“We have to empower them”
- A user study of a library in a Women’s Resource Centre in South India

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The subject of this study is the library of a women’s resource centre in India that is called SAKHI. We have conducted interviews with five SAKHI library users. The aim of this study has been to examine what these users have to say about the concepts of Women Empowerment and its potential relations to the SAKHI library. We have found many examples of potential barriers for a poor rural woman’s access to the library through our informants’ statements, but at the same time they all seem to think that the SAKHI library can have a role in empowerment processes even if it is mainly used by urban educated women. This is because of the efforts the library is involved in concerning poor and rural women; for example by dissemination of information to them. The SAKHI library can thus work with poor rural women in empowering ways. However, we think that empowerment through information dissemination is more likely to occur if the library’s main goal is to give the poor rural women immediate access to information, without having to rely on an outsider like SAKHI. We have come to the conclusion that the library seems to work in empowering ways even for educated women, like our informants. We found that SAKHI is working in empowering ways for them mainly regarding the collective dimension of empowerment.

Nyckelord: Genusfrågor, Indien, specialbibliotek, Women Empowerment
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1 Introduction

We have both had a fascination for India since childhood, but none of us had ever been there. Therefore, we were very happy to receive a scholarship from SIDA to go to India and conduct a Minor Field Study (MFS) in a women’s resource centre’s library. Both of us also have an interest in gender issues, which is why we wanted to have some kind of gender perspective on our study. We went to the state of Kerala in South India for six weeks between January and March 2006. Before leaving Sweden, we were both curious about how a library in India can function, and we got a tip from a researcher that the women’s organization SAKHI had a library that might be of interest for us. The SAKHI library is a special library and it is focused on documents concerning women’s issues from a feminist perspective. This made us even more interested, since women’s issues and feminism still are controversial in India.

When arriving, our initial aim with the study was to find out in which context the SAKHI library is placed, what kind of users it has, what purpose it fills for its users and how it is functioning. We soon came to understand that the library’s main goal is to disseminate information to women in order to improve women’s situation in Kerala in general. This made us turn our focus to the ways in which the library is trying to achieve this.

We think that this thesis can give us a picture of how a library in the Third World might function and what role a library can try to play in the improvement of people’s lives in the Third World. This makes the thesis interesting in the framework of Library and Information Science. Michael Buckland, professor at the School of Library and Information Science in Berkeley, California, writes that library services and their users can be viewed as an “open system” that is capable of affecting its environment, and that libraries participates in other, wider sorts of systems, of which the larger political framework is one. (Buckland 1988, p. 27ff.) It is however very important to point out that we do not know whether a library in general actually can improve people’s lives, we only know what five users and two employees of SAKHI have told us about how the SAKHI library is trying to change the everyday experience of the women in Kerala.

Kerala is one of India’s poorest states, and in many ways this fact was obvious to us. The people were poor, the beggars were common, the traffic jams were crazy and the standard in general was very low. The heat and the humidity were almost unbearable, and we were forced to go home two weeks earlier than planned because our computer did not work. Despite all this we had the time of our lives since we were met by a heart-warming hospitality from the people.

1.1 Problems and purpose of the study

With this study we aim at providing a picture of how a library can work in a context very different from the one in the cultural domicile we are used to. We are interested in the concept of Women Empowerment, and if there any connections between this concept and the work and services performed by the SAKHI library. To explore this possibility, we have done interviews with two employees and five
users of the library. We have then analyzed their statements to find traces of these connections. The tool for analysis in this study is the concept of empowerment, mainly in Joanna Rowlands’ definition of it, and the theories about information access and information literacy by Buckland and Bruce. We want to examine our informants’ statements with the help of these theoretical frameworks. We have chosen this particular library mainly because it appealed to our interest, as mentioned above, but also because it is a kind of small-scale, independent institution, which we thought would suit the kind of study we wanted to do. We have tried to make the study as demarcated as possible to make it easy to handle. For example, a study of “special libraries in India” or “the women’s movement in Kerala” would have been very interesting studies indeed, but they would have been to extensive for us to conduct. We had to be very realistic about what we were able to do, since we only had a limited amount of time in the field. This is also the reason why we chose to conduct such a small number of interviews.

This thesis is connected to the Library and Information Science field simply because it is a study of five library users. But the thesis is also, as you will find, very much connected to the Development Studies field. This has to do with the fact that we are MFS-students, which means that our text has to have connections to SIDA’s areas of interest (in this case the concept of Women Empowerment). This is the reason why, for example, the “previous research”-chapter contains studies from persons that are associated with the field of Development Theory as well as a study conducted within Library and Information Science. However, our aim, questions at issue, analysis and conclusions are conceived with our own research area in mind.

1.2 Aim

Our aim is to find out what role the SAKHI library is playing in connection to the concept of Women Empowerment. We want to see how these connections are perceived by some of the users and employees, and what connections we can perceive ourselves. We are also interested in which potential barriers are connected to use of the SAKHI library.

1.3 Questions at issue

Our main questions are:

- How does the SAKHI library function?

- How do the users and employees of the SAKHI library perceive the connections between the concept of Women Empowerment and the SAKHI library?

- What barriers can we find to use of the SAKHI library?
1.4 Word definitions

**Information**: Data that is carrying meaning within the context of its use. (ODLIS 2006)

**Knowledge**: Information which have been interpreted within a person’s personal framework of experience. The information is then incorporated into the person’s intellectual understanding. (ODLIS 2006)

**NGO**: Non Governmental Organization

**Informants**: In order to keep our informants as anonymous as possible, we have given them assumed names in this thesis. When we mention “our informants”, we are generally referring to the five users of the library and not the two other informants, the librarian and the founder. If we have these two informants in mind, we will point this out specifically.

**Kerala**: Kerala is a small state in the far south of India. Kerala is today inhabited by approximately 33 million people. 66 percent of the inhabitants live in the countryside. Around 60 percent of the Keralites are Hindus, 20 percent are Muslims and 20 percent are Christians. The capital Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram) has a population of around three million people. The local language is Malayalam.

Map from Indien.nu (2006).
1.5 Who did what?

We have written this thesis together. It is very difficult to say exactly who did what since we have both contributed to all paragraphs. The words of the two authors are therefore constantly intertwined. However, at the time of the field work we divided the work between us. We performed the interviews together, but then Frida did the transcriptions and Zelina did the initial research of the subject. After that, we have both read, written, analyzed and drawn conclusions from the material.

1.6 The thesis’ disposition

In chapter two, we will take a look at what previous research has been conducted within Development Theory, Women’s Studies and Library and Information Science that are related to Kerala, Women Empowerment or the SAKHI library. We will then turn our direction to the Kerala state, and look closer at its history; in particular the development of libraries and literacy.

In the third chapter, we will discuss how and why we chose to carry out our study as we did, and possible consequences of these decisions. We will also examine some of the literature used in this thesis.

In chapter four, we will start by discussing the origin of the concept of Women Empowerment and the problems that are connected with its use. Then we will describe Joanna Rowlands’ empowerment theories, which is one of this thesis’ main theories. We begin with looking at four different ways to study the concept of power. We will then examine three dimensions that Rowlands claims that empowerment processes works within; namely the collective, the relational and the personal. We will then turn our eyes to the SAKHI library’s users and their abilities, and the ways in which the library is promoting empowerment. To examine this, we will use Christine Bruce’s seven concepts of information literacy, and Michael Buckland’s six aspects of access to information.

In chapter five it is time to write about the organization SAKHI and its library. We will then give an account of our own perception of the SAKHI- and other libraries in Trivandrum. This paragraph also contains extracts from interviews with two people from the SAKHI staff, namely the director and the librarian of SAKHI. These two interviews provide a good background to understand the organization’s mission. After this, we will give an account of the interviews we have conducted with five users of the SAKHI library, that provides the basis for this thesis.

In chapter six, we will analyze the five informants’ statements. First, we will analyze this material with the help of the different concepts of power and empowerment which we have taken from Joanna Rowlands theories. We will see what connections we can find between the statements and these concepts, and we will also consider what the informants say about the relation between SAKHI’s library and Women Empowerment We will then discuss what abilities and knowledge a library user must have to be able to make use of the library. We will also examine what kind of people that are believed to use it and we will look at potential barriers to accessing the information in the library. We will end the
analysis chapter by examining the connections between the SAKHI library and empowerment processes.

In chapter seven, we report our findings and draw our conclusions.

In chapter eight, we make suggestions for further research.

Chapter nine simply contains a summary of this thesis.
2 Previous research and context of the study

In this chapter we will give an account of research conducted within Development Theory and Women’s Studies that are about women’s situation in Kerala today, in order to get a greater understanding of our informants’ realities as female participants in the Keralan society. We will also look at a thesis in Library and Information Science that is about the SAKHI library.

Furthermore, we will give an account of the context in which our study was conducted. First, we will provide a short overview of the literacy development in Kerala, something that has contributed to and encouraged the extraordinary high literacy levels among women in the state as well as the emergence of thousands of libraries around Kerala, of which one is the SAKHI library. To further enhance the readers’ understanding of the library system in which the SAKHI library is situated, we will provide a short overview of the library development in India and Kerala.

2.1 Previous research concerning women’s issues

Monica Erwér is a Doctor in Peace and Development Research at the Gothenburg University, who has done much research in the Kerala region. She writes that the implementation of the so-called Kerala Model, has led to an increase in women’s status in the state. The Kerala Model is an economic development strategy that has focused on a development of social issues rather than economic. The model is influenced by Marxist theory, and it has received a lot of attention worldwide. The United Nation’s Conference on Population and Development praised the model in 1994, not only because its high degree of human development but also for the high status of the women in the state. Around the millennium shift, Kerala had the highest Human Development Index in India, despite a very low economic performance. (Erwér 2003, p. 121ff.) The Kerala model has also given women access to social development independent of their class, caste and religion. Despite of Kerala being one of the world’s poorest areas, seen from an economic perspective, the women in Kerala are highly literate, they are of good health, they marry late and they give birth to few children. (Erwér 1998, p. 22ff.) Erwér writes:

“Kerala has the elementary prerequisites for women’s equality: literacy, education, freedom from legal inhibitions against women’s education or employment, women’s right to own property including land or houses and to keep savings accounts in their own name, freedom to vote and also to contest in elections. (...) The ‘status of women’ defined from the aspects of health, demography and education is also exceptionally high in comparison with the rest of Indian continent.” (Erwér 2003, p. 128)

An easy conclusion to draw is that the women of Kerala are enjoying a great deal of equality to men, especially when compared to most of the other states in India. But this is only a small part of the truth. Despite their status, Keralite women are having difficulties in getting into the national parliament, the state parliament, the union and other organizations. There are few autonomous women’s groups in Kerala,
compared to other Indian states. Erwér suggests that the high status of women leads to a false assumption that they are really active in politics and decision-making, when in fact, they are far from it. She is therefore of the opinion that the increase of women’s status has not lead to any participation in real decision-making, and this leads her to the conclusion that there exists a **gender paradox** in Kerala. (Erwér 1998, p. 22ff.) Although women in Kerala are getting married quite late, in average when they are 22 years old, marriage is still one of the most important social institutions. The women are performing well in school, but after finishing school, they return to the domestic sphere. Hence education is mainly an investment for marriage and it is used as an asset when “**bargaining on the marriage market**”. (Erwér 2003, p. 125ff.) Women in Kerala generally have a high quality of life in terms of social development index and access to practical interests, but a low level of participation and agency in the public and political sphere. Erwér therefore claims that women in Kerala are empowered socially, but not politically. (Erwér 2003, p. 130)

Maithreyi Krishnaraj is a Women’s Studies researcher at the SNDT Women’s University in Mumbai. Krishnaraj argues that women are absent in leadership positions. Their improved social status has not resulted in any further economic or social improvement. (Krishnaraj 2002, p. 33ff.)

Women’s moral responsibility for family and housework is part of the marriage contract. Krishnaraj writes that:

> "the degree of discrepancy between men and women on time spent in income earning activities to leisure and the degree to which women's time budgets show unreciprocated services to husbands and other males and the percentage of own expenses and children's expenses paid for by women are indicators of lack of power. When families restrict women's movement or choice of jobs, women's power and autonomy is not achieved even if they have education and employment". (Krishnaraj 2002, p. 33)

The eligibility and economic value attached to the marriage make certain bride characteristics desirable. These are: beauty, intelligence and schooling. Krishnaraj writes that marriage is the bedrock for fostering and sustaining patriarchal gender relations, at the same time material and ideological. Krishnaraj is of the opinion that “**schooling**” among the women adds to “**marriage ability**” rather than to empowerment. (Krishnaraj 2002, p. 11f.)

Anna Lindberg, a historian and gender researcher at the University in Lund, writes that there is a consensus that the state of Kerala is facing a mounting economic crisis right now. (Lindberg 2005, p. 25f.). This crisis shows itself in different ways, and many of them are related to the status of the women. Women’s organisations have sent out warnings that suicides and the enigmatic deaths of women following disputes over resources transferred at marriage have increased dramatically over the past few years. The use of the dowry system is also getting more common. SAKHI, after doing research in newspaper, found over 50 reported dowry deaths within 20 months in 2001 and 2002, and this was only in Trivandrum. This leads Lindberg to
the conclusion that “an increasingly dichotomized gender discourse” has begun to rise in the past few years. (Lindberg 2005, p. 162ff.)

2.2 Previous research on the SAKHI library

Rekha R. Nair has written a masters thesis in Library and Information Science on the SAKHI library. It is called “An investigative study of the resources, organisation and services of SAKHI women’s resource centre library, Thiruvanathapuram.” Her aim is to investigate how well the SAKHI library is working and how it corresponds to the needs of its users. She has investigated the satisfaction among the users of the SAKHI library by handing out questionnaires. Her hypothesis is that the library is not sufficient for the needs of the users and this is also the conclusion of her study. She suggests that the books are too few, the premises are too small and the staff is too small as well. She thinks that the SAKHI library can not live up to the demands that its users have on it. Even though the subject of Nair’s study is the same as ours, namely the SAKHI library and its users, the two theses are very different. She uses a quantitative methodology and only focuses on concrete aspects like space and availability, while we are more concerned with more subtle matters. Therefore, we have not found it very useful for our study and only use it for background information.

2.3 The development of literacy

In the 19th century, the state today known as Kerala did not exist. It was comprised of the three principalities Cochin, Travancore and Malabar, which were ruled by local Maharajas. Mats Wingborg is a writer and a journalist, who has written several books about the Asian workers’ movement. He writes that staple food was sold in markets around Kerala already in the 19th century. This led to an economic abundance that made it possible to afford the building of schools, and to satisfy the great interest for education that existed in the kingdoms. (Wingborg 1999, p. 44.) The Maharajas of the principalities of Cochin and Travancore were also encouraging the British missionaries to build schools. The Maharajas were very supportive of education for women, as the inhabitants in the principalities showed a great interest for this. In 1956, the three Malayalam- speaking principalities formed Kerala, one of India’s smallest states. (Svennerstam 2000, p. 14ff.)

The early interest for education for women among the Maharajas and the inhabitants of the three principalities, is one explanation of today’s widespread high educational level of the women in Kerala. (Wingborg 1999, p. 114). It is most probably also one explanation for the exceptionally high levels of literacy among the men and women of Kerala. Today, Kerala has the highest literacy rates in India, with over 400 libraries and a great production of books and literature. (Wingborg 1999, p. 114.) There are 114 daily newspapers, 121 weekly, 103 fortnightly and 527 monthly magazines published, and these are only the ones that are published in Malayalam. Kerala also has over 5000 village libraries. (Erwér 2003, p. 122)

Jean Dreze, a professor in Economics at the Delhi School of Economics and Amartya Sen, a professor in Economics and Philosophy at the University of Harvard, writes that Kerala has a history of a major success in the expansion of female literacy. This has led to many things. The expansion of female literacy for
example can explain the decline in birth rate that has taken place in the state in the recent years. (Dreze and Sen in Mohanty 2004, p. 340 & p. 361.) United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index from 2005 states that the female literacy rate in India is 47.8 percent (UNDP 2005). This is to be compared with the literacy rates for women in Kerala, where 86 percent of the women are literate, in the rural areas as well as in the cities (Erwér 1998, p. 25.)

2.4 The development of libraries

For background information about the library history in India and Kerala we have used K. S. Ranjith’s (of the Centre for Development Studies in Trivandrum) discussion paper called “Rural Libraries of Kerala”, and two chapters (by Ravindran and Devarajan respectively) of the book “Public Library System in India”.

According to Ravindran, libraries have existed in India as early as the Buddhist period. The period of Muslim power, at the 13th century was an important era of libraries in India. The Mughals, who were the rulers, gave very much importance to learning and set up many libraries. However, much of what was built up during this early period disappeared when the Mughal empire declined and when the British took power over India. When libraries began to emerge again, they were no longer built up with Indian heritage, they were now “western products” (Ravindran in Augustin & Devarajan 1990, p. 1f.). Ranjith points out that the early libraries which had existed up till now were all scholarly libraries, whose modern counterparts in many ways still resemble the way they were then. What was new was the public libraries. “The true creation and phenomenon of our time is the public library” (Ranjith 2004, p. 6).

The colonials established libraries in India mainly for their own interests, but these institutions became important centres for those who struggled against the colonial powers. The public libraries began to emerge during the first half of the 19th century. Bombay, Calcutta and Madras all developed public libraries during this period. However, these libraries were not as public as their names suggested, they were rather exclusive to “a thin upper layer of the society” (Ravindran in Augustin & Devarajan 1990, p. 2). The establishment of public libraries in Bombay in 1808, is considered to mark the start of the development of public libraries in India.

The climate was hard for the public libraries for many years, but there were several movements which worked for the establishment and expansion of libraries, among these pioneers like Mothi Bhai Amin, Munindra Deb Roy Mahasaya and S.R. Ranganathan.

It was not until after 1937, when some provinces got democratic governments that the real spreading of libraries outside the largest cities began. The local governments began to set up large amounts of village libraries and travelling libraries in the rural areas of these states. (Ravindran in Augustine & Devarajan 1990, p. 3) Among these provinces were Cochin, Malabar and Travancore, which from 1956 onwards was to constitute the state of Kerala. Kerala already had a long history of libraries itself. The Trivandrum Public Library (Nowadays the State Central Library), established in 1829, is the oldest still existing public library in
India (Devarajan in Augustin & Devarajan 1990, p. 34f). From the 1920’s and onwards there were several more or less successful attempts to organize the libraries in Kerala under an umbrella organization. In the 1950’s, different library organisations in Kerala together formed the Kerala Granthasala Sanghom. The aim of the Sanghom, which still exists, is to function as a central organization for all the libraries in the state of Kerala. They work for establishment of new libraries as well as improvement of already existing libraries (Devarajan in Augustin & Devarajan 1990, p. 36). Since their formation, they have set up several thousands of public libraries in Kerala.

There has been a considerable growth of libraries in the whole of India since the country gained its independence, but mostly these expansions has been in the areas of academic and special libraries rather than public libraries. There have been many attempts to improve the public libraries of India with the help of legislation, but there seem to be very much frustration among people who work with libraries. Several of the contributors to Public Library System in India complain about how the different Library Acts does not lead to any real achievements. Ravindran writes that the library legislations should aim at “uniform development of public libraries in all the states of India” but that the Acts have not lead to any considerable progression for the library development (Ravindran in Augustin & Devarajan 1990, p. 6).

SAKHI is one of the many special libraries which have emerged in India in the last decades. K. P. Vijayakumar (a lecturer at the Department of Library and Information Science, University of Kerala) writes about special libraries and what distinguishes them. The easiest way to define a special library is to say that it is a library “concerned almost exclusively with literature of a particular subject or group of subjects” (Vijayakumar, 2001 p. 47). This is a suitable definition of the SAKHI library.
3 Method

We have chosen to make qualitative interviews, because we think that fits our study best. We were interested in the thoughts and feelings of our informants and for that purpose qualitative interviews are a suitable form. We have also made observations, both at the SAKHI library and at other libraries around Trivandrum. This provided us with a fuller understanding of the subject and the context of our informants.

Heléne Thomsson, a doctor in psychology, says that a researcher to a large extent can benefit from doing reflexive interviews, especially if the researcher is not familiar enough with the subject to be able to formulate immediate questions (Thomsson, 2002, p. 28). Reflexive interviews are leading to a grounded understanding and to qualitative data instead of leading to verification or falsification (Thomsson, 2002, p. 29). We certainly were not very familiar with the subject, the context or the culture, and this form of interview situation was very beneficial when it came to our enlightenment in various subjects concerning getting a greater understanding for a new culture, context and society. Karin Widerberg, who is a professor in sociology at the University of Oslo, writes about the importance of coherence between the interview and the following analysis. She says that it is preferable to already have the analysis quite clearly defined when making the interview guide (Widerberg 2002, p. 68). For us, this has not been possible. We had to conduct our interviews at a very early stage in our work, since we only had a very limited amount of time when we were close to the field of our study. This means that we had not had much time to consider the analysis to be. However, we do not think that the fact that the interviews were conducted at such an early stage has had any remarkable negative effects on the outcome.

We have conducted seven semi-structured interviews. Five of them have been with users of the SAKHI library in Trivandrum, Kerala and two of them have been with people from the staff. The two interviews with people from the staff have been used as background information in the paragraph about the SAKHI organization. The interviews have been ranging from 20 to 40 minutes. All interviews have been conducted in the SAKHI library. There are several reasons for this choice of location. First of all, there were practical reasons. Trivandrum is quite a big city (not compared to other Indian cities, but measured by Swedish standards), which is very difficult to travel in at daytime. There are constant traffic jams on the narrow streets and the heat makes it practically impossible to go any longer distances by feet. Buses only go in and out of town, so the only option is to take an auto-rickshaw or a taxi when moving in the city. Due to the jams, this can be a very complicated and time-consuming project. Therefore, it seemed like a good idea to conduct the interviews at SAKHI, particularly since we often had two interviews scheduled in the same day. Another reason for this location is that the women we interviewed are busy women who had to take care of school or work. We often conducted the interviews when they were visiting SAKHI in some other business as well, which made it easier for them, since they did not have to squeeze in another appointment at some other place in the city.

There have been several disturbing factors during the interviews such as children, traffic noise, cell phones, other visitors etc. However, one has to remember that in India, it is very rare with silent places. Wherever we had conducted these
interviews it is very likely that these kinds of disturbing factors would have been at least as frequent. Other difficulties have to a large extent involved language barriers and cultural differences. To perform an interview with a completely unknown person can become highly successful, Thomsson claims, since the situation makes it easy to ask questions about the most banal issues, without having to feel stupid (Thomsson 2002, p. 134). This is probably accurate when it comes to interviewing a completely unknown person from an unknown background too. Since our background differed so much from the informants’, we felt that we were allowed to ask about things that perhaps would not be okay to ask if we had been from India, since we were not expected to be familiar with the culture. Then again, it could also inhibit us from asking certain questions, since we were not sure about what was suitable to ask and what kinds of questions could be intimidating.

We have been very well met by the staff at SAKHI and we have received enormous help from the librarian of SAKHI. For example the librarian helped us picking out the informants. It is possible that this has caused damage to our thesis but we took the risk since the help also reduced difficulties to a large extent. It saved us a lot of work with finding English-speaking library users that were willing to speak to us but there is also the obvious risk that the informant picking led to a misguided, biased view of the library and the organization. Thomsson discusses the fact that interviewers always picks their informants because of certain wanted features. Interviewers perform interviews only with persons that they think can contribute to their knowledge base. They pick the informants that they have warm feeling for and that they are attracted to, whereas the persons that they develop feelings of anxiety or fear for are not picked out. At least we can not be charged guilty to such judgmental behaviour in the picking-out of our informants!

Thomsson writes that the whole purpose of making interviews is that one can let many informants get their voice heard, so that one is able to get several stories and interpretations of the same phenomenon. (Thomsson 2002, p. 29). Thomas Hylland Eriksen, who is a professor in Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo, writes that a common weakness in fieldwork is the fact that the key informants are not representative for the average members of society (Eriksen, 2000, p. 27-28). The researchers in an interview study often are presented to the “truths” that the powerful in a society are subsidizing (Thomsson 2002, p. 98). Our informants were powerful in some ways, since they had a high level of education and sometimes qualified jobs. Some of them were also involved in the SAKHI organization, which surely gave them a certain amount of power. However, we thought that these facts made their statements even more interesting. The informants that the librarian picked for us were all educated career women and university students, and all of them had a positive view of SAKHI. Our impression after the study’s completion is that these kinds of women were typical average users of the library, but naturally, we can only speculate about this.

Problems with language barriers are relatively easy to deal with, according to Thomsson (Thomsson 2002, p. 98). We do not quite agree with her. There were several occasions when the informants did not understand what we said, and vice versa. The transcriptions of the interviews were also more difficult to perform because of this. The Indian English and the Swedish English have clearly very
different accents and the melody and expressions that are used within the spoken language differs. However, everything worked out fine in most of the situations.

Another potential barrier in every interview situation is the power relation between the interviewer and the interviewed. Interview situations are as filled with prejudgets and power plays as any other situation. Differences between the interviewers and the informants when it comes to different ethnical backgrounds, different classes, different levels of education etc. are very important to note. The interview situation has a lot to do with personal stories and definition of truths. (Thomsson 2002, p. 97) We and the informants obviously came from very different cultural contexts. Everyone involved in this interview project looked, talked, expressed and acted in a way that probably was not fully understood by the other part.

We thought afterwards about the fact that we might have given the informants the impression that we had a lot of money since they knew that we were staying at a hotel, and that we sometimes went into the city by taxi. It is difficult to know in what way our cultural, social and economic differences influenced what the informants were talking about, but since we did not ask them about their opinions of something that might be “dangerous” to talk about, we hope that twisted power relations did not influence their answers too much.

One should be careful with performing interviews with one informant and two interviewers. Perhaps the power relation in that sort of interview can be an obstacle to what is said. However, there can also exist some positive aspects with being two interviewers; for example, the interviewers might supplement each other. (Thomsson 2002, p. 75) We felt that both of us had to be involved in the interview situation, in order to understand what was said and what the informants meant, since it was sometimes very difficult for us to comprehend them.

Usually it is a good idea to record the interviews, since one is interested in the interviews as a whole (Thomsson 2002, p. 90). After each interview the researcher should go through it carefully, to see what was working out well, and what was not working at all (Widerberg 2002, p. 102). We recorded the interviews with an mp3-player and after making some interviews, it became apparent to us that some of the abstract questions in the interview sheet did not work out very well. Our asking of the question led to embarrassment and confusion with some of the informants because the questions were not comprehended so in order to avoid this negative situation, we stopped asking these particular questions. This is also something which is recommended by Widerberg. When different factors in the field of research do not respond to the preconceived notions of the researchers, it is very important that the researchers adjust to the new situation (Widerberg 2002, p71). We did not quite know before we came to India, what kinds of questions would not be productive to ask, but when we identified these barriers, we tried in the best way to adjust to the new conditions.

There are different benefits connected with different ways of treating the recorded interviews. The exact transcription provides possibilities of interpretation of language, way of speaking, silences and interruptions that is only possible to capture with this technique. However, a summary can provide a general picture of
the interview situation, which can be difficult to get from the transcription (Widerberg 2002, p. 115). We have chosen to do both transcriptions and summaries. The transcriptions have been very useful to us in our work with the material, since it has provided us with the full result of the interviews, including both the positive and negative parts. Some details might not seem very significant at an early stage of listening to the interviews, but they can be very useful later, and an exact transcription minimizes the risk of missing such things. However, the summary is a more convenient format to work with and lets the researcher use her/his own words and even descriptions of the situation, which can not be gathered from the transcriptions. We have found both these methods sufficient for our work.

Knowledge without prejudices and beforehand opinions simply does not exist (Thomsson 2002, p. 42). The interpretation or the analysis of the interviews takes place within a framework that is affected by culture, language, society and norms (Thomsson 2002 p. 37). Although we have tried to be as open-minded as possible and tried to avoid being ethno-centric, this thesis is in many ways an analysis of an Indian context seen from a Swedish perspective because it could not be anything else.

3.1 Problems concerning our choice of literature

Marianne Svennerstam is a writer who has spent much time travelling around Kerala and she is the author of the traveller’s guide “Vilse i Kerala: En delstat i södra Indien” which we have used in our thesis. We are certainly aware of the fact that her book might not be the best and most trustworthy source of information for us. For example, we do not know what sources of information she has used for her book, since she does not give an account of it. We are aware of the fact that this makes our decision to use this book in our thesis very problematic. However, since we have found it rather difficult to find reliable, specific facts about Kerala’s history and not India’s as a whole, we chose to use her book as an information source for the “Kerala background” paragraph. We have searched the internet and found several independent websites that confirm the historical dates she states (for example http://www.keralaeverything.com). This made us trust her as a source of information concerning the history of Kerala despite the apparent problems concerning her book.
4 Empowerment and Information Theories

In this chapter we will present the theoretical frameworks that we will use in the analysis. We will start with providing an account of the origins of the concept of Women Empowerment, to enhance the understanding of the difficulties that are associated with the comprehension of the concept.

Then we will explore the Women Empowerment theory, mainly in the way that it is understood by Joanna Rowlands, Janet Townsend and Emma Zapata. We will start by looking at four ways of understanding the concept of power, namely “power over”, “power to”, “power with” and “power from within”. We will then turn our focus back to the concept of empowerment, and three dimensions in which it might occur according to Rowlands, namely the personal dimension, the relational dimension and the collective dimension.

In the last paragraph, we will present Christine Bruce’s seven categories of the concept of information literacy. We will concentrate on two of the concepts, namely; the knowledge extension conception and the wisdom conception. We will then give an account of Michael Buckland’s six aspects of information access. Here, we will focus on the availability aspect, the price to the user aspect and the cognitive access aspect.

4.1 The history of the Empowerment concept

The concept of empowerment can be traced to debates among feminists within Development Theory. The liberal way of viewing the development of women is called WID, which stands for Women in Development. Modernisation and economic growth is considered to provide the right conditions for enhancing the status of women and achieve equality between the sexes, the approach is built on the “politics of access” (Erwér 2003, p. 52). A central thought in this perspective is that women’s lives become better through a series of stages (Erwér 1998, p. 24ff.). The concept of “women’s status” was developed within the WID framework, with the purpose of making women more visible within the development process. However, this concept proved to be very limited when it came to women’s ability to access power and agency. Erwér writes that “the difficulty is how to capture the more intangible indicators in the term status, such as autonomy and control, decision-making, mobility and the ability to make choices”. (Erwér 2003, p. 48f.) She points for example out the fact that the development in Kerala has shown that women do not automatically gain more power and influence just because their status is enhanced. (Erwér 1998, p. 24ff.) In the middle of the 1980s, researchers and activists from the South started criticising the development process. One reason for this was that women still were marginalized within development. (Erwér 2003, p. 50ff.)

Joanna Rowlands has worked for many years as a trainer and consultant for cooperatives and NGOs in Britain and Latin America. She has written several works that deals with the concept of empowerment. In this thesis, we are using her book “Questioning empowerment”, which is a shortened and edited version of her PhD thesis: “Empowerment examined: an exploration of the concept and practice of
women’s empowerment in Honduras”. Rowlands says that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a switch in emphasis to local-level aspects of development. NGOs and grassroots organisations were given more importance and interest than before, something which was closely connected with the growing interest in bottom-up development. (Rowlands 1997, p. 4) A new development approached emerged from below; the GAD approach. GAD, which stands for Gender and Development, is a radical way of viewing the development of women. The GAD approach deals with the need to redistribute power. It is a process-oriented perspective. The GAD perspective does not only concentrate on gender but also class and ethnicity is considered in the analyses. (Erwér 1998, p. 24ff.) The GAD approach is concerned with the importance of “people’s abilities to identify and express their own needs and priorities” (Rowlands 1997, p. 4). Instead of the formerly dominant approach (WID) which was more of a top-down approach, this new view was focusing on the work of NGOs and grassroots-level groups which work with an enabling approach which encourages participation. Through this change of approach, the concept of empowerment took form. (Rowlands 1997, p. 4). The new empowerment concept provided a more complete perspective of women’s positions, and Erwér writes: “The shift in conceptualisation also expresses a new understanding of how crucial female agency is to change gender inequalities and to increase women’s well-being.” (Erwér 2003, p. 50).

During the 1990s, the process of empowerment has been articulated as the main path to a sustainable human development and gender equality, by both UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and the World Bank. The problem is that there is a “large variation in the understanding of and in the meaning of the concept of empowerment, due to its contemporary widespread use.” Feminist researchers and activists stress empowerment as a process that involves social transformation that changes power relations. Resources, ideology and agency are considered by some feminist scholars to be the main components of the concept. In the hands of the World Bank, empowerment is a tool to increase efficiency and productivity. Rowlands points out that the use of the term empowerment is increasing in all kinds of contexts, and she is concerned by the lack of exactitude with which the word is used (Rowlands 1997, p. v). She is of the opinion that this is a problem concerning the overall use of the concept of empowerment and she says that “The word tends to be used in a way which presupposes that the reader or listener will know what is meant. (...) The term may be used merely to communicate good intentions and to imply some unspecified recognition of the need for changes in the distribution of power” (Rowlands 1997, p. 7). With her book, Rowlands wishes to provide a definition of the term empowerment, because she means that unless this is done, the value of the concept is weakened considerably. “Unless empowerment is given a more concrete meaning, it can be ignored, or used to obscure, confuse or divert debates” (Rowlands 1997, p. 8). Janet Gabriel Townsend is a geographer from the University of Durham, and Emma Zapata is a professor in Agricultural and Forestry Sciences at the postgraduate College in Montecillo, Mexico. They have written a book named “Women and power – fighting patriarchy and poverty” that discusses Women Empowerment. Even Townsend detects problems with the word. She writes that all kinds of groups have adopted the word and “made it part of development-speak, and emptied it of meaning. Power is being pushed back out of the language of ‘development’ by the powerful.” (Townsend in Townsend 1999, p. 21).
Naila Kabeer, a doctor at the institute of Development Studies in Sussex, UK, also discusses the widespread use of the concept of Women Empowerment in her contribution to the SIDA publication “Discussing Women’s Empowerment”. She writes that:

“the persuasiveness of claims that women’s empowerment has important policy payoffs in the field of fertility behaviour and demographic transition, children’s welfare and infant mortality, economic growth and poverty alleviation has given rise to some unlikely advocates for women’s empowerment in the field of international development, including the World Bank, the major UN agencies and the OECD-DAC group”. (Kabeer 2002, p. 17)

When we looked up the concept “Empowerment of women” in the book “Economic Development” which is written by two professors in Economics, we found the following definition: “The idea that giving women power over their economic, social, and reproductive choices will raise their status, promote development, and reduce population growth.” (Todaro 2000, p. 794). It is obvious, as we will see, that this definition of what empowerment means is a bit different than, for example, Rowlands definition of the concept.

The most striking difference is that in Rowlands definition there is emphasis on feelings and inner strength, which in turn can lead to changes. In the explanation Todaro provides, empowerment is regarded as something that you can give to someone else, as a means to promote development, while among the writers we have used as theoretical framework, the concept is more concerned with processes which start inside the women themselves.

4.2 Empowerment

We are going to use the theories of Joanna Rowlands in this thesis. In her book “Questioning Empowerment” (see above), Rowlands points out that there are different forms of power or rather, different ways of defining power. She lists four different kinds of power:

- Power over
- Power to
- Power with
- Power from within

The concept of power over is based on a view of power as something that is exercised by one group or person over another group or person. The more power one group has, the lesser power does the other group have. According to a gender analysis which uses the concept of power over, women can only gain power at the expense of men’s power (Rowlands 1997, p. 11). Townsend writes that “power over may be enforced through violence or fear, or they may simply be social rules which force the weaker to accept the will of the stronger.(…) In some cases, the
power is established through force and threats, but often it is more subtle” (Townsend in Townsend 1999, p. 26).

The other three ways of looking at power are more concerned with processes. Power to is described as generative power, for example the one that generates from “the kind of leadership that comes from the wish to see a group achieve what it is capable of, where there is no conflict of interests, and the group is setting its own collective agenda” (Rowlands 1997, p. 12). This conception of power does not presuppose that increase of one group’s power automatically leads to decrease of the other group’s power.

Power with is “a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together.” (Rowlands 1997, p. 13) Power from within is described as “the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and makes us truly human. Its basis is self-acceptance and self-respect which extend, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others as equals” (Rowlands 1997, p. 13). Townsend claims that “Power from within' arises from a recognition that one is not helpless, not the source of all one's problems, that one is restricted in part by structures outside oneself (...) Women have to realize both what they can do, and what is holding them down and back” (Townsend in Townsend 1999, p. 30).

The different definitions of power include different perceptions of what empowerment is. The Power over definition of empowerment suggests that to become empowered, people must be brought from outside the realm of decision-making to the inside of it. Formal decision-making and political structures are seen as very important processes to participate in to be empowered (Rowlands 1997, p. 13). The Power to and Power with conceptions of power are more “concerned with the processes by which people become aware of their own interests and how those relate to the interests of others, in order both to participate from a position of greater strength in decision-making and actually to influence such decisions” (Rowlands 1997, p. 14). A feminist understanding of empowerment includes giving scope to the “full range of human abilities and potential. (...) Empowerment must involve undoing negative social constructions, so that people come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and influence decisions” (Rowlands 1997, p. 14).

Kabeer emphasizes the importance of change in the concept of empowerment. She makes a clear distinction between being powerful and being empowered. People can be powerful without being empowered. In the sense in which she uses the word, people can not be empowered unless they were disempowered in the first place (Kabeer 2002, p. 18f). Kabeer defines the process of empowerment as largely associated with the ability to make choices. She says that empowerment “refers to the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (Kabeer 2002, p. 19).
Rowlands claims that empowerment works within the following three dimensions:

- Personal
- Relational
- Collective

Empowerment within the personal dimension, she describes as “developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalised oppression” (Rowlands 1997, p. 15). Townsend and Zapata emphasises that empowerment should be self-empowerment. By this they mean that people can not empower other people, they have to empower themselves. “It is possible to enable another person to do this or that, but only they can empower themselves to do it.” (Townsend and Zapata in Townsend 1999, p. 2). They write about the dangers of regarding power as something that can be bestowed upon a person by someone else. ‘If you give someone power, you can take it away: it is only if they take that power for themselves that it is theirs’ (Townsend and Zapata in Townsend 1999, p. 24). Zapata defines empowerment within the personal dimension as “the growth of self-esteem and defeat of the "power over" internalised by the individual” (Zapata in Townsend 1999, p. 163).

Empowerment within the relational dimension, Rowlands suggests is “developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of relationship and decisions made within it” (Rowlands 1997, p. 15). Zapata writes that relational empowerment involves “the power to change relationships in the direction the individual wishes” (Zapata in Townsend 1999, p. 163).

Finally, the empowerment process of the collective dimension is described by Rowlands as:

“where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone. This includes involvement in political structures, but might also cover collective action based on co-operation rather than competition. Collective action may be locally focused for example, groups acting at village or neighbourhood level or be more institutionalised, such as the activities of national networks or the formal procedures of the United Nation” (Rowlands 1997, p. 15).
Rowlands shows a model of how these three dimensions of power can interact.

However, for her own study, Rowlands finds this model insufficient for detailed analysis. She provides a new and more complex model. She makes three different variants of it, the first one concentrating on personal experience (personal empowerment), the second one on group experience (collective empowerment) and the third one on experience of relationship (relational empowerment). We have found the concepts she uses in these models useful for our purpose but we find the models themselves unnecessary complicated for this study. Furthermore, they are to some extent designed specifically for her particular study, and would not really fit into our work. However, we provide a picture of one of her models, namely the one on personal empowerment, to provide the reader with a fuller understanding of the terms we have used.
Rowlands divides the aspects of empowerment into three groups which are contextual (the environment), structural (the nature of the organisations and their activities) and psychological (the inner changes and processes) (Rowlands 1997, p. 110). The psychological empowerment is considered to be the most important and significant group and therefore it is given the function as core in the models.

Core values connected to the process of change in the personal experience, Rowland suggests could be self confidence, self esteem, sense of ‘self’ in wider context, dignity and a sense of agency (Rowlands 1997, p. 112). A sense of agency, Rowlands explains as having a feeling “of being an individual who can interact with her surroundings and cause things to happen” (Rowlands 1997, p. 111).

When it comes to collective empowerment, Rowlands lists core values such as: group identity, sense of collective agency, group dignity, self-organization and self-management (Rowlands 1997, p. 116).

The core values connected to relational empowerment are: ability to negotiate, ability to communicate, ability to get support, ability to defend self/rights, sense of ‘self’ in relationship and dignity (Rowlands 1997, p. 120).

The contextual and structural aspects constitute the environmental factors that are either encouraging or inhibiting the process of change/empowerment. “We can thus distinguish between the ‘core’ of the empowerment process, that is, the transformation of the individual or the group that is the ‘key’ that opens ‘locks’ on the empowerment door; and the circumstances that appear to encourage or inhibit the process” (Rowlands 1997, p. 111). Encouraging factors could be having an activity outside the home, ending isolation, sharing of problems and receiving of support. Examples of inhibiting factors are poverty, lack of control over use of time, childcare obligations and opposition from the male society (Rowlands 1997, p. 112). The inhibiting and encouraging factors Rowlands uses as examples are pretty closely connected with the special circumstances of her study, which is why we do not give a full account of them here. Instead, we are going to see what special inhibiting and encouraging factors we can find in our informants’ statements.

Rowlands emphasizes that simply the core values in themselves do not equal empowerment, it is “the action that arises from the core qualities that are significant” (Rowlands 1997, p. 127). Thus, it is not sufficient to just increase one’s self esteem or sense of dignity, unless there is some kind of change taking place as a result of it. Rowlands also points out that the three dimensions of change are closely connected with each other, and that change in one of them often leads to changes in another one (Rowlands 1997, p. 127).

We intend to use Rowland’s concepts of empowerment when we analyze our interviews. We will go through our informants’ statements and see what connections to these concepts we can find. How can we relate the informants’ statements to the different definitions of power and empowerment? What do they say about empowerment? And finally, what do they say about the relation between SAKHI and its library and Women Empowerment? We are also interested in what
kinds of inhibiting/encouraging factors our informants talk about, related to change and empowerment.

First we are going to see what connections to the different power definitions we can find in the informants’ statements. Then we will do the same thing but with focus on empowerment instead of power. We will also see what inhibiting and encouraging factors they talk about in relation to this. Finally we will analyse what they say about the connection between the SAKHI library and Women Empowerment. Throughout this analysis we will not be using Rowlands’ models of empowerment but we will use the concepts from them, such as core values, inhibiting/encouraging factors. We will also use the division into personal, collective and relational empowerment.

4.3 Library access and empowerment

An important, perhaps even the most important, feature of any library is its users. We will use two main theories to analyze what kind of users our informants are, what kind of users that they think that the SAKHI library has and in what way they think that the SAKHI library is connected to Women Empowerment. The two theories are Christine Bruce’s categories of the concept of information literacy and Michael Buckland’s six aspects of information access.

Christine Bruce is a Lecturer in the Queensland University of Technology School of Information Systems in Brisbane in Australia. In her book “The seven faces of information literacy” she has identified seven categories of the conception of information literacy. Bruce objects to an objective, linear understanding of information literacy and proposes a relational method that focuses on the conceptions of the learner (Marcum 2002, p. 3). We are going to focus primarily on Bruce’s categories number six and seven in our analysis chapter. The concepts are:

1. The information technology conception – information literacy is seen as using information technology for information retrieval and communication. (Category one)

2. The information sources conception – information literacy is seen as finding information. (Category two)

3. The information process conception – information literacy is seen as executing a process. (Category three)

4. The information control conception – information literacy is seen as controlling information. (Category four)

5. The knowledge construction conception – information literacy is seen as building up a personal knowledge base in a new area of knowledge. (Category five)

6. The knowledge extension conception – information literacy is seen as working with knowledge and personal perspectives adopted in such a way that novel insights are gained. (Category six)
The knowledge extension conception aims at extending a knowledge base that is already there. This concept’s knowledge base is gained through personal experience and scholarly reflection. The personal experience and the scholarly reflection give the information user an opportunity for analysis of the information and allows for further creative insight to occur. The reflection and creative insight that occurs in this concept usually result in development of novel ideas or creative solutions, according to Bruce. Interesting to note, is that information in this conception is seen as being a part of a person and as being transformed by the person. (Bruce 1997, p. 143ff.)

In the wisdom conception, information literacy is understood in terms of using information “wisely”, and it therefore presupposes a consciousness of personal values and ethics. Wisdom is here related to ideas of social responsibility. Information is used to the benefit of the information user, colleagues or clients. Information literacy is experienced as knowledge extension here, also. However, the knowledge base is supplemented by an awareness of values, attitudes and beliefs that the users are explicitly aware of and which influences their use of information. Here, information is seen as transforming the person. (Bruce 1997, p. 147ff.)

We are interested in what kind of information literacy-skills and previous knowledge that our informants might be in possession of, and how these skills and knowledge can contribute to their use of the SAKHI library. We are also interested in how the informants are viewing the dissemination of information that SAKHI is working with; how is SAKHI using information according to them? To find this out, we will use Bruce’s concepts when analyzing their statements.

Buckland writes that “Information is not stuff but a process. It is the process of becoming informed”. This means that information retrieval systems do not retrieve information but physical things, such as data and documents. According to Buckland “These physical things may, when perceived by somebody with appropriate prior knowledge and suitable cognitive skills, contribute toward a change or increase in that person’s knowledge”. (Buckland 1998, p. 115). According to Buckland there exist six aspects of access to information that has to be considered, namely:

1. Identification.
2. Availability.
3. Price to the user. (The “real price” includes time, effort, and discomfort as well as money.)
4. Cost to the provider.
5. Cognitive access.
6. Acceptability. (Buckland 1988, p. 188ff.)

We will concentrate on aspect two, three and five in our analysis chapter.
When it comes to the “cognitive process” of becoming informed, Buckland writes that there are several factors concerning cognitive skills and prior knowledge that are involved. For example one has to consider:

1. If the person can read
2. If the person can understand the language in which the text is written
3. If the concepts involved are comprehended by the person

According to Buckland it is highly unlikely that the person becomes informed if one or more of these three conditions are not met. (Buckland 1988, p. 116.)

We will use Buckland’s theory in our analysis chapter to find out in what ways the SAKHI library is accessible or non-accessible to its users and what kinds of people that have the best prerequisites to use it. We are also interested in finding out which kinds of users the library has, according to our informants.

Richard Rubin, an Associate Professor at the School of Library and Information Science at Kent State University in Ohio, writes that how someone seeks information may vary by age, level of education, intelligence and discipline. He also writes that a troubling finding in several user studies is that the people who are most likely to use libraries are more formally educated and have higher incomes. (Rubin 1998, p. 26 & p. 34.) These statements will also be valuable to bear in mind when considering possible implications that can be drawn in view of the five informants’ previous skills and knowledge.
5 Results

In this chapter, we will introduce the SAKHI organization and its library. We will give an account for what the Director and the Librarian of the organization think that the main tasks of the SAKHI organization and of the SAKHI library are. We will then present the five users of the SAKHI library that are our informants.

5.1 SAKHI

The word “sakhi” means “female friend” in many Indian languages. When the organization SAKHI was initiated in 1996, it was primarily functioning as a library dissemination and documentation centre. This centre was the first of its kind in Kerala (Erwér 2003, p. 239). The Director, who has been working with marginalized groups for 16 years, says that she…

“…felt the need for having an organisation which will do ongoing work with women alone, with a feminist perspective. Because what I have seen in Kerala is there are lots of organizations, women’s organizations also, but who are doing micro level welfare activity or development activity without any perspective on what they are doing.”

The Director also mentions the information language barriers as a reason for putting up a library dissemination and documentation centre in Trivandrum:

“…because of the language, because India has so many languages and most of the publications on feminism and related debate are always either in English or in Hindi, which is the national languages. And Malayalam is used only in this small state. And there are hardly any publications of that type here. We hardly come to know what’s happening. So there was a big gap of information. So our intention when we started was basically to fill this gap, to act as a bridge between what is happening nationally, internationally and the local groups. So we started with the library dissemination and documentation centre. Collecting books and documents but again because everything is in English, most of these things are also in English, so that won’t be accessible to local groups, so we decided to do translation to local language and publishing in local language. So that has been one of our major activities.”

Today SAKHI has around 15 employees. The organization does not follow any hierarchical administrative organization, and the work is carried out by co-ordinated team work (Nair 2002, p. 72). The SAKHI library has one librarian who works full-time. The library is open from 9 am to 5 pm every day, except for Sundays, when it is closed. It contains around 4000 lendable books, and also a documentation section consisting of articles that are cut out from newspapers and journals and collected in binders. The literature is related to feminism and gender in areas such as health and sexuality, economy, religion, politics, culture, education
and human rights. The membership fee for the library users is Rs. 200, and you also have to leave a security of Rs. 500. The library is used by researchers, students, journalists, professionals like doctors, lawyers and also activists. (SAKHI 2006) The books are selected by the director and the librarian. They are using book selection tools such as publisher’s catalogue and suggestions from the users. (Nair 2002, p. 77) The library follows a feminist classification system called “Akshara”. The Akshara classification was developed by the Akshara women’s group that is based in Bombay, and it includes many women related subjects, which makes the classification of books very easy for the librarian. The library is financed with assistance from the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (Nair 2002, p. 71). This is a fund that was developed to promote women’s education in developing countries. The money is given to the Director on an unconditional individual fellowship for a three years period (Erwér 2003, p. 241).

The main way in which SAKHI is reaching out to the public is through their contact with women’s groups. For example, SAKHI is part of the Kerala Stree Vedi, the Kerala Women’s Forum, a network of several women’s groups with an explicit feminist perspective. The Kerala Stree Vedi was formed in 1996, and it involves around thirty-five women’s groups in Kerala. (Erwér 2003, p. 42 & p. 277) Another way of information dissemination is through writing articles for different journals (SAKHI 2006). SAKHI is also conducting a newsletter in Malayalam that they send out by mail every two months, in which they among other things are giving information about new library book arrivals. The newsletter has about 500 subscribers, mainly made up of scholars, feminists and organizations, of which many are rural. SAKHI also gives out the newsletter when they are holding classes and seminars. The organization also brings out books, pamphlets, brochures and posters in Malayalam, which are used by the local groups. The librarian says there is a very limited amount of books about women’s issues in Malayalam, which is why SAKHI is translating them:

“…these issues, like ideological, social things and educational things and health, we got only English books. In Malayalam, limited books are there. Also we are trying to translate these books into Malayalam and to give information to the local women also. And in each issue we prepare brochures to them about domestic violence, laws to protect ladies, domestic violence and child sexual abuse. We prepare these brochures, ‘what is child abuse’ and ‘workplace harassment’. Like this, ‘what are the rights of women?’.”

However, the Director does not think that disseminating this kind of information is enough:

“We bring out a newsletter or kind of magazine, once in two months, in local language. (…) And this alone is not enough again because women have very little mobility, because of their own particular double-work burden and things like that. Women from Kerala also, all of them can not come here, then we thought that okay, we’d also need to do a lot of training, programmes,
Subsequently, today SAKHI is not only a library dissemination and documentation centre, the organization is involved in many other areas. One of their major parts of work has been directed to women who are suffering from domestic, public or workplace violence. They have set up a legal assistance programme so women who experience domestic violence and who are from very poor families can come to SAKHI and get free legal help. They are also arranging training programmes for female politicians to make them remain in the political field instead of returning to their former life as housewives. SAKHI is also conducting many seminars, courses and training programmes for grassroot women and adolescents in the rural areas, and they work as resource persons for both other women’s groups and the government.

According to the librarian, the groups that mainly use the library are researchers from different universities who come for their assignments. She says that in some universities, the professors are familiar with the SAKHI library and they refer students to it. In one day, “less than five” users come to visit the library.

When asked what the main purpose with the library is, the librarian says:

“The main purpose is to give information to women. Because SAKHI’s main object is to mainstream gender. We have so many books and periodicals and journals about gender in English, but in the local language, that’s Malayalam, very little. So we are trying to translate, or to change the English, and other languages, books and articles, to Malayalam. (...) The main objective of this work is to give information to the grassroot women. They only know that regional language. They do not know English. So we are trying to communicate with them. (...) And dissemination, information collection and dissemination, that is the main aim of the library, for all libraries. Collection and dissemination. We do this especially for women.”

In a brochure from the organization, they write:

“The aim of the centre is to “mainstream” gender as a political discourse in this state. We believe that knowledge is power. Women need to be empowered with information and tools of feminist analysis so that knowledge collectively grows and informs interventions in social processes.” (SAKHI 2006)

The librarian says that the library is mainly used by educated people, but that some of them do not know English. These people are from the rural areas, and they are reading the books in Malayalam that the library contains. When asked if she would like more people without higher education to use the library, she says:

“Oh, we welcome them [laugh]. But this library is located in the city. So most people who come here are educated. Mainly
because so many colleges, research institute are near. And so many college students come here for their research work. Because this type of books they do not get in other libraries. Mainly this women related. This ideology and women’s movements. So college heads, head of the departments, also recommend them to come here and go through these books.”

SAKHI has also made a brochure about their library with their classificatory main headings that they have sent out to every college, to spread information about what kind of library they are.

Anitha Dighe, a Director for Adult Continuing Education at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, writes that women often lack a social space where they can go without a man. Communications studies have identified several “gossip centres”, like the village tea stall, where men meet, chat and exchange information. These centres do not exist for women to the same extent. Dighe writes that women need more places where they can go and feel comfortable alone, a place away from their homes where they can chat, seek the help of other women or just relax. Development programmes which provide these kinds of social spaces are known to enhance women’s learning. (Dighe in Malmquist 1992, p. 50) When asked what Women Empowerment means to the librarian of SAKHI, she too comments on this by saying:

“SAKHI’s main agenda is to mainstream gender in the society so... In my part, Women Empowerment is to make all capabilities to women. The main thing is awareness. Not academic awareness but social awareness. Kerala society, women do not get much information about our society, because the social... Men can understand many things about society and the local development from various sources. But the women got only limited sources. When a girl go to school, only school and then she come back to home. But compared to boys... Boys get information from the public and some libraries. And so many information clubs. (…) But when compared to boys, girls do not get this information. Then she’s growing up as a woman, she got only limited information. So, we are trying to give information, more information, to women and develop their awareness. About anything, health, education. For everything. And they can develop their capacity for getting awareness. And mobility is one main thing. She wants to go distant places alone. In Kerala, night traveling is very dangerous. After six o’ clock it is very dangerous to travel for a woman. So mobility is a problem. We conduct so many campaigns about traveling. Like, we put stickers in the buses: ‘Careful journey is the right of women also’. There are so many laws and rights about this but in practical it is not. So mobility is one problem. Then women get awareness about the laws for them, they can use that. So we are trying to give information. (…) Like this, so many things are here. We are trying to aware these social rights, they have social rights. Awareness is a main thing for their empowerment. So at
this library and information centre, we’re trying to create awareness about all things.”

SAKHI is an autonomous organization. Maxine Molyneux writes that autonomous organizations are characterised by:

“independent actions, where women organise on the basis of self-activity, set their own goals and decide their own forms of organisation and forms of struggle. Here the women's movement is defined as a self-governing community which recognises no superior authority, nor is it subject to the governance of other political agencies. Its authority resides in the community.”

(Molyneux in Jackson 1998, p. 71f.)

We find this definition applicable on the SAKHI organization.

5.2 Our own impression of the libraries in Kerala

During our stay in Kerala we naturally paid several visits to the SAKHI library. However, we also paid visits to the State Central Library, the British Library and the University Library. The State Central Library is a public library and the British Library is private. The two libraries give quite different visual impressions, the State Central Library being quite dark and traditional looking while the British Library is more of a bright, modern looking library, but the atmospheres are quite similar at both places. We got the feeling of a strict and very formal attitude. We had to fill in our passport numbers and purpose of visit before entering the libraries. If we wanted to take photos inside the buildings, we had to apply for special permits, which were not very easy to get. At the British library, we even had to go through a security check when entering and exiting. The University Library also gave a quite traditional impression, and was a bit “old-fashioned” in our western eyes. It was easier to enter this library, but we still had to check in our bags at a counter by the entrance, since no bags were allowed inside.

Compared to these libraries, the SAKHI library is very different. First of all, it is a very small institution, the library section only consisting of two rooms. The atmosphere was much more relaxed (something that our informants mentioned as significant for this place), with people entering and leaving without being checked in any way. We felt that we were met by curiosity rather than suspicion. Concerning the impression we got of the users, there were also some differences between the four different libraries. Hardly surprising, SAKHI had mostly (but not entirely) female users, who lent books or sat reading or discussing. The other libraries had users of both sexes but there seemed to be a difference in how men and women used the libraries. We saw women in the libraries, but they seemed to use it just for picking up books rather than as a social meeting place. In the reading halls and in the other spaces with chairs or benches, there were almost exclusively men. Men of all ages seemed comfortable to use the libraries as a place to meet and relax or study, while women did not seem to use these public spaces of the libraries to the same extent.
5.3 Five users of the SAKHI library

We will here present the results of the interviews we conducted with five users of the SAKHI library. Some of the informants are tightly associated with SAKHI, and do or have done some work for them. Others are just users. We have selected the most relevant parts of the interviews and we provide a summary of each one.

5.3.1 Interview with Fulki

Fulki is a 38 year old woman. She is a writer and an academic and has done research and written articles and books about women’s issues. She has been very active in the women’s movement in Kerala. However, she has currently taken a break from the organizational work to concentrate on writing fiction. Fulki lives in Trivandrum and she has been a member of SAKHI since it started back in 1996.

Fulki says she was not a library user when she was a kid because it was not appropriate for girls to go to libraries in the area where she grew up. Nowadays she is using the University Library and the State Central Library for her research purposes and for references. For her fiction reading she is using the SAKHI library. She also used the SAKHI library collection to find information about women’s history at both the global and the national level for her organizational work before she took a break. She says the SAKHI library has “a precious collection” of gender studies literature. She says that if she is seeking a book that is not available at the library, she can tell the librarian that she is interested in that book and then the librarian will get it from the bookstore. Fulki thinks that the SAKHI library is a good help to the people who are associated with gender or cultural studies and that it would be very difficult to get hold of gender studies books if the library did not exist.

Fulki is very interested in feminist issues and in women’s issues in Kerala particularly. She says her interest in feminist issues inflects her daily life in a way that makes her “challenge stereotypes regarding women and the images of women made by this society”. She also consciously tries to break stereotypical conventions. Fulki is living together with a man and they have a child but they are not married. Fulki says that she and her partner share the responsibility for the baby and therefore she is not “bothered about this so called society” in the sense that she does not let it control her. She says that if she was “an ordinary woman” it would be much more difficult but since she is a writer she is somehow expected to be different so it is not hard but she says: “For an ordinary woman, it’s not very easy, not at all easy”.

Fulki is not very precise when she answers the question about what Women Empowerment means to her: “It has different dimensions, economic, social, cultural, political levels of empowerment.” We try to get her to develop this but we do not get a fuller answer.

Fulki is absolutely certain that the SAKHI library is associated with Women Empowerment because it is “giving capacity building” for women. She says that it is mainly educated women that are using the library because the literature is mainly
in English. The documentation and some books are in Malayalam, but those books are all fiction. She also thinks that there are mostly urban women who are using the library because it is situated in the heart of Trivandrum. However, she does not consider it a problem. Since the organization SAKHI is publishing a newsletter that disseminates information to local women she thinks that SAKHI can work as bridge between the rural and the urban women.

5.3.2 Interview with Geeta

Geeta is a 30 year old woman who lives in Trivandrum with her family. She works as a lawyer and she is also a researcher. Furthermore, Geeta is working at SAKHI with giving free legal aid to women facing violence. She is eager to talk about her work as a lawyer and her research project. Geeta uses the State Central Library for “general reading” and the British Library for research. When asked about the British Library she says “For academic purposes it is very good. Only for academic purposes.” She came to the SAKHI library after she had taken her law degree and she had become interested in gender issues. She visits the SAKHI library every day. She says that “I found a place here, not only for reading and not only for referring or not only for studying. Here it is space for discussion also.” She thinks that the SAKHI library is contributing to making women’s issues more acknowledged because “here in Kerala we have no other library which is oriented to women’s issues.” She says that if you are looking for information about some particular women’s issue, you will find it here. “If it is available in Kerala it will be here in SAKHI.” She says that if she goes to the University Library, she thinks that the documents are not properly placed and then she has to search the whole library. When asked what she would do if the library did not exist, she says:

“Definitely we have to search here and there to collect. (...) I am not only a researcher; I’m also having a family. (...) I’m having family responsibilities; I’m having responsibilities to my office and so many other things are there. So I can’t walk here and there to collect all the things. (...) So as far as I am concerned, so many ladies who are working, or who are researching, or who are doing any other thing, it’s a very good place for them. If [it didn’t exist] definitely I wouldn’t get these materials. I can’t complete my research work in this way because I have to collect it from these other parts of Kerala; I have to go all this way. I can’t go because I have to look after my family, my child, I have to take him along with me.”

This problem is something that she mentions repeatedly, the troubles of being a career woman at the same time as she has to take care of a family. Geeta is interested in gender issues. As a lawyer she gets to experience much, and she says she gets to see so many helpless women who are facing violence from their own families, coming to the court. Asked about Women Empowerment she talks about ideological empowerment (which she actually thinks that we are encouraging when we come and ask our questions) and financial empowerment:

“Economic empowerment is another problem because without economic stability we can’t live. (...) We have to empower them,
both economically, ideologically and their living conditions have to be empowered. (...) We are giving some strength to them so they can live as human beings. Now they are, some of them, the majority of the society is not living as humans; their basic human rights are violated.”

She definitely thinks that the SAKHI library is associated with Women Empowerment since it has do to with ideological development.

“Here in Kerala, nobody focuses on women’s issues. We are giving a lot of foreign and other books to them. Along with that we are giving posters. And we are giving some other things; songs, screenplays. And there we are conveying our ideology. So it’s a very good place for giving information to people who are not here.”

Geeta says that it happens quite often that women without a higher education visit the library, and if they are interested in reading a book in English, SAKHI will translate it into Malayalam for them.

5.3.3 Interview with Poona

Poona is a 46 year old single woman who is working as a research partner and has quite much experience of working with gender issues. She was one of the initiators of SAKHI and even though she is not working for the organization now, she still visits the library frequently. She estimates that she pays a visit to SAKHI once in ten days, which is quite much since her work includes much travelling and she often is abroad. She uses the other libraries in the city as well but she no doubt prefers SAKHI.

Poona finds SAKHI’s library sufficient because of the way it collects women’s issues under one roof. She tells us that the British library used to have a women’s issues-shelf, but that they took it away after one year or so. Poona is not sure of the reasons for this but she thinks that the women’s issues shelf was not very popular. When we ask her about the possible reasons for this unpopularity, she says: “I think it’s this concept of…. Women’s issues are still, you know, not very much accepted as such.” She also says that people in general still have problems with embracing the concept of gender and women’s issues as a way of viewing all aspects of life:

“Okay, you take up something because there is a problem, but you do not have it as a part of life. So people still have to get used to the idea of gender, women’s issues and women’s perspective as something that is there in your life. So that is not very accepted I think as such”.

She suspects that many people still look at women’s issues as something that is not affecting them, but that there at least is a growing awareness of the women’s movements in society. “Women’s issues are getting recognized. A certain consciousness is there, but I don’t think they’ve accepted it.” As an example she tells us that the local bookshops are getting a new kind of awareness of gender
related books thanks to SAKHI. “So now when they get a collection of books dealing with women’s issues, they immediately phone us, ‘come and look at this’.”

Poona thinks that there are great differences between the SAKHI library and other, more traditional, libraries. She thinks that SAKHI’s library has an accommodating and friendly atmosphere compared to other libraries. She says that SAKHI is more welcoming to all kinds of people and tries not to exclude or alienate anyone.

“So there is space here. I think you can notice that at the other libraries you find a more formal atmosphere, it’s very sober and it can be a bit frightening. But here it’s more like, okay come and sit where you like. It’s not judgmental in that way. Somehow I think that makes it different.”

Poona describes the atmosphere in her childhood home as “agitating” and she thinks that is one reason why she quite early developed an interest for feminism and gender issues. She is sure that she has many benefits from being a single woman. She points out that as she does not have a family to take care of, she has more time and she is able to spend and divide that time as she like, which would have been difficult for a married woman. She is “in charge” of her time. Since Poona has a long history of feminist work she is very familiar with the concept of Women Empowerment. She is also very well aware of the fact that there are many different definitions of what Women Empowerment really is and she is not very keen on giving a clear definition of how she defines it herself. She only gives a vague answer to what her sense of empowerment is: “If she’s independent and she’s able to make decisions on her own and…” She is more interested in talking about the problems that are connected with defining other people’s degree of empowerment.

“We have all got an idea about what Women Empowerment is, be in charge of your life, make decisions on your own, but there are many others, women who are happy with how they are, and we feel that they are not empowered and they feel that they are empowered. (…) Yeah, I have a consciousness about what an empowered woman is, but at the same time also trying not to be judgmental about other women. They see themselves empowered but… from our point of view they are not. I think we have to understand that”

Poona is convinced that the SAKHI library is contributing to Women Empowerment, by for example making women conscious about their rights. However, she tends to talk about the whole resource centre rather than specifically about the library.

5.3.4 Interview with Yamini

Yamini is a student in her early 20’s, who is taking the master’s degree of law. She says that she finds much information in the books in the SAKHI library, and that the library has books that no other library in the area has. She also says that the library is very sufficient for people interested in women’s studies. Yamini says that she is interested in feminism and gender studies to some extent. The main reason
she gives for this is that women in India, and especially in Kerala, have to suffer a lot of atrocities and sexual harassments from the men. However, she says that she has not experienced any harassments herself, since she lives in an urban area. Yamini also points out that women also face harassments from other women. She says that “some women, when they have got the power, they sometimes try to down throw these village women, rural women”. She thinks that the SAKHI organization is helping women by participating in the international debate about empowerment of women and because they conduct seminars and other information programs locally. She also thinks that the library is helping because; “So many booklets, brochures and publications come here. This helps women, particularly the women living in the rural areas.”

Women Empowerment to her has very much to do with making women aware about their rights. She says that:

“In India, in a lot of India, we can see that mostly women are not aware of their rights and the privileges that they are given by our constitution, by Indian constitution or any other laws which are there for women. In India we can see there are so many laws for women, but mostly, most of them are not aware by these women in India. And this lack of knowledge is the main reason that women has to suffer from atrocities.”

She also talks about empowerment as being about giving inner strength to women:

“To make them feel that they are not less than, they are not unequal to men. To make a feeling in her self. That she has the power…to overcome all the difficulties that she has to face from the male side, or in the male dominated society. (…) to make a feeling in her mind that she is not unequal to men.”

Yamini thinks that SAKHI is working successfully for Women Empowerment, partly because it is an NGO and does not work for profit. She thinks that this is a good starting point for decreasing the atrocities and harassments of women. Yamini thinks that SAKHI is helping to make women aware about their rights.

5.3.5 Interview with Reena

Reena is a 23 year old social worker student who lives in Cochin. She is doing her graduating field work at a social institution in Trivandrum. For research connected to this work she uses the SAKHI library on a daily basis. She often sits for many hours at the library and she also takes books with her to the hostel were she stays. She finds this library very useful for her subject, which is reproductive health among women, and she uses the books as well as the newspaper clippings. She thinks that the library has got the information she wants and she has no problems locating the documents. The SAKHI library is well known at her university in Cochin and her seniors have recommended her to use it.

When asked whether she is interested in feminism and gender issues she says: “Feminism I’m not clear about exactly, I don’t know, but gender issues I’m really
concerned about.” She points out that gender is something that is increasingly being discussed in many different parts of society. Her own interest for these issues came as a result of this.

Reena thinks that the SAKHI library can contribute to making women’s issues more acknowledged in society, but only to some extent. She says that even though people who read the books will become aware of gender issues, there is still a problem to reach out to new people. To come here and read books you have to have an interest for gender issues to begin with.

Reena seems to be quite familiar with the concept of Women Empowerment. Her conception is that to be empowered is to become self reliant, in a financial, physical and mental kind of way. Unlike the other informants she is not sure that SAKHI has anything to do with Women Empowerment.

“There are many books here, which will explore the idea of Women Empowerment. (…) But I don’t know whether it contributes [to Women Empowerment] because only educated people use this library. But there are many people that are below… that, so I don’t know whether those people use this library. By use of this library, I don’t think Women Empowerment will come.”

However reluctant she is to say that there is a clear and direct connection between SAKHI library and Women Empowerment, she still thinks that the SAKHI staff is doing a good work for women.

“There are many other ways for Women Empowerment. Those people who are working in SAKHI, they are getting out of their office and going outside places and they are working for Women Empowerment. And for that of course they can get ideas from the books from here.”

Reena seems to connect the empowerment-concept mainly with poor women; she talks about the importance of empowerment projects in the rural areas or “tribal areas” as she calls them. But when asked about it she claims that she does not think that all educated urban women are empowered.

An interesting thing that Reena brings up is that she does not think that it is enough for a woman, poor or rich, to just read the literature to be empowered. She emphasizes the need to be open and willing to let herself change. “Otherwise, for knowing, just to know these things, then I don’t know whether it is happening.”

Reena talks about the relation between family and Women Empowerment:

“As far as I’m concerned, Women Empowerment does not mean that… Breaking your families and all. Women Empowerment should happen within the family. (…) In most of the families Women Empowerment is happening. (…) [In India] we give a lot of importance to family. Husband, wife, we give a lot of
importance. (...) I don’t think that family rules and family
maintenance should be broken. By untouching all of these things,
Women Empowerment is ok.”

Reena is here very careful to tell us that she does not think that Women
Empowerment should be allowed to affect the family in a negative way.
6 Analysis

In this chapter we will analyze the informants’ statements. We will start by looking at in which ways their statements can be related to the definitions of power. We will then continue with analyzing their statements with help from Rowlands’ empowerment definitions. Then we will discuss the informants’ own conceptions of Women Empowerment, and in which ways they think that the SAKHI library is related to this. Last but not least, we will look at the fact that all of our informants are academics with a previous feminist interest, and possible implications of this. We will continue by examine possible library barriers and discuss the SAKHI library’s clientele in general. Finally, we will look at the ways in which our informants think that the SAKHI library can contribute to Women Empowerment by dissemination of information.

6.1 The definitions of power

In this paragraph we will look at the different kinds of power we have given an account of earlier and see how they fit into what our informants say. The different kinds of power are “power over”, “power to”, “power with” and “power from within”. We will analyse our informants’ statements with the help of these different kinds of power.

6.1.1 Power over

If we go through the statements in search for power over, we can find several examples of this kind of power relation. Power over is power exercised by one group over another group. One example is when Fulki talks about how she did not visit libraries as a child, since girls were not supposed to do that. In this case society and its conventions had such power over the girls that they did not go to the library, even though it was not illegal or explicitly prohibited. As mentioned earlier, power over can be established by force or threats but often it is a more subtle process, like social rules which you simply do not question.

Many other statements have to do with family. The family is a very strong institution in the Indian society and it often exercises very much control and power over the individual family members. One example of this is when Geeta talks about how the fact that she has a family sometimes can be a problem in her working life. She has to bring her son when she goes different places in her work and that is of course something that restrains her freedom of movement. She also says that she has to “look after” her family, something which suggests that she has many more responsibilities in her home than just to watch over her child. This is an example of what the SAKHI Director means when she claims that the women of Kerala suffer from a “double-work burden”; apart from their work they also have to take care of the home and the family. Poona talks about the problem of family as well, but from a different perspective. She says that she, in a way, has an advantage over married women, since she is able to divide her time as she likes, to spend it on what is important to her. Since she has no family to look after, it can not exercise any power over her.
Geeta also gives examples of more overt power relations concerning families. As she works as a lawyer and specializes in family matters, she sees how much violence and pressure there are among many families.

The concept of power over means that there is a total sum of power to be distributed among people. These examples seem to be easily applicable onto this view. The more power the family has got over the women, the lesser amount of power do the women themselves have over their lives, for example over their time. Among the informants there is also an example of a family where the power is more evenly divided between the man and the woman. It is Fulki, who lives together with a man she is not married to, who provides us with this deviant case. Fulki and her husband share the responsibilities for their home and their child. In their family the power relations are different. This has to do with the fact that she does not have to take the whole responsibility for the family; her husband takes part in this work. Fulki has more power over her life and hence, her time, than many other women have. According to the power over way of looking at power as zero-sum, as something that is in finite supply, Fulki’s life-partner has agreed to lessen his amount of power to let her have more. Since you can only gain power at the expense of someone else’s power, Fulki could not have increased her power if her partner’s power had not decreased.

Both the Director and the librarian of SAKHI take up the problem of mobility. Women in Kerala can not travel around as they like. This is partly said to be because of the families power and the double-work burden but also, as the librarian emphasises, the risks of night travelling. Women can not travel alone after six o’clock in the evening according to the librarian. By this statement she expresses another power relation. This one has to do with the relation between a woman and her family, but between a woman and the male part of the society. Because men, through violence of different kinds, have gained power over women, they have a freedom to travel that women have not. As the librarian points out, it is only a small percentage of the men in a society that exercise this violence, but since the travelling women can not tell who is going to be violent or not, they are still prohibited from night travelling. Once again the statements express examples of the kind of power that the power over view suggests. The more power men have over travelling, the lesser power does the women have in this sphere. It is not only over themselves and their own travelling men have got power, but more importantly over the women’s travelling.

Many of the informants mention that the geographical situation is restraining some women from visiting the SAKHI library. It is the rural women who have difficulties getting to the library since it is located in “the heart of the city”. One possible reason why they have problem with travelling can be that their families do not permit them to travel to town. It does not have to be explicitly forbidden, but it can be an effect of the fact that they do not have power over their own time. It might also have to do with the fact that they can not afford to make the journey, since they lack economic power.
6.1.2 Power to

SAKHI as an organization could be said to deal quite much with *power to*. *Power to* is generative power, such as the kind of power a person or group tries to help another group or person to gain. SAKHI conduct very much work with the intention of generating power to different groups, for example poor women or female politicians. All the informants emphasize the importance of SAKHI’s work with giving power to these different groups. Fulki talks about how SAKHI is “giving capacity building” for women. She also points out that SAKHI’s newsletter is disseminating information to rural women and acts as a bridge between rural and urban women. Even Reena talks about how the SAKHI staff are “getting out of their office” and work with women’s groups in rural areas, for example. However, these are mostly examples of what SAKHI as an organization, and not as a library, does. It seems to be easier for the informants to talk about the power that is connected to these concrete seminars and workshops than the more diffuse work of the library. Maybe this has to do with the fact that it is easier to detect a situation where *power to* is evident in group oriented situations than in the more individual situations that the library sphere often involves. In the definition of *power to* that Rowlands provides, there is also a focus on groups and leaders, something that is perhaps more applicable to the outside work of SAKHI than to the work that is done in the library.

All the informants mention that SAKHI is the only library of its kind in Kerala. Probably that is the reason why it is given such importance. A couple of them also mention that SAKHI is contributing to making women’s issues more accepted, or at least more acknowledged in the Keralan society. This could also pass as an example of SAKHI giving *power to* women in general, all over Kerala. The question is if *power to* can only be conducted if the one that conducts it is a powerful outside person. Rowlands definition somehow seems to suggest this, and even though the staff of SAKHI might have more power than poor rural women, they can hardly be said to be very powerful. Furthermore, they are not coming from the outside, but are very much involved in the struggle, since they are part of the women of Kerala. The question of *power to* gets more complicated when we consider Townsend’s and Zapata’s suggestion that you can not give power to another group, they have to take it themselves. Who is to decide whether a group is actually taking the power or being given power from another group? Where does the line go between providing support for a group to enable them to take power and just giving them power?

Some of the informants emphasize the fact that the library has got a collection of books in Malayalam and that the SAKHI staff is translating books from English to Malayalam for those who do not speak English. This could also be regarded as an example of *power to* since the non English-speaking group through this action get a chance to get information they have previously been denied. According to the concept of *power to*, power is not zero-sum and the increase of one group’s power does not have to equal the decrease of another group’s power. When the SAKHI staff is translating texts into Malayalam, they are intending to give the non English-speaking group more power, but they are not necessarily reducing their own power by doing so.
When Poonā is talking about the dangers of defining for someone else what empowerment should be, she is touching on a possible problem with giving power to. If the leader or person who is supposed to empower a group is telling them how they ought to feel and act, there is a risk that they will feel alienated and patronised. Then they might not gain power, but feel even more powerless. Poonā talks about the importance of understanding that different people have different measurements of empowerment. This is again reminding us of Townsend’s and Zapata’s words about giving power to other people. If someone else, an outside person, is to tell people what it means to be empowered and how they should feel, there is an obvious risk that they are not taking the power themselves but are simply doing what is expected of them. Power that is given to people is easily taken back. If the people who are to be empowered sense this fragility of the power they are bestowed they are likely to reject it.

### 6.1.3 Power with

When a group possesses Power with they have “A sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals”. Our informants all talk about the SAKHI library as a welcoming and open institution. As much as being a place where you can get books and other documents, this is also a social meeting place. As Ėeta puts it, “here is space for discussion also”. Poonā compares the library with the other libraries in Trivandrum and points out how different the atmosphere is in SAKHI. She says that the other libraries have formal and sober atmospheres whereas the atmosphere at SAKHI is accommodating and non-judgmental. We get the impression that the informants feel that they are part of something bigger when they use the SAKHI library. When they speak about the atmosphere of SAKHI, they seem to express some kind of feelings of power with. A visit to the library could be regarded as something very personal and individual, but when our informants talk about their use of the SAKHI library, they rather seem to view it as some kind of collective action. They are clearly regarding themselves to be part of a group, rather than just individual library users. Since they emphasize so strongly the social aspects of the SAKHI library there is reason to believe that they have a feeling “of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals”.

### 6.1.4 Power from within

Power from within has to do with spiritual strength, self acceptance and self respect and thus self esteem. It is a power definition that has to do with consciousness of the power relations in one’s own life and how they affect one’s own actions and choices. When Yamini talks about empowerment as providing women with an inner feeling of being equal to men, she seems to have some kind of power from within in mind. If we look at the informants statements from a power from within kind of way, we can find some examples of this.

One example is when Fulki says that she consciously challenges gender stereotypes and that she will not be controlled by the society around her. We believe that such conscious resistance demands much inner strength and self esteem. Interestingly, it seems that the occupation and family situation she has chosen are very beneficial to her resistance and may protect her from the web of visible and invisible rules,
regulations and norms that society places on “*ordinary*” women. This may further encourage the inner power and strength that resides in her.

Another example of the workings of the power from within, could be when Poona describes the situation in the home where she grew up as agitating and possibly the source of her early developed interest for feminism and gender issues. We interpret this as that her family was working in an encouraging way, which led to her development of a sense of inner power and self respect and hence possibly a questioning of the society’s discourse of women as subordinate.

Perhaps, even the way all the women without hesitation seem to regard themselves as being urban strong women who does not need to be empowered, is pointing to a sense of inner strength and self esteem.

### 6.2 The concept of Empowerment

We will now see what connections we can detect between the informants’ statements and different kinds of empowerment. What we have dealt with up till now in this chapter are different kinds of power. Now we will focus on different aspects of how power is gained. We will use the subdivision that Rowlands presents, namely into personal, relational and collective empowerment. We will see what connections can be drawn between the informants’ statements and these different areas of empowerment. We will also see what inhibiting and encouraging factors connected to these empowerment processes we can find in the informants’ answers. We will then examine their statements about SAKHI’s library and Women Empowerment. One important question is whether SAKHI can be an encouraging factor for change of the core values, and if so, in which ways.

#### 6.2.1 Personal Empowerment

Rowlands describes personal empowerment as “*developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalised oppression*”. All of our informants seem to consider themselves and other urban women to be quite empowered. They tend to talk about empowerment as something that has to be provided for the poor, rural women. Maybe this could be taken as an indicator that the informants really are personally empowered, since they have self confidence and feel that they are strong empowered women. However, our task is not to decide whether our informants are empowered or not, but to consider what they say about the matter. The informants do not talk about themselves as the ones who are going to be empowered, perhaps because they feel that they already are empowered. Rowlands’ description of personal empowerment as a development of a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity is coherent with how the informants talk about themselves. At the same time, their statements about other women, the ones who should be empowered, are suggesting that they constitute this group of other women as being the opposite of themselves. Kabeer writes that a person who has not been disempowered can not be empowered. The problem is that it is very difficult to judge who is disempowered and who is not. Our informants are women who are privileged compared to other women in the Keralan society, but they are still in a subordinate position compared to most men in the society.
Fulki, who is very interested in feminist issues talks about herself in a way that indicates that she considers herself to be personally empowered. In her case, feminism itself seems to have been an encouraging factor in the process of change/empowerment. With the help of her feminist consciousness she challenges the stereotypes of society. Another encouraging factor in this process is her family. The very design of her family is breaking conventions. Her partner does share the family responsibilities with her, doing things that are considered to be women’s tasks, such as looking after the baby. The way she talks about her partner and her family is letting us understand that she regards this as encouraging her way of life as a woman who breaks conventions. She is able to not bother about “this so called society” because she has support in doing so from her partner. As mentioned earlier, Zapata says that personal power is gained when the individual defeats the internalised power over. According to her interpretation, Fulki has then defeated the power over of the family. Fulki also talks about how her occupation is helping her. Since she is a writer she can do many things that would be very difficult for an “ordinary woman”. She talks about her occupation as something that encourages her to be the person she is. She seems to consider society’s conventions as an inhibiting factor for other women’s empowerment, but that she herself is somehow spared from this pressure. The family and the occupation could thus in Fulki’s case, be said to constitute factors which encourages positive changes in her core values. The way she talks about herself indicates that she has self-confidence and dignity, which are such important core values in the process of personal empowerment. These feelings help her being strong enough to question society and live as she wants to.

Geeta is striking us as a strong woman. However, when she talks about her family it is largely in terms of how it is restraining her in her working life. She talks about the family as an inhibiting factor which keeps her from living her life as she would like to live it. There seems to be a clash between the core values she has or wants to have and her role as a mother and wife.

Poona is talking about how she benefits from not having a family. It lets her divide her time and she is free to let her feminism influence her daily life. For her, the lack of a family to look after is an encouraging factor. Since it is not there, it can not exercise power over her. By mentioning that she benefits from not having a family, Poona indirectly suggests that the families are often inhibiting factors because they decide for women what to do with their time. This is possible thanks to the power the family as a social institution possesses. The lack of oppression from a family is regarded as encouraging the core values of being a strong and independent woman. The control over her own time as Poona is talking about could be said to encourage a sense of agency, which helps her in her life.

### 6.2.2 Relational Empowerment

Getting relationally empowered involves “developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of relationship and decisions made within it” (Rowlands 1997, p. 15). At the same time as Fulki talks about her family as encouraging her personal empowerment, she talks about feminism as encouraging her relational empowerment. The family helps her to live as her feminist consciousness demands,
and her feminist consciousness help her to make demands in relational contexts, such as the family.

Reena talks about empowerment as something that should be happening “within the family”. This could be taken as an example of relational empowerment, that she thinks that the family is a very important sphere for women to gain power in. However, she seems to rather speak of the dangers of empowerment and how it can hurt the traditional family. She emphasizes that she does not think that Women Empowerment should be allowed to break families. She also says that she thinks that women are getting empowered in most families and she does not seem to find the family as a threat to Women Empowerment. Rather, she talks about the empowerment as being a threat to the family.

However, there are other kinds of relationships in a society than just the kind that involves two individuals. Poona describes how feminism and women’s issues have for a long time been, and still are, regarded as something marginal, which does not affect ordinary people. But as she says: “at least [there] is a growing awareness of the women’s movements in society”. An example of the changed conditions is that the local bookstores have begun to turn to SAKHI for advice. They have become authorities to listen to and get advice from. This is also a kind of relational empowerment, where SAKHI as a group of people have with Rowlands’ words “developed the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of relationship and decisions made within it” (Rowlands 1997, p. 15). In other words, SAKHI has gone from being a marginalized group dealing with an obscure subject to influence particular parts of the Keralan society. In this case we can talk about a fusion between relational empowerment and collective empowerment, an example of how the different dimensions of change are intertwined with each other. SAKHI as an organization has developed core values such as “ability to negotiate”, “ability to communicate” and “ability to get support”, which are very useful when it comes to contact with other organizations in society. However, this also presupposes a collective empowerment, which we will discuss in the next paragraph.

6.2.3 Collective Empowerment

Collective empowerment is in process when a group works together to achieve things they could not have done on their own. The power with that the group members possess makes the group bigger than the sum of its individuals. When SAKHI has developed the ability to work towards other institutions in society as for example the local bookshops, this can be said to be connected to collective empowerment. It is only possible for SAKHI to hold their own with the other groups if they have a strong sense of collective identity. When a group becomes collectively empowered, Rowlands suggests that it develops core values such as a collective agency and group dignity which enables the group to negotiate with other groups. Thanks to such collective core values, SAKHI is able to influence other parts of society. If they had been a more shattered and disharmonious group, they would probably have had much more difficulties going from a marginal group to an influential one.

As we have already discussed, some of the informants talk about the SAKHI library as a social meeting place which can be an arena for power with. The statements
about this can also be regarded as examples of collective empowerment. In these cases it is the library itself that is given the role of encouraging factor for the change. When Poona says that she found a place for discussion when she came to SAKHI, she is hinting that she lacked such a place before. Poona talks about the same thing when she says that the SAKHI library has an accommodating and friendly atmosphere. But she not only emphasizes these values of SAKHI, she also contrasts it against other, more conventional libraries. She talks about the formal and sober atmosphere of those libraries as “frightening”. She also points out that SAKHI does not want to alienate anyone, something which can be taken as a way of saying that the other libraries are doing this. SAKHI is in this way working as an encouraging factor, making the informants feel that they are part of a group and that they are strong together. The formal atmosphere of the other libraries would be an inhibiting factor, but maybe inhibiting the personal empowerment as well as the collective empowerment. Poona suggests that the way people are received at the conventional libraries, make the feel afraid and alienated, and might give them a feeling that they are not really entitled to be there. She says that at SAKHI there is an attitude of “okay come and sit where you like”. Poona talks here about a welcoming attitude, which could make people feel strong and meaningful instead of diminished. When she talks about the fear that the atmosphere of some libraries can generate, she talks about these libraries as inhibiting the personal empowerment of individuals. However, this could also be regarded as inhibiting collective empowerment, since to be met by such treatment hardly encourages a feeling of being a part of a group, but rather a feeling of not belonging at all in this place. The core values are kept from emerging in such an atmosphere.

Getting collectively empowered through the use of a library might seem very tranquil compared to Rowlands examples of political work and villages working together, but nonetheless the statements of our informants show examples of the same processes as do Rowlands’. With the help of SAKHI, the users seem to build up core values such as a feeling of being entitled to a place in the group as well as the group being entitled to a place in society.

6.2.4 The informants’ conception of Women Empowerment

All of our informants are familiar with the concept of Women Empowerment. They are talking about different forms of empowerment, but they are not using the same kind of subdivisions as Rowlands. Geeta talks about that people have to be economically and ideologically empowered. She also says that their “living conditions have to be empowered”. Poona is reluctant to give a clear definition of what empowerment is to her, but she says that it includes becoming independent and being able to make decisions of your own. According to Yamini, Women Empowerment is mainly about making women aware about their rights. Reena’s definition of empowerment deals with self reliance, in a financial, physical and mental kind of way. Each informant has her own definition of the concept. Even though they are not using the words of Rowlands or the other authors, they still talk about the same things as they do.

To a large extent our informants seem to regard empowerment as something that should be provided for women of another category then themselves, namely the poor, rural women. Reena does not think that the SAKHI library is dealing with
Women Empowerment since only educated women use it. Both Geeta and Yamini explicitly uses the word “they” when they are to describe their conception of Women Empowerment. Maybe we should not give this too much importance given the language barriers which have been parts of the interviews, but two particular statements by Geeta are hard to ignore. She says “We have to empower them”, and “We are giving some strength to them so they can live as human beings”. Here it gets very clear that the women who should be empowered are other women, not the urban, working lady. Here it is easy to think about Townsend’s and Zapata’s words about self-empowerment. In this case the informants speak about empowerment as something that they should bestow upon the poor, rural women, exactly what Townsend and Zapata suggest is impossible. However, Poona is actually problemizing the tendency of urban educated women to tell others what empowerment is. She seems to have thought much about the issue, and she is also, probably as a result of this, reluctant to give a clear definition of what Women Empowerment is.

6.2.5 The informants’ view of the connection between Women Empowerment and the SAKHI library

Almost all of our informants are convinced that there is a strong connection between Women Empowerment and the SAKHI library. Fulki laughs and says “of course” when asked about this. However, the examples she gives of why she is convinced of this connection all seem to have to do with what SAKHI as an organization does, and not the library part. Geeta seems to be equally sure when she answers the same question with “definitely”. The reason she gives for this is that SAKHI deals with ideological development, and she stresses the importance of providing documents of different kinds for the illiterate women. She is hence suggesting that the main way in which the SAKHI library has to do with Women Empowerment is that they reach out to the rural and illiterate women and offer them ideological development. Poona and Yamini are also sure that SAKHI has to do with Women Empowerment.

It is only Reena who breaks this trend. She gives a firmly negative answer to the question about whether SAKHI’s library has to do with Women Empowerment. She is also the only informant who makes a clear division between the library and the rest of the organization. Maybe this is a result of her being an outside person. She does not in any way work for SAKHI, as some of the others do, and she does not live in Trivandrum, so the area of SAKHI is new to her. The other informants seem to have difficulties separating these different parts of the organization when they talk about SAKHI. Maybe this is typical for the structure of the organization. We, who like Reena, come from the outside are also very eager to separate these two parts of the organization, but maybe it is not really preferable or even possible to do so. One example of how the different sections of SAKHI are intertwined with each other is that only one person works in the library. However, all the other people in the SAKHI staff help her with the library-connected work.

Reena’s main argument why the SAKHI library does not deal with Women Empowerment is that it is only used by educated people, and she also says that to come to a library like this you have to have some initial interest for women’s issues. Reena seems to have a very sober and, maybe realistic, view of the
possibilities of change in the Indian/Keralan society. Maybe her sceptical way of talking has to do with her education as a social worker, where she probably have seen and heard dark and depressing things about the possibilities of change. The negativity in her answer could indicate that she focuses very much on action. She no doubt regards SAKHI as an important organization, which does remarkable work, but she divides this work into two different parts. All the work with visiting activities, were the SAKHI people reach out for the rural and poor women, she regards as working with Women Empowerment. However, the library work she rather seems to view as work for educated, well-off urban people, who might even already be empowered. She says that the library can provide inspiration for the other work, but she is still unsure about if use of the library is connected with the actual empowerment process. Her statements also suggest that she regards empowerment as something that has to be provided for the poor and uneducated. Even if she says that not all educated women are empowered, she only does that following our direct question about this.

There is much talk among the informants about the uniqueness of the SAKHI library. They talk about how important SAKHI is for people who work with, or are interested in, gender issues and they all agree that without this library things would be much more difficult. One example of this is when Geeta talks about her family obligations. She points out how important the existence of this kind of library is to her as a woman who has to take care of her family. If the SAKHI library had not existed, she is convinced that her work would have been very difficult to carry out. We get the impression that she doubts that she would have been able to do what she has done, had it not been for the SAKHI library. She says that she would not have been able to complete her research work without it, because she would have had to collect it from all parts of Kerala, which she can not do since she has to look after her family and her child. Hence, she does not talk about the family as restraining her from using the SAKHI library, but from travelling around to other libraries to collect the same information she gets at SAKHI. The SAKHI library offers her a way of coping with the power the family exercises over her. Hence the SAKHI library could here very much indeed be regarded as an encouraging factor for Geeta to keep up with the gender issues she is committed to. When Poona talks about how a married woman has problems that she herself does not have she does not explicitly talk about the use of the SAKHI library, but rather about incorporating a feminist way of thinking in your daily life. However, since she talks about the importance of being in charge of your time, she seems to view usage of the kind of facilities and institution that SAKHI is, as a very important part of living.

All the informants, except for Reena, talk about the SAKHI library as a means to change. If we use Rowlands words, SAKHI's library provides the encouraging environmental and structural factors which make a positive change of the core values possible. The change of the core values enables empowerment. We can not decide whether the SAKHI library really encourages Women Empowerment, but we can see if the informants talk about it as if it does that. Mainly they tend to talk about how the library is bringing change for marginalized groups in the society, but indirectly they also speak about how it encourages changes in themselves, such as providing them with a sense of collective power.
6.3 Library access and empowerment

Now we will look closer at a few questions concerning library access and empowerment. We will start by pondering the fact that all of our informants are academics with a previous feminist interest. We will continue by examine possible library barriers to the poor, rural, non English-speaking users and discuss the SAKHI library’s clientele – what kind of people is it that uses the library, according to our informants? Finally, we will look at the ways in which our informants think that the SAKHI library can contribute to Women Empowerment by dissemination of information.

But before consider these questions we must take a minute to consider the concept of empowerment, seen from a LIS perspective. What is it that makes the process of empowerment starting to develop inside an individual? We think that one factor that triggers this process can be information. SAKHI’s main objective is to give information to women and to collect and disseminate information focused on women’s issues in order to improve women’s lives. One way of doing this is by running a library and sending out a newsletter. As they write in one of their brochures, they want to empower women with information. Thus, they believe that information can lead to empowerment, a presumption that we have chosen to embrace.

6.3.1 User access to the library and its collections

Buckland writes that data and documents might contribute to an increase in a person’s knowledge if it is perceived by someone with appropriate prior knowledge. All of our informants have a high level of education. Fulki is a writer and has an academic background, Geeta is a lawyer, Poona is a researcher, Yamini is a law student and Reena is a social worker student. Before visiting the library, our informants had all taken an interest in feminism or gender issues. Fulki, Geeta and Poona are currently or have been working with these issues; Yamini and Reena are or have been working with them in school. This then means that they all have some prior feminist or gender issue knowledge. If we look at these facts from Bruce’s category six, the informants are using the SAKHI library to extend a knowledge base that is already constructed. According to this category, the information that is used is transformed and analyzed by the informants to fit in with their world perspective. To their help in the analysis, they have their previous personal and scholarly experience. This process usually leads to development of new ideas or insights, according to Bruce. It was difficult for us to find out if the informants had gotten any new ideas or insights from the documents in the library, since this was one of the questions in our interview sheet that clearly did not work (see the Appendix, questions 27 & 28). We still do not know if these questions did not work because the informants simply did not want to answer them or if perhaps they could not answer them because the process that involves change in a person’s thoughts, feelings, way of acting, etc., might be very hard to consciously be aware of, not to mention to be able to point it out to two strangers. Reena says that the library has a problem with reaching out to new people, and that to come to the library one has to have an interest to begin with. This raises questions of whether a previous interest or knowledge about gender issues is a common feature among the library users. Is the library used only by long-time feminists, or are other groups...
also drawn to it? We do at least know that all of our informants had developed a firm academic/scholarly ground and a prior feminist interest before visiting the SAKHI library.

Buckland’s six aspects of access to information included “availability”, “price to the user” and “cognitive access”. Buckland writes that when it comes to the cognitive process of becoming informed, one has to consider whether the user can read, if the user understands the language in which the text is written and if the user comprehends the concepts used in the text. Most of the literature in the SAKHI library is in English, which means that the library users must possess some language skills in order to comprehend the information in these specific documents. However, since our informants can read, do possess the suitable language skills, and have some prior knowledge of feminism or gender issues which means that they might easily comprehend certain concepts, they have all the right prerequisites to make the most out of the SAKHI library. They all have an extended knowledge base that existed before they paid their first visit to the SAKHI library which makes them able to reflect and analyze the information with help from their scholarly background and personal experience.

But what if a person does not have a prior knowledge base, scholarly training or English language skills? Could she or he still make use of it? There is no doubt that a woman without a higher education degree can have much personal experience of different aspects of women’s issues. But she probably does not have access to scholarly tools in the same way as a woman that for example has attended the university. Without an extended knowledge base that is grounded in academic knowledge and the following opportunities of reflection and analysis, some of the documents in the SAKHI library can be difficult to fully comprehend. Fulki says that it is mainly urban educated women who are using the SAKHI library, and that the reason for this is that the literature is mainly in English. Clearly, this must be a troublesome fact when trying to reach out to non-educated women, which we think is the reason why the library today also contains literature in Malayalam. However, this literature is mostly comprised by fiction which means that a non-English speaking woman does not have the same opportunity to study the non-fiction literature as an English speaking woman. To overcome this problem, the SAKHI staff is offering to translate books into Malayalam. We found it hard to find out how often this actually occurs, and the statements from our informants about the non-educated women’s eventual use of the library are diverse. Whereas Fulki, as written above, claims that the library is mainly used by urban educated women, Geeta is in her turn convinced that it happens quite often that women without a higher education visit the library. However, we can not help but wonder if a woman that does not read English must not be very courageous to walk up to the librarian and ask her to translate a whole book into Malayalam for her?

Fulki says that the fact that the library is situated in the centre of Trivandrum might be a reason for why it is mostly used by urban women. This statement automatically leads us back to Buckland. If we look at the aspect of availability, it is obvious that a library that is situated in the centre of Trivandrum might be more difficult to visit for poor women, who are often living in the rural areas and who has very little mobility and who perhaps are not even allowed by their families to visit nearby friends on their own, than for urban, educated women that live in
Trivandrum, or in another city. These women can always say that they need to visit the library in educative matters, and who might have access to a transportation vehicle like a car or a motorbike. The library collection is simply not available to the rural women in the same way.

The aspect “price to the user” includes time, effort, discomfort and money. Here also, one can speculate if the price for a poor, rural woman is not a very high one. First, there is the actual price; the membership fee for the SAKHI library users is Rs. 200, and you also have to leave a security of Rs. 500, which may be a considerable amount for a person without economic means. When it comes to time, a poor rural woman may simply not have it. Family and housekeeping duties may take all her time, whereas academic researchers, for example, may include a library visit into their work schedule. The effort might also be greater for a poor rural woman, for example the problem with transportation that was discussed above. And last but not least, when visiting the library, the discomfort might be great when faced with the literature that is mainly in English, and the highly academic context with researchers, students, journalists and professionals as the main users.

6.3.2 Connections between information and empowerment

So, does the SAKHI library really have any users that are poor and rural and non-English-speaking? We do not truly know the answer to this. However, our informants consider it likely that the library may have a role in an empowerment process.

Reena raises the idea that the books in the SAKHI library may be empowerment tools even if the library is only used by educated, urban women because the people that are working in SAKHI are getting out of their offices and going outside places and working for empowerment and they can get ideas from the books in the library that might help them with these tasks. Hence, the information that is picked up from a book in the library by a person who is a part of the SAKHI organization is disseminated to the poor, rural women in order to benefit them.

Fulki thinks that SAKHI can work as a bridge between the rural and the urban women because they are disseminating information in their newsletter. This newsletter contains information from books and the documentation centre in the SAKHI library and it goes out to the rural women in Malayalam.

Poona is convinced that the SAKHI organization is contributing to Women Empowerment, by, among other things, “making women conscious about their rights”. We think that she means that SAKHI is giving women information, possibly through their newsletter, that makes them conscious about their rights. This information thus has the potential of changing the women’s perceptions of their own rights and of themselves, which is one way of empowering them. It is also a way of using information in a way that benefits others.

Geeta says that SAKHI has to empower the poor, rural women, both economically and ideologically. One way of their empowerment mission is to give out some kind of ideological conviction. SAKHI is conveying their ideology through books that they are giving to the rural women. This then means that, according to Geeta, the
information that SAKHI is giving out, is leading to change in the way that the women are looking at themselves and the world. Thus information leads to empowerment.

Reena is the only informant that seems somewhat sceptical to an obvious connection between information and empowerment, although she seems to be convinced that there can exist a connection if the person is willing to take it in. She does not think that it is sufficient to merely read the literature in the library to be empowered, since she says that it is possible to “just know these things” and then she is not sure whether empowerment will occur. She says that in order to turn information into empowerment one has to be “open and willing to change”. This means, as we interpret it, that she thinks that it is possible to merely be in possession of information, and that it is not automatically turned into an empowerment tool; it takes some kind of willingness and interest of a person to encourage this internal process.

All of our informants seem to think that the SAKHI library can have a role in empowerment processes, even if it is mainly used by urban educated women. This is because these women forward the information that they pick up to the poor rural women, for example through their newsletter. This information may then trigger empowerment processes among the later. This thought leads us to Bruce’s wisdom conception, where information is related to some sort of idea of information use as a social responsibility. In this concept, information can also be used by a person for the benefit of others, be it “colleagues or clients”. In this particular case, the “clients” are the women that our informants see as in need of empowerment; the poor, rural women. The information is also seen as transforming the users of it. This means that when the information is used, it has the potential of changing the user. In this particular case, changing the person means empowering the person. All of our informants seem to think that there do exist at least a potential connection between information and empowerment, or rather between SAKHI’s dissemination of information and an increased empowerment base of the rural women. This leads us to the conclusion that the SAKHI library may have an important role to play in the empowering of women.

However, we are also forced to conclude that in one way, the SAKHI library is controlling information. The SAKHI library is in charge of which documents in the library that will be translated and thus available to non English-speaking users, and which documents that will not. Although they are offering to translate documents on a direct request, they still have the power to deny the inquirer this service. The SAKHI library also decides what information will be disseminated, for example through their newsletter, when it will be disseminated and to whom it will be disseminated. Our study was not designed to investigate in what ways this information control might be expressed, but it is still interesting to ponder the subject. The SAKHI staff is superior to the information users when it comes to this subject, since the users have to rely on SAKHI for their access to this information. Put together with some of the informants’ view that empowerment is something that can be given to a person from another person, there might be a reason here to ask what SAKHI’s actions are leading up to; can a controlled and limited dissemination of information really lead up to any real empowermental processes in the poor rural women that are the information receivers? According to Townsend
and Zapata, this is not possible, since empowerment can not be \textit{given} from one person to another person, since it then can be taken away again. Empowerment therefore has to be \textit{self-generated}.

Of course, one conclusion does not automatically exclude the other. The SAKHI library may still have an important role to play in the Empowerment of Women, but only if they are encouraging the poor rural women’s own information requests and access, so that the women eventually can control it themselves, without having to rely on an outsider for their supply.

Then, empowerment can really occur.
7 Concluding discussion

7.1 Main conclusions

The aim of this thesis was to find out how the SAKHI library is functioning and what role the SAKHI library is playing in connection to the concept of Women Empowerment. We wanted to see how these connections are perceived by some of the users and employees, and what connections we could perceive ourselves. We were also interested in which potential barriers are connected to use of the SAKHI library.

We have found that the SAKHI library seems to work as an encouragement for mainly collective empowerment for our informants. Furthermore, it seems as this in turn also can lead to encouragement of personal and relational empowerment. However, we have also come to the conclusion that the informants do not really regard these kinds of processes as the real empowerment achievements of SAKHI. Instead, they emphasize the poor, rural women as the ones who are to be empowered and suppress the significance of their own experiences.

All of our informants were in possession of a firm academic ground and had developed a prior feminist interest before visiting the SAKHI library. This might be characterizing for all users of the library, and in that case one can question whether the library really is as accessible to everyone as some of the informants claim.

The library barriers might be of considerable amount for a poor, non English-speaking, rural woman who wants to use the library. This has to do with the library’s location, the documents in English, documents that contain concepts that may be unfamiliar to someone without previous knowledge of women’s issues, the membership fee, aspects of time, problems with transportation and general feelings of discomfort. We do not know whether the library has any users that are poor and live in rural areas.

All of our informants seem to think that the SAKHI library can have a role in empowerment processes, even if it is mainly used by urban educated women. This is because the SAKHI women forward the information that they pick up to the poor rural women, for example through their newsletter. This indicates that the library can play an important role in the empowering of women.

However, this presupposes that the SAKHI library is working towards the goal that the women, whom they consider being in need of empowerment, eventually can access information without the middle hand that is the SAKHI organization. Since we embrace the belief that empowerment has to be self-generated, we consider this an important point to be made. Naturally, we do not mean that the SAKHI library should end their disseminating of information, only that they become aware of the limitations that can be embedded in this line of action as a tool for empowerment. Of course this might be something that SAKHI has already considered, but since they did not mention it, we found it likely that they had not problemized this to any large extent.
7.2 Further discussion

We will now discuss some of these findings further. As mentioned earlier, we noticed that some of the questions we asked did not work too well, due to their personal and intimate nature. When we asked about feelings in overt words it was difficult to get good answers. This problem was particularly significant since the informants did not have any problems answering any other questions. They did not act nervously and they were generally very talkative. Maybe this was the effect of a cultural clash; they did not feel comfortable with telling these two foreign girls about their feelings. It could also have to do with an unwillingness to open up too much and tell us about too personal matters. But whatever the reason was, because of this, we do not know much of the informants’ own use of the documents in the library, and hence if the library has empowered them in any way. It was a salient feature of the interviews that the informants talked about other people rather than themselves. We could constantly throughout the interviews detect reluctance among the informants against talking about themselves. When we speak explicitly about Women Empowerment, they talk about them, the other women. We do not know why this is, but it could indicate that that the women do not identify themselves as the ones who are in need. They are already, if not empowered, then at least aware of their rights in a way that the poor illiterate women are not.

Concerning the library and how it can work in empowering ways, the informants tended to suppress their own use of the library and instead wanted to talk about the poor rural women’s use benefits from it. This became somewhat problematic, since they also said that almost every user was urban and educated. Somehow they did not seem to regard their own use of the library as sufficient examples of empowerment, they had to take to the extremes. In their eagerness to show us the benefits of the SAKHI library, they forgot about their own part in this. However, this was only concerning the overt statements of empowerment, we could still collect very interesting thoughts about the processes of empowerment from their other statements. Hence, the informants said quite much about the relation between the SAKHI library and empowerment, but the most interesting examples of this appeared when the word empowerment was not pronounced.

Rubin writes that the people who are most likely to use libraries are more formally educated. This is very significant when we look at our own informants. They are in this case, the ideal SAKHI library users, seen from an efficient perspective. It is a fact that the library contains many documents that are not accessible to everyone.

The section that is in Malayalam is mainly comprised of fiction, which means that non English-speakers have a rather small chance of getting access to non-fiction, which leaves them with a rather decreased range of documents that contains concentrated facts, and shuets them out from the world of information. As written above, we found it hard to find out to which extent the library is used by rural, non English-speaking women. Still, our informant’s statements about which kinds of people that use the library were sometimes pointing towards the fact that poor rural non English-speaking women were using it. Perhaps they really wanted the library to be used by women who they believed were in need of empowerment, since this would imply that SAKHI library is truly open to everyone. But as we have seen, this is not always the case.
The main general empowerment-inhibiting factors we have found in the informants' statements are the (male-dominated) society, family, and formal and alienating atmosphere. SAKHI seems to work as an encouraging counterweight to these factors in different ways. The most prominent role of SAKHI seems to be as encouraging the core values which enable collective empowerment. That is in our own interpretation of what we have heard from the informants. However, if we would have asked them, they would probably have said that it is giving information to marginalized women. This discrepancy is not very strange at all, since we tried to look at the library as an exclusive entity, and the informants tended to have the other activities of SAKHI in the back of their heads. But then again, when we asked them explicitly about the library, some of them still said that uneducated women used it, while others said that this was not the case. We think that this could have to do with the fact that they wanted to provide us with a positive picture of the library and then maybe a little bit told us what they thought we wanted to hear.

Anyway, the statements bear witness of an improved feeling of belonging to a group, which have collective group agency. This also encourages the core values of personal empowerment, where this space, this context, encourages feelings of dignity and agency. Thus SAKHI's library could be regarded as an important tool for personal empowerment as well as for collective empowerment.

When it comes to relational empowerment, we have not noticed many signs of the SAKHI library being an encouraging factor. However, we believe that this has to do with the fact that the informants were not very eager to talk about their personal, intimate experiences and hence their relations. We think that in many cases SAKHI's library can indeed help people develop the core values crucial for relational empowerment, but maybe in a bit more quiet and subconscious way. We have though seen how SAKHI itself can function as a group which gets relationally empowered in its contact with the outside society. At the same time we have also noted how that relational power emerges from the group being collectively empowered.

According to our informants, information about women’s issues is not easy to find in the state of Kerala. This is probably the reason why the SAKHI library is well known even in the schools in Cochin, which is situated in the other end of the state. The library seems to be recognized among students, teachers and researchers. We think that the mere fact that there is a library containing documents that are all about women, might lead to a greater acknowledgement of women’s issues in Kerala. Perhaps then the library can work in an empowering way by merely existing.
8 Proposed further research

We think that it might be of interest to make a larger study of this library. Since we did not track down whom its users really consisted of, this is still left to do. We are also curious of which kinds of people that do not use the library, and what stops them from doing so, and if there is a possibility of drawing them to the library by extending its services in any way.

It would also be interesting to look closer at SAKHI’s work with dissemination of information in the rural areas of Kerala. What kind of information are they disseminating? Why? How is the information perceived by the women who are receiving it? How is the information used by these women? Is it really empowering them in any way? What do they think of SAKHI?
9 Summary

We received an MFS-scholarship from SIDA, which enabled us to travel to India to conduct a user study. We spent six weeks in January-March, in the state of Kerala, South India. The subject for our study is a women’s resource centre located in Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram) which is the capital of Kerala. The centre is called SAKHI and apart from their different projects and seminars they also run a library and dissemination centre. This library, which has been the focus of our study, contains documents on gender issues and women’s issues. There are books, both fiction and non-fiction, newspapers, newspaper clippings and even some video films.

We have conducted seven interviews, of which two are with members of the staff, namely the librarian and the founder of the organization, and the other five being with the users of the library. The time of the interviews have ranged between 20-40 minutes and have all been conducted at the SAKHI library. We have also made some observations.

The aim of this study has been to find out how the SAKHI library is functioning and what role the SAKHI library is playing in connection to the concept of Women Empowerment. We wanted to see how these connections are perceived by some of the users and employees, and what connections we could perceive ourselves. We were also interested in which potential barriers are connected to use of the SAKHI library.

For theoretical framework concerning the concept of Women Empowerment we have used mainly Joanna Rowlands, but also Townsend and Zapata, Erwér and Kabeer. These researchers are all engaged in development theory and represent a radical way of understanding power. For theories about information and barriers, we have used the theories of Christine Bruce and Michael Buckland.

We have come to the conclusion that SAKHI is regarded by the informants to deal very much with Women Empowerment, because of the efforts they do for poor and rural women. However, our own impression is that not only does the library deal with Women Empowerment in that sense, but it also seems to work in these empowering ways for educated women, like our informants. Our informants wanted to emphasize the empowerment of poor, rural and illiterate women, and neglect their own processes of change. We could however find many things in the informants’ statements that could be interpreted as SAKHI working in empowering ways for them, mainly regarding the collective dimension of empowerment.

All of our informants were in possession of a firm academic ground and had developed a prior feminist interest before visiting the SAKHI library. This might be characterizing for all users of the library, and in that case one can question whether the library really is really as accessible to everyone as some of the informants claim.

The library barriers might be of considerable amount for a poor, non English-speaking, rural woman who wants to use the library. This has to do with the
library’s location, the documents in English, documents that contain concepts that may be unfamiliar to someone without previous knowledge of women’s issues, the membership fee, aspects of time, problems with transportation and general feelings of discomfort.

However, all of our informants seem to think that the SAKHI library can have a role in empowerment processes, even if it is mainly used by urban educated women. We think that the SAKHI library might still play a crucial part in the empowerment of women since the library disseminates information to the women that has not got the opportunity to visit the library in person.
10 Literature

10.1 Non-printed literature


Interviews with five library users and two SAKHI employees, conducted in January-March, 2006. Kept by the authors


University of Kerala (2001). *SOUVENIR* Thiruvananthapuram: University of Kerala. IASLIC XXIII All India Conference, 4-7 December,

10.2 Printed literature


Nair, Rekha R. (2002). An investigative study of the resources, organisation and services of SAKHI women’s resource centre library, Thiruvananthapuram. Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Library and Information Science


Townsend, Janet Gabriel; Zapata, Emma; Rowlands, Joanna; Alberti, Pilar & Mercado, Marta (1999). Women and power – fighting patriarchy and poverty London: Zed Books


Widerberg, Karin (2002). Kvalitativ forskning i praktiken. Lund: Studentlitteratur
Appendix: the interview questions

1. Age?
2. Occupation?
3. Education?
4. Where do you live (urban or rural area)?

5. Did you go to libraries when you were a child?
6. Which libraries do you use today?
7. Why do you visit libraries?

8. How did you find out about the SAKHI library?
9. When?
10. Why did you go there the first time?
11. Why do you visit it now?
12. How often do you visit the SAKHI library?
13. For what purpose?
14. What do you do at the SAKHI library?
15. Do you find what you seek?

16. Are you interested in gender issues?
17. Why are you interested in these issues?
18. How does that inflect your day-to-day life?
19. Are you active in any gender/feminist organizations/groups/work/activities?
20. If so, can you use SAKHI’s library in your organizational work?

21. Have you heard the expression ”Women Empowerment”?
22. What does it mean to you?
23. Do you feel that SAKHI’s library has anything to do with Women Empowerment?
24. If yes, how or in what ways?

Questions that did not quite work

25. Married?
26. Children?
27. Do you feel that you have changed in any way since you became interested in women’s issues or started reading the books in the SAKHI library?
28. Do you feel that information and knowledge about women’s issues have inflected/changed:
   …your occupational/student work?
   …your personal life?
   …your way of thinking?
   …your way of feeling?
   …your way of acting?