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'Research Sounds so Big . . .': Collaborative Inquiry with Women in Drevdagen, Sweden

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Introduction

'What is your research question?' In academia a clearly defined research question is the *sine qua non* of a good study. Research is supposed to produce knowledge that is disseminated to others. Researchers decide what to research and how. We choose the questions and thereby choose the lessons for a wider audience. How do we do this without suggesting that only professional researchers are experts, that other people's expertise is not important? Moreover, how are we accountable to those with whom we work and whose lives we analyse?

Academic research can dominate other important sources of knowledge because of its privilege in defining knowledge. This is problematic because theoretical knowledge is valued over practitioner knowledge within academia. Further, as feminists (e.g. Grosz 1991) have shown, many theories considered neutral have a male bias since they are based on certain men's experiences of the world. Knowing this, how does one link theoretical and conceptual categories with real change for women and men working in natural resource management? I began my research wanting to analyse the dynamics of local forest management at the village level with special attention to how gender relations were negotiated. I also wanted to position it in a way that would be relevant to the people that I worked with. Although I was inspired by Freire's

(1970) praxis, it was not an 'emancipatory project' that I had in mind. I wanted to keep the inquiry open to the possibility of embracing its own concepts, to be of practical use and to be accountable to community members. This approach presented two challenges: to let the conceptual categories emerge from the research process rather than from prior theories and to bridge the gap between researcher and 'research subjects' in order to formulate a research question useful not only to scientists but also to community members.

The points of departure

I first visited Drevdagen, a community in a sparsely populated region of western Sweden, in September 1998 (Figure 8.1). The inhabitants had set up a village association to work on questions of village development, of which

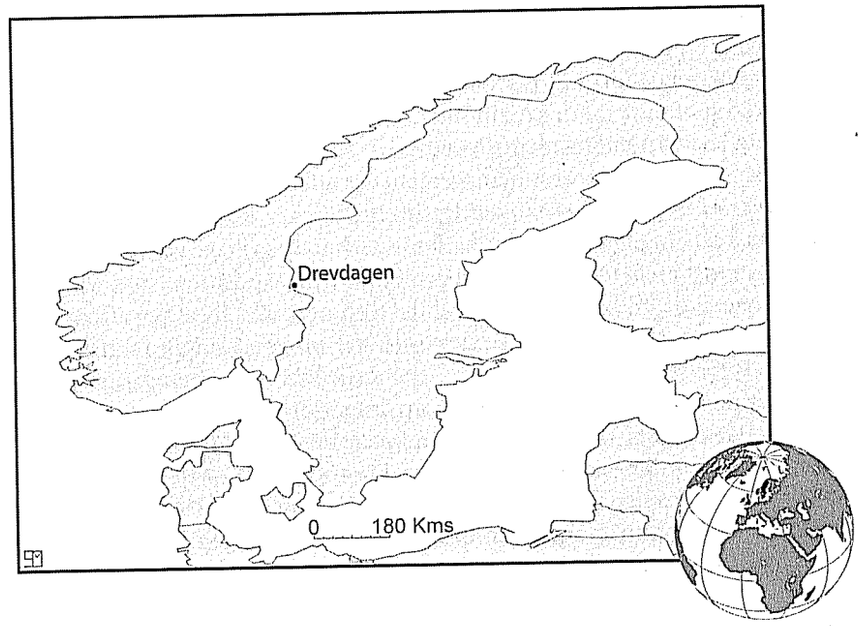

Figure 8.1 **Location of study area in Sweden.**

local forest management was a part. They wanted the right to use the forests around their homes to create employment opportunities in the village as well as to contribute to the development of the area. A semi-private company owned the forests at the time. Over the years, the villagers protested against the clear-cutting policies of the company. Before I started research in Sweden, I studied local forest management in Orissa, India where many village committees had taken over the management of forests around their villages. In Orissa, women were excluded from formal decision-making despite the fact that many worked in the forests collecting fuel wood, seeds and herbs and planted trees on the outskirts of the forests. Sweden was named by the United Nations (cf. UN World Economic Forum 2005) as the most gender equal country in the world; I became interested in studying how gender relations are negotiated in a community forestry project in a country famous for its policies on gender equality.

In preliminary conversations with the villagers, I realized that gender and power relations in forest management in India and Sweden were not so different. There were few women in the village association in Drevdagen, and, as the women pointed out, they did not talk much when they attended village meetings. 'It feels so intimidating', said Åsa. It seemed as though these gatherings were mainly a forum for a few village men.

As a result of my experiences in India, I chose to work mainly with women. The interviews I conducted in Drevdagen reinforced this decision. I knew local development and forest management are affected by ideas about gender and power relations. I chose to work with the women in order to study these processes, realizing that if I did not ask to speak to the village women, I would primarily meet men. Our research together gave me a position from which to analyse theories and practices of rural development and local resource management. I was aware that by working with the women I might reinforce the differences between the women and the men who dominated the formal organizations in the village. However, my intention was to create a space for different viewpoints to emerge. In doing so, the women and I challenged dominant definitions of rural development and local forest management, both at the university and in the village (Arora-Jonsson 2005).

I used collaborative inquiry to dialogue with Drevdagen women on how they worked regarding development and forest management despite the constraints they faced. In collaborative inquiry (a form of participatory research), participants reflect together on a question of interest to everyone. I wanted to conduct research *with* people and not *on* them (Reason 1994). I especially wanted to create a meeting place for reflection – the form and content to be

shaped by the women – a meeting place between the academic world and their everyday lives.

I insisted on calling us co-researchers. This was received with jokes and some suspicion. What is life to some is research to others. 'Research sounds so big', said Inga-Lill, 'to us, the important thing is what we want to do in the village, what are the problems that come in the way of our work and what it is that we can strengthen'. It felt important to demystify research and to point out that this method or way of working was as new to me as it was to them. We would use our different positions for analysing the issues and to question one another. I hoped to contribute to the discussion from my position as researcher, outsider and an Indian. At the same time, I could be questioned and held responsible for my research. I did not only want to pass their knowledge on, I also wanted them to take part in the analysis. In retrospect, I realize that I might have had a simplified idea of what a collaborative inquiry with a group of dynamic women in a village might entail. In the following section, I describe our collaborative 'research' between 1998 and 2000 and how it continually changed. Little did I know how right Inga-Lill was when she said; 'We change our minds so often, you will have to work hard to keep pace with us!'

In the 'space-off' of local forest management

A more conventional research approach would have been to start with the institutions for forest management and village development. The supposed neutrality of such a framework does not question theories on resource management or that institutions might be biased against women. It assumes women are passive or powerless and that they need only to be included in already existing theories or institutions. I chose to start research from outside the institutions. By directing attention to the process of the women's organizing *vis-à-vis* rural development and local resource management, I wanted to highlight the 'space-off'[1] in rural development and local forest management. That is, I wanted to focus on the meanings and the material practices that are rarely visible in mainstream discussions but play a decisive role in the outcomes, and where gender and everyday life are given meanings different from those that are dominant.

Scholars write that the mythical notion of community cohesion is part of all work on participatory rural development. This obscures a tendency to turn to those with the most power, often men who find it easier to make themselves

heard in formal contexts. This completely ignores the dynamics of gender and power (Guijt & Shah 1998: 3–9). Participatory action research acknowledges the centrality of power in the social construction of knowledge. Feminist research alerts us to the male bias in much participatory research (e.g. Maguire 2001). I discovered it is difficult to do participatory research without feminist epistemologies.

Action research was an appealing starting point since it argues for *acting* as a basis for learning and knowing. I wanted to use the different dimensions of knowledge: action, cognition and emotions as valid ways of knowing. My emphasis was not only on understanding or expanding theory but also on linking theorizing to practice, in what Freire (1970) has called *praxis* or reflection for action. Feminist methodologies' attention to action orientation, reflexivity, the affective components of the research and the use of the situation at hand (Fonow & Cook 1991) resonate strongly with action research. Feminists have also exposed how power relations are implicit in what is produced as knowledge and science, that science is not merely contemplative reflection (cf. Grosz 1991).

I was, in fact, questioned in academia and by others in forestry who thought I committed a basic error by choosing to work only with the women while it was actually men who were formally responsible for forest management and village development. I had consciously chosen to do research with the women. Haraway (1991) writes that the only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular, to make visible one's own position, 'We do not seek partiality for its own sake, but for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. She explains objectivity as positioned rationality, its images not the product of escape and transcendence of limits, but as views from somewhere. As a member of the inquiry, the presence of the others helped me to think reflexively about my own actions. I considered myself a part of our joint inquiry but as coming from a different position. The point was not to try to erase these differences between us but to use them to understand our situation and question one another.

The process: inquiring for a living countryside

I visited Drevdagen in 1998 with a university colleague who was helping the village association in their struggle for local forest management. At that time, Drevdagen had 140 inhabitants and was known for its rebellious and stubborn

people. They had battled municipal authorities for over 6 years to keep the village school open so they would not have to send their children to nearby towns.

On my first visit, I spoke to five women and three men. 'We must get the countryside to live', said Ylva, one of the women. Drevdagen's remote location meant that municipal services had been reduced in the past years with increasing emigration to towns. Most villagers felt that it was up to them to do something about the village and its environment. When I asked if there would be any interest in collaborating on research that might also be of practical use for them, a few of the five women I was interviewing suggested that I speak to all the women in the village. They wanted to see if there was interest among the women in doing something together. It was something that they would have liked to do but did not have the time themselves. In the spring of 1999, I interviewed 23 women living in the village at that time (more or less all the women) – most between the ages of 30 and 75 years. We talked about their life in the village, and their thoughts about development and forest management.

When I took the report on these interviews to Drevdagen, my trip coincided with a meeting in the village to form a network on local forest management with my colleagues from the university and village groups from northern Sweden. None of the village women had been invited. Most did not know about it. Some were irritated that they had not been informed. They spoke about finding other ways to meet and discuss matters that they found important. As a result, two women published a note in the village newsletter, the *Drevdagsbladet*, inviting women in the village for a meeting to discuss village development and collaboration.

After one meeting of 12 women and a second with 10 it was clear that the women wanted to work together but it was unclear how to proceed. As I looked for ways of structuring our gatherings, I chanced upon accounts of cooperative/collaborative inquiry (Reason 1994). This involved the idea of taking action as individuals and then coming together as a group to reflect upon it. My intention was to create a structured but informal place for reflection and analysis where we would feel comfortable discussing village and forest issues and one that would generate collaborative processes.

I wrote to everyone I had interviewed to see whether they were interested in taking part in joint research/work. A notice inviting all the women in the village was also put into the *Drevdagsbladet*. I described 'collaborative inquiry' as a space to ask questions that felt important and that would be decided upon

together. We would also attempt to link theory to our practice. I followed up with phone calls. The answers varied: 'I'm not sure I have anything to say, maybe you would rather talk to my husband about the forest.' 'It sounds fun, will the others come too?' 'I would love to come.' 'I can't make it, I have to put the children to bed, help them with their homework.' 'No, all this is too much for me. I am involved in the school and that's enough.'

Eventually 11 women met. I introduced my ideas about collaborative inquiry to the others, explaining that I wanted to ground my research in their everyday lives. We established ground rules for the group. Some said it was a nice surprise to see that so many women turned up, 'It is not usually so easy to get people to come out', Maggan said. Six to 22 women met every sixth week, with a break in the summer. Usually, I stayed on for some days to talk to men and women in the village.

We used storytelling as a method. In the beginning, many found it hard to talk about themselves. They did not believe they had much to say. 'I haven't done anything special' was a regular rejoinder. However, once we started talking, people were pleased to discover that so many others were interested in listening. Fascinating stories of itinerant lives unfolded. Whether they were born in the village or not, everyone had done some travelling. The prevailing Swedish media portrayal of a backward-looking and unchanging countryside certainly did not apply here.

Through the stories, we were able to see the 'ordinary' as something that we made happen in many different kinds of relationships. New ways of looking at events arose and different ways of acting seemed possible. The women told stories of struggles and disappointments, of hope and success, and their dreams for the future of the village. Ylva's earlier comment that 'We must get the countryside to live' came through in many of them. The stories brought the group closer together. 'Though you think you know one another, you don't usually get to hear these things. To hear about lives in this way is like watching movies', said Maggan. Even though most of the women had lived in the same village for some time, they learned things from and about each other they had not known before. It was therapeutic, Cecilia said, to be able to talk about yourself and listen to the others without being embarrassed.[2] 'It was cosy and nice to meet like this, to hear about the others but also about oneself. You surprise yourself . . . that you are willing to share so much', mused Maggan. Ewa explained, 'It is usually so that you rarely talk about yourself . . . you know . . . you say why would I? Who would be interested in me?' To be able to express dreams and emotions, to experience being heard

and understood provided an energy that was in many ways the most important outcome. The discussions became a kind of 'active theorizing' about life in the village and put many village and forest activities in context for both me and other participants.

As part of our discussions about village life and activities, we did an exercise in photovisioning, trying to visualize our reflections. Each woman took five photographs of positive things they would like to see in their village, and five that were negative and that they wanted to change. The images were a mixture of personal and common themes – lush forests, clear-cuts, the school, the village cottage where village social activities were organized, the old shop and housework. Many were shown as both positive and negative depending on what aspect the photographer chose. Some were only positive, such as the school, and others overwhelmingly negative, such as the clear-cuts.

The 'pond'ering petticoats

The place the women chose for the first meeting was a cottage by the village pond to mark their distance from the formality and rigidity of the village association's meetings. They spoke about wanting to create an informal network partly because they felt excluded from the meetings held by the village association. They wanted to work freely, give each other the space they needed and support each other.

'Old habits die hard', said Maggan, 'women are silent in gatherings. They don't get many chances of speaking at meetings . . . we could find other ways of working together than these meetings . . . not follow the men's patterns.' Cecilia who had been active in the association felt that not very much came out of the village meetings, 'Men are so dependent on set meetings. It sometimes feels that not much actually happens at these meetings. The village association has a lot of plans, but since this is still not visible in the village one can lose spirit, thinking that it is all just talk.' She felt that dividing village life into separate bureaucratic projects was alienating for most villagers. The village association had applied for funding to be able to work with local forest management, but as she put it, 'The whole village needs to act as a whole, even though different people are doing different things. That is the only way of realizing our larger thought – that of a self-managing village.'

Women who were interested in working with the forests had found it difficult to get into that particular group in the association. Lotte told me that

although she had shown an interest in taking part in the village association's activities, the men did not take this seriously. She felt that they were afraid of strong women. Barbro, who headed another association, noticed that the men seemed to feel that women were not able or did not know how to run associations. Ylva said she rarely went to the village meetings. She said that it was much more effective to discuss issues at the kitchen table, privately with friends and then try to influence the meetings through the men in their families. Most were of the opinion that to be active as a woman in the association needed much energy and time.

The women divided into working groups to address different village matters such as the school, the shop, the running of a goat farm, the *fäbodar* (summer farms in the mountains), as well as a tourist camping site. Practical plans were discussed, such as screening films about the village's earlier years, documenting village history with elderly villagers, planning the Christmas fair and organizing village get-togethers. One question that arose was whether the network should include the entire village or only women. 'You need to have women as well as men who work together, even though the initiative comes from the women' some pointed out. It was not entirely clear what the purpose of the new group or network would be or how they would go about structuring it. At the first three meetings the discussions centred on the women's ideas and project. We met at different locations in the village. It was important as a social event and as work. Maggan called us the 'pondering petticoats' in the village newsletter; 'Our latest meeting at the pond hut resulted in an upcoming theatre in the village. I agree with Eje, we shouldn't just meet when there is work to be done, we also need to have a good time together' (*Drevdagsbladet*, September 1999).

At the next meeting, we wrote down what we felt was important for us to work with in the group. We discussed these contributions and identified common themes. For example, the need for community relations (*gemenskap*) in the village: to work for companionship and a sense of belonging, to support one another, to build women's self-esteem, and to work with village development.

A turn to action: the *kvinnoforum*

'Has everyone been invited to this get-together?' read one of the notes scribbled down during the exercise, and this became a signpost for the group. As

we continued to meet, a need grew for what some called a *kvinnoforum*, a women's forum, in which all the women in the village would feel welcome. Women from outside the village wondered if it was only for the women in Drevdagen. Since the aim was to encourage all women, some of them also began to attend the gatherings.

As they met, the women created an alternative space where their own ideas came forth. They wanted a forum where women could take up important issues that did not find a place in the formal village associations but were vital for the functioning of the village, such as the need to work for community spirit. 'It is not so much about prestige but about developing together and getting the best out of each other. To be open and to create space', wrote Maggan in the village newsletter (*Drevdagsbladet*, June 2000). Since the number of women at the meetings varied, the boundaries of the group were flexible as women came when they could and new women joined in. This way of organizing, however informal, was nonetheless chosen purposively. The group often reiterated why they needed the forum, not only because there were always new women present, but also because there was no 'one' answer to the question.

I started the inquiry with an idealized image of how research and the everyday life of the women would interweave. I imagined that we would discuss village issues and the women's activities and reflect on them within the space of the inquiry. And we did do that, but in a way different from that I had pictured. The women reflected by acting. The focus of the group became, in constant dialogue, to organize a women's forum, and to think about why they felt that they needed this space. From a research (methodological) point of view, it was difficult to reflect on one specific research question. To impose a structure on the forum might have meant that we moved further in analysing one main issue. However, it would have meant that everyday life and emotions were kept out of the discussions and that new participants were excluded. The inquiry would have become *my* research tool. For the women, widening the circle and creating the forum became the most important activity and, in many ways, the research question that engaged the group.

By taking action, the women understood what they could or could not do. In this sense, action and reflection were indivisible. Forming the group was one way of dealing with unequal gender relations in the village and the inquiry, though not designed as such, became a kind of feminist praxis. The idea that action would take place outside the group and reflection within was a theoretical proposition that was untenable.

The research had multiple results for the village women as well as for me. Several women became active in the village association. Some found it easier to engage in its work when they saw other women taking part. Maggan became the chairwoman of the village association. She and a few other women worked hard to ensure that the association involved more women in its activities and in the forest project. The initial focus on needing to increase women's self-esteem so that they would become more active in village organizations changed to wanting a women's forum. They realized that entering into the village organizations did not automatically change their situation and could create male resistance. They sought to find collective solutions to wrongs that were located in social relations rather than the 'failings' of any one woman.

This paralleled the change in my ideas about collaboration for local forest management. It was clear that both the men in the association and the women in the forum believed in working together for the village and the forests. So did my colleagues and I. When I started my research with the women, the men at the university and the men in the village association saw it as a way of making the women engage in the association. However, as I learnt from our discussions in the inquiry, collaboration can mask relationships of power, not to mention *how* the women and men were supposed to collaborate and complement each other. Collaboration was clearly a value-laden term that needed to be negotiated.

This negotiation was far from simple. Some men in the association were upset that the women wanted a group of their own. Karl asked, 'Why do you need a women's forum at all? You're making exactly the same mistake as we men did in the association.' Maggan pointed out that there were actually several other spaces where only men got together and that this was an attempt by the women to form their own space, 'You take it for granted that the men can go away for the hunt and the women stay at home and take care of the children. It is not the same thing at all when we want to get away on some women's thing, then we often have to take the children with us . . . as we actually have done at some of our gatherings.' The women saw their organizing as a source of energy in their work for the village. However, the village association thought the *kvinnoforum* undermined what they believed to be the harmonious gender relationships needed in working with the most important issue: local forest management. Likewise, the men from the university thought that my writing about the women's critique of the village association could jeopardize the forest project and divide the village between the men and women. It focused on problems, which to their minds, did not exist.

Maguire (2001) writes that feminist-grounded action research affords participants the power and space to decide for or against action and for or against breaking the silence. In this case, creating the *kvinnoforum* broke the silence. The mere fact that the women met and discussed village issues in their own forum was fraught. The presence of a researcher in the group made it more public. In village public life, they came to acquire interests and values as women, contrary to 'the tendency among women not to think of themselves as "women" in the public arena or as having values and interests other than those deriving from their connections with men' (O'Connor 1998). By organizing themselves into the *kvinnoforum*, the women challenged dominant ways of organizing and interrupted the normal. The silence was already broken!

Finding the right question in action

The analyses and insights that emerged from my discussions with the women would never have been so rich had I not been part of a common process. By leaving the framework open for negotiation, the language and the categories that were relevant for the women defined the research. This approach brought into focus discordant and noisy categories of analysis, vital for development but seldom taken up in the literature on natural resource management – for example, dreams and practice, the importance of community relationships (*gemenskap*) and gendered aspects of collective action and individual freedom. The struggle was not over the forests and not necessarily over whether or not they should have local and collaborative forest management, but over the meanings that they ascribed to the resources and to what collaboration really meant.

The inquiry enabled me to go beyond looking at women's customary absence from forest organizations, and how women may gain a foothold in them, to understanding how the women framed their needs and issues and how they envisaged working in relation to village organizations. The women's organizing also contested what made rural development and local resource management visible. It revealed how dominant meanings are established and maintained. While they intended to democratize forest management, my colleagues' support of the men in the association and their disregard of the women's critique served instead to strengthen existing social relations and reinforce gender inequalities. The women showed that forest issues were

unlikely to be resolved without tangible change in the village itself. Their point of departure was the community and not a specific project or resource, making it clear that questions of forest management needed to be dealt with in their social contexts. The question was not *what* was to be done but *how* development and local forest management were to be carried out in everyday practices. The women wanted to be able to participate through a variety of different forms – as individuals, in village organizations, and from within their own groups. However, this did not fit the existing organization of power relations nor the emerging new institutions for local forest management, which all too soon began to mirror the bureaucratic norms they sought to replace. Letting the categories emerge from the process meant that I was able to examine how local management was constituted and how gender was central to this.

At the beginning of the inquiry, my role in the forum was unclear. We decided that I would participate in the discussions and also observe and document the process. I was determined that the group should facilitate the process together. The women emphasized that it was important that someone from the outside take part. As we discussed why they thought this was needed, Ewa said, 'One always comes together in one way or another . . . but by having someone from outside look at what we do, we have been able to see more clearly what is positive and negative about our work and the village. You realize what you actually think is good and bad. You get to think another round. You relate to yourself in another way when you see how someone else perceives your situation.' One role I played was to legitimatize the group in the village. This also had a downside. The group attracted more attention and became more controversial because a researcher was present.

In an earlier version of this paper that I presented to the women I wrote, 'Research is often done with the underlying idea that what you write about might change something and that the results need to be presented in a way that make them useful to others. This process on the other hand was useful to the women while it happened, in the moment of action, when we met and discussed.' Writing for this book enabled us to realize that our experiences and learning stretch beyond the time of the inquiry. We carry the lessons with us in our work, in the village, in academia and in everyday life.

For me, it was also an effort within a larger process of democratizing research, of linking the university to the world it studies and to open up academia to scrutiny. I do not know whether I succeeded in these intentions, or

if that was possible in all parts of the research. What finally emerged as an important difference between the women's work and my academic research was the need to present it differently. As a doctoral student, I was expected to write about and analyse the process by relating it to literature in order to be able to speak to other scientists. This aspect did not always feel accessible or interesting to the women in the forum. In such instances, I found that I had to assume the role of the person with the power to define (cf. Acker *et al.* 1991). Smith (1987) asks, 'How does one create a sociology for women and not about women?' I began my research believing that the answer lay in working 'with the women'. Then I discovered that my position as an outsider provided me not only with privileges but also with a different kind of responsibility and obligation from theirs. The dissertation included an analysis of the social organization that constituted our experiences but was outside of what we knew just then and something that was analysed in retrospect (cf. Smith 1987). In the end, as Robert Chambers (1997) would say, I am left holding the stick (a symbol for having knowledge and the right to speak), but it is a different stick than the one I started with. I had undertaken participatory research to bridge what I saw as the distance between the university and the 'field'. I learned that the question was not merely that of bridging a distance. The research showed how forms of working are normalized and social relations of gender and power are produced across structural distances, in the village and the university. Gender and power relations are integral to dominant theories that universities adopt which may reinforce unequal relations in a remote village.

Our 'research' helped me to get closer to what the women cared about, to 'do research' *with* them in a way that would not have been possible by using other methods. As I traversed the boundaries of the village and the academic world, there was openness in the context that we created. Our meetings were often messy and unstructured, but what they taught me would have been hard to find otherwise. The approach differed from other participatory action research in that I did not start with a predefined and 'right' question that we then chose to work with. The frame for the inquiry emerged in discursive activities from within it. The women took up their agenda in a process of dialogue and meeting at what Haraway (1991) calls 'points of affinity'. As a researcher, I learned what was important to the women in relation to one another, and how they went about creating space for this. The search for the right question became a journey that we set out on together.

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Notes

1 De Lauretis (1989: 25) writes of 'space-off', the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots of its representations: 'I think of it as the spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and

chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparati. And it is here that the terms of a different construction of gender can be posed . . . in the micropolitical practices of daily life and daily resistances that afford both agency and sources of power.'

2 Cecilia, Karl and Lotte are pseudonyms. They had moved from the village and I was unable to get in touch with them.