often highly educated but without possibilities of gaining a decent salary, due to the high unemployment rates and the forgetting of traditional skills.

The first of these three criticisms however is perhaps the most central when making use of gender as a main category, and I will therefore concentrate upon the analysis of this part of the informant's criticism.

One of the main traits of the Kerala model is, as shown in chapter one, its emphasis on, and success in, minimizing illiteracy across social division-lines such as class and gender. The empirical material also indicates a significant number of women and girls in higher education and universities. When walking around a university campus in Kerala, there seems to be no obvious under-representation of either women or men. But, as the gathered material indicates, there is still a vast difference between the status of women and men within the university and school-system and highly different expectations tied to the schooling and higher education of girls than that of boys. This 'difference' has been labelled by the informants as a *domestication* of girls and women, although they are also very much *present* in the public sphere of schools and universities. Several informants, like this example taken from interview number four, mention examples of how they regret to see that women's literacy and education is often primarily seen as an asset concerning her chances of marriage and her potential as a wife, mother and daughter-in-law.

That they, they many men say that they marry an educated wife so that their children's education is taken care of, that they tutor their children well and things like that. So it's only that kind of a very, very narrow, it's not that the women assert and they have their own voice in things, that they have the freedom, mobility, nothing of this is accompanying that education. So that in itself is not going to empower women.

Thus, a well-educated woman will be well-mannered and able to tutor her children well. Further, as displayed extracts from the interviews have shown, strong norms exist in the 'Malayalee modernity' steering women away from gaining status and actively using their high educational level in the public sphere. This is connected by the informants to the general passivity of women's gender script in Kerala<sup>36</sup>.

The reason then, the *how* and *why* education is criticized as a means to empower women in the 'Malayalee modernity', seems to lay in the fact that modernity, with all *its* patriarchal elements, has embraced education for girls and integrated it into a structure already unfavourable to women. This in turn has, according to the interviewed women, unveiled a bitter side to the sweet-sounding promises of education's core role in the betterment of women's life. According to several informants, neither increased freedom and mobility nor greater authority over own life-situation, is gained by the education women receive in Kerala today<sup>37</sup>. Rather, the patriarchal elements of society, reinforced by female as well as male family members, serve to strengthen the domestication of women. Further, it seems as though schooling itself can be said to have turned into a widened domestic sphere. Many of the young women I talked to during my stay in Kerala, including some of the younger informants, tended to describe school and home as the only two arenas in which they were allowed to interact with others during their adolescent-years. Some of them express regrets about not being allowed more interaction with young people their own age, specifically being robbed of all contact with the opposite sex. Perhaps then, has not only the way in which education is canalized and used in the lives of women, but also the school-situation itself, become a tool to control women's lives? There are certain indications suggesting such a controlling mechanism in the material. As I will continue to discuss related to health, several elements of development are explicitly labelled by the informants as means to control women's lives.

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<sup>36</sup> Although as a contrast to these accounts I would like to remind the reader that informant number eight, the trade union leader, ranks education and labour-market participation as two of the most important factors for the emancipation of girls and gender-equality (page 40). J.fr comment on page 103.

<sup>37</sup> However, as moderation, it should be underlined that some of the informants also attributed importance to their own position in society, partly gained through higher education, which enabled them to criticize the Kerala model as well as being able to challenge expectations and norms.



## *Health*

Another main issue often pointed to by the informants when critiquing the Kerala model, was women's health. Like education, women's health is an important indicator in the measuring of women's development, and represents one of five main categories created to *measure the gender gap*<sup>38</sup> in the report *Women's Empowerment*, published by the World Economic Forum (2005). In light of its significance as indicator of women's development, it constitutes another very interesting category to look into as far as the informants' criticism is concerned.

One informant in particular, the middle-aged leader of a women's organization, concerns herself with questions related to women's health. Some of the most significant claims she makes during the interview is related to the control of women's bodies through controlling their health, in particular their reproductive health. She reveals that behind the statistics displaying very low infant and maternal mortality-rates there is a strong *over- medicalisation* of women:

So it's such an over- medicalization, complete control over your body. With the doctor and the medical system, and there are three scans during that pregnancy, the pregnancy, 45% of the deliveries in Kerala are caesareans, whereas WTO- standards are only 15%.

A woman in Kerala is controlled by a physician nine times during her pregnancy, virtually all babies are born in a hospital and, as the informant points out in this extract, forty five percent of births are caesareans. These numbers does result in very low mortality- rates, but from this informants view the actions taken to gain such results are both excessive and an inhibition to women's control of their own bodies. She further argues that such a situation does not only inhibit the emancipation of women in Kerala, but also effects women in the neighbouring states. Because, as an overly amount of caesareans are being carried out in Kerala, women are dying in nearby regions due to the lack of proper medical attention.

Another informant who contributes to the critical assessment of women's reproductive health as a measure of women's situation and empowerment is informant number three:

And so, of course it might, it definitely helped reduce infant- mortality and so on, that is not the same as saying that gender- justice was delivered. It is often just assumed that gender- justice would be automatically delivered in this, it didn't happen that way. And health, there's so much focus on

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<sup>38</sup> *This study is a first attempt by the World Economic Forum to assess the current size of the gender gap by measuring the extent to which women in 58 countries have achieved equality with men in five critical areas: economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, and health and well-being* (1: 2005) <http://www.weforum.org/site/homepublic.nsf/Content/Interview>

reproductive health and so much less on the other issues. You know, we have enough and more data that shows that women in Kerala are both physically and mentally much less healthy than men.

Statements like these made by the informants, suggests yet another example of how development strategies has a significant dark side for women in contemporary Kerala. Not only insofar as the means drawn upon to improve women's lives potentially become tools of control, but also by the focus and importance such measures are granted, which can serve to overshadow issues of perhaps greater concern. Thus, the disadvantages the development strategies cause women in Kerala seem underestimated, as they continue to be used as important measuring tools in influential statistics on development and women's life-situation<sup>39</sup>.

As I will return to discuss, the reasons for such an underestimation, can perhaps be sought in the milieu in which the development strategies and statistics were designed. I will suggest that a certain 'cultural blindness' is present when 'Western' tools of analysis are made use of in the measuring of women's development.

Before this, however, I will continue the analysis of the informants' critique of the Kerala model through making use of yet another variable, namely labour-marked participation.

#### *Labour-market participation (economic participation)*

The issue of labour-marked participation for women in Kerala is, as in most other parts of the world, closely tied to issues of domesticity, care and household chores. Further, labour-marked participation is one of the five main variables used to categorize and measure the *gender gap* in the mentioned report issued by the World Economic Forum (2005). In this report, the main variable *Economic participation* is divided into five sub-categories, taken from data issued by the World Bank's 'World development indicators' and UNDP's 'Human development report'. The sub-categories measures female unemployment in relation to male unemployment, female to male income, economic activity rate and wage equality for similar work. Thus, this part of the report aims to measure women's labour-market situation in relation to men's. However, issues regarding domesticity do not seem to have been granted

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<sup>39</sup> The Economic Forum's 2005 report *Women's empowerment: measuring the global gender gap*, for example features five main variables: *economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, and health and well-being*

sufficient importance when exploring this relationship<sup>40</sup>. A remarkable difference can be seen when comparing this to the focus given by the women I interviewed.

Judging from the statements given by the informants, domesticity seems inevitably linked to the status, scope and type of women's labour marked participation in Kerala. I will therefore briefly go into some of the different ways in which the link between domesticity and labour-market is proposed by the interviewees, in order to demonstrate the difference in emphasis between these and that of the World Economic Forum report (2005). I will do this to shed additional light on the informants' critique of the Kerala model of development and this model's embedded-ness in 'Western' development logics.

Several of the informants talk about labour-market participation in relation to an array of subjects, especially subjects touching upon the domestication of women in the 'Malayalee modernity'. Through the section on 'Domesticity and passivity in the Malayalee gender scripts', this side of the 'Malayalee modernity' was explained, defined and exemplified by many of the informants. There is a focus on the difference between the presence, and active participation, of women in society. As for instance presented through extracts taken from interview number two<sup>41</sup> and four, women are present on the streets, busses and offices in Kerala, but frequently displayed by the informants as passive agents who do not dare to truly engage themselves in activities outside of the home and family sphere. Another informant who outspokenly questions the positive role of education for the emancipation of women in Kerala is informant number three, the academic in her thirties:

(...) it was not meant to be subversive of the public –domestic divide in any way.

Except that a few women went to work, but even that was justified in terms of them contributing income to the family. So, family survival was certainly the most important consideration in sending women to work.

The reason for this situation does to a certain degree seem to be attributed to the lack of possibilities, mobility and a decent salary for the women. The main reason, however, often seems to lie either in social expectations that the home must remain a woman's main priority,

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<sup>40</sup> The rapport does feature another main variable *Economic opportunity* which touches upon domesticity through questioning *weeks of paid maternity leave allowed per country* and *availability of government provided childcare*.

<sup>41</sup> *Because the assumption of most of the women was that, their place at home were that of a domestic maker and they were not looking at this as a profession, they were looking more as a job, you know, so that they could get the money- packet or whatever it is. But beyond that they did not relate themselves you know, that they had a role to play in society and their voices were very important or pertinent.*

or in the lack of someone with whom it is possible to share the burden of care and household chores. The two elements are closely entangled, as it proves socially and emotionally difficult to revolt against norms and restrictions and practically difficult to leave a task when no one else is present to fill the gap, as suggested by informant number two in this extract:

Informant: For example, she used to look, example, she used to look, the women used to look after the old-aged women and the sick women at the house, but today because of her, you know, place in the labour- market she is unable to do that. Then she, they will say what, you know? This woman, that was her responsible job that she is not doing, and she is blamed. She's harassed, she is humiliated, it is beyond her tolerance- level. How do you do that?

Interviewer: Mm, she is being blamed by society for not taking care of her own mother or?

Informant: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: But, but how do you? According to what principals would you like to redefine the women's role for instance?

Informant: What I am trying to say is, even though we argue that women should come into the labour- force, we have not had any social dialogue regarding women's position in the public sphere. That is the thing!

Informant number one adds that although women have access to the labour- market, different sorts of familial conservatism often efficiently stops women from truly having a go as professionals. Since the home has not changed, and gender roles prevail, women must both take care of a husband, children, aging parents or relatives as well as the household, in addition to making her daily trip to the office. Interestingly, this informant makes use of Sociologist Arlie R. Hochschild's expression *the stalled gender revolution*<sup>42</sup>, to label the some of the relevant limitations for women in the 'Malayalee modernity'. The expression originates from studies made of families in the United States and intends to label the process wherein women were allowed to enter the labour- market, but were not alleviated from the chores and responsibilities already present in their gender-role.

This professor in her fifties, thus, not only points to how conservative gender- roles limits the amount of time available for women to use for career- related matters, but also indicates a highly relevant cultural comparison as far as gender roles and labour- market is concerned. When critiquing the Kerala model of development and the restrictions facing women in the 'Malayalee modernity', this informant ties women across the developing and developed world together, as she points to the limitations of modernity for all women.

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<sup>42</sup> Taken from Hochschild's 1989 book *The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home*

I will return to discuss how the acknowledgement of such cultural similarities can be used to unveil some of the ‘cultural blindness’ present in ‘Western’ (modern) approaches to women’s development in this chapter’s second half.

Thus far, I have intended to demonstrate, through the use of three specific variables found in the interview-material, what I perceive as the most important and urgent critique directed at the Kerala model for development. Further, some of the implications surrounding this critique have been shortly mentioned in order to establish the connection between the Kerala model and ‘Western’ development regimes and logics. I will make use of this connection in the second half of this chapter to elaborate upon the implications already mentioned and moreover, to discuss such implications in light of some theoretical suggestions.

### **The cultural embedded-ness of the Kerala model**

By analysing the eight interviews according to concepts considered central, information about the informants’ visions of what a ‘good society’ ought to be has come to light. Discussing and analysing such societal *quality* is closely connected with criticizing unwanted elements and emphasizing what is seen as desirable. By doing so, and by concentrating on subjects that touches upon the emancipation of women’s status, the main issues around which this thesis evolves, has been outlined.

Different visions of modernity have been presented to illustrate how the informants view the reality surrounding them. The pictures of modernity encompass visions of the family, gender-equality and gender-roles. One of the clearest similarities between the accounts given through this analysis is the emphasis laid on the domesticated women’s role in the ‘Malayalee modernity’. Whilst an obvious difference between the accounts was the ways family were depicted and envisioned. As a result, the heterogeneity colouring the analysed accounts was brought to attention, while the similarities signaled by the informants supplied a starting point for new enquiries. Through describing, and pointing to the shortcomings of the ‘Malayalee modernity’, the informants brought analytical attention to the critique of the Kerala model of development.

Through the analysis of gender roles and women’s situation, in light of modernity and development, an array of questions have been discussed and new ones have appeared. Inspired by the statements made by the informants, I will continue by focusing especially on some of the questions regarding the cultural relationship between the so-called ‘developed’ and the so-called ‘developing’ worlds. Several questions regarding this relationship have

already been shortly commented upon; one example of which is the described difference in emphasis between the eight informants and the official statistics presented. Based on the assumption that the relationship between ‘the developed’ and ‘the developing’ has considerable influence on gender- development schemes, the analysis of this issue will continue. To do so, ‘cultural blindness’ will be introduced as a concept of analysis in order to describe and label some of the less visible processes colouring this relationship.

*What is wrong with statistics of gender- development?*

In light of the informants’ critique of the Kerala model and feminist post-colonial literature<sup>43</sup>, taking a closer look at the cultural embedded-ness of Kerala’s gender- development, seems relevant. The main starting point for approaching this issue are the many statements made by the interviewees which, as already pointed out, clearly indicate a difference between the much emphasized goal- attainment of the Kerala model and the informants’ regrets regarding the ‘Malayalee modernity’. Such difference has been outlined in the conclusions reached in the quantitative measures indicating Kerala’s gender- development<sup>44</sup> and those provided by the interviewees. The Kerala model was criticized harshly by the informants, not only for misinterpretation of women’s development when choosing focus in development schemes, but also for using development- measures to control and domesticate women. The critique of Kerala’s development, thus, has two main components that I will discuss according to cultural implications it can be said to have. I will argue that both the main areas of critique are affected by a process which I choose to label ‘cultural blindness’.

One of the assumptions made, after analysing the content of the domesticated role of women in the ‘Malayalee modernity’, was that it represented part of the core critique directed at the focus and goal- attainment of the Kerala model. Another of the main areas criticized was the tendency to use development-schemes, such as education or health, to actively control women’s lives. The domesticated status of women in the ‘Malayalee modernity’ and the mentioned accusations made towards development- measures does represent a contrasting tale after reading Kerala’s statistics of gender- development. Based on statistical information available about gender- development in Kerala, all might seem quite well as far as women’s

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<sup>43</sup> For instance Narayan (2000).

<sup>44</sup> As for instance the statistics of gender-development found on the official web-site of the Government of Kerala: [www.kerala.gov.in/](http://www.kerala.gov.in/)

emancipation in the state is concerned, while the eight interviewees in this project do not give a similar impression.

Due to this contrast, a number of related questions arise, regarding the reasons for this situation. Is it a question of methods, of not being able to measure what one intended to measure? If this is the case, what is the reason for the wrongly 'asked' questions? I will start the enquiry by discussing possible answers to these questions according to the assumption of the above mentioned cultural embedded-ness of the Kerala model.

The first question to be approached is; why does the issue of domesticity in Malayalee gender scripts seem to receive very little attention when measuring the state's gender-development? Informant number five, a researcher in her thirties, offers a possible starting point in the process of answering such a question in her attempt to explain what inhibitions are present for women in contemporary Kerala:

(...) so then it becomes very difficult to really reconcile with what is, if you live in Kerala a very ehm, very perceptible and something that you cannot not name kind of harassment, it is very much in the air. Eh... but it's not in anything, it's not in anyway that we really talk about in scholarly terms. You know, so it's very difficult to put your hand on.

As this extract shows, the interviewee more than implies that 'the problem' in Kerala is quite difficult to grasp, it is something *in the air*. How to address and label such a problem, thus, is slightly less given than in the case of something more explicit and specific. Perhaps this can be said to be part of the problem when approaching and measuring gender-development in Kerala? Probably, taking such 'unspoken' issues into account involves a greater uncertainty when attempting to understand, not only the issue itself, but also the reasons behind it. It requires open-ness as to what might pose a problem and it will most likely prove very difficult to decide beforehand exactly what matter is to be investigated. What more, the efforts spent might very well prove practically impossible to transfer into quantitative measures. Therefore, it seems probable that such 'unspoken uncertainties' are better approached using qualitative methods<sup>45</sup>. It does seem clear, at least, that some very important features concerning women in the 'Malayalee modernity' is more often than not left unconsidered when the overall situation is measured and commented upon by statistics.

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<sup>45</sup> J.fr. Klausen 1999:136-137. In his Autobiography (1999) Klausen claims to have developed a *anthropological suspicion* towards statistical methods. He exemplifies this suspicion by referring to methodical weaknesses in an unpublished enquiry on the Indo-Norwegian Pilot project.

I will not, however, attribute the main reason for why matters present *in the air* of the ‘Malayalee modernity’ are not sufficiently approached, to the shortcomings of statistical methods. I do think that the tradition in which statistical methods are embedded, namely the influence of the enlightenment project of ‘Western modernity’, has an important role to play in this matter. Thus, I will debate these questions further based on the assumption that a certain culture or tradition is colouring the questions asked when enquiring about gender-development, and indeed, the very assumptions regarding what gender development is and ought to be.

From looking at the main areas emphasized by the Government of Kerala<sup>46</sup> and The World Economic forum<sup>47</sup>, it is possible to identify some currents as to what is seen as important when discussing matters of gender- development. The fact that these currents are as harshly criticized by the informants as they are, including the three main areas education, health and labour-market participation, suggests some form of disagreement as to what ought to be emphasized regarding gender-development. It also implies a different focus altogether, between those making and presenting the statistics on gender-development and the informants, when approaching questions concerning the common good.

My suggestion, based on the analysis of the collected material, is that this difference in focus derives, at least partly, from a ‘cultural blindness’ present in development schemes such as the Kerala model, because of their inherent connection to the ‘Western enlightenment- project’<sup>48</sup>. This suggestion is closely connected to post-development theory arguing that ‘Third World development’ is in fact based on a specific mindset and philosophy deeply rooted in ‘Western’ ideals (Tvedt 1990; Simmons in Rahnema et al 1997). The background of what I would like to label by the usage of the concept ‘cultural blindness’ is a *cultural bias* present when deciding what areas ought to be approached when considering women’s development and empowerment. It seems that such a cultural bias, deeply rooted in the culture and values of the ‘West’, is colouring the informants’ critical stance towards the Kerala model for development. The reason for such an assumption is that much of the critique directed at the development model is concentrated around a questioning of its main variables, such as education and health, and their effects on women’s lives. ‘Cultural blindness’, in continuance,

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<sup>46</sup> As presented in the statistics of gender-development found on the official web-site of the Government of Kerala: [www.kerala.gov.in/](http://www.kerala.gov.in/)

<sup>47</sup> When seen in light of The World Economic Forum Rapport issued at: <http://www.weforum.org/site/homepublic.nsf/Content/Interview>

<sup>48</sup> The ‘Western enlightenment- project’ and its connection to the colonization of the so called ‘Third world’ will be discussed further in the chapter on theory, amongst other in light of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978).



will be looked upon as one of the outcomes of such a cultural bias, resulting in an inability to see the questions not yet properly approached by the 'West', neither in the 'West' nor in the 'outside' and 'developing' worlds. Further, such blindness also seems to result in a very low capacity for seeing the *similarities* between for instance women's challenges across spheres of 'developed' and 'developing', an example of this, used amongst others by Narayan (1997), is the issue of domestic violence and family brutality.

I will argue that such processes are the result of a 'cultural blindness' seemingly present in gender- development schemes manufactured under the influence of the culture and traditions in the so- called 'West'. Does being developed come to mean enhancement for women according to the areas defined as progress in the developed world and thereby a reproduction of the successes *and* failures of the developed world? There seems to be a tendency at least, that areas of concern not yet approached or properly addressed by the 'developed' part of the world, are neglected in the development schemes of the 'developing' world. Perhaps such cultural embeddedness can partly explain the informants' discontent with the goal attainment of the Kerala model?

The five main variables considered when The World Economic Forum issued a report aimed to measure the global gender gap, for instance, were: *economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment and health/ wellbeing*. These five variables are all examples of areas more or less properly addressed and put on the agenda in most areas of what is referred to as the 'West'. Variables concerning what the informants referred to as harassment *in the air* in Kerala or an evidently important issue such as domestic violence, on the other hand, are neither measured in the report nor can they be said to have been as thoroughly 'dealt with' in the 'West' as those represented through the variables used in the mentioned report. Perhaps due to the lack of critical assessment of the basic assumptions upon which progress for women is measured, a failure *to see* problems, apart from those already defined and accepted, seems to be present in the gender- development scheme that has coloured the 'Malayalee modernity'.

The methodical reason for this attempt to label the difficulty of seeing and acknowledging similarities and problematic issues of women's development, is the need for a tool in the continuing analysis and debate of the informants critique of the Kerala model and the 'Malayalee modernity'. The reflexive nature of some of the statements made by the informants can perhaps contribute to a greater understanding of women's situation across the division- lines of 'developed' and 'developing'?

*Using 'cultural blindness' to see more clearly*

In this section I will suggest the possibility of using the concept 'cultural blindness' to make way for visible comparisons between cultures and modernities. To do so, I will use some of the statements made by the informants to illustrate the link between the interview-material and such an analytical suggestion. Theoretically this discussion will be based mainly on some of the suggestions made by Narayan (1997; 2002) concerning enquiries of the relationship between the 'West' and the 'Third World'. Narayan claims that an array of similarities between the 'West' and 'Third World' are present, but overlooked.

In her book *Dislocating cultures* (1997), for instance, Narayan argues that many issues attributed to 'culture' in the 'Third World' also exists in the 'West', this similarity is overlooked, she suggests, because in the 'West' culture is not used as the main explanatory variable for issues such as gender-based violence, whilst in 'Third World' countries it often is<sup>49</sup>. Thus by paying attention to the *similarities* between women's situation in different parts of the world, it is possible to move beyond the *cultural explanations* (1997:105) that obstruct the understanding of, for instance, 'dowry-murders' in India and domestic violence-related deaths in the United states, as very comparative phenomena. Drawing upon Narayan (1997), I would therefore like to continue the analysis by looking at some possible comparisons between the lives and challenges of women in the 'West' and the 'Third World'.

The concept of a 'cultural blindness' is inspired both by Narayan (1997) and the women interviewed for this project, in particularly so by informant number three, the woman in her thirties who positions herself as *one of the few women academics around*. When this informant approached what I have chosen to call 'Western modernity', she points to some of the limitations women face when acting according to 'Western' gender-scripts. She does this it seems, in order to demonstrate a similarity between the 'Malayalee' and 'Western' modernity's attempt to control women's lives by restrictions on clothing and appearance:

Asians are looked down upon because they somehow don't seem to conform to the sexually liberated types. In the sense that in if the university you are not admired by the men you are considered somehow a little less important than everyone else. (...)

It is no longer liberation in that sense, it has become a norm. They don't, those Indians who go there seeking sexual liberation don't see that there it is a norm.

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<sup>49</sup> *The assumption that 'Third-World women's problems' are fundamentally problems of 'Third-World women being victimized by Traditional Patriarchal Cultural Practices' (...) seems to be a pervasive assumption within Western public understanding of Third-World contexts, and of women's issues within them (1997:57-58).*

In my opinion, the logics behind such a statement is transferable to the questions regarding a 'cultural blindness' present in statistics and schemes of gender-development.

Most people on a university campus in the USA (or in Norway for that matter) probably fails to see the restrictions laid upon women, through persistent dress- codes and a gender script implying sexually liberated and 'desirable' behaviour, as something degrading. Another probable side to the situation on the American university campus, not taken into consideration by the informant, is an additional set of unspoken restrictions telling the girls not to be *too* sexually liberated and not to dress *too* sexily. The probability of such additional value-strain however, merely underlines the very presence of a 'cultural blindness' additionally. Thus, restrictive content colouring the gender scripts of women on the university campuses in Kerala as well as in for instance California, seems to have one important thing in common; (...) [it is a] *very perceptible and something that you cannot not name kind of harassment, it is very much in the air.*

This comment was, as mentioned earlier in this section, made concerning the domesticity and passivity colouring the gender scripts of Malayalee women, but could perhaps have been uttered as a comment concerning the restrictions laid upon women on a university campus somewhere in the USA? As in the USA, gender- development scores in Kerala are relatively high, but an unspoken harassment is still present, and seemingly due to its unspoken- ness one easily fails to recognize it when assuming the level of gender- equality in these societies. Perhaps it is possible, by looking at the similarities in women's situations more or less explicitly pointed to by the informants, to learn something about under-communicated challenges also facing women in the so-called 'developed world'? To further enquire the possibility of such a suggestion, I will provide more examples of how the gap between women's situation in the 'Western' and 'Malayalee' modernity, is minimized by some of the informants in this selection (Narayan 1997).

As mentioned during the presentation of the informants' critique of the Kerala model, informant number one suggested a comparison between the problems of the working mothers in A.R. Hochschild's *The Second Shift* (2003) and the situation facing working mothers in the 'Malayalee modernity'. Through the comparison of working mothers, this scholar and activist in her fifties focuses attention on the burdens and challenges women share when facing modernity:

(...) even here economic independence has been the major thing which women have found... hoping this will give them freedom, but as in the West, here also, the women have ended up with double burden of work.

One possible way of analysing such a statement is to say that the informant minimizes the distance between women in the 'developed' part of the world and those living in Kerala. As the informant turns the attention away from themes that 'Western' women can easily distance themselves from, such as for instance dowry, a connection is made between what might have seemed like two different worlds. This way, the informant challenges the assumption of difference and sheds light on the similarity and likeness present, in accordance with the above presented focus made by Narayan (1997).

Part of the issue I have chosen to label 'cultural blindness' is the tendency to separate societies in the 'Third world' and the 'West' into different worlds altogether<sup>50</sup>. As I have suggested, it seems as though part of the culture and tradition in which gender- development schemes are embedded, is prone to doing just this. When the above cited informant makes a statement that can be said to tie these 'worlds' tighter together it seems probable that additional traits connecting women in 'Kerala' and the 'West', exists. There are, as already mentioned, several additional indications in the interview-material supporting such an assumption. Informant number seven, for instance, the PhD student in her twenties, told me that although she considered 'Western modernity' to represent more freedom for her as a woman than the 'Malayalee modernity', some of the same challenges were present both places:

So, it makes more struggling here from the women than the Western countries women. I think, I think that, around the family, both Western and Eastern women are having the same troubles... Domestic violence or whatever and family responsibilities and whatever, but eh, social, for example, there women can easily go to the pub or be free and themselves (...)

Although very critical towards many aspects of the 'Malayalee modernity' the extract shows how this informant still considers some highly similar oppressive elements, such as familial conservatism, to be present in the gender scripts and culture of 'Western modernity'. This informant too, thus, points to elements through which the alleged gap between the modernities women live in is made slightly less wide.

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<sup>50</sup> J.fr. some of the core ideas presented by Edward Said in his 1978 book on colonial peoples and intercultural studies, *Orientalism*.

In this section I have drawn upon Narayan (1997;2000) and made use of the concept 'cultural blindness' to become more aware of the similarities between the 'Western' and 'Malayalee' modernity, pointed to by some of the informants in the selection. The presentation of such similarities is aimed at countering one of the probable outcomes of 'cultural blindness', namely not seeing 'the other' (nor oneself) very clearly because an *insistence of difference* (Narayan et al 2000:83<sup>51</sup>). As this short presentation has intended to show, a continued *insistence on difference* goes against these suggestions made by the informants. If one is to continue insisting on the non-existence of relevant similarities between women's situation in the 'Malayalee' and 'Western' modernity, it will be necessary to actively overlook them, not merely passively being unable to spot them.

However, seeing such similarities is only one of the mentioned sides to the enquiry of questions related to the cultural embedded-ness of the Kerala model and the 'cultural blindness' seemingly colouring this development scheme. In the following section the concept will be applied in an attempt to further analyse one of the main parts of the critique directed at the Kerala model by the informants.

#### *The paradoxical position of women's education and health in Kerala*

'Development' today implies a linear, evolutionary process –a single 'progressive' path along which countries are graded, according to per capita income, gross domestic product, or more recently, literacy levels and child mortality rates. One path, one scale, one world. This is not the sort of 'liberation' women has envisaged and fought for' (Simmons in Rahnema et al 1997: 244)

Through the analysis of the informants' critique of the Kerala model, two main areas of critical assessment were identified. Firstly, the informants seemed to largely disagree with the importance attributed to highly emphasised development measures, such as advancing women's health-situation and educational level. Secondly, the mentioned measures were accused of being used as channels through which women's autonomy was diminished rather than enhanced. The possibility of gaining further insight into the latter part of the critique by focusing on the cultural embedded-ness of the Kerala model, will now be looked into.

The specific variables used when enquiring about gender development in the repeatedly mentioned statistical material, gives, as previously mentioned, an indication of what is perceived to be the most important focus when measuring different countries' degree of

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<sup>51</sup> The '*insistence on difference*'; on sharp, virtually absolute contrasts between 'Western culture' and Other cultures' is, according to Narayan, an important part of the problem she identifies as *Cultural essentialism*.

gender development. The five main variables made use of to measure *the global gender gap* in The World Economic Forum's report, for instance, were as mentioned: *Economic participation, Economic opportunity, Political empowerment, Educational attainment* and *Health and Wellbeing*. Interestingly enough, these variables more often than not coincide with the informants' critique directed at the Kerala model of development. As a matter of fact, the very measures seemingly used in the gender-development scheme to enhance women's status in the 'Malayalee modernity', are criticized by the informants for adding to the control and domestication of women in Kerala. I will argue that this paradoxical situation can be approached, and partly explained, by the use of the concept 'cultural blindness'.

One of the main questions I aim to shortly discuss in the following is: How can measures of gender-development in Kerala be criticized for contributing to the domestication of women's gender script in the 'Malayalee modernity'? My suggestion is, as already mentioned, that the paradox seemingly present in important variables of gender-development, at least in part, derives from the cultural embeddedness of the Kerala model. Thus, the emphasis of the gender-development scheme currently colouring the 'Malayalee modernity', seems to be similar to the emphasis that has led to the current situation of gender development in 'Western modernity'<sup>52</sup>. In this way, it can seem as though the philosophy and ideology behind the current gender-scripts of 'Western modernity' to a large degree have been applied to the 'Malayalee modernity' through the Kerala model's close connection to 'Western' development logics.

Education and reproductive health, along with similar variables, are criticized by the informants for having a double, or two-faced, agenda. It can be argued that the modest attention this phenomenon seems to receive, in for instance statistics of gender-development, is partly due to the importance of such variables for gender-development in the 'Western modernity'. Accordingly, the lack of critical assessment of women's emancipation in the 'West' result in difficulties seeing the negative outfalls of women's revised situation in all modernities heavily influenced by 'Western' enlightenment philosophy<sup>53</sup>. To specify, two

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<sup>52</sup> In the *Gender development Indications* comparing Kerala and India presented in the Planning and economic affairs Department's Economic review, chapter 18: *Gender and development*, thirteen indicators are presented: *Sex ratio, Life expectancy at birth, Mean age at marriage, Birth rate, Death rate, Infant mortality rate, Total fertility rate, Literacy rate, Gross enrolments primary/upper primary school, Work participation rate, Public sector employment and Administration employment rate*.

<sup>53</sup> According to Oxford's Dictionary of Sociology *There where many strands to the Enlightenment (...)* Overall, however, it is equated with a materialist view of humanity, an optimism about the possibility of rational and scientific knowledge, progress through education and a utilitarian approach to ethics and society (Marshall 1998:195).

examples taken from the World Economic Forum report on gender<sup>54</sup> will be provided. Firstly, reading about the importance of education in this report provides an interesting contrast to the critical attitude towards education displayed by many of the informants through the interviews.

Educational attainment is, without doubt, the most fundamental prerequisite for empowering women in all spheres of society, for without education of comparable quality and content to that given to boys and men, and relevant to existing knowledge and real needs, women are unable to access well-paid, formal sector jobs, advance within them, participate in, and be represented in government and gain political influence. Moreover, the risk increases for society as a whole that the next generation of children will be similarly ill-prepared. If, as a broad body of empirical work has shown, education and literacy reduce mortality rates of children—including the bias toward female child mortality—and help reduce fertility rates (...) (2005:5)

Thus, it may seem as though a number of ideals originating from the enlightenment era, such as the belief in progress through education, are incorporated into some parts of gender development- schemes as nearly undisputable truths. I suggest that this may result in a ‘cultural blindness’ when assessing problematic sides to variables closely related to these ideals. For researchers and others, designing and assessing gender- development schemes, seeing the difficulties and negative outfalls of for instance education, may prove difficult due to such ‘blindness’. When taking a closer look at The World Economic Forum report, one will notice that a possible pitfall is in fact presented, in what comes off as a relatively uncritical assessment of education:

However, if the content of the educational curriculum and the attitudes of teachers serve merely to reinforce prevalent stereotypes and injustices, then the mere fact of literacy and education does not, in and of itself, close the gender gap; schooling as a catalyst for change in gender relations will be more effective only if appropriate attention is also given to curriculum content and the retraining of those who deliver it. (2005:ibid)

This statement, however, can be said to represent quite a relevant ambiguity, as the potential pitfalls described in this extract are not approached in the actual variables and indicators presented as basis for the report’s conclusions. To specify, the five tools of indication used to measure *Educational Attainment* are: \*Average years of schooling, \*Female to male ratio in gross primary enrolment, \*Gross secondary level enrolment, \*Gross tertiary level enrolment and \* Adult literacy, female rate as percentage of male rate. As far as I can see, non of these

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<sup>54</sup> <http://www.weforum.org/site/homepublic.nsf/Content/Interview>

indicators measure, or even take into account, the problematic area or pitfall in education that is pointed to in the report. This must be said to represent an important ambiguity, especially seen in light of the critique directed at education by the informants in this project. Another and similar example taken from the World Economic Forum report touches upon the importance of variables which I have argued not being yet sufficiently dealt with in the 'West'. Discussing the content of one of the five main variables *Health and Wellbeing*, the report touches upon gender-based violence:

Women's particular vulnerability to violence is perhaps the most obvious aspect of reduced physical security and integrity of person, but one which is perhaps the least amenable to accurate statistics<sup>55</sup>. Even Sweden, long recognized as a leader in the area of gender equality was recently called to task by Amnesty International, which stated that "the prevalence of gender-biased violence shatters many people's image of Sweden as being the most gender equal country in the world". A recent front-page article in the International Herald Tribune also noted that the implementation of violence-related laws in Sweden was marred by "spotty prosecutions, vague statistics, old-fashioned judges and unresponsive governments" (2005:5)

What the report approaches here is a highly relevant theme as far as the discussion of a 'cultural blindness' is concerned. Seemingly, the report questions the supposition of Sweden's leading position in the area of gender- equality, pointing to the country's high levels of domestic violence. But, as in the handling of the possible pitfalls of education, the report does not seem to transfer such questioning of gender-equality in the 'West' into statistical indicators. In practice, the report bases its data in the category *Health and Wellbeing* on five indicators: *Births attended by skilled staff*, *Adolescent fertility rate*, *Maternal mortality ratio*, *Infant mortality rate* and *Effectiveness of government efforts to reduce poverty and inequality*. Judging from these indicators, it seems as though the report has not taken the areas of concern pointed to in the above extract very seriously in practice. As a result, there are small chances that the alleged points of appeal regarding Sweden's high gender-development ranking, will have any effect on the conclusions reached in the report. An additional point of importance is added when the selection of indicators constituting the variable *Health and Wellbeing*, is seen in light of the specific points of critique suggested by the informants in this project. As demonstrated in this chapter's section on the critique directed at the health scheme of the Kerala model, all but the last of the five indicators are specifically criticized for veiling

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<sup>55</sup> J.fr Narayan (1997)



negative outfalls for women. Informant number four, in particular, bases much of her critique of the Kerala model on the ambiguities surrounding measures to increase women's health:

Informant: (...) And if you look at health, what happens in Kerala is a very high over- medicalization of women's health, through that all our deliveries are done in institutions, whereas other states are striving for institutional delivery, but in Kerala 95% of all deliveries are institutional.

Interviewer: mhm

Informant: But then from the first month of pregnancy the women goes and sees her doctor and she sees her doctor nine times, whereas in Sweden and Norway it's only five times average.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Informant: So it's such an over- medicalization, complete control over you body. With the doctor and the medical system, and there are three scans during that pregnancy, the pregnancy, 45% of the deliveries in Kerala are caesareans.

Interviewer: Mmm

Informant: Whereas WHO- standards are only 15%.

Another informant, the researcher in her thirties (number five), suggest that the statistics displaying Kerala's gender- development hides actualities similar to those found in 'Western modernity':

Women's health is rated extremely well in terms of indicators of life expectancy, you know, comparable to the Western world. Or... we've well reached demographic transition, we don't, the fertility- rate has gone down drastically or maternal mortality is low, infant mortality is low. (...)

I really do think eh is important is to put this across, you know, in the sense that, what we are talking about today as development, gender development, where Kerala is always seen as a model of some sort, it's really when talking about women that Kerala is seen as a model, that there's something really wrong with that. That if that is what you are trying to aspire for then, you know, you should really rethink it, but in order to see that you really have to describe what is that is wrong. And there is a lot of, but we have to go on, but again that's what you find in the Western world, like violence against women; extremely high in Kerala. Ah...including domestic violence and things like that...

Extracts like these serve to demonstrate that the specific indicators presented to measure gender- development are looked upon as categories that veil some of the problems women are faced with in the 'Malayalee modernity'. Further, due to such problems seemingly being left undiscovered in the report issued by the World Economic Forum in the attempt to measure *the global gender gap*, it can also be said to serve as an example of a 'cultural blindness' present when addressing gender- development. According to Simmons (1997), the integration of women into development has been built upon a number of false assumptions, one of which is:

But the assumption behind expanding the development model is that women are somehow better off in the First World. Materially, many of them are, as they share the takings from the Third World, but socially and emotionally they have made little headway. (...) Sexual harassment, rape and domestic violence appear to be on the increase. (...) The ideological pressure to conform to male- defined femininity seems as strong as ever. Women's magazines are filled with features on 'keeping your man' or 'how to look ten years younger'. Social problems such as youth homelessness and children's delinquency are explained as being due to the 'breakdown of the family', and by implication the failure of the woman to hold things together. (Simmons in Rahnema et al 1997:251)

By looking beyond the blinding and culturally embedded assumptions here pointed to by Simmons, the shortcomings in women's progress towards equality with men in the 'Western modernity' can easily be tied to the critique directed at women's enhancement in the 'Malayalee modernity'. As the displayed extracts have shown, the informants complained of an array of problems facing women in the 'Malayalee modernity', in spite of high literacy rates and educational attainments. As experiences from the 'West', such as the countries included in the sphere of the Scandinavian Welfare model have also shown, many of the difficulties facing women cannot be solved merely by looking to traditional gender-development models advocating measures inspired by ideas deriving from the enlightenment era. Therefore, it seems necessary to suggest a critical assessment of the pillars upon which 'Western modernity' is based, in order to see and understand the critique directed at the development- measures of the Kerala model. By doing so, perhaps it is even possible to gain increased understanding of the shortcomings of gender- development and the challenges facing women, in the so-called 'developed' societies of the 'West'?

When Maria Mies organized a 'Women and Development' course in the Netherlands, she introduced women from the Third World to Dutch women. 'Third World women learned that First World women, in spite of their education, their higher income, their greater access to paid jobs, their modern lifestyle, were not liberated but suffered from sexist violence and were sometimes ideologically more fettered to housewife/mother/lover image than they themselves. The Dutch women, on the other hand, learned that Third World women are not all poor and uneducated, that some were more educated than they were and above all less dependent on the ideology of romantic love and hence less emotionally oppressed'. As one Filipina student put it, 'I have always thought that Western values were good for Western people and Eastern values good for Eastern people. Now I have realized that Western values are also not good for Western people. (Simmons in Rahnema et al 1997: 252-253)

In this section I have intended to shed light upon the cultural embedded-ness of the Kerala model by defining and contextualizing the concept 'cultural blindness'. The concept is not meant as an all-encompassing explanation of the informants' critique of the Kerala model. Rather; it is merely one suggestion, out of many possible, as to what seem to be part of the challenge when considering women's development. Thus, I have attempted to explain, by the use of this concept, some of the processes affecting the differences in the attribution of importance between statistics, taken to represent a development model based in 'Western' enlightenment ideals, and the informants interviewed, when assessing gender-development. In conclusion, I have intended do demonstrate how the cultural embedded-ness of the Kerala model can be said to influence such difference.

### **Concluding remarks**

During the course of this analysis an important sociological step has been taken, a step which involves transition from on one analytical level to the next. The starting point for the analysis was the perspectives provided by the informants, through which descriptions and analysis was conducted mainly at the agency-, or micro, level. This part of the analysis involved informants' depictions of 'Malayalee' and 'Western' modernity, through which some areas seemingly displayed as important by the informants, such as their notions of gender-equality, were crystallized. By taking a closer look at the different descriptions and opinions offered by the informants through statements about their life-worlds, particularly in the section on *domesticity and passivity in Malayalee gender-scripts*, the backdrop for an analysis on a more structural level was constructed. In chapter four, thus, the analysis continued to be more explicitly tied to the macro level by structuring the critique directed at a specific model of development, the Kerala model, to developments' cultural embedded-ness in enlightenment philosophy, colonialism and globalization. The concept, 'cultural blindness', was introduced in order to illustrate this embedded-ness and to further discuss some of its structural implications in light of a small selection of theoretical material. The questions discussed, and conclusions reached in chapter four were however, inspired by, and related to, theoretical material. Some of this theory will be further discussed in the following chapter. Within the limitations of this project, it will not be possible to, in a thorough manner, go into all theoretical connections, implications and discussion related to the themes and questions suggested through the analysis. I do intend to at least provide an overview of the theoretical

landscape I have manoeuvred in, to leave the reader with an impression of the main theories and authors influencing the presented analysis.

## Chapter five: Discussing theoretical perspectives

In this chapter I intend to provide an overview of the theoretical framework influencing this thesis through engaging in some of the core discussions deriving from the previous chapters of analysis. I will divide the discussions into two parts, influenced by C.W. Mills' notions *personal troubles* and *public issues*. Mills' underlines the importance of using ones *sociological imagination* in order to become aware of and understand the innate connections between *troubles* and *issues*:

That, in brief, is why it is by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society. (1967:7)

Mills' background for making the above illustrated distinction is to stress the importance of seeing the connections between problems that appear at the different levels and arenas of society. I have intended to address this connection in the analysis and discussion of the empirical material and will continue to do so in chapter six. The usage of the division between the personal and the public, the micro and macro aspects of society in this chapter however, is more of a practical tool than an actual attempt to discuss the connections between the problems addressed in this thesis. My aim is more specifically to theoretically embed the analysis and discussions that have and will take place along this interplaying division-line.

In this chapter's first half, I will present and discuss theory related to some of the themes suggested by the informants, themes which can be said to represent *personal troubles*. An example of which are the limitations said to be present in Malayalee gender scripts. Such limitations are labelled by the informants in terms of domesticity, passivity and harassment *in the air* as well as education, health, domestic violence, sexuality and the domestic division of labour. In the second half of this chapter I will concentrate on discussing how these troubles are connected to *public issues* such as modernity, strategies of gender development, as well as the relationship between 'The West' and 'The Third World'.

## Part one

### *Understanding uneasiness*

I will begin this theoretical enquiry with a thematic that plays a highly important role in the addressing of gender-development, which is one of the core issues dealt in this thesis.

During the course of the analysis, the informants often pointed to the inability to pinpoint a certain type of problems as anything but a *feeling* or *something in the air*. I will make use of a Sociologist as well as the founder of Psychoanalysis in an attempt to theoretically address this slightly inaccessible thematic.

In his 1959 book *The sociological imagination* Mills communicates engagement in the presence of undefined problems that are difficult to label and to grasp. He approaches the ungraspable as issues of importance, which should be offered attention by social scientists:

Ours is a time of uneasiness and indifference (...) Instead of troubles –defined in terms of values and threats –there is often the misery of vague uneasiness; instead of explicit issues there is often the beat feeling that all is somehow not right (1967:11).

Mills bases this suggestion on the assumption that many of the problems facing people in contemporary societies have not been properly defined, neither by the public nor by the social sciences. The uneasiness people feel thus is the fruit of the unspoken and un-investigated. The reason for this situation, according to Mills, is the inability to see the connection between larger social *issues* and the *uneasiness* of *personal troubles*. An example of this is how authority is often inexplicit due to those in power's unwillingness to make it explicit and to justify it. Because of the individual's inability to clearly target the whereabouts and content of the authority she is exposed to she, according to Mills, *adapts* to the situation and *does the best [s]he can* (1967:169-170). By doing so, she distances herself from, and become less aware of, the uneasiness and feeling that *all is somehow not right*. The fact that many grow unaware of the *uneasiness* of our time is in itself a source of uneasiness according to Mills, as feeling that *all is somehow not right* represents an important, although blurry, awareness of the above mentioned unspoken troubles. Mills argues that such awareness represent a potential starting point in becoming able to understand how individuals are often *falsely conscious of their social positions*<sup>56</sup> (1967:5) and thereby formulating uneasiness into explicit troubles. Thus, by becoming aware of the feeling that *somehow all is not right*, the potential to discover *what* it is that is not right, is born.

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<sup>56</sup> J.fr. Bourdieu (1999)

Through these particular suggestions formulated by Mills in his 1959 classic, a take on the unspoken uneasiness that plays such an important role in the previously described accounts of Malayalee gender scripts, is provided. Mills points to the importance of being aware of feelings of uneasiness in order to be able to reach the source of unspoken problems. He does not provide the reader with any readymade solutions to unspoken problems and feelings of uneasiness, nor suggestions on how to unveil their unspoken-ness. His main focus lays in the request to seriously address feelings of uneasiness and thereby problems of unresolved and unconscious character. In light of the analysis conducted in chapter three and four, such problems are addressed and pointed to by the informants, especially in their attempt to show what exactly is the matter with women's role and position in the Malayalee modernity. Understanding the uneasiness communicated by the informants and incorporated<sup>57</sup> through the fieldwork thus, became a highly central issue in the analysis of the gathered field material. A process of understanding that is theoretically based, as well as inspired by, the takes of C. Wright Mills.

Further, an author criticized by amongst others Mills for clinging too tightly to enlightenment ideals and the assumption that reason and freedom is inevitably interlinked (1967: Chapter 9), namely Sigmund Freud, has also contributed to the process of understanding the uneasiness present in our cultures. I will not engage in the discussion regarding the vast critique directed at Freud from an array of different disciplines and schools of thought, merely note the fact that he is often and enthusiastically criticized<sup>58</sup>.

Although Freud's writings are issued in the realm of psychoanalysis and psychology, his book originally titled *Das unbehagen in der Kultur* (1966); The distaste of culture, can be said to comment upon a cultural phenomena slightly similar to the *uneasiness* approached by Mills. According to Freud, certain limitations, such as the feeling of guilty conscience, is forced upon every individual by his or her superego (1966: chapter 8). Further, Freud argues that the aggressiveness of the individual's superego is felt merely as a reproach, whereas the actual demands causing the individual to reproach herself, remains *unconscious*. As a parallel, Freud claims the existence of a *cultural superego*, and suggests the possibility that entire cultures can be said to suffer from a neurosis due to an immense pressure of unconscious cultural demands. Freud thus, not only comments upon unconscious processes very similar to those

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<sup>57</sup> In chapter two I argue that part of my overall understanding of the research field was gained through an incorporation of the perceived cultural do's and don'ts of the Malayalee modernity.

<sup>58</sup> Beauvoir in *The second sex* (1949: Volume one, chapter two), for instance, claims that psychoanalysis continuously offers women a secondary position; women are 'the other'.

suggested by Mills, but also indicates a relation between the ills of human beings and those present in society as a whole.

The concept of a *cultural superego* is in this thesis mainly taken into account as an additional example of a notion that labels the cultural phenomena of something *in the air* or the *uneasiness*. -This ‘something’ which often results so difficult to grasp, both as a member of society and as a social scientist at work. Such uneasiness or distaste, most likely present in most cultures, is a particularly useful and important tool of analysis when approaching what has not, in Mills’ words; *been formulated as problems of social science* (1967:11)<sup>59</sup>. In the analysis of the troubles of women in the Malayalee modernity pointed to by the informants in this project thus, the use of such notions became an important theoretical tool.

I have supplied examples from Mills and Freud in order to give an overview of the theoretical backdrop influencing my understanding of the cultural uneasiness discussed in the chapters of analysis. Such uneasiness played an important role in the understanding, not only of the *unspoken harassment* pointed to by some of the informants, but also of the connections between women in the ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ worlds; a connection I will return to discuss in this chapter’s second part. Before this, however, I intend to continue the theoretical investigation of additional *private troubles* suggested by the field during the course of the analysis.

### *Theorizing gender roles*

One of the key issues discussed during the analysis of the empirical material was the role of women in the Malayalee modernity. I will approach this theme in the following by the use of two different texts in order to illustrate some ways through which the construction of gender roles can be approached theoretically.

In their 1966 book *The social construction of reality*, Berger and Luckmann defines social reality as a synthesis of three dialectical moments: *Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product.* (1979:79) Men and women thus both externalise themselves into the social reality in which they live and internalise the social world as their objectively perceived reality. Berger and Luckmann’s take on perceived reality as a social construct can be tied to many of the issues discussed during the course of the analysis. One example of this is how the construction of the category ‘Malayalee modernity’ functioned as a

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<sup>59</sup> Although it should be mentioned that the well known sociologist Bourdieu in his 1998 book *La domination masculine* approaches an issue which handles men’s symbolic power over women in society as a type of distaste of culture.



label of the reality in which the informants of this project found themselves. Further, the meanings that categories such as ‘Malayalee modernity’, ‘Western modernity’ and ‘The Kerala model for development’ were filled with, constitute additional examples of the social constructions of reality. My main aim in the following is to link Berger and Luckmann’s theory to the construction of roles in social reality, as part of the theoretical enquiry of gender roles.

According to the *Social construction of reality*, individuals learn to become adequate members of society through the process of socialization, wherein the learning of correct role behaviour is one of the most important processes. Role behaviour is created in a process where the individual internalise the expectations of its significant others and thereby learn to define the social reality which he or she is part of. Through the learning of how to play the given roles; *institutions are embodied in individual experience* (1979:91) and the actor of a role is held responsible for abiding the set standards of the role performance. According to Berger and Luckmann, the social construction of reality involves mechanisms of control in order to ensure that the role descriptions are followed:

*All institutionalised conduct involves roles. Thus roles share in the controlling character of institutionalisation. As soon as actors are typified as role performers, their performance is ipso facto susceptible to enforcement. Compliance and non-compliance with socially defined role standards cease to be optional. Though, of course, the severity of sanctions may vary from case to case.* (1979:92)

Drawing upon Berger and Luckmann, one type of institutionalized conduct which necessarily involves role-specific behavior is the performance of ones gender in the social reality. Therefore men and women everywhere must act according to the role- specific behavior ascribed to the socially defined role standards, at least in order to be accepted by their generalized other and avoid sanctions. Although not specifically approached by Berger and Luckmann, gender roles can be said to be one of the most basic and important constructs ascribed by society, which strongly influences the individual’s place in society as well as his or her self-perception<sup>60</sup> (Bourdieu 1998<sup>61</sup>). As a result, women who found themselves in the midst of the social construction which in this thesis have been labeled ‘Malayalee modernity’

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<sup>60</sup> Beauvoir says that despite of women’s apparent freedom in a world of free individuals, a woman discovers herself and sees herself in a world where she is instructed by men to see herself as ‘The Other’. (2000:48)

<sup>61</sup> Bourdieu (1998) claims that masculinity’s dominance over femininity is incorporated into members of society and thereby becomes part of the social construction of reality, or in Bourdieu’s terms; physical and social order is organized according to an androcentric principle which justifies the inferior position of women in society.

were heavily influenced by the expectations and role-scripts surrounding their gender-performance.

For women everywhere, uneven, limiting and exploitative notions color role scripts. Such notions represent the personal troubles linked to the performance of their gender-roles. Amongst the more visible personal troubles are official and institutional constraints, which restrict the individual woman's entrance to education, public spaces and the democratic process. While some of the less visible constraints laid upon women in the expectations tied to the performance of their women's role, are those discussed under the heading *understanding uneasiness* earlier in this chapter. Based on the notions which emerged from the analysis, as well as theoretical material yet to be presented, I relate to the construction of women's role according to the assumption that it is soaked in an intricate, and not always visible (Mills 1967), *subordination* (Hirdmann 1988).

Yvonne Hirdmann has occupied herself with women's subordinate position in the socially constructed reality. I will therefore continue this theoretical account the personal troubles pointed to by the investigated field, by drawing upon her article 1988 article *Genussystemet – reflexioner kring kvinnors sociala underordning*.

Hirdmann opens her article with a pronounced skepticism toward the use of gender-roles as well as the expression *gender*; a term used in order to distinguish the social or cultural (gender) from the biological (sex). According to Hirdmann, the use of the latter expression often results in a discussion regarding the social construction of sexuality, which in Hirdmann's opinion, is far less important than addressing the power relations present in the social dynamic between women and men (1988:50).

In this thesis I have chosen not to engage in the discussion addressing the biological and social aspects of the relation between women and men. I have, however, made use of the terms gender-roles due to its usefulness as a lingual tool in the addressing of the issues and relations between women and men in society.

In her article, Hirdmann approaches the relation between women and men in society by making use of the label *gender system (genussystem)*. This system, she says, is a network of processes, phenomena, conceptions, and expectations that interrelates in such a way that they result in behavioral patterns and regularities (1988:51). According to Hirdmann the *gender system* structures gender according to a scale that forms the base for other social structures. As a result, the power relations of the *gender system* dialectically affect women and men in

society by constituting a cultural superstructure which encompasses both social integration and socialization in what Hirdmann labels a *gender contract*<sup>62</sup>.

As demonstrated, Hirdmann moves beyond Berger and Luckmann (1979) in her account of the processes surrounding role-behavior and expectations, in particularly so through addressing and paying very specific attention to the *gender system* as an all-encompassing organizing principle. Both texts, however, can be said to play important roles in the understanding of the personal troubles of women in Kerala. Berger and Luckmann underline the importance of complying with role expectations and the importance of roles in the individual's conceptualization of the self in the socially constructed reality. Roles in general, thus, are by no coincidence displayed as an important basis for the personal troubles of women. The role-expectations and fear of sanctions serve to limit and control women's behavior across variations of constructed realities. The importance paid to the *gender system* as a suppressive organizing principle in Hirdmann's article serves to emphasize the effect that, particularly gender-roles have on women's lives. Thus, whether one is acting on a social arena as a woman or as a man is perhaps *the* most important distinction influencing the possibilities and limitations one is facing on that arena. As treated in the analysis of the empirical material, the expectations and restraints laid upon members of the Malayalee society, is often linked by the informant's to the gender-role expectations attached to that individual. In the coming section I will concentrate upon providing theoretical examples of some of the more specific troubles tied to the role-expectations of women.

#### *The personal troubles facing the modern and developed*

In this section I will shortly discuss some examples of the personal troubles women, influenced by certain constructions of modernity and development, are faced with.

The construction of the modern and developed woman can result quite differently from one social reality to another. However, an important dichotomy present in the gender-roles of women living under so-called modern and developed circumstances, is the balancing between the world of career and the demands of the domestic sphere; the work-family balance.

In a paper issued in 1980, Mies suggest that the development and modernization of Narsapur in the Indian state Andhra Pradesh, have led to a number of negative effects on women's

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<sup>62</sup> J.fr. Bourdieu (1999)

lives. Due to the rising demand for lace in the foreign market<sup>63</sup> from the 1970's onward, a lot of poor women in Narsapur are producing lace in their own homes for increasingly low wages. Although the women sow laces in order to sustain their family, the work they do is unorganized, unofficial and defined as a spare-time activity conducted by housewives. Mies argues that the social definition of women as housewives, irrespective of whether they are *de facto housewives or not*, is a modern tool to control women, and labels this process *housewifisation* (1980:131). The result of the housewifisation of the lace-makers of Narsapur, argues Mies, is that they are deprived of social status as well as economic and political rights given to those defined as workers. The women also have to work for a much lower income and often suffer from an array of illnesses due a total lack of spare time. Mies claims that the extremely low wage levels of these women are due to the housewifisation, which again serves as the main prerequisite for the enormous profits made from their labour on the world-market. Mies' paper thus, demonstrates an example of how processes labelled development and modernization, can lead to a decrease in women's quality of life and an increase in their reported personal troubles<sup>64</sup>.

Additional examples of personal troubles facing women living under so-called modern and developed circumstances can be found in Hocschild's 1989 book *The second shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*. Hocschild approaches the myth about the successful working-mother in contemporary America, claiming that she is in fact overworked due to the *stalled revolution*; women entering the labour-market while continuing to do the same amount of care- and domestic work as before this entrance. The *revolution*, thus women entering the wage-labour market, is *stalled* due to the lack of change or revolution in the home; women are merely granted a *second shift*, instead of the equal rights fought for during the seventies. The result of the stalled revolution in the home and second shift women face when returning home from their first shift at the office, says Hocschild, is emotional and physical exhaustion and feelings of guilt colouring the relationships on both arenas. Although the women in this book are economically far better off than the lace-makers in Mies paper, the women in *The second shift* who appear to 'have it all' are also faced with grave personal troubles linked to their modern women's role.

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<sup>63</sup> In this thesis, I have chosen not to take the role and influence of the market into account when addressing the situation of women in Kerala. I made this decision due to the vastness of possible points of analysis. I do not, however, out rule that this could have contributed to, and enriched the overall understanding and analysis.

<sup>64</sup> The women in Mies paper reported higher levels of exhaustion, greater workload, problems with eyesight, backaches, rheumatism etc than before starting lace-production. In spite of which they were not able to improve their economic situation (1980:130).

The issue of personal troubles tied to the ‘modern’ women’s role is a highly central one in the analysis of the interviews. The ‘Malayalee modernity’ is, as depicted by the informants, directly tied both to what Mies labels *housewifisation* and *the stalled revolution* pointed to by Hochschild. Several of the informants, as demonstrated in the chapters of analysis, pointed to the lack of focus on the woman as sole bearer of domestic chores and care work, in particular the effect this has on her ability to combine her domestic life with a career. These processes have also been suggested by the informants, as demonstrated in chapter four, to unite the personal troubles of women living in the ‘Malayalee modernity’ with women in ‘Western modernity’ (Narayan 1997), a suggestion which will be further discussed in chapter six.

## **Part two**

As accounted for in the introductory part of this chapter, I draw upon the distinction between personal troubles and public issues suggested by Mills (1967), in order to divide the theoretical discussions into two different levels. Part one has approached themes linked to the *personal troubles* of Malayalee women, while part two will theoretically address issues at a more structural level. Discussions regarding how the levels of analysis are interlinked will be left nearly unexplored in this chapter, as they are thoroughly accounted for in the previous chapters and will be further discussed in chapter six.

In this part of chapter five, I will concentrate upon the theoretical embedded-ness of one of the most strongly emphasized structural issues of this thesis, namely the relation between the ‘West’ and the ‘Third World’. Due to the vast scope of this issue as well as its broad historical and cultural implications, I will only be able to lightly scratch its surface. It should be underlined, however, that this thematic has strongly influenced the design and conduction of this project. The theme will be divided into three different parts, two in which the general symbolic of this relationship is approached and a third which discusses the case of women in particular.

### *The construction of 'the Other'*

In his 1978 classic *Orientalism*, Said approaches the construction of *the other*<sup>65</sup> through an analysis of the divisions of the world into 'Western' and 'Oriental', or more specifically 'us' Europeans and 'those' non-Europeans (1979:7). Said argues that through the construction of 'the Orient', 'the West' has created an *other* over which to rule, and a culture over which to be superior. And, perhaps just as importantly; *the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience* (1979:2-3). According to Said thus the 'West' has constructed an image of the 'Oriental' or 'non-Western', not only in order to create an object over which to rule but simultaneously a cultural projection of undesirable characteristics such as stupidity, lack of respect and loose sexual moral (1979:103). This way, the 'West' is able to create a self-image clenched of such negative labels, leaving reason, purity and moral to be the main characteristics of 'us'<sup>66</sup>.

One of the most important notions of Said's groundbreaking classic is that the 'Orient', as well as the described relation between 'Orient' and 'Occident', is a *social construction*:

I have begun with the assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely *there*, just as the Occident itself is not just *there* either. (...)—such locales, regions, geographical sectors as 'the Orient' and 'Occident' are man made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. (1979:4-5)

What might seem like a geographical or cultural area is in fact, according to Said and in accordance with Berger and Luckmann (1979), a socially constructed reality. Spivak (1990 in Harasym) emphasize, in accordance with both Berger and Luckmann (1979) and Said (1979), the importance of remembering that history does not consist of brute facts, but of narratives that are, more often than not, generated in the Western realm of thought. According to Spivak, what is being produced by these historical narratives, are *cultural explanations that silence others* (in Harasym 1990:33). Similarly, Orientalism has been constructed as an objective area of study but should, according to Said, rather be regarded as *a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the orient* (1979:3). This *construction* of an us- them

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<sup>65</sup> I would like to note that Beauvoir argues that the category 'the other' is as basic as consciousness itself, but in contemporary societies He has been granted the position of the Subject and the Absolute while She is always in the position of the Other (2000:36). This is an important dichotomy that is philosophically linked to the 'Western' construction of the Other in the 'Oriental' which Said writes about.

<sup>66</sup> To provide an interesting apropos and contrast, this years 'TV-aksjon' (Yearly funding and information campaign sent on Norwegian TV) focuses on the prevention of violence against women world wide. The campaign is, according to NRK, supported by the 'Islamsk råd' (Islamic council) in Norway, but apposed by Norwegian 'men's groups' [http://www.nrk.no/programmer/tv/tv\\_aksjonen2005/5157543.html](http://www.nrk.no/programmer/tv/tv_aksjonen2005/5157543.html)

relationship and its array of culturally ascribed connotations is highly central to the discussions approached in chapter four. Through the construction of ‘Western’ ideals, built upon for instance Victorian codes of sexual moral and Enlightenment philosophy, as being in a superior position opposite the ideals and conduct of the colonized during the period of colonization, the basis of a relationship of contemporary actuality was created. This relationship has been historically influential and is still influencing the relationship between the ‘West’ and the ‘Third World’ insofar as ideals of modernity, capitalism, progress, gender-equality and schemes for development, are concerned (Tvedt 1990; Narayan 1997).

*Outcomes of the construction of ‘the other’: Norway’s good intentions*

In his 1990 book *Bilder av ‘de andre’* (Images of ‘the other’) Tvedt claims that a ‘Westernization’ of the world has taken place through the intertwining of colonialism and development aid (1990:16-36). He exemplifies by using the African continent, which according to him has been subject to three phases of ‘Western’, state financed cultural expansion: firstly ‘the great discoveries’, secondly the ‘colonization and imperialism’ and lastly; ‘development aid work’ (*bistandsarbeidet*) (1990:18)<sup>67</sup>. The intention to develop and modernize is, says Tvedt, closely tied to the *white man’s burden*; the perception that the West has a paternal responsibility to improve and change so-called uncivilized societies<sup>68</sup>. Thus, Tvedt claims that development aid presumes a normative theory to change societies, a norm which is not culturally neutral, but based upon an evolutionary logics created by Western history in which Western societies are by definition more advanced than an African village (1990: 24). In line with Said’s claim that the ‘West’ is defining itself in relation to a created ‘other’, Tvedt includes development aid into the analysis of the constructed relation between the ‘West’ and its ‘others’.

In the following, I will provide an example of the manifestation of the constructed relationship between the ‘Western developed’ and the ‘Occidental underdeveloped’ by presenting the so-called *Indo-Norwegian Pilot project* (Klausen 1969). The project was initiated in 1953 in an attempt to mechanize the fishing-activity in two coastal villages of Kerala. The development initiative was the first ever engaged in by the Norwegian authorities and the information about the receiver society was scarce (1969:119). The main aim of the

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<sup>67</sup> Vandana Shiva’s book *Staying alive: Women, Ecology and Development* offers a similar perspective, for instance by claiming that development is a contemporary form of colonialism (Chapter One, 1989)

<sup>68</sup> J.fr Shiva 1989

project was, according to Klausen, to develop and mechanize all aspects of the local fishing-industry:

The chief advantage of mechanized fishing was to be that in shorter time one could go further out from land than in the canoes, and in that way reach new fishing grounds. Motor-driven fishing also makes more catches per day possible. One could moreover reduce the number of the crew and in that way increase the profit per man. (1969:124)

With the intention to increase profits for the local fishermen, the project administration brought bigger, motorized boats into an area where fishing until then had been conducted either from the shore or from relatively small canoes. What the designers of the project did not take into consideration, however, was the impact this was to play on the existing economic and social relations of the local communities (1969:126). Firstly, the villages mainly consisted of two religious communities, a Christian and a Hindu, which reacted very differently to this external stimulus. Secondly, the mechanized boats, although bigger than the un-mechanized, tended to have only one owner. In addition the owner's share of the profit increased from the traditional thirty to thirty three percent to about fifty percent of the catch (1969:128). In short, the Norwegian initiative led to greater socio-economic differences within the local community, as the Christian community had more capital available, a higher educational level and more effective economical merchandise system than the Hindus (1969:159). In addition, the Hindu community was, according to Klausen, restricted by several taboos when confronted with new and mechanized fishing techniques<sup>69</sup>. Thus, because of the lack of knowledge about local culture, exemplified by the assumption of heterogeneity (1969:138) within and between the communities, the project unintentionally favoured families who were in an advantaged situation before the initiation of the project.

The *Indo-Norwegian pilot project* can therefore be used to exemplify two cultural phenomena of the 'West- East' relationship discussed in the previous part of this section. Firstly, as an example of how 'our' assumptions about 'the other', such as 'our' inability to see individual, economic and cultural differences between 'them', assuming that 'they' are one mass of poverty struck individuals, are widespread and often not realized by those attempting to develop the underdeveloped. Secondly, as an example of how the assumption that 'our' techniques and expertise are necessarily better for 'the other' than traditional skills can result in highly negative costs for local communities, for instance through a reproduction of systems

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<sup>69</sup> In fact, fishing itself was attached with a caste stigma for the Hindus, while not so for the Christian community, according to Klausen.



of social inequality present in 'Western' societies and a reinforcement of the inequality already present in the local communities.

An additional dimension added to the critique directed at the Norwegian development project in Kerala is the ecological consequence (Eriksen 2003) of the attempt to *substantially increase the country's agricultural production* (Klaussen 1969:20).

Production according to accumulative (Mies 1986) and capitalistic philosophy originating from 'Western' colonial philosophy and tradition is harshly criticised by for instance eco-feminists (Shiva and Mies 1993) for harming the sustainability of the earth's resources.

Further, both Mies (and Shiva 1993) and Shiva (1989) approaches questions regarding the disruption of the ecological balance of the earth and the dismissing of traditional knowledge as issues closely related to patriarchal structures and therefore prone to be most hurtful to women's situation and position in society. Issues related to the particular role of *gender* and its impact on the relationship between the 'First' and 'Third' worlds will be further discussed in the next section.

In this section I have provided discussions related to the theoretical embedded-ness of the important 'West'-'Third World' relationship. I have done so by showing how the 'West' constructs and relates to its 'other' on the theoretical and empirical level by referring to different theoretical material. In the section to come I will turn to concentrate on some of the gendered aspects of the 'West'-'Third World' relation.

### *Twice 'Othered': Third World Women*

According to the above presented authors, the colonial tone that has coloured and defined the relationship between the 'West' and the 'Orient' (Said 1979) for centuries still strongly affects this relationship in many respects. Several feminist authors engage themselves in questions that touch upon this uneven and often suppressive relation and connect it to feminist discourses (Spivak 1990 in Harasym; Shiva 1989; Mies 1986, 1980).

One important part of this discourse, linked to issues regarding the division between the biological (sex) and the social (gender) (Hirdmann 1988), is *gender essentialism*. Essentialist characterization of what a woman is and how one ought to behave in order to have the right to call oneself a woman, has been approached by, amongst others, Beauvoir (2000). Beauvoir regards such gender-essentialism a patriarchal tool, which is used to control women and make

them remain in their secondary positions in society<sup>70</sup>. It seems as though the process 'othering' women, here approached by Beauvoir, have an array of similarities with the 'West's' 'othering' of the non- West.

Acceptance and awareness of the many and shifting gender performances according to global differences in the social constructions of gender, has been on the agenda for many feminists, as here pointed to by Narayan (2000).

The feminist critique of gender essentialism does not merely charge that essentialist claims about 'women' are over-generalizations, but points out that these generalizations are hegemonic in that they represent the problems of privileged women (most often white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual women) as paradigmatic women's 'issues'. (Narayan in Narayan et al 2000:80)

In the essay *Essence of Culture and a Sense of history: a feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism* (in Narayan et al 2000) Narayan moves beyond the questions approached by Beauvoir (2000) and Hirdmann (1988) by investigating the theoretical intersection between *gender essentialism* and *cultural essentialism*. She thereby approaches the themes in which the relationship between the 'West' and its 'others' is considered in a gender-perspective. According to Narayan, some feminist writers tend to avoid gender essentialism by making use of essentialist notions of cultural differences between 'Western' and 'Non Western':

The project of attending to differences among women across a variety of national and cultural contexts then becomes a project of that endorses and replicates problematic and colonialist assumptions about the cultural differences between 'Western culture' and 'Non-Western cultures' and the women who inhabit them. (2000:81)

This approach says Narayan, continues to use and construct sharp and essentialist binaries between women from one part of the world to another similar to the gender-binaries criticized by many feminists. Therefore, she continues, anyone attempting to move beyond such pitfalls must both be attentive to the differences among women *and* acknowledge the *insistence of difference* between the 'West' and its 'others' as being a *politically motivated colonial construction*. Thus, in accordance with Said (1979) Narayan underlines the cultural influence of *the self-proclaimed 'superiority' of 'Western culture'* in the construction of 'the other' as well as the *self-portrait of 'Western culture'* (2000:83). In this essay, Narayan concentrates

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<sup>70</sup> 'Den ekte kvinnen er den som godtar seg selv som den andre.' (2000:321)

upon the similarities between different essentialist explanations in order to advocate a post-colonial feminist perspective that takes such pitfalls into consideration.

As shortly discussed in chapter four, Narayan, in her 1997 book *Dislocating cultures*, supplies the reader with some examples of how the ‘miseries of ‘Indian women’’, such as dowry murders and *sati*, are understood by many, including feminists<sup>71</sup>, to be phenomena ascribed to the ‘Indian culture’. She contrasts this by emphasizing how the domestic violence happening in ‘Western’ countries are no less common than those taking place in India, but most commonly explained as personal tragedies and not as a ‘Western’ cultural trait. This *asymmetry* in the explanation of violence against women in ‘*mainstream Western culture*’ and the ‘*death by culture*’ explanations of violence against women specific to ‘*Third World contexts*’ (1997:113) pointed to by Narayan, can be said to serve to maintain the distance between ‘Third World’ and ‘Western’ women, as well as to continue the traditional *insistence of difference* (Narayan et al 2002<sup>72</sup>).

Drawing upon Narayan (1997) and Simmons (in Rahnama et al 1997) as well as the analysis of the empirical material, it seems as though a culturally essentialist view which insist on such differences, serve to obscure the similarities between women’s problems across division lines such as ‘developed’ and ‘developing’. Still, I argue a considerable link between the process wherein women are being constructed as an ‘other’, discussed by amongst other Beauvoir (2000), to the ‘West’s’ ‘othering’ of the non- West, treated by authors such as Said (1979) Spivak (in Harasym 1990) and Narayan (1997; 2000). The themes discussed and links made by contemporary post-colonial feminist authors have therefore been of great importance to the enquiries I have attempted to engage in during the gathering and analysis of the empirical material.

### **Summarizing theory**

In this chapter I have attempted to theoretically demonstrate two linkages of great importance to this thesis. First, the link between the *personal troubles* in the informant’s accounts and the larger, structural, *public issues* found both in the informant’s accounts and in the analysis of the accounts.

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<sup>71</sup> Narayan provides examples from for instance Mary Daly 1978. *Indian Sutee: The ultimate consummation of marriage*. In *Gyn/ecology: The MetaEthics of radical feminism*.

<sup>72</sup> J.fr. also Said (1979)

Secondly, the link between the culturally essentialist colonial approach to the cultures in the so-called 'Third World' and the contemporary relation between 'The West' and its 'Others' expressed through both academic writings and development projects.

Further, I have intended to demonstrate how the social construction of gender-roles as well as development is tied to the process of *Othering* on two different, but interconnected, analytical levels.

## Chapter six: Summarizing and concluding

Working with this thesis has indeed been an exercise in the attempt to make use of the sociological imagination C. Wright Mills calls upon. The links between the problems and uneasiness in the informants' accounts and the larger social, economical and historical issues of broad concern became increasingly evident as the analytical process progressed. Therefore I will continue to discuss some of the links made during the analysis in an attempt to formulate some of the key-questions deriving from the analysis. I will do so by, first shortly summing up and discussing the findings made during the course of the analysis and secondly, suggesting some practical and theoretical implications deriving from the findings.

### Findings

Through the interviews and additional field material, accounts of the 'Malayalee modernity' and 'Malayalee notions of gender equality' formed the basis of what came to represent the constructed reality in which the women I talked to in Kerala placed themselves. The interviewees perceived to be living in a gender-conservative context in which women's possibilities are easily limited due to the societal expectations tied to their gender-roles. The modernity-construction displayed by the informants indicated that Malayalee women feel such limitations due to the existing threat of gender-based violence and rape as well as by the taboos surrounding 'alternative' family constellations, divorce and multiple partners. The informants further reported that women's situation in Kerala was coloured by control and *domestication*, as most women in Kerala are expected to first and foremost be good daughters (in-law), wives and mothers. This expectation and norm of domestication was reported to limit women's mobility and voice in the community as well as their chances to make use of educational and labour market attainments.

These accounts are contrasted in the material by the goal attainment of the Kerala model for development, which displays a very different situation for the women living in contemporary Kerala, exemplified by a scholar quoted in the introductory chapter; *The Kerala model would never have been actuated without female literacy and tolerant social attitudes towards women* (Ramji 2000:12).

The contrast between the depictions of the 'Malayalee modernity' and the version reflected through the goal attainment of the Kerala model is displayed through the informants' critique of this model for development. As a result, the informant's indications suggest that the

manner in which gender-development is measured in mainstream comparative statistics seemingly tend to overlook issues and aspects of importance to Malayalee women. The constructions of development and modernity as it is played out in Kerala today are criticized by the informants and suggested replaced by some visions of what such notions should be in order to improve women's lives. By criticising the 'Malayalee modernity' and the Kerala model, the interviewees provide suggestions and examples of what ought to be changed in order to facilitate 'a better society' for women in Kerala. In this way, both 'Malayalee modernity' and the Kerala model for development are contrasted with the informant's envisions of a better life for women living in Kerala. Such envisions include an increase in women's access to public life and safety in their private existence alongside less restrictive norms and moral codes tied to the gender script of women.

### **Discussing theoretical and practical implications**

The themes that constitute the above mentioned findings are evidently intertwined, because the constructions and effects of modernity and development are not separated processes. Certainly, the very intersections between them are of great interest and will not be left unexplored. The following discussion of implications that derive from the findings will be approached according to the concepts *modernity* and *development*, not however, in order to separate the two notions from each other, merely to attempt a systematic approach to the discussions.

#### *Modernity*

Among the key issues addressed during the analysis are domesticity, sexuality, clothing, marriage arrangements, the division of labour and gender-based violence. Domesticity is perhaps the most frequently used label for the limitations faced by women in the 'Malayalee modernity'; a term which encompasses many of the norms of passivity influencing women's gender scripts. Domestication is part of the patriarchal societal mechanisms<sup>73</sup>, drawn upon by both women and men in the community, which aim is to control women's conduct and sexuality as well as ensuring their limited influence in public life.

In contemporary Kerala women do have the right to enter public spaces and participate in educational and professional arenas, rights that are made use of by women to a relatively high

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<sup>73</sup> J.fr Mies' (1980) concept *housewifisation*.

degree. Further, women in Kerala do not merely have the right to vote and to participate on the political arena; 33% of all seats in the local parliament are reserved for women electorates<sup>74</sup>. Still, the interviewees most frequently used label when describing women's role in contemporary Kerala is *domesticated*. What the informants are addressing by the use of such a label, thus, is not the right to speak or the right to be present, but rather the right to be *listened to* and *included* in the public decision-making processes on all levels of society<sup>75</sup>. This can be said to represent a general controversy and problem present in modernity. Societies that aspire to label themselves 'modern' are often caught up in mantras of freedom, but seem to have a difficulty acknowledging the lack of freedom that can not be addressed by reforms in the formal laws and regulations. The *distaste of culture* (Freud 1966) or *uneasiness* that Mills (1967) pointed to, has led to a very particular lack of freedom for women living in the 'Malayalee modernity'; by the social process Mies labelled *housewifisation* (1980) they have been robbed of their active agency in the public sphere. -If women are not *really* counted or listened to in the overall social processes of society, then modernity is suffering from a silent but severe deficiency, some of which' many consequences are serious defeats for the freedom and democracy of modern societies.

I would like to turn the attention to informant number five, a historian who offer insight into Kerala's modernization- process and thereby supplies a picture of the early epoch of the construction of today's 'Malayalee modernity'. Interestingly, through her accounts it becomes clear that a great part of the ideals and traditions colouring issues such as family organization, sexuality and clothing in Kerala today, are in fact closely tied to the patriarchal social organization and Victorian ideals for womanhood introduced by the British colonizing power. A substantial part of the construction of women's role in the family and society at large, including the gender scripts supplying the unwritten rules of conduct and behaviour for women in the 'Malayalee modernity', can be traced back to the influence of the modernity brought to India through colonization. Examples of this is that before the late colonial period, it was customary for many women in Kerala<sup>76</sup> to not cover their breasts and for people belonging to the matrilineal Nair<sup>77</sup> community to change between sexual and cohabiting

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<sup>74</sup> The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992-93) in India provide an extraordinary case study on women in local government as the Acts reserved 33 per cent of seats for women in the three tiers of government ([http://action.web.ca/home/sap/india\\_resources.shtml?x=59207&AA\\_EX\\_Session=536d955abeea94dcc775b4b6b7bbb3a2](http://action.web.ca/home/sap/india_resources.shtml?x=59207&AA_EX_Session=536d955abeea94dcc775b4b6b7bbb3a2)).

<sup>75</sup> J.fr Spivak in Harasym 1990:59-60

<sup>76</sup> More correctly district of Malabar, now part of Kerala.

<sup>77</sup> Nair is the label for a warrior caste in Kerala, relatively high in the social hierarchy.

partners insofar as divorce was easily granted for both women and men. The picture drawn of Kerala in the late colonial period creates an interesting contrast to women's problems in the 'Malayalee modernity' as they were addressed by the informants during the course of the analysis.

It is important to stress that I do not wish to advocate a view wherein Kerala before the late Colonial period and the influence of 'Western' modernity is viewed as an untouched and pure society free from patriarchal elements and structures. What I do argue, however, is that the inequalities between women and men are reproduced due to the adaptability of patriarchy, when new systems of thought and practice, such as 'Western' influence, modernity or development, is introduced. Thus, due to the adaptability of repressive structures power-relations are not necessarily eradicated when social changes occur. Rather, they seem to canalize into new 'modern' structures and thereby become incorporated into the practices of individuals<sup>78</sup>. The result thus, is a familiar package of power relations supplied with new rapping.

The restrictions laid upon girls' and women's interaction with men on social arenas in Kerala, were addressed by several of the informants. Another important mechanism drawn upon to control and discipline women in the 'Malayalee modernity' that was pointed to by the informants, is the threat of gender-based violence both in the domestic and public sphere. Such mechanisms used in order to control the sexuality of girls and women present in the 'Malayalee modernity' seem directly tied to social restrictions denying women access to certain social arenas, such as coffee houses, and on certain hours of the day, such as after dark (around six p.m.). In addition, similar controlling mechanisms are expressed through the strong social restrictions laid upon the dress-codes of women. Many girls and young women feared to be frowned upon and seen as unrespectable by fellow students if they were to wear anything but the traditional *sari* or the *salwar kameez*<sup>79</sup>. An important part of the controlling mechanisms present in these dress-codes is that they ensure to always cover the legs down to the ankles as well as the shoulders, they also have a looser and less revealing fit than for instance a 'western' style long skirt and blouse.

Even as a foreigner and outsider one can clearly detect the strong restrictions against showing the legs or wearing anything with a tight fit when on a public arena in Kerala. It is interesting

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<sup>78</sup> J.fr Bourdieu and Wacquant 1995: 159-160

<sup>79</sup> Popular dress and pant-combination with a shawl originally from the north of India, worn by girls in Kerala but not by grown women. The S.K. is said by the girls to be far more practical and comfortable than the sari which consist of one long piece of cloth and a blouse.



to note that what might seem like conservative, old-fashioned or ‘*Oriental*’ controlling mechanisms present in the ‘Malayalee modernity’, has very strong ties to ‘Western’ ideals of modernity influencing Kerala during the late colonial period, wherein the open display of the female body and sexuality as well as multiple sexual relations for women were unheard of and seen as highly immoral.

Further, there is a strong link between the attempt to control women’s sexuality and conduct by *hiding* skin and shape in the ‘Malayalee modernity’ and the ‘Western’ beauty regime which *demand*s display of shape and skin to compel with the set ideals for femininity<sup>80</sup>. These processes both seem part of the *symbolic control* exercised through the *masculine dominance* of modern societies (Bourdieu 1998) as well as an upholding of *myths of femininity* (Beaviour 2000: 321-322). The symbolic and direct control deriving from the *masculine dominance* over women’s lives and self-perception seems strongly related to the *construction* of women as a passive ‘Other’ over which to rule. Thus, the myths spun around what a woman should be; how she should act and what she should look like are in fact an under-communicated and unconscious part of the *social construction of reality* in modern societies, a process which results in a felt *uneasiness* deriving from the construction of women as *the Other* (Berger and Luckmann 1979; Mills 1967).

The power-tools used and processes observed in the social construction through which women are given the position of the ‘Other’ are similar to those drawn upon in the patriarchal practices of colonization and the making of the ‘underdeveloped’ as the ‘Other’. I will therefore turn to discuss these questions in light of ‘Western’ development philosophy to further clarify the link between two processes of ‘Othering’.

### *Development*

In the following, development will be discussed through drawing upon the informant’s critique of the Kerala model. I will link the discussion to ‘Western’ notions of development and use the gendered aspects of the Scandinavian Welfare model as a comparative example. The Kerala model was brought to light by the informants through a pronounced scepticism toward the supposed conclusions of its goal attainment. Thus, indicators said to increase women’s enhancement in the ‘Malayalee modernity’ were criticized by the informants for, on

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<sup>80</sup> Although, societies in the ‘West’ as previously mentioned also restrict women’s sexuality with a virtual arsenal of norms regarding dress-codes and rules of conduct. A woman or girl is for instance far more likely to be labelled promiscuous when having several sexual partners than a man is.

the one hand being much less influential for enhancement than assumed and, on the other hand for being direct tools in the process of domesticating, silencing, controlling and disciplining women.

The informants focus on interesting and perhaps unfamiliar aspects of the good health and high educational level of women in Kerala; pointing to how patriarchal structures are reproduced through these institutions. As with many of the traits said to colour the 'Malayalee modernity', the development logics upon which the Kerala model is built have strong ties to the 'Western' realm of thought. Thus, the importance health, labour-marked participation and in particular education is granted in the development of 'Western' society and culture, is strongly reflected upon the design and emphasis of the development scheme in Kerala. As a result, the ideals seemingly agreed upon in the 'Western modernity' about what gender equality should be and how women are best emancipated is questioned by the informants. For this reason it seems plausible to make a comparison (Narayan 1997) between the ways in which the Kerala model and the Scandinavian welfare model can be said to represent a similar controversy for the women situated in these spheres of interest.

Like Kerala, or probably more so, the Scandinavian countries have often been displayed as 'gender equality paradise' (Skrede in Kitterød 1999:1). However, when looking behind the impressive official statistics that place a country like Norway in such a favourable light, it results far from complicated to find points of appeal similar to those proposed by the informants in this thesis. On a general basis, women in Norway are highly educated and very successful, but unfortunately, they are also overworked, depressed and tied down by *gender ideologies* (Hochschild 2003:198-201; Simmons in Rahnema et al 1997: 251-253). Firstly, the *gender ideologies* of Scandinavian women come off as very similar to those labelled by the informants as *domestication*. In Norway, one can detect the reflection of such ideologies in the gender segregation of the Norwegian labour market, wherein women work a lot more part time than men (Ellingsæter in Boje og Leira 2000:104) and the most substantial part of the increase in the much emphasized female employment rate, which is currently at 76%, is canalised into state financed care-work (Bakken 2005). Thus, in spite of living in an alleged 'gender equality paradise', women in Norway 'choose' traditionally by giving less priority to their own careers than men and by going into jobs where their prime identity as 'caring' is left undisputed. Secondly, women's 'time squeeze' or *second shift* (Hochschild 2003) caused by their entrance into higher education and the labour market without any substantial change in

the division of labour between the members of the household (Wærness 1999<sup>81</sup>), have lead to many exhausted and overworked career mothers trying to do the impossible. In addition, women's exposure to gender based violence, both in the domestic sphere and on public arenas, throughout Scandinavia (WEF report 2005:5), remains a grave obstacle for the true emancipation of women in Scandinavia.

Inspired by Narayan's (1997) invitation to oppose the assumption that women's problems in the 'Third World' and 'West' are fundamentally different, I argue that if the notion of gender equality asserted by the Scandinavian welfare model claims to improve the quality of life for women living in the 'Norwegian modernity', the attainment of this claim ought to be questioned. If the Scandinavian Welfare model, like the Kerala model, in fact *isn't* as favourable to women as it claims to be, the assumption that the Scandinavian countries have achieved gender equality and the culturally essentialist idea that patriarchal structures only remains in 'other' cultures, could no longer remain intact (Narayan 1997).

Drawing upon the informants' critical approach to the Kerala model, and the above made links to the Scandinavian welfare model, perhaps the very construction of reality in the 'West' as to what degree the pillars upon it is constructed brings liberation and a better life for the women living in 'Western modernity' ought to be questioned? Such questioning would involve a break in the surprisingly undisputed colonial tradition wherein the 'West', by means of state-financed *cultural expansion* (Tvedt 1990:18), educates *the Other* (Tvedt 1990; Said 1979) about the better, modern or more *developed* way. The practical result of such questioning would be to critically assess the assumption that objectives of development, such as education and a high control of women's reproductive health, brings freedom to women in societies aspiring to label themselves 'modern' as well as those undergoing 'development'. Based upon the findings in this thesis, such an assessment should strive to uncover the nature and scope of the negative aspects linked to measures meant to improve women's lives. The intention of this would not be to claim that improved health and literacy per se are processes undermining women's emancipation or social betterment for people in general<sup>82</sup>. It seems clear that it is not education or good health facilities as such which forms the basis of the informants' critique<sup>83</sup>, but rather the philosophy and praxis *embedded* in the institutions

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<sup>81</sup> According to Wærness, among couples with children men's housework amount to half of the housework done by the woman, whilst the figures that might seem like an increase in the man's share in housework is actually a result of women doing less housework than before (Wærness in Hufton et al 1999:213-214)

<sup>82</sup> The UNFPA's *State of the World Population report 2005* for example underlines that *Reproductive health (...)—reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, and combating HIV/AIDS(...). No other area of health presents such large disparities between rich and poor, within and among countries.*

offering education and health. The critique thus seems aimed at certain currents colouring modern societies, currents integrated into new institutions and trends, such as gender-development measures. -This way, the institutions become vehicles for the reproduction of patriarchal and suppressive elements while assumed and intended to increase women's personal freedom and possibilities in the society in question.

Such mechanisms demonstrate the enormous adaptability of patriarchy and other suppressive structures that colour the power-relations between women and men in modern societies as well as the relation between the 'West' and its 'Others'. It also indicates that the *cultural expansion* conducted by the 'West' through philosophies of development involves, not only the spreading of conscious elements such as education, reproductive health and human rights<sup>84</sup>, but also of certain unconscious and unspoken elements harmful to the emancipation of women. In this way, the *masculine dominance* (Bourdieu 1998) serves as unconscious and unwanted ballast in the 'Western export' of development and modernity.

Therefore, I believe that in order to critically address the situation of women in Kerala as well as in Norway (Narayan 1997), one should ask whether it is a modern trait that the power-relations present between women and men are hidden and therefore perceived to be non-existent. If this is a consistent part of the transition labelled gender-equality, an effort should be made by social scientists to formulate it as a problem of social science (Mills 1967: 11).

### **Topical questions and further research**

I would like to conclude by suggesting two questions of current interest, the first of which is; *what is good gender-development?*

This thesis has uncovered and analysed some of the critique and scepticism directed at the Kerala model for development and related it to the patriarchal structures present in modernity and the 'West' - 'Third World' relationship. It has however merely touched upon what gender-equality should be and thus what alternatives women in the 'Malayalee modernity' envision to improve the individual lives and general status of women in Kerala today. It would also be of interest to enquire further about the understanding and presence of unspoken gender-discrimination in 'Malayalee' as well as 'Western' constructions of modernity.

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<sup>83</sup> In fact, several of the women I talked to said they were in the fortunate position of being able to criticize the system in which they found themselves partly due to their educational level and occupational position. Others pointed to how women in neighbouring states were being robbed of *necessary* measures to prevent mothers and babies from dying.

<sup>84</sup> Constructions in themselves far from unproblematic due to elements of cultural imperialism, i.e. 'Western' hegemonic decision-making about what is best for its 'Other'.

To conclude, I would like to ask the second and last question; *how should gender-equality be measured?*

Trough the analysis and discussion of the findings it became clear that the indicators currently used, by amongst others World Economic Forum, to measure gender-development are inadequate in a number of respects. An interesting starting point for further research within this field thus, would be the attempt to prepare suggestions for an improvement of the current statistical indicators of gender-development.

### **Closing note**

As stated in the introductory chapter, my preliminary intention with this project was to learn something about the *relationship between women's situation in the so-called 'Third World' and challenges concerning women's rights in the so-called 'West'*. And, although I was not always consciously aware of exactly how I was to do so during the process of writing this thesis, I can now truly say that I have learned something about the interconnection between women's emancipation in Kerala and Norway. In addition, I have learned a lot about my own embeddedness in the positioning of the 'West' as 'further come' than the 'Third World' and about the challenging exercise attempting to look beyond culturally incorporated assumptions about the state of the world, can be. In this way, this thesis has also been a highly personal project, from which I feel to have learned a great deal.

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