Contextualizing Empowerment Discourse in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo:

A Case Study of the Ushindi Project

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A Case Study of The Ushindi Project

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ABSTRACT

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Contextualizing Empowerment Discourse in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo:
A Case Study of the Ushindi Project

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This research examines the role of a bilaterally-funded development intervention in empowering women and men in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Since the initial conflict began in 1996, an estimated 5.4 million people have died as a result of the ongoing DRC conflict (Prunier, 2008). Although various peace accords have been signed since 2002, conflict continues to plague the eastern region. A major consequence of this brutal war has been widespread and systematic sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women. Starting in 2010, The Ushindi Project has implemented a holistic approach for combating SGBV, which addresses the root causes of violence against women. Central to this approach is the claim of “empowering” survivors and communities throughout the nine intervention sites. The empowerment approach, as discussed by feminist and development scholars, involves complex meanings of power and agency. Utilizing critical discourse analysis and empowerment theory to examine local stakeholder narratives, this research explores the discursive relationship between USAID discourse, Ushindi administrator dialogues, and ground level personnel’s conceptualizations of empowerment. My argument is that Ushindi personnel contextualize and appropriate meaning to Ushindi discourse in ways that are locally relevant while also circumventing essentialist and outcome-based notions of
empowerment. This illuminates both the power of donor-funded interventions in the promotion of “real” empowerment and also the role of agency in shaping local meanings of transnational concepts.

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ACRONYMS

ABA – American Bar Association
ABAROL – American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative
CDA – Critical Discourse Analysis
CEDAW – Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women
CIA – Central Intelligence Agency
DRC – Democratic Republic of the Congo
FARDC – Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo
FDLR – Federation for the Liberation of Rwanda
GAD – Gender and Development
GBV – Gender-Based Violence
HHI – Harvard Humanitarian Initiative
HEAL Africa – Healing Education Action and Leadership for Africa
IDI – In-Depth Interview
IMA – Interchurch Medical Assistance
NGO – Non-Governmental Organization
PNC – National Congolese Police
PPSSP – Program for Promotion of Primary Health Care
PI – Principle Investigator
SGBV – Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
USAID – United States Agency for International Development
WID – Women In Development
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As I sat in the HEAL Africa conference room listening to Mama Isabelle’s\(^1\) [key informant, SGBV specialist] story of a young sexual violence survivor, I jotted down the phrase “power” in my field notes. I listened closely as Mama Isabelle told the story of the young woman who had been attacked by “unknown men” when she was cultivating in the field. Following the attack, the young woman sought Ushindi’s services at a nearby Wamama Simameni\(^2\) house in her community. Prior to Ushindi, Mama Isabelle explained, the young woman had not received an adequate education as a result of her gender. Through Ushindi, however, the young woman began the alternative livelihood training program with other women in her community, encouraging her “belief in herself”. Mama Isabelle expanded, “You see, when you don’t know how to read or write, you will not have self-esteem or strength”. Most importantly, as Mama Isabelle explained, the young woman went on to share these skills with other woman in her community, teaching them how to make soap and bread for revenue. “Power” Mama Isabelle said, “This is power”. Mama Isabelle’s story reminded me of feminist notions of power such as “power with” and “power within”, and I began to speculate about the universality of such concepts. How is it, as scholars currently contend, that concepts that are assumed to be “Western” and/or “feminist” in origin find legitimacy in cross cultural settings? Are these concepts

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\(^1\) In Swahili culture, women are often addressed as “Mama” to denote respect and wisdom.

\(^2\) *Wamama Simameni*, meaning “women stand up together” in Swahili, are a series of community houses throughout Eastern Congo which were set up through HEAL Africa and The Ushindi Project. These houses serve as resource centers for survivors of sexual violence where numerous projects such as skills training, women’s discussion groups, and many other women’s programs are facilitated.
locally held to be of “outside” influence? And, if so, how do these ideas find meaning in the context of eastern DRC?

Like Mama Isabelle’s story, *Ushindi* personnel’s accounts of women’s empowerment that resonate throughout this study provide a testament to the complex relationship between local voices and “mainstream” development discourse. Current research on the epidemic of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) indicates that the current social, political, and economic environment in eastern DRC is not favorable to women (Bartels, 2006; Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI), 2009, 2010; Megar, 2010). As a result of ongoing conflict, brutalized sexual violence has resulted in the raping of an estimated two million women across DRC. Additionally, a study that was published in May 2011 in the *American Journal of Public Health* estimates that 1,140 women are raped a day in eastern DRC (Peterman, A., Palermo, T., & Bredenkamp, 2011). *The Ushindi Project*, a $16 million dollar intervention, funded through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), has implemented an approach to SGBV that moves beyond previous “band-aid” solutions and instead focuses on the root causes of sexual and SGBV (i.e. unequal power relations). Additionally, the project’s assertion of individual and community empowerment proposes a long-term, gender-oriented approach to both SGBV and women’s equality. *Ushindi* personnel, as they are the forefront of the battle against sexual violence, occupy unique positions in their community, negotiating USAID discourse and local level meanings of “empowerment”. Moreover, conceptualizations of empowerment via staff provide insight into the role that
outside change agents, such as *Ushindi*, can play in empowering and/or disempowering communities in post-conflict eastern DRC.

1.1 Purpose of Study

Mainstream development agencies have been both acclaimed and critiqued for their adoption of alternative, participatory development models such as women’s empowerment (Kabeer, 1994; Cornwall, 2010; Parpart, Rai, Staudt, 2002). The fundamental concepts of empowerment theory suggest a transfer of power from the development stakeholders to women at the local level. Currently, feminist and development scholars continue to debate the efficacy of empowerment models when tied to donor-led, multilateral and/or bilateral development agencies (Kabeer, 2011; Cornwall, 2010; Parpart et al, 2002). There has been little research on the discursive process that takes place within the diffusion of powerful development discourse at the local level and how this process affects local application of alternative development concepts in post-conflict settings. Currently, further research is needed to understand how local stakeholder’s conceptualization and realization of “empowerment” fit into broader discussions concerning the localization of development discourse and women’s empowerment in post-conflict settings. In the context of SGBV intervention in post-conflict DRC, the empowerment agenda claims to offer a sustainable, people-centered approach for long-term SGBV mitigation and community capacity building. Using discourse analysis to examine empowerment discourse through local stakeholder narratives, this research examines the more implicit exchange of transnational discourse.
and how this process manifests within the material world. Rather than questioning whether global “feminist” discourse is entirely beneficial and/or detrimental to local populations, this research aims to better understand the complex interchange between global and local development discourse and how mainstream empowerment concepts, such as gender equality and women’s rights become contested, negotiated, and contextualized.

1.2 Research Questions

Using Ushindi as a case study, this research will focus on the staff narratives in order to gain a broader understanding of the project’s application of empowerment discourse within the communities it operates. Women’s empowerment is best understood though complex understandings of power and agency. The main objective of this study is to understand the means by which empowerment discourse is contextualized within development interventions such as Ushindi and how this process contributes to understandings of the influence of discourse through powerful development institutions such as USAID. The following research questions will address this study’s overall objective:

1. How do Ushindi personnel conceptualize empowerment?
2. What factors do Ushindi personnel perceive to contribute to or impede their capacity to carry out goals (i.e. translate “empowerment” into practice)?
3. How do understandings of empowerment vary across official Ushindi (USAID) discourse, ground-level staff, and administrators?
1.3 Significance of Study

The weak political and economic infrastructure of the DRC indicates that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are at the forefront of the campaign against SGBV in eastern DRC. The allocation of funding and resources to NGOs are highly dependent on programming impact and practicality. The sexual violence epidemic in eastern DRC is highly complex and requires entry at multiple levels of intervention. Promoting women’s empowerment, as adopted by The Ushindi Project, is a central approach used to address the holistic needs of rape survivors and community infrastructure.

“Empowerment”, a term vague in its simple use, provides a conceptual vehicle for potential access to “power” for survivors of sexual violence. The concept of women’s empowerment is vital to the efforts of sustainable objectives; however provision of such services are challenging in a post-conflict setting with pressing humanitarian needs. As Parpart (2002) elaborates,

NGOs that identify with the empowerment approach acknowledge that it is often a difficult process, requiring time and patience. However, they are often caught in a bind because of their donors: development planners are searching for easy schedules, quantifiable targets and simplicity, while addressing enormously complex situations. (p.225)

Unless development scholars and practitioners are better able to understand the implications of using a strategic approach within an environment that so desperately warrants practical needs, they are doomed to fail.

Evaluation of individual and collective understanding of women’s empowerment is a fundamental mechanism to understanding program sustainability and local efficacy. There is currently little research on the operationalization of the GAD-centered
empowerment approach in SGBV interventions within post-conflict settings. More importantly, there has been little research on the actual process of contextualizing empowerment approaches to SGBV mitigation contexts. Empowerment programs are often bypassed by donors because impact assessment is a long process without immediate outcomes. Consequently, long-term goals are rarely translated into practice.

Accordingly, a more thorough examination of empowerment discourse through staff perception is important to a wider understanding of strategic goals at the ground level and how development practitioners accomplish sustainable social change through donor-led development discourse. More importantly, this study is important to current debates regarding the transformational nature of “empowerment” discourses when coopted by mainstream development agencies. I believe Cornwall’s (2010) quote accurately portrays the predicament of “empowerment” narratives in the confines of donor-funded discourse:

> Development agencies often evoke images of empowered autonomous subjects, able to choose, make and shape their own directions of travel. In reality, very few of us have the capacity to make independent choices and to follow them through. These ‘structures of constraint’, referred to by Marx are usefully highlighted by many feminist economists, restrict women’s ability to choose their own paths. But also the very nature of empowerment is something far more contingent and contextual, and ultimately far less predictable than the quick fit solutions, purveyed by development agencies, allow for. (p.2)

In the case of *Ushindi*, how do local actors cognize the role of this donor-led “community-based” intervention in SGBV mitigation and women’s empowerment?

Through this case study, my research adds to the literature on “women empowerment” at the local level, where development discourse plays an integral role in the multiplicity of knowledge production and spaces for conceptualizing women’s empowerment and ultimately social change.
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL PARADIGM AND LITERATURE REVIEW

My overall objective for this chapter is to provide a theoretical framework for the overall scope of this study. First, I will explain my theoretical pursuit, which underlies the entirety of this research. Next, I will explore the literature on empowerment theory and the complications associated with the application of empowerment discourse within donor-funded development interventions. Lastly, I will explore the literature on the localization of donor-led, alternative development approaches, such as empowerment, that transpire within the global/local knowledge exchange. Largely, I contend that empowerment discourses, when coopted by mainstream development, facilitate an interchange of knowledge between the local and global spheres, which inevitably affects the practical application of empowerment discourse within development settings. Additionally, the implementation of empowerment agendas involves a complex process through which global discourses might become internalized, contested, and/or contextualized. This process of diffusion generates a contested space where local actors become the means through which discourse is translated within their given context. Ultimately, I aim to provide both a conceptual framework for further discussion of “empowerment” in the context of Ushindi as well as illustrate the need for more research on the contextualization of empowerment discourse within SGBV interventions in post-conflict settings.
2.1 Theoretical Pursuit

The theoretical framework for this research involves both empowerment theory and critical discourse analysis. My goal for this research is to draw on “local” conceptualizations of “empowerment” in order to examine the role of a bilaterally-funded development intervention in empowering (or disempowering) women, and men, in eastern DRC. More importantly, this research seeks to examine the discursive methods of contextualizing that local actors use to appropriate meanings of women’s empowerment. Thus, I utilize “empowerment” as a theoretical framework for exploring staff narratives and also interpreting the empowering or disempowering nature of Ushindi discourse for local stakeholders. Additionally, while I exclusively use “empowerment” as a theoretical model of analysis, I inevitably approach this study through a “feminist” lens, recognizing and utilizing my reflexivity and positionality throughout this study.

2.2. Empowerment as “Alternative” Development

Empowerment, as a philosophy, has its historical roots in the work of Paolo Freire and his concept of popular education, Amartya Sen’s work on women’s capacities, and “Third World” feminisms (Luttrell, Quiroz, Scrutton, & Bird, 2009; Sen, 1990; Friere, 1970). Although it can be thought of as a single approach, the basic suppositions of empowerment language intersect and overlap with varying levels of academic and popular discourse. The concept itself is not particularly unique in the realm of social opposition, as the term can be traced back as far as the Protestant Reform in Europe during the 16th century (Batliwala, 2007, p.3). However, during the 1970s and 1980s,
increasing awareness of unequal distribution of wealth and disenchantment with modernization theory caused alternative theories of development to take hold. Within these alternative approaches, theories such as postcolonialism and postmodernism sought to break down and question the very construction of mainstream development discourse (Peet and Hartwick, 2010). As discourse informs policy, underlying motives and meanings beneath such knowledge are the key to real social change. Consequently, this decolonization of powerful discourse created opportunities for dialogue concerning construction of knowledge and power that underlie development.

In brief, empowerment discourse emerged as a result of increasing criticism of dominant Western feminist theories of development (Young, 1997). While earlier liberal feminist movements challenged women’s role within development, it neglected a critique of the patriarchal nature of mainstream development and its effect on gendered power structures (Kabeer, 1994). “Third World Feminisms” and the critique of the universally defined “Third World” challenged popular images of the “Third World Women” as “victims”, “dependents”, and “powerless” (Mohanty, 2004). Previously, Women in Development (WID) was used as the theoretical model for improving the lives of women in development. Ultimately, the Gender and Development (GAD) model emerged in the 1980s as a wider exploration of unequal distributions of power and a careful critique of gender relations. Unlike previous feminist theories, the GAD model “called for a deeper analysis based on gender, that is, on an understanding that women’s and men’s roles are socially constructed, not biologically determined” (Jaquette & Summerfield, 2006, p. 28).
Within this analysis, GAD moved beyond the practical needs\(^3\) of women’s to address the more complex, strategic\(^4\) interests of women, which corresponds comparatively to unequal power structures (Molyneaux, 1985). The approach of GAD offered a wider context for examining gender relations and challenging the fundamental obstacles that maintain gender inequalities (Young, 1997). The GAD framework acknowledges the limitations of the standard, top-down approach of development policy and alternatively calls for a bottom-up, localized approach to combating gender inequality (Young, 1997; Kabeer, 1994). Essential to the GAD approach is the role of women’s empowerment, a contentious concept now used for diverse meanings among feminist scholars and development practitioners.

At its simplest explanation, the idea of empowerment can be linked to the transformation of unequal economic, political, and social power relations. However, the ongoing debates within empowerment discourse provide a divided consensus for how we operationally define “empowerment”. In one publication, the World Bank defined empowerment as the “process of enhancing an individual’s or group’s capacity to make purposive choices and to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes” (Cornwall, 2010). According to Kabeer (2005), “empowerment refers to the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability” (p.13). The endless attempts to define empowerment illustrate the complications development scholars and practitioners encounter when trying to fit such a complex

\(^3\) Practical needs refer to the more immediate concerns of women that affect their daily lives such as food, clothing, and shelter (Molyneaux, 1985).

\(^4\) Strategic gender needs denotes women’s long-term interests that challenge unequal power structures that perpetuate gender inequities (Molyneaux, 1985).
concept into a neatly packaged definition. In the following sections, I discuss ideas that I believe to be fundamental concepts of empowerment, which warrant further exploration, especially in the context of SGBV.

2.2.1 Rethinking Power

As with empowerment discourse on the whole, meanings of power are contentious and subject to change depending on contextual factors. Therefore, a complex analysis of power is a necessary starting point for understanding the process of empowerment. Parpart, Rai and Staudt (2002) note this importance in that, “empowerment cannot transcend power relations, it is enmeshed in relations of power at all levels of society” (p. 3). A multidimensional approach to power and its meanings provides a platform for evaluating the transformation efforts of NGOs on the individual and collective level. Particularly, Michel Foucault’s work has been fundamental to nuanced examinations of power. Foucault (1982) contended that the comprehensive understandings of power relations should move beyond superficial explanations of “power over”. Additionally, Foucault disputed the importance of subtler, but no less influential, forms of power within knowledge and resistance that operate within dominant discourses (i.e. development discourse) (Cheater, 1999). Power, then, is a process subjected to mediation of social actors and the institutions encountered in the social sphere. Foucault’s model of power, as a nuanced set of social relationships, transformed previously offered philosophies of power as an isolated set of actions (Foucault, 1982; Cheater, 1999). Despite his immense scholarly contribution to our understanding of
power, Foucault failed to include a detailed analysis of gendered power relations and its effect on a larger patriarchal institution of power and knowledge.

Moving to a more nuanced analysis, power can be understood across diverse time and space and through various levels and mechanisms. The complex interactions of power in a changing social world are best understood through four types of power: power within, power with, power to, and power over (Parpart et al, 2002). However, it is important to mention the interconnectedness of these power types, as overlapping is possible and expected. The most widely discussed type, “power over”, is one group or institution’s ability to control another group’s actions or options (Cheater, 1999). Within the “power over” dynamic, power can emerge through hidden, visible, and invisible forms (Gaventa, 2006). The visible form can be understood as “observable decision making”, hidden as “agenda setting”, and invisible as “shaping reality” (Gaventa, 2006).

The remaining models of power are closely related to feminist theory as they offer the possibility of change through unconventional, subtle modes of power. First, “power within” represents an organic power in which the individual actor is the medium for power. The individual, rather, possesses internal capabilities and can exercise power through agency and choice (Kabeer, 1999). “Power with” involves collective organizing through networks of individuals. “Power to” refers to a type of power that arises from the opposition of structural/organizational institutions (Kabeer, 1999). These feminist concepts of power have constructively expanded our understandings of what it means to be “empowered”.
2.2.2 The Agency/Structure Debate

Connected to the concept of “power” is the relationship between agency of the individual and the structural forces outside of the individual’s control, such as institutional power. The empowerment framework is fundamentally linked to the grassroots movement and therefore the importance of agency has been central. However, it is first appropriate to discuss what I mean by “agency”. Rather than adhering to a superficial understanding of “agency” as free will or resistance, I understand agency to be a process of interaction between the individual and the social world. Within this interaction, social agents encounter structure or constraints within the material and discursive world. Thus, it is important to explore meanings of what is meant by the terms “agency” and “structure”. Agency, or “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them” as defined by Kabeer (1994) encompasses multiple layers of the power forms discussed in the previous sections. According to Kabeer (2010), “choice” and one’s ability to use such is a vehicle for exercising one’s agency.

Still, we need to be aware of developing a biased notion of agency, which neglects “silent” or “subtle strategies” of resistance. As Parpart (2010) warns, “The literature on women’s empowerment, with it’s emphasis on voice and agency, is embedded in neo-liberal assumptions that individuals who speak hard truths will be protected by international and national institutions devoted to democracy, freedom of speech, and human rights” (p.1). Especially in the context of SGBV, international agencies have shaped empowerment around women’s right to “speak out” against perpetrators. Consequently, international and academic discourse has a critical role in
constructing meanings of what is meant to “assert agency”. For myself, I do believe the enacting of “choice” from a set of alternatives is important for the actualization of empowerment. However, realizing the structural constraints that affect individual and collective “choice”, I agree with Kabeer (2010) who argues “material alternatives are undoubtedly important but I give particular stress to the importance of alternatives at the conceptual level, the ability to imagine possibilities other than those that are prescribed by norms and conventions of society” (p.17). Thus, I refer to agency throughout this research as a strategic choice, whether conceptual or material.

2.2.3 Empowerment as a Process

Empowerment can be thought of as both an outcome and a process. The transformative nature of the empowerment framework relates directly to the process of social change. Perceptions of empowerment as a process highlight the fluidity of change over time. However, acknowledging the importance of measurable outcomes is also essential to practical application. A focus on outcomes and the process of empowerment has differing methods within development projects. A useful starting point for examining empowerment as a process and outcome is Kabeer’s (1999) description of “resources, agency, and achievements”. Resources refer to the pre-conditions that exist within an individual’s reality and can either be material or nonmaterial assets. As discussed earlier, agency is the individual expression of one’s capabilities, both material and conceptual. In relation to choice, there must first be a set of alternative options to choose otherwise that are seen to exist (Kabeer, 2005). Achievements, on the other hand, are the outcomes
produced within a given context when resources and agency converge. Equally, achievements can address immediate needs such as income generation or strategic needs such as political participation. So that measure of both the process and outcome of empowerment are achieved, inequalities and access to choice should be considered starting points of analysis. However, conceptualizing empowerment as a process creates spaces of “unconventional” ideas of oppression and social change not implanted within development interventions.

As I have discussed through the aforementioned concepts, scholars are a long way from outlining a conceptually agreed upon model of empowerment. However, as I have attempted to illustrate, the process of empowerment involves complex meanings of power and agency. First, I contend that considering empowerment to be conceivable first requires examination of the given oppressive context and understanding the structural framework for which various levels of power operate. Secondly, I consider power to exist on various complex levels of actualization such as power with, power to, power over, and power within and on various spheres such as local, regional, and global. And finally, I believe “true” empowerment involves critical consciousness of inequality and a material and/or conceptual challenge of the oppressive circumstances (i.e. agency).

2.2.4 Empowerment as Human Rights?

Popular within current sexual and SGBV interventions, The Ushindi Project situates women’s empowerment in a universal and rights-based approach. Feminist and development scholars continue to discuss the usefulness of the right-based approach as a
tool for women’s empowerment as it is historically “premised on a combination of law, modernization theory, and Western liberal feminist jurisprudence” (Merry, 2006, p. 64). Moreover, issues of cultural relativism and Western ethnocentrism have posed concerns about the women’s rights as a pathway to contextually applicable notions of women’s empowerment. Additionally, various arguments have been posed about the efficacy of adopting an “equality” approach for empowering women because of its presupposition on biologically determined meanings of men and women. Moreover, legal rights for women have run the risk of subversion if there are not substantial institutions to support women’s access to resources or legal recourse. Structural hindrances can thus negate the influence of a rights-based approach to find legitimacy in a multiplicity of contexts. For this reason, Hilary Charlesworth’s question requires attention: “Do legal rights really offer anything to women? Women’s disadvantages are often based on structural injustice and winning a case in court will not change that” (Barber in Parpart et al., 2002, p.57). I disagree with Charlesworth, and other scholars who argue for the general restrictions of human rights as these concepts can find local relevance. Clearly, understanding the rights-based approach as purveyed by *Ushindi* and whether it has the potential to empower women through a legal framework is essential.

Furthermore, the discussion of women’s rights as a pathway to women’s empowerment has not been entirely situated in the “Western” context, as transnational organizing has occurred around this concept. The years of 1975-1985 marked the UN decade for women, at which time local and regional networks of women began organizing on the global scale via women’s UN conferences (Bunch & Fried, 1996).
These conferences created a new international space for discussions and input from diverse transnational voices about what “women’s issues” actually mean (Wölte, 2002). In 1979, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was an important document in that it “recast concepts of ‘women’s rights’ in a global perspective and established a supervisory machinery with terms of reference similar to those of existing human rights organs” (Ali in Parpart et al., 2002, p. 62). Ultimately, this document provides a universal framework for women’s rights as human rights or as the UN states a “socio-legal tool” (Ali in Parpart et al., 2002, P.62). At the Fourth World Conference on Women, the 1995 Platform for Action was signed by various government parities, setting the stage for “women’s rights as human rights” language as the global consensus (Bunch & Fried, 1996). On the transnational organizing scale, the “women’s rights as human rights” framework has since provided a set of universal standards women have been able to collectively utilize, creating tangible changes for women in various contexts. For instance, authors Bunch and Fried (1996) reflect on the benefits of the Beijing effect, “such an understanding can be transformed into human rights practices – reaffirming women’s rights to literacy, food, and housing, along with their rights to freedom of association and speech and to live free of violence, enslavement or torture” (p. 202). In the context of SGBV, the rights-based framework has been crucial to advocating for women’s rights within the confines of patriarchal and oppressive institutions.
2.3 Empowerment Discourse and the Global-Local Interface

As previously mentioned, the term “empowerment” has become another appealing buzzword applied within development practice to denote bottom-up, local approaches to complex “development issues”. The theoretical concepts explored thus far demonstrated the transformational potential of empowerment discourse for women’s social realities. The utilization of women’s empowerment initiatives by foreign aid-led NGOs can offer transformatory possibilities when local women’s interests are a first priority. However, development discourse and policy can often represent the autonomous objectives and interests of mainstream development agencies and donors themselves (Parpart et al., 2002). As Kabeer (1994) stated, “one of the major limitations of the development NGOs as a vehicle for women’s empowerment is that it tends to be accountable to upward governments and donors” (p. 262). Hence, the objectives set forth by NGOs are essentially not entirely representative of local populations, but development interventionists themselves. In fact, as Simpson (2006) argued, “many researchers have questioned the capacities of these ubiquitous organizations [domestic NGOs], arguing that more often than not, in attempting to garner funding, domestic NGOs ultimately strive toward ‘issues that Western donors found important, but rarely around issues that locals confronted on a daily basis’” (p.21). Certainly, there are significant difficulties related to the processes through which local NGOs decide to navigate the hierarchy of donor-led development. The language donors use to achieve their desired “outcomes” carries with it its powerful implications for the potential translation of such ideas at the local level.
Additionally, development interventions often employ the language, which they anticipate will generate the largest sum of funding. Because mainstream development discourse operates on its own suppositions, hegemonic narratives emerge to alter what empowerment has come to represent in development settings. Cornwall (2010) elaborates on this phenomenon, “Their use of the iconic image of the ‘poor, powerless and pregnant’ Third World woman may have given way to the smiling faces of ‘empowered’ women, but the narrative is still one in which the development agency plays the part of hero” (p. 4). Consequently, the language utilized by development interventions becomes a framing mechanism through which “development issues” are presented to at the local, state, and global level. The way in which development interventions choose to represent issues can have serious consequences on local and global interpretations of reality. Uma Narayan’s (1997) influential work, *Dislocating Cultures*, employs a postcolonial praxis to explore the problems encountered within the phenomenon of “culture” and “tradition” framing. Using dowry as a lens of analysis, Narayan (1997) argues that “Third World” issues are often framed in a way that decontextualize the historical and political realities of such matters.

Within development discourse, such framing does not in fact position the issue from a local content and can therefore produce an incomplete portrayal of complex social authenticities. Moreover, within development discourse these “frames are not themselves ideas but ways of packaging and presenting ideas that generate shared beliefs, motivate collective action, and define appropriate strategies of action” (Merry, 2006). While framing can help to disseminate their objectives and create points of entry, such a narrow
lens for analysis is inevitably limiting. If empowerment discourse communicated by NGOs does not represent the realities of the local populations, I would argue that this “approach” is not empowerment at all. Ultimately, the language that organizations and their constituencies communicate at the international, regional, state, and local level certainly affects the means by which powerful discourse is eventually disseminated and endorsed.

Likewise, discourse carries with it powerful meanings and material outcomes in the contexts for which these programs operate. Therefore, while one might contend that while the adoption of “empowerment” within mainstream development discourse is beneficial, the translation of these concepts can lose legitimacy in the hierarchy of donor-led development. Thus, the cooptation of empowerment via mainstream development can do “more to improve productivity within the status quo than to foster social transformation” (Parpart et al., 2002). In fact, there is substantial literature suggesting that empowerment discourse, when adopted by major development agencies, does not actually offer a people-centered participatory approach, which addresses unequal power structures (Kabeer, 2004; Parpart et al., 2002; Cornwall, 2010). Clearly, development is tied to funding and with that monetary relationship comes certain expectations from all parties at hand. Thus, within this complex relationship, donors and local populations must guard their own interests at stake. Merry (2006) elaborates on this occurrence:

As they scramble for funds, they need to select issues that international donors are interested in—such as female genital cutting, women’s empowerment, or the trafficking of women and children—and connect these agendas to problems that interest local populations—such as clean drinking water, more jobs, or good roads. State policies may silence these efforts or subvert them into reinforcing forms of male authority even as they seem to be promoting women’s human rights. (p. 42)
This dilemma illuminates the power of development discourse to generate material outcomes, whether negative or positive, for local populations.

The harmful implications of such ineffective empowerment planning can proliferate in post-conflict environments where program implementation is exceptionally difficult (D’Odorico & Holvoet, 2009; Mackenzie, 2009). A prime example of the difficulties interventions face in “empowerment” application within emergency scenarios is found in Meagan Mackenzie’s study on empowerment initiatives in post-conflict Sierra Leone. In her findings, Mackenzie (2009) contends that empowerment initiatives used in demobilization of female soldiers were unsuccessful because they failed to address the actual unequal power structures that underlie women’s realities. Mackenzie (2009) concludes, “development actors in Sierra Leone made little effort to understand the motivations and experiences of women and girls during the conflict. In turn, initiatives designed to address women and girls’ needs and to ‘empower’ them post-conflict are ill informed at best” (Mackenzie, 2009). Mackenzie’s (2009) findings demonstrate the outward enthusiasm of development intervention to adopt empowerment language without a clear commitment to effective programming. How then, do development interventions facilitate effective language that actually translates into real meaning for local populations? Kabeer (1999) argues,

Just as women’s cognitive capacities are a critical element in the processes involved in their empowerment, so too are the cognitive dimension of development interventions – the way interventions ‘think’, the ideas, values, assumptions and information that shape their practice – is an important determinant of what they are able to achieve. (p. 208)

Hence, the processes that generate contextually diverse vernaculars and concepts around
meanings of empowerment will surely shed light on the means by which social change is realized.

As with discourse on the whole, development speech is not static or unaffected by engagement with other vernaculars and dialogues at the local level. And, because women’s empowerment is often situated in a “rights-based approach”, universal notions of women’s equality have affected the interaction of global discourse and local ideas of women’s rights. Women’s rights language is thus neither confined to the local or the global but rather enmeshed in a local/global binary in which various knowledge, such as local, global, and scientific interact. In other words, there is a complex exchange of knowledge that occurs in the process of “contextualizing” complex development discourse such as “empowerment” and “women’s equality”. In the context of people-centered development interventions, local NGO practitioners, such as those interviewed in this study, take on unique roles that must “straddle” the line between local identity and allegiance with the given donor-funded NGO. In her work on localizing human rights, Merry (2006) explains that this phenomenon involves a “process of vernacularization through the people in the middle: those who translate the discourses and practices from the arena of international law and legal institutions to specific situations of suffering and violation. Intermediaries or translators work at various levels to negotiate between local, regional, national, and global systems of meaning” (p. 39). What is often taken for granted in development practice is the praxis that occurs at the individual level of the local development practitioners, those who engage with empowerment discourse through mainstream development narratives and within local realities. Drawing from her work on
localizing gender politics in Central Asia, Simpson (2003) explains the significance of these processes,

Simply put, globalizing gender politics contributes to processes of localizing. It would be to the benefit of women—and men—in Central Asia and worldwide, to consider the implications of these processes, as well as how local is conceived, and by whom, and how. (p.27)

The analysis of development discourse at the practitioner and organizational level via staff narratives is one way of examining these complex processes and the larger implications for women’s empowerment.

2.4 Critical Discourse Analysis

I apply critical discourse analysis (CDA) as both a framework and method in order to analyze the power structures embedded within staff utilization of empowerment discourse. I approach this study with the supposition that discourse exists on multiple levels (micro, meso, and macro) of interpretation and power. The scope of this study seeks to understand the process of discourse production through local level interpretation and everyday speech patterns within The Ushindi Project. CDA provides a conceptual framework to analyze meanings behind powerful development discourse such as Ushindi’s approach to SGBV mitigation via women’s empowerment. For my own analysis, I have applied the perspectives of discourse analysis from various discourse scholars who together shape a cohesive context for approaching my research objectives. Norman Fairclough’s (1997) work on CDA was particularly useful as a means to position my pursuit. I have situated my theoretical focus through CDA because it provides a suitable lens for understanding the relationship between discourse and social structures.
More importantly however, I am ultimately concerned with the meanings behind powerful discourse (mainstream empowerment) and the relationship to social realities (i.e. women and men in eastern DRC). As Fairclough (2012) explains, CDA is “an explanatory critique in that it does not simply describe existing realities, but seeks to explain them, for instance by showing them to be effects of structures or mechanism or forces that the analyst postulates and whose realities s/he seeks to test out” (p.9).

In relation to this study, expressions of power are implicitly situated within mainstream development discourse and the influence this is likely to have on contextualizing such discourse within specific social institutions such as *Ushindi* has important inferences. Likewise, in the same way that discourse can serve a powerful role in shaping “truth”, social actors also have the capacity to develop new ways of internalizing discourse through acts of resistance. I find Van Dijk (2008) expansion on the process of discourse exchanged to be particularly useful,

People are influenced by the news they read or see, if only in order to acquire and update knowledge about the world. But their comprehension of the news and the way they change their opinions or attitudes depends on their own earlier attitudes or ideologies (shared with other group members), as well as their personal experiences. (p.15)

Through discourse analysis, I remained cognizant of the implicit means through which language in internalized, negotiated, and/or contested at the individual and institutional level.
In eastern DRC, the systematic and chronic nature of sexual violence in a post-conflict backdrop has resulted in challenges to intervention implementation. In the wake of chronic conflict, the DRC faces weakened infrastructure such as broken health and judicial systems (Freedman, 2011; Bosmans, 2007). Despite limited resources, international and local non-government organizations are attempting to address the needs of rape survivors in eastern DRC through alternative means. However, recent findings have indicated that the current SGBV programs and interventions in eastern DRC have adopted a pre-WID approach, rather than an empowerment approach (D’Odorico & Holvoet, 2009). Interventions that only focus on the immediate needs of rape survivors will ultimately fail to address the structures that foster and exacerbate violence against women. Bosman (2007) addresses this predicament through her research of factors that hamper aid to rape survivors in eastern DRC. Bosman’s (2007) findings reveal the structural implications that influence violence against women, which are major obstacles to sexual violence mitigation. Consequently, strategic gender needs, such as the unequal power structures that foster SGBV have gone unchallenged. Sexual violence against women, especially in the pandemic case of the DRC, requires sustainable interventions that address underlying causes of GBV and women’s position in local, national, and global domains.

Prior to the implementation of Ushindi, SGBV interventions in eastern DRC have done little to address the interconnected relationships that exist between men and women and how these influence SGBV mitigation efforts (D’Odorico & Holvoet, 2009). The
most telling reasons for this failure have been due to the lack of time and resources of agencies, which battle the SGBV endemic (Bosman, 2007; Megar, 2010). The situation of conflict in the DRC has required development and health practitioners to provide services under limited funds and within environments of insecurity and urgency. Hence, long-term goals, such as Ushindi’s focus on strategic individual and community empowerment, are only applicable in post-conflict environments when the necessary practicalities are first intact. Subsequently, practical needs, which are also often met with implementing programs, are the major focus within development SGBV interventions. Currently, major interventions in eastern DRC have been unsuccessful in implementing holistic strategies that address the root causes of sexual violence (D’Odorico & Holvoet, 2009). D’Odorico and Holvoet (2009) expound on this phenomenon,

Most organizations seem to misunderstand the root cause(s) of violence against women and hence do not tackle violence against women as an outcome of unequal or oppressive power relations between men and women. Consequently, current responses continue to foster unsustainable aid practices and reinforce gender-based inequality. (p.51)

D’Odorico & Holvoet (2009) argue that it is critical for interventions in eastern DRC to adopt an empowerment approach that can tackle the practical needs of survivors and also strategize for longer-term, transformative objectives that challenge gender inequality. Ushindi’s goals are rooted in the belief that deeply entrenched beliefs about women and unequal power relations between genders are at the foundation of widespread SGBV in eastern DRC.

Undoubtedly, a bottom-up localized approach, one which tackles the root causes of sexual violence through preventive measures, is a critical entry point for addressing
unequal power relations in eastern DRC. The complexity of SGBV as a social issue warrants contextually appropriate techniques for each particular setting. Research, particularly on GBV, has indicated the interminable ways GBV interventions fail when the local context is not applied to development models (Terry, 2007). Also, development interventions, which do little to view SGBV problems through a comprehensive, gendered lens (i.e. Ushindi), will neglect the interrelated ways gender is expressed within various levels of social relationships. Especially in the context of post-conflict situations such as eastern DRC, the diffusion of empowerment discourse has the potential to open up new spaces for both marginalized men and women.

Nevertheless, development interventions are attached to particular discourse, which carries its own ideas and representations of reality. Discourse embodies power and therefore reflects whose interests are represented and through what avenue “empowerment” should be achieved. In the case of Ushindi, Congolese staff navigate and engage with both USAID development language and local/cultural discourse via their lived social realities. Accordingly, the ways in which Ushindi personnel internalize and conceptualize “empowerment” determines the process by which the goals of Ushindi are likely to be achieved. As Kabeer (1994) contends there is “an intimate relationship between ways of thinking and ways of doing” (p.303). The meanings of empowerment that are provided by Ushindi “translators” are central to a broader analysis of development discourse and how gender approaches operate at the local level. More importantly, the individual processes for defining and operationalizing empowerment discourse per Ushindi staff communicates to the wider organizational approach of
“empowerment” within the domain of large, donor-funded development projects that claim to offer social transformation. Likewise, examining the relationship between discourse and practice is an essential tool for understanding the capacity of *Ushindi* to provide sustainable solutions to eastern DRC’s populations. Currently, research is needed to understand the discursive conceptualization of empowerment discourse via staff narratives in the context of SGBV intervention. Such research will provide insight into both the local level negotiations that occur through individual accounts of global discourse on “empowerment” and the functionality of such programming in post-conflict environments. My research contributes to this gap and adds to the current discussion on “women’s empowerment”.

CHAPTER 3: STUDY AREA/INTERVENTION

The chapter expands on both the study area and intervention of this research. First, I expand on the background of conflict and SGBV in eastern DRC and then provide information on *Ushindi* and discuss its aims and objectives. The incidence of SGBV in eastern DRC is intrinsically associated with historical and political influences such as colonial and modern exploitation. Consequently, any attempt to comprehend SGBV in eastern DRC first requires an analysis that contextualizes the issue appropriately.

Moreover, examination of SGBV in the context of eastern DRC illustrates the individual and social consequences as well as highlights the need for long-term gendered approaches that challenge unequal power structures.

3.1 Background to DRC Conflict

Formerly known as “Zaire”, the DRC is a country rich in vast natural resources, particularly in the mineral rich eastern region. The nation’s natural wealth has created exploitative conditions on the basis of monetary incentives as well as individual and institutional greed. Beginning with the extraction of ivory and rubber by Belgian colonial powers in the 19th century, the minerals of current international interest include cobalt, copper, coltan, and gold, some of which are crucial for the production of all electronic devices used across the globe (Turner, 2010; Stearns, 2010). The current state of political and social unrest in DRC can be understood as a result of complex factors that have plagued the nations since colonial conquest (Prunier, 2007; Turner, 2010). Thus, the grim situation of the political, economic, and social environment in DRC is not isolated to
recent conflicts but rather a culmination of various historical implications from both internal and external standpoints.

The pillage of the DRC began with the arrival of King Leopold II of Belgium in 1885, an imperialist who justified his conquest of DRC with grand proclamations of “bringing civilization to the people of Congo” (Turner, 2010; Prunier, 2009). Once the material wealth of the DRC has been realized, Leopold and his fellow colonizers established the Congo Free State in 1885 at which time the extraction of the two most lucrative and readily available resources, ivory and rubber, commenced. During this time, colonial rulers disrupted social structures by creating a hierarchal system of forced labor while also killing hundreds of thousands and bringing death by disease to millions (Hoschild, 1998; Prunier, 2009). In lieu of increasing international awareness, Leopold handed over the Congo Free State to the government of Belgium in 1908 (Hoschild, 1998; Stearns, 2010; Prunier, 2009). Despite this transition, little was changed to stop the curses of colonial exploitation and imperial domination.

The DRC gained independence in 1960 at which time Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, an outspoken anti-colonialist, stepped up to lead the country to sovereignty (Prunier, 2009). Thus far, the Congolese state had been subjected to nearly one hundred years of slavery, disease, exploitation, and social disruption through imposed European rule. At the time of Lumumba’s appointed leadership, the Congo Free State and the structures used to govern had never belonged to the Congolese people. However, Lumumba had an alternative vision for the DRC. However, Lumumba’s dream for the future of DRC would soon be altered. Amid growing concerns of a communist-backed
agenda, Patrice Lumumba was assassinated with the help of his opposition in the Katanga Province and Belgian and U.S. backers (Prunier, 2009).

On November 24, 1965, Mobutu Sese Seko took power through a military led coup, marking the subsequent years of dictatorial rule that were to follow. During his 30 year presidency, Mobutu became one of the wealthiest men in the world by channeling the country’s revenue into his own hands as well as his cronies (Turner, 2010; Bates, 2007). Although the economic atmosphere was relatively optimistic during the later 1960s and early 1970s due to the international demand for copper, the long–term detrimental outcomes of Mobutu’s Zairianization⁵ policies and kleptocratic⁶ government were soon to take hold. Thus, at the beginning of the 1990s, there was a collective discontent of the Congolese population with the current economic and political conditions they were facing (Turner, 2007). Moreover, prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the self-proclaimed anticommunist received financial and political support by Western powers such as the United States. However, the beginning of the 1990s and the end of the Cold War meant that Western supporters no longer had invested reasons for backing Mobutu and his collapsed empire.

Beginning in 1994, the Rwandan genocide sparked widespread regional chaos within the Great Lakes Region, thus providing the backdrop for the years of conflict that would follow in eastern DRC. Following the Rwandan genocide, two million Hutu

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⁵ The term Zairianization refers to Mobutu’s economic nationalization policy which included the privatization of mining companies and exportation of foreign-owned businesses, a covert opportunity to funnel money into the hands of the elite (Haskins, 2005)

⁶ The term “kleptocracy” first emerged from critique of Mobutu’s regime and the rampant theft of national income and wealth for personal gain (Haskins, 2005)
refugees fled across the Rwandan border into neighboring DRC (Turner, 2007). Among these refugees were former *genocidaires*\(^7\) who participated in the slaying of nearly one million Tutsis during the genocide (Prunier, 2008). To the recently established Tutsi government, there became a widespread fear that the Hutu exiles residing across the border in eastern DRC would attack Rwanda in retaliation. Thus, Rwanda attained the necessary justification for the invasion of DRC. Subsequently, in 1996, President Mobutu was ousted from power by future presidential successor, Laurent Kabila, who was backed by Rwandan and Ugandan forces. The second Congolese War erupted in 1998, however this time those parties, Rwanda and Uganda, who had backed Kabila in the first war were now out to remove Kabila from power (Stearns, 2010; Turner, 2007). Amongst growing unrest, Kabila was assassinated by his own bodyguard in 2001. However, the true motives behind Kabila’s death are still debatable (Turner, 2007). Following Kabila’s death, his son Joseph Kabila assumed power and a general state of optimism for future peace followed. Various peace accords were signed in 2002 and 2003 between rebel parties and the DRC government.

### 3.2 Current Sociopolitical Landscape

The DRC has undergone decades of social upheaval beginning with the colonial conquest by Belgian interests in the 19\(^{th}\) century. Understanding the historical background of the DRC is extremely important for any analysis of current humanitarian issues within its borders. Importantly, the current state of military and political rule is a

\(^7\) All parties and/or individuals responsible in the Rwandan genocide (Prunier, 2008).
result of years of poor governance beginning with both the impositions of social structures by the Belgians and the venal international interests for its resources. The current sociopolitical atmosphere of eastern DRC is one of turmoil, corruption, and insecurity. There are currently around 29 rebel groups that continue to operate throughout the eastern region of the country (Stearns, 2010). What’s most striking is that there is still no real consensus on developing a sustainable solution to mitigating conflict and building infrastructure in the eastern region (Trefon, 2011). Since the formal end of Second Congo War in 2003, state-building efforts have become part of the national landscape, including “security, poverty reduction, improved governance and rule of law, macroeconomic management the physical rehabilitation of infrastructure” (Trefon, 2011, p.1). Despite a multiplicity of efforts to increase growth and security, domestic and international endeavors to foster “development” have been ill equipped to promote sustainable change. A major source for this “failure” has been widespread corruption and a lack of government accountability (Stearns, 2010; Trefon, 2001; Turner, 2007). In his book *Congo Masquerade*, Trefon (2011) argues that this dilemma has come to shape the political culture of present-day DRC. Likewise, the international aid scene in DRC has done little to resolve many of the aforementioned efforts because of inefficiency and corruption at the state and local level. Overall, the reform efforts in eastern DRC have done little to improve the lives of the average Congolese citizen and international aid agencies have played a role in this predicament.

Women have played an integral role in peace building efforts within the Inter-Congolese Dialogues and reforming Congolese legislation (White, 2005). Their untiring
efforts have paved the way for increasing women’s rights and access to the political sphere. However, women still have a long way to go in shaping political reform in DRC and accessing positions of leadership. Certainly, increasing women’s political participation could create more equitable conditions for women and other marginalized groups. Nonetheless, the current sociopolitical environment of DRC poses particular challenges for improving conditions for Congolese, especially in the eastern region.

3.3 Eastern DRC: “The Rape Capital of the World”?

In eastern DRC, where an estimated two million women have been raped, the social conditions that warrant and perpetuate sexual violence are of upmost importance (Peterman, Palermo & Bredenkamp, 2011). As previously noted, years of political and economic instability have allowed the widespread conditions of government unaccountability, stifled civil society, legal impunity, and economic hardship to persist. Particularly, the DRC post-conflict environment has produced volatile conditions for women and manifested negative gendered relationships within the private and public spheres. As with sexual violence on the whole, the experience of SGBV in the DRC does not occur as isolated occurrences within static environments. Rather, SGBV in eastern DRC involves an intersectional process by which the effects of rape permeate through various levels of society. Moreover, the characteristics of wartime rape in eastern DRC indicate complex and incredibly vast incidences of sexual violence. For instance, various experiences of gang rape, forced sex slavery, rape of the very old and young, rape with foreign objects, and forced incest have all been documented (Bartels, Scott, Mukwege,
Lipton, VanRooyen, & Leaning, 2010). Undoubtedly, the distress of rape survivors stretches far beyond the immediate ramifications. Women’s lives are affected through psychosocial, medical, and economic avenues (HHI, 2009). Impending violence, social stigma, and health implications all play a role in the devastating effects on the individual level while the society as a whole endures as well.

3.3.1 Social Implications

The social consequences involved in instances of SGBV are manifold and linger long after the physical wounds of sexual violence have healed. The experience of sexual violence in the DRC carries socially restraining consequences for survivors following an experience of sexual violence. The issue of sexual violence is a highly stigmatized topic in Congolese society (Bartels et al.; Mechanic, 2004; Megar, 2010). As a result, the suffering of rape survivors stretches far beyond the immediate ramifications. The social stigma surrounding rape in the DRC can create impediments to social mobility thus affecting livelihood patterns and social fabric. Following the experience of rape, many survivors are forced to leave their homes and/or communities and are often abandoned by their spouses. A report conducted in South Kivu by HHI found that “twenty-nine percent of women said they were forced to leave their families as a realities of having been raped, 6.3% of women were forced to leave their communities, and fifty-eight percent of women reported feelings of general isolation after their attack” (Bartels et al., 2010). The nature of stigma surrounding rape in eastern DRC poses consequences for the survivor, family, and the community.
The psychological damage related to rape perpetration is detrimental to a survivor’s ability to return to daily activities and carry out livelihood actions. For many women, psychological damage is the most restricting outcome of rape, as anxiety, depression and other mental disorders often follow (Bartels et al., 2010). Mental anguish and suffering have long-term consequences for an individual’s capacity to mentally and physically reintegrate within their communities. Moreover, the psychological trauma endured from rape indirectly affects those within the survivor’s life such as children, spouses, and so on.

3.3.2 Health

The health repercussions involved in the experience of sexual violence in eastern DRC often create immediate physical limitations as well as long-term damages. The brutalized rape being waged in eastern DRC can produce serious health consequences such as HIV infection, physical injuries such as fistulas, and psychological damage to mental health. Research indicates that HIV infection is a major concern for survivors of rape in Eastern DRC (Bartels, et al., 2010). The vicious nature of wartime rape may increase the risk factors for contraction because of injuries such as vaginal tearing. In addition to the long-term health implications that effect mobility, HIV infection is a risk factor for the abandonment of community and spouses and thus its effects are layered.

The physical injuries suffered by rape survivors are often devastating and may lead to physical incapacitation and sometimes, even death. Physical injuries can also lead to spousal abandonment if the injuries are severe enough that they have visual results.
Fistulas, a condition from the tearing of the vaginal walls and rectum, are often suffered as result of vicious rape. Fistulas have the potential to leave women permanently incontinent, often causing further isolation in their communities (Megar, 2010, p. 126).

3.3.3 Damaged Livelihoods

There are overlapping implications of sexual violence that lead to decreased economic productivity and viable livelihood patterns. Women who are unable to work because of sexual violence injuries are incapable of earning an income and providing for their families. In addition to social stigma and health consequences, looming attacks of violence can also play a vital role in the degradation of women’s livelihoods and economic capabilities (Bosmans, 2007). Whether it is through home invasion or deterrence from firewood collection and field tending, the widespread threat of violence creates a chaotic social environment that is detrimental to income generating activities. Additionally, the threat of widespread violence can have negative consequences on livelihoods through shrinking social spaces for income generating activities such as firewood collection and agriculture. Women in the DRC constitute 73% of agriculture workforce and produce more than 80% of food crops (Bartels, 2010, HHI, p.50). From a community perspective, women’s lack of participation in light of increasing violence has detrimental effects for the community as a whole.
3.3.4 The Pervasiveness of Impunity

In 2006, the government of DRC amended Law 06/018 which broadened the definition of rape to include acts such as sexual harassment, forced pregnancy and sterilization, and other acts of SGBV (Lincoln, 2011). Although this law indicated an achievement for rape prevention and prosecution, little has been done in the way of comprehensive implementation. Because of the impunity that pervades in eastern DRC, many survivors are apprehensive to report incidences of sexual violence as the repercussions often favor the culprit and not the survivor. Thus, the judicial impunity for both military and civilian perpetrators remains an obstacle for the mitigation of sexual violence in eastern DRC. Moreover, looking at the legal system through a gender lens, the whole of the judicial framework in eastern DRC is not favorable to women (Lincoln, 2011). One example is highlighted in Article 444 of the Congolese family code that states “The husband is the head of the household. His duty is the protection of his wife; his wife owes her obedience to her husband” (Mechanic, 2004). Additionally, Trefon contends “for the UN’s Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the promotion of women’s human rights and gender equality is not seen as a priority” (p.13). Evidently, an already gendered legal system coupled with ever-failing civil infrastructure and local government has resulted in a blatant state of impunity.

3.3.5 Gender Inequalities: Then and Now?

Media outlets and activists frequently refer to eastern DRC as the “worst place on earth to be a woman”. As previously discussed, the brutality of the Congo Wars has
created extremely poor living conditions for vulnerable populations such as women and children. However, research has indicated the conditions that existed for women prior to the war were far from ideal (Mechanic, 2004; Bosmans, 2007). Human Rights Watch, for example, found that “women and children were second class citizens even before the war” (Mechanic, 2004). Interestingly, while the rape endemic in eastern DRC is often referred to as wartime sexual violence, “cultural” and “traditional” explanations usually follow these statements. In my research, I have found divergent arguments around the “root causes” of sexual violence as a “culture of violence”, “harmful traditional practices”, “wartime rape” and so on. For example, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (2009) states, “Congolese policy and socio-cultural customs continue to discriminate against women, effectively preventing their economic advancement and independence.” Consequently, HHI argues, “the mentality of entire communities will likely have to be reset to recognize that rape is an unacceptable and punishable crime and to accept women as equal members of society” (p.40). This standpoint is congruent with Ushindi’s approach to long-term sexual violence mitigation. Because of the increasing trend in civilian perpetrated SGBV, it is valid to question the function of intolerance of sexual violence survivors and women’s equality. However, it is also important to acknowledge the historical factors (i.e. colonialism) that have contributed to the degradation of social institutions (Prunier, 2007; Turner, 2010).
3.4 Overcoming Sexual Violence in Eastern DRC: The Ushindi Project

_Ushindi_, which means “victory” in Swahili, is a holistically designed intervention for “overcoming sexual and gender-based violence in eastern DRC” (USAID Cooperative Agreement, 2010). _The Ushindi Project_ is the culmination of efforts of various local health organizations, which have determinedly combated the SGBV epidemic in eastern DRC for several years. _Ushindi_ is an extensive, concerted, and complex operation. Within the five-year _Ushindi_ intervention, the complex social issues surrounding SGBV in the DRC are being confronted through a strategic framework in addition to practical application of a vital health component. _Ushindi_ is a collaborative effort led by local NGOs which partner with international NGOs to “join hands” in _Ushindi’s_ effort to strategically mitigate SGBV. _Ushindi’s_ aim to “join hands” with local and international NGOs, healthcare facilities, community groups, and local stakeholders is what sets it apart from other SGBV interventions in eastern DRC. The specific objectives of _Ushindi_ are: ensure survivor accessibility to and quality of treatment, increase community capacity to effectively respond to SGBV, improve the ability of survivors and communities to control and participate in community-based social and economic recovery activities, and strengthen communities (both survivor and community) ability to prevent SGBV. _Ushindi’s_ focus on preventative and local level capacity building is a central to its expectation to “change minds” in these communities.

_Ushindi_ claims to promote survivor empowerment through its four-tiered approach to SGBV mitigation: psychosocial, economic, legal, and medical. Within each sector, examples of current programs and strategies are provided. Rather than provide
only immediate services, the overall goal of *Ushindi* is to develop community and individual capacity within nine sites in order to implement its objectives in each sector. Therefore, although *Ushindi* takes a four-tiered approach to individual empowerment, infrastructure and community capacity building are of equal importance. Additionally, there are educational projects and training programs that correspond directly to each sector which work to educate local medical personnel, paralegals, counselors, community leaders and mobilizers. *Ushindi* has taken a participatory approach, with the objective that the communities will have developed the capacity to respond to and prevent sexual violence after five years. An important component of community training employed by *Ushindi* is gender sensitivity training programs that address masculinities and attitudes towards sexual violence and gender. Also interrelated to each sector, *Ushindi* uses community awareness campaigns such as local radio, community forums, and educational programs within schools and churches to promote *Ushindi*’s message of gender equality.

Within its four-tiered approach, *Ushindi* focuses on the legal component with the assistance of the American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative (ABAROL). This component of the intervention focuses on assisting with court cases against perpetrators and training paralegals locally to inform the community of their rights and advocate the law. Economically, *Ushindi* has implemented the Village Savings and Loan (VSL) program to empower women through microcredit schemes and savings groups. The VSL program is only available to women. The medical piece of *Ushindi* is increasing women’s access to medical treatment and buildings infrastructure in local medical facilities within
health zones. Psychosocial treatment is provided to survivors of sexual violence by local (volunteer) counselors who have been trained in the area of mental health counseling.

In addition to its holistic approach, the implementation of *Ushindi* is based on collaboration between various NGOs and donor-funded agencies, thus adding to the effectiveness of its programs beyond a single organization’s concept of empowerment. The primary contractor, Interchurch Medical Assistance, works with three implementing health partners, Panzi Hospital, *HEAL Africa*, Program for Promotion of Primary Health Care (PPSP), locally developed NGOs operating in eastern DRC, which provide services to survivors of SGBV. Also partnering with implementing partners, are five NGOs (i.e. the American Bar Association, Save the Children, CARE International, Children’s Voices, IMA), which work in alliance in order to provide tools and resources to project partners (USAID Cooperative Agreement, 2010). Figure 3.1 (USAID Cooperative Agreement, 2010) below illustrates the “hierarchy” of the project. Through community and organization collaboration, *Ushindi* provides the needed tools to communities at the legal, medical, psychosocial, and economic levels. The year 2010 marks the beginning of the *Ushindi* project, which will continue until the year 2015. Within the five years of *Ushindi*, the overall objective is to create a sustainable, community-based approach that will empower individual and community capacity for response and prevention of SGBV. Importantly, what makes *Ushindi* objective of empowerment on a larger global scale is the goal of building local NGOs in order to avoid a parallel reliance on international NGOs.
Figure 3.1 Hierarchy of Ushindi (USAID Cooperative Agreement, 2010)
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

The research for this study took place over the course of three months during the summer of 2011. My time spent in Goma included both data collection for this research project as well as an internship based at HEAL Africa with the USAID intervention, The Ushindi Project. During my internship at HEAL Africa, I worked as a research assistant on an impact evaluation of Ushindi, managing data and transcribing interviews. As the primary research assistant for the project, I managed the database for all quantitative and qualitative data from the Ushindi Impact Evaluation. The tasks for this position included quantitative data entry from field surveys, transcription of all qualitative data, and assistance with organization of the aforementioned data collection processes. The lack of sufficient personnel working on the Ushindi Impact Evaluation meant most of my time was not spent doing personal interviews or traveling to partner sites. Accordingly, I spent the majority of my time dedicated to the Ushindi Impact Evaluation, a project that would become the very basis of this study. Therefore, while my commitment to the Ushindi Impact Evaluation deducted time away from own research objective, my understanding of the project itself grew in great detail.

As previously stated, the meanings and definitions of empowerment vary by individual understanding and organizational approach. The operational application of empowerment requires an examination of the conceptual framework on various levels of meaning. Qualitative methods are appropriate for the overall objective of the study seeing that knowledge regarding staff perceptions is central to research questions. The methodology I chose for this study includes in-depth key informant interviews, analysis
of secondary data, in-depth interviews, from the *Ushindi Impact Evaluation*, textual analysis of an official *Ushindi* document, and participant observation. Through the use of mixed methods, I was able to approach my research questions with greater depth and varied perspective. The selected methodologies provide a nuanced and rigorous assessment of the constructed meanings of empowerment.

4.1 Study Area

The research for this project was collected in eastern city of Goma and was carried out over the course of three months. The secondary data from USAID impact evaluation of *Ushindi* took place in nine intervention sites within eastern DRC over the same three-month period. Intervention sites include Lolwa, Lubero, Obekote, Kitutu, Shabunda, Ferekeni, Alimbongo, Mutwanga, and Mwenga. The key informant interviews collected by myself were carried out in the capital city of Goma in the North Kivu province. The city of Goma lies directly across the border from Gisenyi, Rwanda and has been a central location in the Congolese conflict. Following the 1994 Rwandan genocide, thousands of refugees fled into the city of Goma, at which point the city became the epicenter of the refugee crisis. Currently, the city continues to recover from the eruption of its volcano, Nyiragongo, in 2002. Blankets of volcanic ash and rock cover the roads and infrastructural damage is still evident. The map below (Figure 4.1) illustrates the entire eastern region where all data used for this research project was collected.
4.2 Data Collection

4.2.1 Data Needs and Sources

Qualitative methods are appropriate for the overall objective of the study seeing that knowledge regarding staff perceptions is central to my research questions. Largely, obtaining data on staff and intervention perceptions around empowerment discourse was my ultimate objective. I have outlined my data needs and sources in Table 4.2. My first research question pertains to Ushindi conceptualizations of empowerment discourse. Therefore, I needed to obtain data on personnel perceptions of “empowerment” and more generally, The Ushindi Project. To answer this question I collected data through USAID interview transcripts (ground level) and conducted five key informant interviews with administrators. I also conducted participant observations during interviews and
throughout my role as a research assistant. My second research question also relates to perceived obstacles and/or beneficial factors that influence the work of *Ushindi.* Therefore I draw on the same data sources for this question. The third research questions concerns the relationship of discourse at various levels of “conception”, which required that I also collect data on official *Ushindi* discourse, which I obtained from the USAID Cooperative Agreement.
Table 4.1 Data Needs and Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Needs</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do Ushindi personnel conceptualize meanings of empowerment?</td>
<td>Information on individual and organizational perceptions of Ushindi and women’s empowerment.</td>
<td>Ushindi personnel, observation</td>
<td>USAID interview transcripts, key informant interviews, participant observation</td>
<td>Coding, discourse analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do Ushindi personnel perceive factors that contribute to or impede their capacity to carry out goals (i.e. translate “empowerment” discourse into practice)?</td>
<td>Information on organizational and personnel perceptions of obstacles and/or factors that contribute to Ushindi’s success.</td>
<td>Ushindi personnel, observation</td>
<td>USAID interview transcripts, key informant interviews, participant observation</td>
<td>Coding, discourse analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do understandings of empowerment vary across official Ushindi discourse, ground-level staff, and administrators?</td>
<td>Personnel perception on individual and official Ushindi discourse on meanings of empowerment.</td>
<td>Ushindi personnel, observation, official Ushindi discourse</td>
<td>USAID interview transcripts, key informant interviews participant observation, USAID cooperative agreement</td>
<td>Coding, discourse analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As my overall scope for this research relates to meanings and implications of empowerment *discourse* within the context of *Ushindi*, thematic coding and critical discourse analysis were employed to analyze data.
4.2.2 Interviews from The Ushindi Impact Evaluation

With the permission of the Ushindi Impact Evaluation Project Coordinator, 10 in-depth interviews from the project’s qualitative data set were selected to answer my research questions. The 10 in-depth interviews from the Ushindi Impact Evaluation represent the perspectives of Ushindi Project practitioners and ground level staff. The Ushindi Impact Evaluation Project yielded an abundance of qualitative data from both ground level staff and administrators. However, for the purpose of my research, I selected only in-depth interviews with ground level practitioners to gain a solid understanding of bottom to top level experiential perceptions. The term “ground level” does not refer to skill level but is rather defined as such for two purposes. First, ground level staff is meant to represent the specialized nature of their work within the professional order of Ushindi. “Administrators” include such specialized tasks of “overseeing” the project from a macro/analytical standpoint such as “monitoring specialists” and “project manager”. Conversely, the term “ground level staff” is meant to represent those who work at the micro-level, carrying out the specific tasks of Ushindi such as lawyers, nurses, and counselors. Secondly, the locale of such positions also characterizes them as “ground level” and “top level”. Though extensive travel is required, administrators occupy positions that require them to be based at HEAL Africa, the project’s headquarters. Specialized “ground level staff” are often based within a particular intervention site, where their services are required as essential to the project. At the ground level staff, such as those represented in this study, were trained on Ushindi’s target goals and objectives and their “role” within their community. Distinguishing between these two
“levels” provides a basis for further inquiry of the powerful discourse that is exchanged and conveyed within the hierarchy of development interventions such as Ushindi.

The purpose of the Ushindi Impact Evaluation Research Project is focused on a baseline understanding of Ushindi staff’s overall experience with the project. Thus, the in-depth interviews from The Ushindi Project produce information on staff perceptions of sexual violence in their community, their experience with Ushindi, and their views on the transformational capacity of the project. My primary reason for selecting these involves the implicit nature in which meanings of empowerment are able to emerge. Thus, while participants were not asked directly about “empowerment”, language related to empowerment and power was able to emerge naturally and without coercion by the researcher.

The primary researcher of the Ushindi Impact Evaluation collected these interviews over the course of three months throughout the nine Ushindi intervention sites. These interviews were conducted in Swahili and transcribed verbatim by myself throughout my three months of field research. Similar to the key informant interviews, the USAID interviews were also conducted using a semi-structured format. The questions employed for both sets of interviews differed slightly in the content of the questions asked. However, both sets of interviews reflect staff perceptions of The Ushindi Project and its potential for change in their communities. The 10 in-depth interviews I chose for analysis were selected because they span a wide range of locales, represent various job titles, and portray equal gender representation. These in-depth interviews are therefore a necessary starting point for thematic analysis of my research objectives. The use of this
data was explained and approved by the Ushindi Impact Evaluation for the purpose of this research.

4.2.3 Key Informant Interviews

In addition to the Ushindi Impact Evaluation qualitative data, the method of semi-structured, open-ended interviews with upper-level staff was used to probe for meanings of empowerment. I conducted five one-hour in-depth interviews with staff, specifically in administration positions, working for Ushindi. I have come to see these interviewees as key informants for two reasons. First, while the Ushindi Impact Evaluation interviews are revealing, I was not able to have the same interaction and experience from the interviews I actually conducted myself. Secondly, as administrators, the key informants provided “specialized” knowledge on the organizational approach and macro level functionality and thus provide a broader perspective of the project. Hence, although I use the terms “ground level” and “key informant” to distinguish observable differences, I am in no way attempting to convey a perspective on the importance of either category. In addition to the Ushindi Impact Evaluation qualitative data, the key informant interviews allowed for an assorted representation of Ushindi from a horizontal as well as vertical perspective. As administrators, key informants generally possessed more experience in programming and management within SGBV intervention than ground level personnel. Administrators occupy “elite” positions in the organization, as they are part of developing, monitoring, and evaluating Ushindi’s objectives.
Throughout my research with *Ushindi*, I worked indirectly with the intervention and therefore had the necessary access to these participants through my affiliation. Because administrators were based at *HEAL Africa* in Goma, I was able to easily locate them within the organization and arrange interviews. I employed snowball sampling as a means of identifying the appropriate persons, starting with the research coordinator of *Heal Africa*, whom I worked closely with. Key informant interviews were collected to better understand staff evaluation and knowledge through their own retelling of their experiences. In relation to USAID in-depth interviews, key informant interviews were conducted in a similar format as I asked only open-ended questions. Key informant interviews were conducted in both Swahili and English and were translated verbatim. All key informants I interviewed possessed a proficient knowledge of the English language. However, we agreed to use both Swahili and English, as there were concepts they felt they could better convey in Swahili. At the time I began the interviews, I had been trained for nine months in colloquial Swahili. Thus, I possessed enough language proficiency to communicate along more complex lines of communication and consequently felt comfortable with this arrangement. Primarily, I did not want to limit the scope of the concepts they wished to address during interview. Field notes were also used during the interviews to capture potential ideas and note further questions. A biographical list of both key informant interviewees and ground level staff, who are all Congolese, is included in Table 4.3 below.
Table 4.2 Participant Biographical Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>Key Informant</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Goma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>Key Informant</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>SGBV Specialist</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Goma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Pierre</td>
<td>Key Informant</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>M&amp;E Specialist</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Goma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Key Informant</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>M&amp;E Specialist</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Goma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrice</td>
<td>Key Informant</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Chief of Party</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Goma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Secondary Data</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Paralegal</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Mutwanga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahati</td>
<td>Secondary Data</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Shabunda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florance</td>
<td>Secondary Data</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Lolwa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>Secondary Data</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Paralegal</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Ferekeni</td>
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<tr>
<td>Esperance</td>
<td>Secondary Data</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>High School</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Nurse</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Alimbongo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pascaline</td>
<td>Secondary Data</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Shabunda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin</td>
<td>Secondary Data</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Community Mobilizer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Noel</td>
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<td>Lubero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deo</td>
<td>Secondary Data</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Community Mobilizer</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Mwenga</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.4 Textual Analysis of USAID Cooperative Agreement

In addition to the abovementioned methodologies, I used textual analysis of pages 21-40 of the 88-page USAID Cooperative Agreement (2010) of *The Ushindi Project* to achieve my overall research objectives. The Cooperative Agreement is a formal contract between USAID and the implementing partners of USAID and is thus representative of “official” *Ushindi* discourse around its objectives and strategies. I chose to analyze pages 21-40 only because these pages contain important content on project goals and design. The USAID Cooperative Agreement provides an important angle to this research, as it is an official document highlighting the objectives and proposed outcomes of *Ushindi*. Interviews and observation offer information on research questions through personal, lived experience. Conversely, the USAID Cooperative Agreement provides a method for exploring the intervention’s official language and thus exploring the means for which “empowerment” is represented within intervention’s dialectal approach to sexual violence intervention. I chose to use context analysis as a broad framework for exploring the organization’s use of the term “empowerment”, how it is situated in the overall language of *The Ushindi Project*, and the implications of such textual dialogue. I selected the USAID document in order to “ascertain the trends and patterns of words used, their frequency, their relationships, and the structure and discourse of communication” (Grbich, 2007, p. 112). Thus, through careful analysis of key words and phrases in the document, I was able to gain a broader understanding of the implied meanings behind the document’s usage of empowerment discourse, and thus Ushindi overall approach.
4.2.5 Participant Observation

During my research in Goma, the majority of my time was spent working on the USAID Impact Evaluation of The Ushindi Project. My position as a research assistant required that I spend the majority of my time with Ushindi working to input and clean all data. My experience as an “intern” within the organization of HEAL Africa allowed me to casually and frequently interact with Ushindi staff. Thus, I chose to use participant observation to acquire knowledge about HEAL Africa and Ushindi from “experiencing and recording events in the organization’s social setting” (Lindolf et al., 2008, p. 135). Because I was interning with the organization, I was acting in the role of the “observer-as-participant”. I was mostly interested in observing group members but interacted “casually, occasionally, and indirectly” (Lindolf et al., 2008, p. 147). I relied on my “gatekeeper”, the research coordinator of HEAL Africa, as well as my supervisor for my internship, for accessibility to the site. I took field notes both during observations at HEAL Africa as well as during interviews to reconstruct events and produce a description of observations during my fieldwork. Field notes were recorded using a audio recorder as well as a notebook.

4.3 Positionality: Locating the Self

There are several ways in which my identity has come to shape the way this research has emerged. The very nature of this research, an exploration of meanings of empowerment, and the more powerful implications within it, means my own “voice” carries with it its own authority and influence. Thus, constant and critical reflexivity of
my role within this study is vital to allowing for the narratives of the participants to be told through their own words. Despite my efforts to remain impartial during my research, I have come to believe that the concept of “objectivity” as something better left outside the realm of qualitative research. Likewise, embracing my position, or my own “identity”, within the research serves as a means for understanding the perspective of participant’s standpoints from their own contextual identities. My “position” as the principle investigator of my own research study carried with it many labels: researcher, outsider, observer, and most importantly the “other”. However, through field-note taking, contextual background research, and self-reflection, I have made an immense effort to consistently locate myself within the research, acknowledging all of the “identities” I represented as an “outside” researcher.

The phrase used by the media to describe the DRC, “the rape capital of the world”, was my first contact with “women’s development issues” in the DRC and ultimately my initial motivation for this research. However, my time spent in the DRC, my engagement in development politics, and my experiential effort to understand the contextual underpinnings of “women’s development issues” in the DRC has ultimately shaped the way I have come to see this research. My role as the “principle investigator” has supported my struggle to situate myself as the “instrument”, the means for which findings, or “truth”, has materialized, but not the “truth” itself. Moreover, I have attempted to grapple with, as well as appreciate, my position as a “Western Feminist” in a “Third World” context. Thus, acting in this position means I may implicitly carry with me my own understandings of power, empowerment, and “women’s interests”.
However, I have familiarized myself with the often-implicit assumptions Western feminists make when traversing cross-cultural contexts (Narayan, 1997). Thus, I have struggled to exercise awareness and engage cross-cultural perspectives throughout the entirety of this research.

4.4 Data Analysis: Making Meaning

All data was manually recorded and later transcribed onto a laptop following data collection. Interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure exact reproduction of participant's response. Throughout the course of this research, data were managed on one laptop to organize, sort, and observe data accordingly. The qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo 9, was used to manage and analyze all data. Data analysis for this research involved both iterative and investigative (semiotic) techniques. More specifically, proponents basic thematic coding was used in conjunction with elements of critical discourse analysis (CDA) in order to probe for meanings of empowerment as well as investigate the discursive meanings of language that are embedded within narratives of empowerment. Using CDA, I was able to employ a methodological approach for identifying important categories and concepts that helped to generate larger themes in relation to research questions. Thus, open coding and thematic analysis provided the broader themes for which I was then able to further investigate. However, because my overarching goal of this research is understand the more subtle meanings behind narratives of empowerment and their connection to power, CDA became a necessary means for achieving this overall objective.
4.4.1 Coding through Discourse Analysis

First, data was evaluated and coded according to research questions so that emerging themes could be identified. I employed coding through a discourse analysis perspective, allowing the aforementioned empowerment concepts to guide my point of inquiry. Although I drew on various discourse analysts to inform my overall pursuit of language and power, I relied mainly on Norman Fairclough’s (2012) “transdisciplinary methodological praxis” for coding through a discourse analysis. This “methodology” relies on the following stages: “1. focus upon a social wrong, in its semiotic aspects 2. identify obstacles to addressing the social wrong. 3. consider whether the social order needs the “social wrong” and 4. identify possible ways past the obstacles” (Fairclough in Gee, J. & Handford, 2012, p.12). The social wrong in this case is SGBV in DRC which narratives of empowerment and gender equality via Ushindi discourse are the focus. My analysis of Ushindi discourse and personnel narratives relates more to step 3 and 4 in which examining the discursive relationship within the social order and the social wrong is the primary focus. Ultimately, my focus includes particular attention to “ways in which discourses, narratives, arguments are being contested and replaced by others, as parts of struggles against mainstream strategies and in support of alternatives” (Fairclough in Gee, J. & Handford, M, 2012, p.15).

Necessarily my analysis comprises a central concern in “the shifting relations between genres, between discourse and styles; change in social structuring of relations between them that achieves relative permanence and stability in orders of discourse, and
the ongoing working of relations between them in text” (Fairclough, 2010, p.12). It is first necessary to define the terms genre, discourse and style. Genre can be thought of as semiotic ways of interacting with the social world while discourse pertains to semiotic (in this case words) means for construing the physical and mental world (Fairclough, 2012). Lastly, styles involve “ways of being” or “identities”. All of these processes form what Fairclough (2012) terms the “order of discourse” which constitutes the semiotic dimension of (networks of) social practices that constitute social fields and institutions and organizations. In the context of this research the “orders of discourse” at hand is empowerment while my objective is to understand the means (genres) Ushindi personnel, as members of the institution interact with Ushindi discourse. Adhering to the framework of CDA, analysis of data involved a sequence of probing for words and phrases based on research questions to identify patterns previously discussed, grouping of code families, and eventually emerging themes. In correlation to my research questions, analysis included three sub categories of definitions/meanings, and obstacles and aids, and comparative analysis. From these categories, I employed a combination of basic thematic coding related to those groupings and discourse analysis to understand the implications of Ushindi discourse at the practitioner level. Also in my analysis, I was concerned with the similarities and divergence in USAID cooperative agreement, administrators, and ground level personnel.

Finally, I conducted both a micro analysis of the contextualization of discourse and also applied it to a broader macro level analysis of Ushindi discourse. Consequently,

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8 Fairclough describes this as “mean-making as an element of the social process” or also “the study of discourse” (2012, p.11)
the language and perspectives of *Ushindi* staff came to represent the *speech community*\(^9\) within the social structure of the intervention itself. Employing CDA necessitates that I view discourse and language on any level as a socially constructed phenomenon in which speech rules and norms influence the materiality of the social world. Therefore, while I recognize my voice carries with it its own implicit assumptions and potentially dominant effects on language, I acquiescently assume this position in the following exploration of *Ushindi* discourse.

### 4.5 Limitations: The Experiential Learning of a Fieldworker

#### 4.5.1 Time

Throughout the duration of the research, I was often met with restraints that affected my capacity to conduct the highest quality, or largest quantity, of research possible. Of these restraints, the issue of time was often the most hampering. As I previously mentioned, my work with the USAID project constituted a much larger portion of my time than I could have anticipated. The principle investigator and myself were often aware of the looming project deadlines that were approaching at the end of the summer. While I was highly dedicated to my own research objectives, my first priority was my position with *Ushindi Impact Evaluation*, as this meant other people were also relying on my efforts. Therefore, despite my desire to conduct additional interviews with both administrators at *HEAL Africa* and fieldworkers, I simply did not possess the means

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\(^9\) CDA scholar Fairclough (1995) refers to the speech community as an institution with its own “particular repertoire of speech events, describable in terms of the sorts of “components” which ethnographic work on speaking has differentiated – settings, participants (their identities and relationships), goals, topics, and so forth” (p.38).
to accomplish both my internship and additional research. Despite this limitation, this research provides a nuanced analysis of narratives of empowerment through both the intervention’s data and outside inquiry.

4.5.2 Language

In eastern DRC, the primary languages spoken are both French and Swahili, while Goma locals often use a combination of the two. Following one full year of Swahili training, I possessed the necessary linguistic tools to navigate the city and communicate with locals on a proficient conversational level. Despite my aptitude in Swahili, I was still far from having complete or fluent listening comprehension and speaking skills. Additionally, throughout the course of my fieldwork, when I would often sit in HEAL Africa and write field notes, much of my knowledge of conversations was lost in translation. Luckily, I was provided with an interpreter shortly after I arrived, which helped me to understand the USAID interviews as well as interact with staff more. I conducted key informant interviews towards the end of my three months in Goma. At that point, my Swahili skills had improved significantly and thus provided richer interviews.

4.5.3 Study Redirection

Initially, I had embarked on this research as a similar study of the organization HEAL Africa itself and not The Ushindi Project, a development intervention I had little knowledge prior to my internship. When I arrived in Goma, I decided to reorient
the direction of my research towards The Ushindi Project for three important reasons. First, my role as a research assistant to The Ushindi Impact Evaluation provided me insight into the project that enhanced my understanding of its functionality. If I had chosen to remain with my original study of HEAL Africa, my familiarly with the organization would have suffered on account of my dedication to Ushindi. Secondly, quality of useful information was as important as access. The Ushindi Project offered a fuller and deeper analysis of “empowerment discourse” as it is both a creation of HEAL Africa and various other organizations. Finally, as I mentioned previously, time became a crucial concern once I arrived in Goma and realized time constraints I was under to achieve my research objectives.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

Ushindi narratives highlight the discursive process through which local stakeholders conceptualize “transnational” concepts such as women’s rights as human rights and vernacularize USAID’s language to local realities. Within this process, local stakeholders engage with the “order” of both development discourse and local level settings through contextualization and resistance strategies, enacting their distinctive “voices” within the boundaries of Ushindi discourse. Ushindi narratives reveal conceptualizations of empowerment as a community-based process through which rights-based approaches are engaged at the local level. Still, top and ground level narratives of empowerment reveal a complex relationship in which local level application becomes challenging and the micro/macro analysis of the intervention’s objectives becomes blurred. Within this chapter, I first explore Ushindi discourse through the USAID cooperative agreement. Next, I explore the major themes of participant’s conceptualizations of empowerment concepts in the context of their work with Ushindi. Lastly, I examine the social factors that assist and impede Ushindi staff’s enactment of empowerment ventures and ultimately provide a comparative analysis between ground level and administrator narratives.

5.1 USAID Discourse: Point of Departure

The USAID Cooperative agreement is a starting point for analysis of Ushindi discourse. Although the document does not explicitly outline an operational definition of “empowerment”, embedded discourse reveals a thematic approach to women’s
empowerment. As *Ushindi* involves a complex and vital health component, meeting the practical needs of SGBV survivors is a main objective. However what makes *Ushindi* distinctive in its approach is its collaborative, holistic framework, ultimately aimed at supporting and “empowering” local infrastructure and survivors of SGBV. *Ushindi* discourse acknowledges unequal power structures as oppressive obstacles for women and children and stipulates that “long-term attitude change” is an effective technique for addressing the imbalance of power between men and women [USAID Cooperative Agreement, 2010]. This central point of departure resonates throughout *Ushindi* narratives at both the administrative and ground level narratives. Furthermore, official *Ushindi* discourse frames empowerment through community and survivor approaches to SGBV mitigation, highlighting the duality of both the individual and the collective. For example, the USAID Cooperative Agreement states that *Ushindi’s* process “compares the new laws with traditional belief systems, and encourages the community to understand that it is to everyone's benefit to integrate women on an equal footing into community life and development” (2010, p.33). Thus, empowering communities is as essential as empowering women. In the same accord, community capacity building and grassroots mobilization are discussed as indirect means of empowering survivors.

The notion of power is addressed within the document and redressing the imbalance is noted as a primary solution to mitigating SGBV. As the document states “women are vulnerable to SGBV because of unequal power relationships, ignorance, and the power of traditional practices” (USAID Cooperative Agreement, 2010, p.38). The document takes a stance that power relations are at the root of the SGBV endemic.
Additionally, reversing these power structures are mostly discussed around increasing women’s access to resources (through the VSL program), practical care for survivors, and awareness raising on the issue of gender and SGBV. Importantly, the power imbalance is more around framed through patriarchal oppression in which gender equality is the ultimate goal. While USAID discourse implies women’s empowerment is practicable through a rights framework, the USAID Cooperative Agreement (2010) states “real empowerment includes economic empowerment”. The Village and Savings Loan Program (VSL) is one of the intervention’s entry points for addressing women’s economic empowerment, a women’s only program that brings women together through microfinance. Through these groups, women are also able to unite on other issues, which relate to individual and collective empowerment. The only instance when the term “agency” is uttered in the document is in the description of women and children’s groups which “will strengthen their voice and sense of their own agency and thus address gender power issues” (p.37).

Official USAID discourse adheres strongly to a rights-based and equality framework. Ushindi discourse indicates that promotion of women’s rights will generate a more impartial environment for women and children to achieve gender equality and thus empowerment. Community wide awareness programs work to raise awareness about women and children’s rights, especially in the context of sexual and gender-based violence. The cooperative agreement maintains that awareness of rights will empower individuals to take legal recourse within structures that may enforce “enforce traditional customary practice that favor males”. Additionally, the document (2010) approaches a
“rights” framework through advocacy legislation (rights-based) as well as “human rights dissemination” (2010, p.36). Thus, while the document stresses the need for “gender equity”, while often citing the “new” Congolese constitution and also the law on sexual violence that was passed in 2006” (2010, p.21).

5.2 Ushindi Empowerment Narratives

5.2.1 Discourse of “Culture” and “Tradition”

The topics of “tradition” and “culture” were pervasive themes within personnel narratives. Every ground level and administrators cited “tradition” and/or “culture” as being the underlying reason for the pervasive incidence of sexual violence in eastern DRC. Administrators and ground level staff discuss the concept of “tradition” of “culture” in divergent ways although I will discuss these variations later in this chapter. In this section I will discuss these terms interchangeably to provide an overview of social “framing”. Ushindi staff interpret “harmful traditional” practices as disempowering in the sense that “old ways of thinking” can facilitate negative attitudes towards women and foster unequal power structures. The notion of “culture” as a barrier to empowerment came to my attention early on my research as administrator interviews revealed this discourse. However, it was rarely necessary to bring up the issue in the remaining interviews as it came naturally without direction from myself. Early on in administrator interviews, participants brought up the concept of “culture” and they were enthusiastic about the dire need to initiate the process of “changing minds”.
There was not a cohesive definition or meaning provided of what actually constitutes “culture” or “tradition”, nor was there an exclusive discussion of how various historical, political, and economic factors have come to shape these concepts. However, both ground level and administrators were adamant that traditional practices were intrinsically tied to the communities understanding of women’s equality and empowerment. Thus, changing the minds of individuals is a primary goal of Ushindi and empowering communities is accomplished through provision of alternative instruction or “sensitization”. In one administrator interview, Jean Pierre stated, “We are helping them to change their minds, some problems they cannot understand because they have their culture and they are tied to their culture”. Similarly, Mama Isabelle [key informant, SGBV specialist] confidently told me in our interview, “You know the biggest problem is culture and we are doing our best to involve all the leaders, community leaders… to involve them in our activities and give them the project”. This language was common among both ground and upper level staff. In this interpretation that “tradition” is the problem, local actors have come to share a set of standards for potential mitigation such as “changing minds”. The implications of this language will be examined further in the discussion section however it is important to emphasize the validity and adherence to the discourse of “tradition” and “culture”.

5.2.2 Empowerment as a Process

Throughout administrator interviews, each participant spoke candidly about the goals of Ushindi and the concept of empowerment as a “process”. Following my analysis
of ground level staff interviews, I was especially surprised to find that every ground level participant also addressed the notion of empowerment as a process. The language used to communicate views of this process spoke to the significance of approaching change in these communities as a development that necessitates intervention at multiple sectors. Both ground level and administrators are aware that community transformation and empowerment will take significant time, even more than *Ushindi’s* five-year duration. This idea often came up during my discussions with staff, as they would discuss increasing women’s access to resources through various levels and often citing individual power as an initial pathway.

During my interview with Mama Isabelle [key informant, SGBV specialist], she described the communities’ response to *Ushindi* as being a “process” of change which includes various levels of entry. At this point, I was already cognizant of this vernacular so I expressed to Mama Isabelle that this concept seemed very powerful within *Ushindi’s* approach. She explained how *Ushindi* was initiating the process of empowerment through gender sensitizing through primary school curriculum, exposing children to the message of gender equality. My interview with David [key informant, M&E specialist] also highlighted similar perspectives. When I asked if he thought the change he spoke of could occur in five years, David replied,

> The change is now seen but we hope that day after day the change will be increasing. It is a process. To change, it is a process. We can’t say we want the community to change after the first year but hope since we are progressing, we are increasing the rate of change.
Evident in all interviews, the language around the process of empowerment indicates the conceptualization by Ushindi staff as empowerment as a complex process, which involves sustainable shifts in power relations at the individual and community level.

I was particularly struck by utilization of “process” terminology, especially by ground level staff, because of both the frequency of the idea but also the methods participants used to illuminate its meaning. For instance, rather than immediately referring to empowerment as a process as a characteristic of Ushindi’s approach, participants often interjected this view when I or the Ushindi Baseline PI inquired about “change”, asserting its importance. In the USAID interviews, a common question asked by the PI inquired if participants believed Ushindi would “change communities”. A common response was similar to Oscar’s [ground level, paralegal] reaction to the PI’s question on whether he did in fact believe Ushindi would bring about change and if he thought it would be difficult, “Yes, I think the minds of people will change, but it will not be [achieved] in one day. I know that changing behaviors will not be one day. It’s called processes”. Oscar’s straightforward declaration, “it’s called processes”, reflects his commitment to and confidence in this notion that empowerment involves entry at multiple levels. Moreover, Oscar went discussed these processes through individual and community behavioral change.

5.2.3 Empowerment in the Local

The value of local collaboration, acceptance, and community ownership was demonstrated through administrator and ground level accounts of Ushindi’s capability to
facilitate sustainable change within the interventions sites. Staff discourse suggests their view that *Ushindi*’s message of gender equality will need to be heard and accepted by the entire community (i.e. collective action) for change to occur. Throughout my interviews, participants were acutely aware of the challenges they faced because of the intervention’s confrontation with local politics and resistance. However, the local level approach collectively discussed by *Ushindi* personnel indicates that *Ushindi* staff view this approach as being necessary for sustainability. This aspect of *Ushindi*’s approach is further validated in staff’s discourse on local/community tactics and the importance of collective action.

To begin this exploration I turn first to an administrator interview with Jean Pierre, who described *Ushindi*’s approach as shifting ownership from *Ushindi* to local peoples. When inquiring on *Ushindi*’s alternative approach, Jean Pierre [key informant M&E specialist] explained, “The community will not need someone from outside to come and give a message but the community will have some resources that will be helping them to change their minds.” Later in the interview, he elaborated on this point, “*Ushindi* is not something for *Ushindi*, it is for us, for our government, we have to win this, it is our law, we have to follow what was voted by our parliament. And we hope that people will be in power in the future”. *Ushindi* staff frequently spoke of the power of *Ushindi* in reference to community ownership. Similarly, paralegal Joseph [ground level, paralegal] affirmed, “I told you that it’s necessary to insist on sensitization, it’s the foundation of success. It means asserting the lower structures in the community and it’s necessary to sensitize local chiefs when they understand; they will spread the news to
others”. Largely, the theme of empowerment as local capacity building reveals a commitment to collective and individual organizing as a means for social change.

5.2.4 Rights Discourse

The use of “rights” discourse was palpably common in both USAID transcripts and administrator interviews. *Ushindi* personnel discuss human rights discourse as a powerful tool for women across various contexts in order to assert their agency. Enforcing both (recent) Congolese legislation and utilizing human rights language provides a platform from which *Ushindi* are able to not only prosecute offenders but also to inform people of their rights, a strong entry point for personnel. Together, *Ushindi* personnel use similar language to designate the rights of women and men being an absolute “god given” truth, citing the Bible as an example of the validity of these “truths”. Common in administrator interviews, Christopher [key informant, project manager] described *Ushindi*’s rights-based approach as a “strong point” to empowering individuals and communities. When describing *Ushindi*’s main objectives, Christopher stated boldly, “to let people understand that all we are humans and we have rights, men and women”. Likewise, in a administrator interview with Mama Isabelle [key informant, SGBV specialist], she elucidated on the power women gain from knowing their rights, “They don’t know this [their rights]. If they don’t get information, they won’t know their rights, they won’t know the rights of women, the rights of children. When they get information that removes ignorance, and this is empowerment”.
Ushindi personnel accounts reveals the exclusivity of rights-based approach in relation to The Ushindi Project and how both staff and community members are drawing on a rights-based approach and human rights language as a means to validate its objectives. The human rights framework is described in its capacity to empower both the entire community and individuals because its usefulness extends to benefit all community members. In a Ushindi Impact Evaluation interview transcript, Bahati [ground level, counselor] provides a description of this incidence,

There are children who have seen that Ushindi has brought good information in our lives because they defend the rights of children, because the rights of children who have been forbid and forgotten. But, children are happy, they have said you all lift our rights, we knew these things before but they were neglected. But, the teachings of Ushindi have come to warm our hearts.

As a speech community, Ushindi staff collectively operates on the postulation that Ushindi’s ultimate objective is to inform citizens of the rights that belong to both women and men. Moreover, the language around human right’s discourse suggests that although staff considers Ushindi to be “implementing” human rights initiatives, the notion of human rights is something that preexists Ushindi. For example, during the USAID transcription with Mama Pascaline [ground level, nurse], the Principle Investigator (PI) inquired on the efficacy of Ushindi if persons do not welcome Ushindi’s message. In her response to this Mama Pascaline explained that Ushindi is something recent brought by from the outside however human rights is something the “Bible started” and is therefore a powerful mechanism for men and women.

Also important, Ushindi staff frequently referred to both Congolese legislation as means of empowerment and also as a regulator of individual and collective behaviors. To
elaborate on this point I turn to a administrator interview with Christopher in his reflection, “It means people now fear to do something they could do it freely [with disregard], people could rape easily and they say now “these guys are here they can take and arrest me.” Similarly, doctor Florence [ground level, doctor] stated, “Before a person who raped today, again you will hear tomorrow he raped again. Now, when Ushindi has the option to arrest people, and bring them to the government, it will start to bring fear”. The execution of Congolese law and the potential “deterrence” it evokes in perpetrators demonstrates the powerful capacity of human rights law to facilitate tangible change.

5.2.5 Power

Collectively, Ushindi staff narratives reveal a complex and nuanced conceptualization of “power” and its material functionality. Using diverse points of reference, participants discussed power through various interpretations of approaches and/or limiting structures of enacting power. That is to say participants used particular language, which reveals the significance of considering various levels of power such as “power within” and “power with”. For instance, increasing self-esteem and confidence through skill building and literacy was cited as a vital pathway to empowering women. Jean Pierre [monitoring & evaluation specialist, key informant] explained,

That is why we initiated some capacity building, life skills for women, those who are learning how to cultivate and how to read. And we also advise them to be a part of the local leaders, so they will be able to be part decisions makers in their communities and their households. Since women are not a part of decision-making, they know they will not be understood. But since they can say for women this is their right, for men this is their right, and we have to work together. Then it will help us to change the communities.
Additionally, participants refer to both individual and community empowerment, affirming a view that power exists on multiple social spheres. By and large, participants acknowledge that empowering individuals and communities is situated in the shifting of power from the project itself to the communities.

During my interview with Mama Isabelle, she explained that it is important to empower at both the community and individual (survivor) level. She specifically talked about the individual effects of education and how this was vital to the process of empowerment. When I inquired on the importance of empowering women via “basic needs” such as literacy she stated, “When they have self-esteem, they are happy, they have self-esteem and they believe in themselves because for people who don’t study they often don’t believe in themselves”. In my interview with Christopher, he explained the connection between community and individual empowerment in an effort to imply its significance, “Empowering communities, the objective are to empower individuals normally. When you empower communities, you are securing individuals but you cannot expect to empower the community without empowering individuals because the communities constitute individuals”. Discussions of “individual” and “community” levels of empowerment were common between both sets of interviews. For instance, Benjamin [ground level, community mobilizer] explained that it is first necessary to “educate people on the issue of rape, so they understand that it is bad”.

Moreover, accounts of empowerment also reflect the concept in terms of spheres and/or spaces of power. For instance, participants address power attainment through such avenues as legal mechanisms, social institutions, and economic avenues and thus
indicating the various spaces where by power is (or is not) enacted. Within these various spaces, individual and community empowerment is acknowledged as attainable. While participants often discuss the various “types” and “forms” of power, there was less discussion of the various levels, such as those at the state, regional, and global.

### 5.3 Enacting Empowerment

Participants frequently discussed the quandary local stakeholders encounter when individual action, or agency, encounters institutional structures, such as poor economic, political, and legal infrastructure. In other words, the capacity for Ushindi to empower individuals and communities is often constrained by “opportunity structures” that operate on other levels of power. The most often cited obstacle for Ushindi was the inefficiency of civil infrastructures and the weak Congolese “State”. Although this topic was often not addressed in public settings, it did come up in my conversations with people in the field. I can recall an instance when my colleague returned from the field in Beni and informed me with shock that the central prison lacked a gate. Similarly, my interactions with administrators commonly addressed this issue. When I asked David what might hinder Ushindi’s success in these communities, he replied,

> As I said, the environment, maybe the political one, is not sufficient for us to succeed because the issue of corruption, the lack of infrastructure - like prisons. And all public workers who could be paid by the government are not paid. It is difficult to say that Ushindi will succeed.

David was astutely aware of the challenge Ushindi faces against local and state institutions and the restrictions of empowerment. This common reference to “lack of infrastructure” indicates the pervasive influence the state has in facilitating and/or
impeding women’s empowerment initiatives. Joseph [ground level, paralegal] discussed the role of “corrupt” police officers of the National Congolese Police (PNC) following the Ushindi Baseline PI’s question, “Do you think police officers are good leaders here?” Joseph responded,

To be honest, no. When we ask them ‘why do you behave this way although you know what the law prescribes?’ He answers ‘If I follow the law, what will I eat? I am not paid, so I need to clear up the way for myself’.

Ushindi personnel expressed a lack of distrust in local and state political and civil institutions.

In addition to issues of local and state infrastructure, Ushindi personnel discussed the difficulty of implementing Ushindi’s long-term, strategic approach in an environment that warrants attention to practical needs. For instance, during my interview with Mama Isabelle, she explained that local persons often expressed the need for food, money, and other basic needs that their communities lacked. Likewise, David [monitoring and evaluation specialist, key informant] explained that communities were often hopeful that Ushindi would provide basic needs such as access clothing, food, and job opportunities although, as David explained, Ushindi’s role is to “change minds”. For instance, as David [monitoring and evaluation specialist, key informant] elaborated, “we are [part of] Ushindi and know that we are not ready to answer to this problem [basic needs provision] and afterwards they are expecting these answers but Ushindi is bringing something else, this is another problem”. Overall, staff often discussed the quandary they faced in employing Ushindi’s strategic approach when local actors often perceived basic needs to be their greatest concern.
Drawing from the previous findings, *The Ushindi Project* and its alternative approach to SGBV mitigation face significant challenges, which will continue to interact with its objectives at the local and state level. Despite these setbacks, staff confidence in individual willingness and community/local-level collaboration indicates the combative measures working to challenge detrimental social environments. In many cases, participants discussed the will of individuals, community organizing, and advocating Congolese law as a fundamental dynamic that positively influences *Ushindi*’s work. The following exchange between *Ushindi* Baseline PI and Mama Noel [ground level, paralegal] illustrates a general confidence in the eagerness of community members to learn. Prior to this conversation, Mama Noel explained to the PI of the significance in working to expand the community’s perception of women and gender equality. Mama Noel discussed the acceptance of the “change” brought about by *Ushindi* and explained that communities were open to *Ushindi*’s message. Mama Noel stated,

> They are happy to learn, there are people who it has been habitual, and it has become normal to people. They were doing these things without knowing they were bad. Indeed, they call this the “weight of the custom”, so you are used to doing things the same way after years, now you think it’s the normal thing to do.

Although *Ushindi* staff face the obstacle of what is referred to as “traditional” or “cultural” resistance, their confidence in individual eagerness to “change” is powerful. The previous exchange illustrates the power of education and information, which, in her experience, is welcomed because of its view as “education”. More importantly, Mama Noel’s confidence in this point suggested that persons are not fundamentally “immoral” but rather behaviors are a product of learned actions.
In addition to staff confidence in individual and community agency, the community local stakeholder collaboration provides strength to the success of the intervention’s objectives. This theme denotes the significance of local level, collective organizing. During my interview with David, I asked him how *Ushindi* would provide sustainable change. His response was shared among personnel:

A good opportunity for *Ushindi* is the presence of local churches in all communities, and traditional systems, traditional leadership, people have a lot of confidence with this when the same people understand, this we are able to exploit.

In a few cases, NGO collaboration was discussed as both a strength and weakness, however the sustainability of this approach was usually discussed as a primary importance.

Returning to the topic of human rights discourse and Congolese legislation, these concepts were both indirectly and directly discussed in terms of their “power”. This was especially evident in personnel’s discussion of “rethinking” religious texts through a human rights framework. Additionally, “women’s rights as human’s rights” dialogue emerges as a “tool” for *Ushindi* staff and a fundamental “truth” for which all must adhere. In response to a question regarding “persons who refuse to accept *Ushindi*’s message”, Joseph stated, “There will be such people but they will have to admit that it’s a disposition of the law. The sensitizer is not going to say he changed the tradition but the law changed and all of us are under the law, we must all respect the law in all its texts”.

5.4 From the “Top” to the “Bottom”

To examine the means through with empowerment discourse is “disseminated”, I conducted a comparative analysis of top level and ground level language (USAID transcripts). The aforementioned narratives of empowerment are common themes represented throughout both administrator interviews and ground-level USAID transcripts. Thus, these concepts represent Ushindi’s shared conceptualization of “empowerment” discourse. Within this analysis, I found important variations in the way the issue is framed and the various ways through which top-level and ground level appropriate USAID discourse. Additionally, at the ground level, shared concepts were discussed in more contextually relevant ways, situating concepts within their lived experience. Largely, the discourse of administrator and USAID documents employed more technical, abstract, and/or point-by-point speech mechanisms while ground-level staff used personal narratives to convey meanings of empowerment.

A starting point for exploring the relationship between bottom and top-level conceptualizations of empowerment was examining discourse of the USAID cooperative agreement, administrator interviews and ground level staff. Subsequently, I compared this language relationship with modes of speech used by ground-level participants. Expectedly, I found thematic similarities between the language of the USAID cooperative agreement and personnel, producing the centralized discourse of Ushindi’s objectives such as “collective community action”, “challenging traditional power structures”, “promoting gender equality”, and “women’s rights”. Ushindi, as a development intervention, can be understood as a social institution with its own discourse, which it
produces at the macro level. As *Ushindi* participants are part of this social institution, it is not particularly striking those broader linguistic conceptions are manifested in the individual discoursal modes of the “social subjects”. However, the relationship between administrator and ground-level interview indicate that the “social subjects” of *Ushindi* reflect these concepts through contextualizing relevance and personal reflection.

First, there were significant variations in the ways administrators and ground level staffs talk about “tradition” and “culture”. The USAID document frames the issue in terms of both “challenging traditional power dynamics” and “cultural conservatism” because “gender inequities are rooted in tradition, thus unequal power dynamics are tied to tradition (USAID Cooperative Agreement, 2010, p. 25). Thus, empowering women means challenging traditions and redistributing power relations. In the case of ground level interpretations, it was more common for staff to give examples of “harmful traditional practices” that manifest within their given social environment rather than using generalizations about “culture”. Administrators spoke openly and generally about “culture” as a major barrier to women’s inequality. In my analysis of ground level narratives, there was not one instance when personnel use the word “culture” to convey efforts and hindrances to social change. Rather, ground level staff would provide specific examples of traditional practices as harmful such as bride kidnapping. Additionally, a few ground level staff even explained that pervasive sexual violence was not problematic prior to conflict. On the contrary, some argued that there were traditions that were in place prior to the war, which provided norms and systems for dealing with SGBV.
However, since the conflict, breakdown of tradition and social institutions have exacerbated conditions for women and children, increasing the incidence of SGBV.

As previously mentioned, administrators were more likely to use “technical” and/or results based speech than ground level personnel. While administrators and ground level discussed empowerment through, ground level personnel often spoke of empowerment in reference to local level stories or personal testimonials. In my experiences with administrators, they would often employ technical language or reference “target goals” or objectives of the project and how those related to women’s empowerment. However ground level personnel engaged in personal narratives to convey meanings of shared concepts. In an interview with Mama Pascaline [ground level, counselor], the Ushindi Baseline P.I. began the interview by asking the interview what level of education she had acquired. Her response illustrates a intimate connection to Ushindi at the individual level, as she explained that she herself had not had the opportunity to study prior to Ushindi because her elders thought it was not important for woman. However, since Ushindi arrived, “as a result of the sensitization campaign you have shown us, we can understand, that all men and women are people”. Moreover, Joseph spoke about his work with Ushindi in terms of personal narration and the personal dilemma he often encountered. When discussion obstacles Ushindi faced, he cited an incidence when his own life was threatened because of his local affiliation with Ushindi.

Additionally, throughout these personal and technical speech patterns, the term “we” was applied by both ground level and administrators. However, ground level often used the term “we” to refer to the persons receiving the message rather than
administrators who used “we” in reference to the ones giving the message. Although part of the same speech community, this divergence lucidly situates the administrators and ground level staff on opposite ends of the intervention. *Ushindi* staff are aware of their position within the institution of *Ushindi*, especially administrators, who spoke of *Ushindi* communities through language of “providing for”, “giving to” and “changing them”. Most importantly, personal testimonials illustrate local level ownership of *Ushindi* discourse. Ground level personnel referred to the project as “theirs” and not something that they did not control or have ownership. Whether ground level staff were talking about human rights or education, local level staff discussed these concepts as belonging to the community rather than being “given”.
6.1 Discussion

In this chapter I will explore the previous findings through analysis of discourse at the various levels of Ushindi discourse. Largely, I will consider the larger implications of Ushindi personnel’s conceptualization of empowerment and how these narratives relate to current discussions around empowerment discourse. As I will argue in this section, the aforementioned themes illustrate the power within the major positions of USAID discourse in the context of Ushindi. As Ushindi personnel participate as group members through Ushindi discourse, their distinctive roles as “translators” uncover an interesting exchange of knowledge and power sharing at the multiple levels of interaction. As the following discussion will elucidate, this discourse produces complex constraints on what speech Ushindi personnel used to implement understandings of empowerment. Despite these influences, contextualization and resistance strategies show both the applicability of such concepts as well contestation as they apply Ushindi discourse at the organizational and local level. Ultimately, I aim to provide a discussion which illustrates the complex engagement with Ushindi discourse in which personnel appropriate, contextualize, and contest Ushindi discourse all at the same time.

6.1.1 Navigating “Levels” of Discourse

In order to understand the exchange of discourse from the “top” to “bottom”, I chose to examine the voices of Ushindi through USAID text, administrator interviews, and ground level narratives. Although I have come to recognize both ground level and
administrators as “translators”, I recognize that administrators occupy a unique space and thus may wield more power. As they have more access to discourse, these power elites “have a special role in planning, decision-making, and control over the relations and processes over the enactment of power” (Van Dijk, 1993, p.225). While I have remained cognizant of the spheres of power occupied by administrators and ground level staff, I see that both “groups” act “in the middle”, engaging both Ushindi discourse and local knowledge. Findings from both administrators and ground level narratives generate themes around meanings of empowerment that are fluid throughout both levels. These themes represent conceptualizations of empowerment at the organizational level. Conversely, the findings indicate that ground level personnel resist and contextualize notions of empowerment and equality through divergent means. As administrators also act as “translators” and discourse is shifting rather than fixed, resistance tactics and contextualization of discourse are not separated neatly at the various personnel levels. In fact, the findings indicate that although power elites are situated closer to “the top”, they also employ contextualization through their participation in empowerment discourse.

6.1.2 Engaging the Discourse

I begin this analysis by first begin by focusing on collective Ushindi narratives and how appropriation of USAID framing (i.e. discourse) is challenging for local level meanings of empowerment. Although Ushindi is comprised of diverse subjects with their own beliefs, Ushindi itself represents an institution, or speech community, in which similar contexts are drawn upon in order to make meaning. Interpretations by Ushindi
personnel of *Ushindi* discourse reveal a fluid relationship between the objectives and approach of USAID language and staff understandings of these concepts. Both ground level and administrators discussed the holistic approach of *Ushindi* as being key to its potential success. For myself, I engage the discourse with the assumption that *Ushindi* discourse is not merely a product of “Western” and/or “elite” knowledge that serves to directly regulate or authorize voices. Moreover, I do not assume that all development discourse is Western in origin, especially in the context of women’s empowerment, which has been shaped by voices of the “South”. As Gardner and Lewis (2000) state, “Rather than being understood as wholly top-down and hegemonic, ‘development’ is not wholly produced by the North, and nor can the world be neatly divided into ‘developers’ and ‘victims of development’” (p. 17). However, I do in fact acknowledge that *Ushindi*, as a development institution, adheres to particular discourse, which can be centralized “at the top” and thus unavoidably carries with it particular “influence”. Likewise, I agree with Kabeer (2010) in her argument that,

Theories of change tend to reflect the worldviews of those who formulate these interventions and their understanding of social reality. In a world that is characterized by an unequal distribution of power, this means that the worldviews that underlie development interventions are not only partial and imperfect but likely to be biased. (p.105)

Therefore, I am aware of the influence *Ushindi* and its potential effects on “local” interpretations of SGBV mitigation and women’s empowerment and thus position this discussion with this conjecture.

As collective *Ushindi* narratives indicate, conceptualizations of gender equality are advocating new pathways for women’s empowerment that have been lacking in post-
conflict interventions. In the context of *Ushindi*, achieving SGBV mitigation via gender equality has been largely framed as challenging “traditional” and/or “cultural” practices, and community capacity building in which the rights-based approach has been instrumental. As the findings illustrate, the speech acts of both ground level and administrators reflect major conceptually agreed upon approaches developed through USAID guidance. This is not particularly unexpected as *Ushindi* personnel are in fact part of the institution of *Ushindi*. Because personnel are members of the *Ushindi* context, the speech acts they use to discuss empowerment expectedly align with the discourse of USAID. As I will discuss later in this chapter, addressing women’s empowerment through a rights-based approach has provided useful tools which participants have ascribed local level importance. Likewise, *Ushindi*’s local level approach and comprehensive focus has contributed to the participatory approach of that is central to the grassroots mobilization efforts. However, the epidemic of SGBV in eastern DRC has been framed mainly by *Ushindi* (USAID) discourse as a local issue firmly rooted in harmful traditional practices for which community infrastructure and human rights awareness raising is fundamental. This approach is both beneficial to local women and also problematic. However, at the level of the *Ushindi* discourse, conceptualizations of empowerment in the context of *Ushindi* pose quandaries to *Ushindi* personnel, which are echoed in feminist critiques of mainstream empowerment discourse, which I previously discussed. I will examine these concepts through a discussion of framing which focuses on “culture”, neglects to challenge the power that exist outside the local level power
sphere, which may pose challenges to conceptualizations of empowerment for “local”
women and men.

6.1.3 Problematizing Ushindi Discourse

In order to discuss issues of framing as they relate to women’s empowerment, I
draw on collective conceptualizations of women’s empowerment via Ushindi staff
narratives. In this section, I discuss the following concepts which Ushindi staff appear to
appropriate through their conceptualizations of women’s empowerment. First, “cultural”
and/or “traditional” framing has been as an entry point for the Ushindi intervention,
providing a pathway for which to mobilize for gender equality at the local level. Feminist
literature has critiqued the use of framing through cultural and/or traditional lenses
because of its simplicity (Narayan, 1997; Mohanty, 2003). Such framing can be limiting
since it may discount the historical and political circumstances and miss the “full scope”
of root causes of SGBV. Ground level narratives reveal a nuanced interpretation of
“harmful traditional practice” and “culture”. However, cooptation of “cultural” and/or
“traditional “ explanations for gender inequality may prove insufficient to “empowering
local women”. This issue has been addressed widely among feminist scholars such as
Lila Abu Lughod (2002), who explores the impact of cultural framing in the context of
Afghanistan. In her research she argues that this kind of framing is restrictive, “Instead of
asking questions that might lead to the exploration of the global interconnectedness, we
were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres”.

Likewise for eastern DRC, framing the issue as “harmful traditional practices” may
work more to neglect a nuanced interpretation of the roots causes of SGBV and create a
gender binary in which Congolese men are the problem. Moreover, it simultaneously
obscures global networks of power, which affect local level relationships. As Narayan
(1997) argues this analysis, “obscures the degree to which many “Third World Women’s
problems” are rooted in ”modernization” and social change – such as those produced by
ongoing economic and “development” policies” (p.60). Likewise, I would argue that this
sort of framing neglects to consider the historical (colonial) and political (national)
underpinnings of SGBV in DRC that are not a product of “harmful traditional practices”. Paradoxically, this is problematic in that ideas of what constitute “tradition” and
“culture” are left unaffected and rather reproduced without critical analysis. Approaching
the issue of gender inequality through a traditional lens could provide useful tools for
local women when tradition and/or culture are used as justification for perpetuating
inequalities. However, within particular speech communities, utilization of “culture”,
without critical analysis, could further perpetuate inequalities within and/or between
social classes.

Additionally, while Ushindi’s focus on community level action is both invaluable
and necessary for SGBV intervention in post-conflict eastern DRC, its neglect of global
and state power structures is restrictive. The local level approach emerges as a stark
response to the state’s failure to provide fundamental services such as a well functioning
justice system. Despite the endless efforts of community capacity building, a fragmented
state system has created a quandary for long-term social change. Recent research has
indicated, “civil society actors have been powerless to combat the Congo’s state
resistance to change” (Trefon, 2011). This relationship was reflected through administrators and ground level accounts of weak infrastructure as a barrier to change. Raising awareness on the level of community may not directly speak to the weight of political and state power and its influence on gender relations. Furthermore, empowerment literature suggests a diversity of power that exists at the individual, community, state, and global level, which must be challenged in order for unequal power relations to shift. As Young states (2000), the shifting of gender power within the “public and private sphere” involves engagement of “power with other structures in politics: people organized to engage official, state, and international agencies and/or other organizations (Parpart et al. p. 98) Certainly, women’s political position in DRC and weak institutions do not provide the most advantageous platform for engagement with local or state level political discourse. However, as the incidence of sexual violence is indeed interrelated with the failure of the state to provide to its citizens, framing the issues in the local may cause problems for long-term social change for women. Moreover, framing women’s empowerment in such a way may provide challenges for local stakeholder’s to articulate their own interpretations of women’s empowerment. As Parpart (2002) explains, “Participatory empowerment techniques will have to pay more attention to the way national and global power structures constrain and define the possibilities for change at the local level” (p.174). In the case of Ushindi, personnel both acknowledge these hindrances but do not let it define their capacity to conceptually challenge such institutions.
6.1.4 Sites of Struggle

As previously discussed, empowerment discourse, when tied to foreign funding carries with it particular limitations that influence practical application. However, I stray from a totalizing view of discourse interchange in that participants draw on *Ushindi* discourse to find relevance and appropriate meaning in local contexts. *Ushindi* discourse promotes women’s empowerment through problematic framing such as insufficient depictions of the autonomous actor able to make choices freely despite “unseen” oppressive structures. However *Ushindi* is also opening up new spaces for women’s empowerment by increasing women’s access to recourses and raising awareness at the individual and community level. At the practitioner level, *Ushindi* conceptualizations of women’s empowerment and SGBV migration indicate the agency of local stakeholders engagement with this discourse. I will examine these notions through a discussion of resistance strategies at the staff level (both ground and administrators) and also contextualization tactics of ground level narratives. Additionally while the following discussion highlights a variance within Ushindi (USAID) discourse, I believe these processes to be happening simultaneously on various levels of interpretation. In this research, I refer to personnel resistance in terms of their negotiation with “mainstream” development discourse. I am mostly concerned with the production and reproduction of discourse, the power relationships that exists in the process, and why that is relevant to conceptualizations of “empowerment” in the context of *Ushindi*. Consequently, I use the term “resistance” to refer to the conflict and/or negotiation *within* the discourse of a
powerful development intervention. However, I do not attempt to assert whether resistance of *Ushindi* discourse is ultimately affecting social realities but rather how *Ushindi* personnel negotiate the discourse and conceptualize empowerment discourse on their own terms. Accordingly, I agree with Ahearn (2001) when she states, “that there is no such thing as pure resistance; motivations are always complex and contradictory” (p.116).

6.1.4.1 Claiming Agency

*Ushindi*’s interpretation of women’s empowerment and women’s equality reflect a struggle with social institutions such as the Congolese political and judicial system and “cultural” institutions. *Ushindi* personnel straightforwardly discuss the role of political and social institutions in hindering and/or supporting women’s empowerment ventures in eastern DRC. At both levels, *Ushindi* staff describe the challenges the intervention faces in transformative change because of the limitations of their environment. As executed via foreign funding and through international (and local) NGOs, *Ushindi* faces the challenge of promoting transformative change without relying directly on state policies. Despite these constraints, participant discourse reflects subtler modes of power that are vital to the process of empowerment. This “pathway” to women’s empowerment was articulated through personnel’s description of various forms of “power” such as “power within” that exists outside the structural limitations of political power. NGOs are often restricted within the environments, which they operate. More importantly perhaps, reliance on informal politics (women’s discussion groups, literacy and skills training) and how this
transforms women’s lived experiences exemplifies the power of increasing women’s access to recourses. As Desai (2002) states, “Informal politics contributes to the women’s conscious sense of political agency. It helps to break the chains of victimhood and facilitates women’s emergence as full and active citizens” (in Parpart et al., 2002). In addition to their awareness of restrictive political, economic, and social environments, *Ushindi* narratives reveal interpretation of power in the subtler forms of women’s empowerment and social transformation.

6.4.1.2 Empowerment as Processual

Both ground level staff and administrators addressed the concept of empowerment as a process, highlighting an “opening” in local interpretations of empowerment as a progression of change. Conceptualizing empowerment as a process implicitly challenges an outcome-based approach to women’s empowerment as a definitive model. As a development intervention with particular targets outcomes for its five-year duration, personnel’s conceptualization of empowerment of a process contests that power shifts are not quantifiable and constant. Particularly in the context of mainstream development interventions, outcome-based ideas of empowerment often do not reflect on women’s lived realities in which social spaces of change are constantly shifting.

I turn to Aradhana Sharma’s (2008) work on empowerment discourse in women’s empowerment programs in India to consider how this relates to similar findings. Sharma’s findings reveal a more open rejection and acknowledgment of outcome-based empowerment,
Such measurement, according to them [local level NGO workers], did not capture the variety of meaningful and, to an extent, unquantifiable changes that had happened in the clients' lives through the program. Moreover, it subverted the flexible, contextual, processual nature of empowerment emphasized by radical thinkers such as Freire, and by GAD feminist whose ideas influenced the MS program. (p.89)

_Ushindi_ personnel did not openly speak about the burden of quantifying social change, however, the utterances that convey a process focus as the means to empowerment rather than figures is telling. As Cornwall (2010) states “seeing empowerment as a process of negotiation – one that may consist of subtle acts that increase women’s room for maneuver as well as the overt exercise of agency – opens up the possibility of recognising the ‘empowering’ elements of acts that might at first sight appear ‘disempowering’” (p.7). Defining empowerment and social change as a process rather than merely a quantifiable outcome may indicate that the subtle acts of women’s agency are also part of this progression of change. This space of articulation demonstrates contestation within the discourse, which highlights _Ushindi_ personnel’s subjective vision of empowerment not exclusively grounded in mainstream notions of “empowerment”.

_Ushindi_ personnel engage daily with both _Ushindi_ discourse and their own interpretations of sexual violence and women’s empowerment in DRC.

### 6.1.5 Ground Level Divergence: Contextualization

The following section discusses contextualization tactics of ground level personnel. The previous sections have considered discourse of both ground level administrators and how these narratives reflect the appropriation, contestation, and contextualization of personnel. My aim now is to examine the divergence of
administrators and ground level narratives and in what way contextualization of such discourse is both resisted and contextualized. Through this examination, the complex exchange of discourse at the local level exposes the complex means through which local stakeholders negotiate women’s empowerment discourse in locally relevant ways.

### 6.1.5.1 Utilizing the Rights Framework

Both ground level and administrators drew on women’s rights discourse as a tool for women’s empowerment. However ground level narratives spoke of rights discourse in both their *sociocultural* and *political* (even if informal) relevance. For instance, human rights concepts were referenced as “natural” to all humans, an approach which assumes a universal truth. In the context of eastern DRC, breakdown of civil infrastructure has created an environment of pervasive impunity. Thus, using women’s rights as a pathway to women’s empowerment provides a successful platform for women to seek justice. To elaborate on this issue, I refer to Sonja Wölte’s work on human rights discourse in Africa in which she explains that in order for this discourse to be effective, “they [rights discourse] need to be localized and contextualized within the concrete political and sociocultural settings in which women’s organizations operate” (p. 178). Ground level *Ushindi* narratives reveal domestication of human rights language in a way that is locally effective through these openings. More than any other concept or term, ground level personnel spoke of the human rights framework in its capacity to foster real change for women.
Drawing from Wötle’s work, Ushindi personnel have indeed adapted these concepts through means, which are locally impactful through sociocultural and political meanings. The statements used to convey the importance of women’s rights were representative of how women’s rights are contextualized within each health zone via ground level narratives. Both administrators and ground level staff discussed the sociocultural transferability of these concepts through religious contextualization, citing instances when the interpretation of religious texts such as the Bible and Koran are key. However, the discussion and personal references of ground level staff illustrate the applicability of these concepts within their particular contexts. Ground level references to women’s rights revealed their commitment to this discourse because it was something seen as natural and situated in faith that preexisted Ushindi rather than a “product” of Ushindi.

Additionally, Ushindi personnel discuss the “power” of the rights discourse for empowering women through its politically relevant meanings. While the pervasive corruption of DRC has created an environment of political instability, use of a rights discourse allows Congolese to hold government institutions accountable to legislation on SGBV. While ground level personnel spoke of women’s rights as basic rights, they also equated it with Congolese law, contextualizing gender equality in the national and political context. Despite having training on both areas, ground level personnel, such as paralegals, drew on Congolese legislation rather than Western liberal notions of human rights discourse such as CEDAW. The application of rights discourse at the local level has been contextualized in ways, which are both socially and politically relevant to local
populations. Discourse across individual meanings of the rights-based approach denote the “legitimacy” of women’s rights as pathway to empowerment if it takes on meaning at the local level.

6.1.5.2 Ownership

Ground level narratives reveal ownership of The Ushindi Project through personal testimonials of Ushindi’s work and utterances of trust. Ushindi ground level constitutes both men and women who belong to the communities in which Ushindi’s objectives operate. For instance, local level staff spoke about Ushindi as our project and our struggle. Local narratives reveal a relational orientation to the Ushindi project, as something that is part of their everyday lives and community structures. Development scholars have argued for the transformative potential of women’s empowerment initiatives where there is a relationship with the local NGO itself (Kabeer, 2010; Cornwall & Edwards; 2010). In the context of Ushindi, personnel talk about power of Ushindi through a rights-based approach, which belongs to them. Additionally, through personal testimonials, ground level staffs discuss the ways in which Ushindi has brought change to their communities such as the formation of women’s groups, increased access to literacy, and changing attitudes towards women’s rights. As Cornwall and Edwards state (2010),

Mainstream empowerment narratives tend to neglect relationships, focusing on individual trajectories of self-improvement or on the bigger picture of society-wide economic change. But women’s lived experiences of empowerment cannot be understood adequately by approaches that atomise women, abstracting them from the social and intimate relations that constrain and makes possible their empowerment or disempowerment. (p. 4)
For local level stakeholders, the significance of *Ushindi* as empowering was echoed in their personal stories of struggle and social change in which they as community actors are part of a larger story.

6.1.5.3 Navigating Essentialist Discourse

Discussions around cultural and or traditional framing reveal a level of appropriation within local level conceptualization and application of empowerment. However, ground level personnel contest this discourse and instead discuss these concepts through more nuanced explanations of “harmful traditional practices”. Administrators exclusively discuss “culture” as an obstacle to women’s empowerment and provide restrictive and totalitarian explanations. However, ground level staff were much more nuanced in their explanations of “traditional practices” while some personnel actually argued that sexual violence was not a problem until the war arrived. This divergence of discourse reveals a level of resistance at the local level to utilizing essentialist language around local level meanings of culture. In the context of SGBV, “traditional” and “cultural” framing have taken precedent in international campaigns and interventions. *Ushindi* discourse exclusively uses “cultural” and “traditional” framing however local level resistance strategies reveal that such discourse may not become fully localized in understandings of women’s (dis) empowerment.
6.2 Conclusion

Ushindi narratives reveal a complex and discursive interchange of local level knowledge and development discourse. Rather than focus only on the authoritative role of “mainstream development discourse” on local populations, I have attempted to illustrate the discoursal process through which administrators and ground level personnel engage with Ushindi discourse of women’s empowerment. And although the objectives of Ushindi utilize essentialist framing, which may work to restrict conceptualizations of women’s empowerment at the local level, Ushindi personnel exploit Ushindi discourse through contextualization and resistance strategies. This practice reveals a strategic process through which Ushindi personnel locate and attribute meaning through mainstream discourse. Inevitably, I find Kabeer’s account of development exchange to find applicability to this research as she contends, “development planning is not simply a technocratic response to neutrally determined imperatives; it is also a process of struggle over concepts, meanings, priorities, and practices which themselves arise out of competing world views about the final goals of development” (p.69). At the level of Ushindi discourse, outside framing of “the problem” has been used as an entry point for women’s empowerment and SGBV mitigation. In essence, this has the potential to disempower local women, and men, because simplistic narratives reinforce notions of “East” and “West”, “Developed” and “Developing”, and Western cultural supremacy. However, within the volatile sociopolitical environment of eastern DRC, Ushindi discourse does provide valuable instruments for challenging oppressive structures that work to disempower women, such as economic ventures, women’s groups, and right’s
awareness. Ultimately, *Ushindi* discourse is both restrictive and empowering at the same time. However, this research illustrates the agency of local stakeholders to exploit *Ushindi* discourse in locally meaningful ways, which necessitate permanence such as rights appropriation and alternative conceptualizations of power and agency. Likewise, the unique voices of *Ushindi*, which are evident throughout this research, speak to the role of local stakeholders who engage with mainstream notions of empowerment discourse and inescapably generate tangible change at the local level.

### 6.2.1 Implications of this study

A vast amount of research on sexual violence in eastern DRC exemplifies the complex means through which SGBV is altering the social fabric of community structures. Likewise, the gendered nature of sexual violence indicates an increasing imbalance of power between men and women. *The Ushindi Project* claims to empower women and communities through a holistic model through which unequal gender relations and traditional power structures are challenged. In the wake of chronic conflict and diminished infrastructure, the importance of *Ushindi*’s community and individual empowerment approach cannot be overstated. Still, *Ushindi* discourse around women’s empowerment creates some discursive barriers to local level notions of women’s empowerment. Moreover, structural barriers related to local infrastructure and practical needs pose obstacles to women’s empowerment.

Despite these limitations, *Ushindi* narratives reveal how local stakeholders negotiate USAID discourse through local contextualization of notions of women’s
equality and gender in ways that may open up new political and economic spaces for women and men in these communities. Staff conceptualizations of empowerment and women’s rights reflect such transformative pathways such as multiple forms of “power”, awareness raising, and utilization of rights discourse. Additionally, Ushindi personnel discussed the quandary in advancing women’s empowerment while simultaneously addressing basic needs, demonstrating a gap in the government’s capacity to provide these services to its citizens. At the ground level, personnel utilize discourse through convergent means, indicating contextualization’s strategies in which transnational concepts find local relevance. In the context of Ushindi, advancing women’s empowerment faces significant challenges, both in terms of discourse and practice. This research has implicated areas of importance, which are informative for developing women’s empowerment programs, especially in SGBV efforts in post-conflict settings.

6.2.1.1 Enabling a Women’s Movement

Among the findings, Ushindi personnel spoke of the necessity of empowering women on the individual level, often through such avenues as skill-building activities and educational attainment through literacy. Increasing self-esteem and self-confidence is a necessary starting point for individual conscientization. This component of the empowerment process is necessary in supporting women’s agency and thus their capacity to challenge circumstances, which they themselves understand to be oppressive. The

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10 The term “conscientization” became popular with Paolo Freire (1970) and his work in Latin America on critical consciousness of the oppressed. In brief the term refers to a “deep awareness of one’s sociopolitical environment” (Stromquist in Parpart et al., 2002, p.22).
locality of women’s activities takes place within the *Wamama Simameni* houses in which women are meet to articulate issues related to their lived realities. My findings pointed to the significance of these centers for opening up new spaces for women to collectively organize and explore their “power within”. These women’s spaces open up new possibilities for women to organize on issues of SGBV and potentially mobilize on other interests, such as politics. Research has indicated the role that donor-funded domestic and international agencies can play in facilitating or hindering a local women’s movement. From her work in Central Asia, Simpson contends, “In Tajikistan, for instance, targeted aid and assistance efforts present barriers to women’s ability to create a space for diverse organizing, to cooperation among women’s organizations, and to the formation of a sense of movement” (2006, p.27). In the context of eastern DRC, how can international stakeholders help to facilitate local women’s movements beyond the confines of development agencies?

Global narratives of empowerment argue that various pathways to empowerment must be acknowledged for “real” empowerment to occur (Parpart et al.; Kabeer, 1994). Although discourse around women’s empowerment was not framed in the political, creating spaces for women to articulate their own needs beyond the domestic will likely provide pathways for this kind of mobilization. These “women’s spaces” can be utilized for women to express political needs and address oppressions beyond patriarchal structures alone. As Stromquist argues, “through collective struggle, collective identities are created and refined as new sources of political power” (Parpart et al., 2002, p.33). SGBV interventions and women’s empowerment initiatives that operate within the
confines of an “oppressive state” may want to consider providing more of their resources into facilitating women’s groups if local women’s empowerment is their ultimate goal.

6.2.1.2 Filling the Gap

This study indicates the challenge local stakeholders face in application of “feminist” discourse through SGBV mitigation in a post-conflict environment. The SGBV epidemic in eastern DRC is a major obstacle to increasing women’s agency and access to resources. How are women able to contemplate the rewards of gender equality when they must worry about the everyday burdens such as insecurity and caring for their families? Widespread sexual violence is powerfully linked to women’s overall position in society and thus SGBV mitigation alone will not combat the issues that perpetuate attitudes towards women. D’Odorico’s (2008) recommendation that empowerment approaches are necessary for long-term solutions to women’s issues in eastern DRC is unquestionably accurate. How, then, can development interventions introduce strategic goals such as gender equality in post-conflict environments that necessitate a vital focus on the practical? If development interventions and organizations were able to devote more time and resources to meeting women’s strategic gender interests, then goals such as “empowerment” could be a higher priority. Ushindi staff recognize that fragile civil infrastructure, chronic insecurity, poverty, and corruption significantly hinder their immediate (and long-term) objectives. In addition to a focus on women’s groups, which can facilitate political organizing, more collaboration with local and state government by SGBV interventions and women’s groups can provide some resolutions to this
predicament. As this research illuminates, there is a strong relationship between the role of the “State” in perpetuating poor conditions for men and women and SGBV prevalence. Holding local and state government at least partially accountable for basic needs provision would leave more resources of bilaterally-funded projects and international organizations to promote women’s strategic interests.

6.2.1.3 Why Discourse Analysis is Important

At the practitioner level, examining the transmission of discourse, especially those ideas argued to be “transnational” in nature, opens up a dialogue about the impact (i.e. power) of discourse within social transformation. CDA is limited in that it seeks to examine discourse and the implications behind it rather than analyze the functionality of practice. Still, discourse informs policy and understanding the impact transnational discourse has on the local has extremely significant consequences and outcomes. Utilizing a discourse analysis framework, this study has illustrated the negotiation of discourse at various levels of exchange. How can approaches such as discourse analysis be applied to determine if language is beneficial at the local level and how practical application can be improved upon? As Van Dijk states, “the practical relevance of CDA can be found especially in the critical education of students as future professionals, in its role in preparing expertise for powerful organizations” (2008, p.26). Development organizations that propose shifting power relations should be aware that the discourse they utilize in these efforts has tangible outcomes for local populations. Analyzing the discourse of transnational concepts often employed by development organizations at the
“translator” and “local” level would help to determine what parts of the discourse are useful and which are creating new inequalities.

6.2.1.4 “Interpreting” Transnational Concepts

The variation in ground level and administrator narratives imply that, at the practitioner level, *Ushindi* staff are exploiting discourse to bring about change in their communities. This research suggested that the rights framework is applicable at the local level because “translators” conceptualize these notions in terms of both Congolese legislation and natural meanings of “equality” and “human rights”. This approach allows *Ushindi* staff to apply significance in the local context without relying on “universal” notions of women’s rights such as transnational documents like CEDAW. Current research on translating transnational concepts such as “women’s rights” and “empowerment” indicate a space of contestation where “universal” notions of human rights are not legitimated at the local level (Merry, 2006). As “rights” concepts are locally adapted in the case of *Ushindi*, it is important to question the overall impact this interpretation will have on shifting conceptual ideas about gender. As Merry inquires from her transnational study of this phenomenon “to what extent does it [human rights framework] contribute to diminishing the oppressive control that community leaders or the state exercise over the marginalized and poor?” (2006, p.39). In the context of eastern DRC, conceptualizing human rights as universal could provide effective avenues for challenging other oppressive structures, although it may prove more difficult in increasing local legitimacy.
This research contributes to current discussions around the efficacy of human rights, and more specifically women’s rights, at the local level. Moreover, it necessitates a rethinking of whether transnational discourse such as “gender equality” and “human rights” are rooted in Western belief systems or if they are capable of finding relevance across various contexts. A closer look at the application of women’s rights discourses would contribute farther to the literature that debates the significance of local adaptation and acceptance. While “rights” discourse is recognized at the local level, other narratives encounter contestation. The variation of “tradition” and “culture” indicates that “at the top” more general and essentialist narratives of eastern DRC are utilized while local level application is much more nuanced. It would be wise for development interventions and organizations to consider to local level utilization of these narratives and determine if they are more helpful and/or harmful to the communities in which this discourse is enacted.

6.2.2 Recommendations for Further Research

This research highlights the prospective for bilateral development projects to empower and/or disempower local stakeholders who implement gender policies. In the context of Ushindi, men play an integral role in the implementation of women’s empowerment and gender programming. The possibility for women’s empowerment discourse has recently been taken up by GAD scholars in an effort to understand the consequences of “men-streaming” (Chant and Gutmann, 2002). This study particularly focused on Ushindi personnel as members of Ushindi discourse and I therefore chose not
to expand on men’s particular voices. And although I endeavored to create gender balance in my participant selection, the truth is that most of the Ushindi administrators were male. Research has indicated the possible hindrances to women’s empowerment when, institutionally, men claim more spaces of power (White, 1997). Within the objectives of Ushindi, men play important role in both gender programming and implementation. The men I interviewed for this study are dedicated individuals who worked tirelessly on SGBV mitigation. Nonetheless, further research on the effect of gender on empowerment discourse could provide insights into men’s roles as mobilizers for women’s empowerment. As Cleaver (2003) argues, there is currently, “the need to understand more about the personal and professional opportunities and constraints facing both men and women working on gender issues; to understand more about identity issues; and to learn from pioneers of change of both sexes” (p.10).

As this research conveys, Ushindi has a critical role to play in advancing women’s interests in eastern DRC. It is important to note however that Ushindi faces particular challenges because of the precarious sociopolitical environment in which it functions. While globalization is creating new interactions between local, state, and regional networks, it is important to question the relationship between international NGOs and/or interventions and the “State”. In eastern DRC, foreign aid and international NGOs have been an integral component in reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts. However, it has recently been argued that aid inefficiency and the failure of outside change agents to challenge corrupt government structures indicate the problematic intentionality of foreign funding (Trefon, 2011). Moreover, Trefon (2011) argues that this “approach has proved
to be largely unsuccessful because state-building strategies tend to mask the importance of political culture, and deeply entrenched sources of tension, hatred, distrust, ethnicity, and violence (p.4). As Desai (2002) states “some development scholars and development practitioners believe NGOs should strengthen the capacity of the state as part of their localized, grassroots work, rather than creating parallel of alternative welfare delivery systems” (p. 226). In the case of Ushindi, there appears to be a gap in the state’s capacity or willingness to address SGBV mitigation and local NGO initiatives. Moreover, I wonder will reliance on outside funding work to thwart women’s empowerment in the long run? Although I did not explore this matter in this research, it appears that the potentiality of women’s organizations in eastern DRC in becoming part of a “shadow state” is worth further exploration.

This research illustrates how Ushindi personnel who work with the confines of Ushindi, negotiate transnational concepts such as gender equality and empowerment. However, this analysis does not include the voices of the most marginalized in these communities, such as local women. Thus, while this research highlights the role of local level practitioners in shaping ground level implementation of transnational concepts, it does not explore conceptualizations of empowerment at the most “local” level. Further research on the relationship between Ushindi personnel and local women’s perceptions of the project could provide insight into the process of contextualizing empowerment discourse.
6.2.3 Ushindi: Empowering Eastern DRC?

Administrator and ground level participants reveal the individual process of conceptualizing “women’s empowerment” in the context of Ushindi discourse. While Ushindi staff, and especially administrators, adhere to particular language around the issue of SGBV and women’s empowerment, individual narratives reveal a much more complex depiction of process through which staff appropriate local level meaning through contextualization and resistance strategies. These findings emphasize significant points about women’s empowerment discourse within the confines of bilaterally-funded projects such as Ushindi. First, despite mainstream development discourse’s power to subvert local voices, interpretation and implementation via local stakeholders indicate the capacity of these personnel to adopt and exploit discourse in locally relevant and adaptable ways. Secondly, staff appropriation and contextualization of discourse of women’s rights and empowerment illustrates the transferability of such ostensible “feminist” and/or “Western” concepts. This interpretation postulates a challenge to the current critiques of “alternative” development strategies that stress the hegemonic power of donor-led discourse to subvert local voices. Like this research, critiques of such arguments, “while acknowledging the power of discourse, remind us that even the apparently “powerless” can sometimes turn development discourse to their own ends, using it as a basis for their own demands” (Parpart at al, 2002, p.8). As Congolese women, and men, continue to engage “local” and “global” notions of women’s empowerment and women’s rights, Ushindi narratives reveal that local stakeholders draw
on both local level meanings and “upward” discourse through strategic mechanisms to confront SGBV and women’s inequality.

Thinking back to Mama Isabelle’s introductory story of “power”, I believe *Ushindi* discourse encompasses the potential to open up new spaces for advancing women’s empowerment in the context of post-conflict eastern DRC. Despite their often “Western” label, concepts of human rights and gender equality are highly transferable in the context of eastern DRC. Although some *Ushindi* participants do indeed identify with the message of *Ushindi* as “foreign”, local stakeholders draw on these concepts to further the rights of all peoples of eastern DRC, implicitly holding the “State” and local government accountable. Nonetheless, it is important to question the impact that mainstream development discourses have on the “local”, even when they suggest a grassroots, participatory focus. I began this study with an exploration of complications associated with the cooptation of “empowerment” discourses by mainstream development agencies. For, “we must be wary of “business as usual” in the development industry. If empowerment is everything, then nothing distinguishes it from development as usual” (Parpart et al., 2002, p.204). *Ushindi* is conceptualizing the SGBV epidemic in eastern DRC through transformational agendas, moving beyond quick fix solutions that do little to consider underlying risk factors. In the context of “empowerment”, *The Ushindi Project* does face substantial limitations within both the material and discursive setting for which it operates. Still, *Ushindi’s* holistic approach is generating new and powerful spaces for marginalized groups in eastern DRC.
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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

My name is Katie Hargis and I want to thank you for participating in my research. I am a university student conducting research for my graduate degree. This research is focused on the practical application of notions of empowerment in development interventions, specifically Ushindi. So, I am interested in the personal definitions of empowerment, implementation, and factors that contribute or impede the Ushindi’s capacity to translate empowerment goals. Please feel free to ask questions at any point.

1. What is your name? How old are you? Do you have a family? Are you originally from Goma? If not, what bring you to Goma?

2. How much education have you had?

3. How long have you worked with the Ushindi project? How did you become involved with Ushindi? What is your position with Ushindi and what does it entail?

4. Do you think there are environmental factors that foster sexual violence against women? Do you feel that gender inequality in a root cause? How?

5. Ushindi is a very complex project. Can you briefly explain the dynamics of the intervention?

6. How is Ushindi different than other SGBV projects? Many organizations partner with Ushindi, why is this important?

7. What are the long-term goals of Ushindi and do you think the project will offer sustainable solutions?

8. It is my understanding that one of the goals of Ushindi is to empower communities. How does are communities empowered through the Ushindi project?

9. What are some of the ways in which survivors are empowered through the Ushindi project?

10. How do staff encourage and support survivors and communities?

11. Have you seen it working yet? Can you give an example?
12. What obstacles, if any, have you observed in your work (in the field, in meetings)? Are there limited resources? Are there personal obstacles you face? How could these be improved upon?

13. What factors contribute to the success of your work with Ushindi? What factors contribute to the overall success of the project?