

POLICY ARENA

ASSESSING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

SARAH MOSEDALE*

Institute for Development Policy and Management, Manchester University, Manchester, UK

Abstract: When policymakers and practitioners decide that 'empowerment'—usually of women or the poor—is a development goal what do they mean? And how do they determine the extent to which it has been achieved? Despite empowerment having become a widely used term in this context there is no accepted method for measuring and tracking changes.

Presumably if we want to see people empowered we consider them to be currently disempowered i.e. disadvantaged by the way power relations presently shape their choices, opportunities and well-being. If this is what we mean then we would benefit from being better informed about the debates which have shaped and refined the concept of power and its operation.

Therefore in this paper, after briefly reviewing how the empowerment of women has been discussed within development studies, I look at how the concept of power was debated and refined during the second half of the twentieth century and discuss how power relations might be described and evaluated in a particular context. I then propose a conceptual framework within which empowerment might be assessed. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

What is Empowerment?

'Empowering' women has become a frequently cited goal of development interventions. However, while there is now a significant body of literature discussing how women's empowerment has been or might be evaluated, there are still major difficulties in so doing. Furthermore many projects and programmes which espouse the empowerment of women show little if any evidence of attempts even to define what this means in their own context

*Correspondence to: Sarah Mosedale, Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester, Harold Hankins Building, The Precinct Centre, Oxford Rd, Manchester, M13 9QH, UK.
E-mail: sarah.mosedale@manchester.ac.uk

let alone to assess whether and to what extent they have succeeded. Instead traditional development goals, such as better health or increased income, are cited as evidence of empowerment. In such cases it is not clear what is added by using the word 'empowerment'.

Despite its having 'identified empowerment as a... primary development assistance goal... neither the World Bank nor any other major development agency has developed a rigorous method for measuring and tracking changes in levels of empowerment' (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002, p. 3).

Different people use empowerment to mean different things. However there are four aspects which seem to be generally accepted in the literature on women's empowerment.

Firstly to be empowered one must have been disempowered. It is relevant to speak of empowering women, for example, because, as a group, they are disempowered relative to men.

Secondly empowerment cannot be bestowed by a third party. Rather those who would become empowered must claim it. Development agencies cannot therefore empower women—the most they can achieve is to facilitate women empowering themselves. They may be able to create conditions favourable to empowerment but they cannot make it happen.

Thirdly, definitions of empowerment usually include a sense of people making decisions on matters which are important in their lives and being able to carry them out. Reflection, analysis and action are involved in this process which may happen on an individual or a collective level. There is some evidence that while women's own struggles for empowerment have tended to be collective efforts, empowerment-orientated development interventions often focus more on the level of the individual.

Finally empowerment is an ongoing process rather than a product. There is no final goal. One does not arrive at a stage of being empowered in some absolute sense. People are empowered, or disempowered, relative to others or, importantly, relative to themselves at a previous time.

Women and Gender

While the reasons for any particular woman's powerlessness (or power) are many and varied, considering women *per se* necessarily involves questioning what *we/they* have in common in this respect. The common factor is that, as women, they are all constrained by 'the norms, beliefs, customs and values through which societies differentiate between women and men' (Kabeer, 2000, p. 22). The specific ways in which this operates vary culturally and over time. In one situation it might reveal itself in women's lower incomes relative to men, in another it might be seen in the relative survival rates of girl and boy children and in a third by severe restrictions on women's mobility. Virtually everywhere it can be seen in domestic violence, male-dominated decision fora and women's inferior access to assets of many kinds.

A woman's level of empowerment will vary, sometimes enormously, according to other criteria such as her class or caste, ethnicity, relative wealth, age, family position etc and any analysis of women's power or lack of it must appreciate these other contributory dimensions. Nevertheless, focusing on the empowerment of women as a group requires an analysis of gender relations i.e. the ways in which power relations between the sexes are constructed and maintained.

Since gender relations vary both geographically and over time they always have to be investigated in context. It also follows that they are not immutable. Nevertheless, particular manifestations of gender relations are often fiercely defended and regarded as 'natural' or God-given. Although many development interventions involve challenges to existing power relations it tends to be those which challenge power relations between men and women which are most strongly contested.

While there has been criticism of attempts to 'import' Northern feminisms to the South it is patronising and incorrect to assume that feminism is a Northern concept. Women of the South have their own history of organization and struggle against gender-based injustices. Also, gender analysis arising from the second wave of feminism in the North has benefited from extensive criticism of its initial lack of attention to class and ethnicity and its Eurocentricity and there has now been some twenty years of dialogue and joint action between Northern and Southern feminists.

The validity of using gender as a critical analysis of the position of 'Third World women' (itself a critically contested category) is not universally accepted. Of course the validity of the concept is also contested in the West. We are told that we now inhabit a post-feminist era—the implication being that whatever reasons women may have had in the past for dissatisfaction with their social and political identities (it's usually conceded that our being allowed to vote and own property should stand for example) there is no further need for agitation. Further, it is said that irritating Western feminists are guilty of stirring up discontent among women in developing countries and applying inappropriate culturally-specific notions of female liberation. This is considered particularly offensive since these Western feminists often come from nations which have oppressed these countries in the past (and arguably continue to exploit them in the present).

However Western feminism has not only been attacked by those who are against feminism in general. For example Chandra Mohanty criticizes (some) such feminist texts for their underlying assumption that feminist interests as articulated in the US and Western Europe are the norm and that 'third world women' constitute a homogenous Other. 'This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-orientated, victimized etc). This... is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions' (Mohanty, 1991, p. 56).

Mohanty also criticizes the way much feminist discourse defines women in terms of 'object status' i.e. the way they are affected by certain institutions or systems. This perspective characterizes women as a pre-existing socio-political group outside such social relations instead of understanding that 'women are produced through these very relations as well as being implicated in forming these relations' (Mohanty, 1991, p. 59). Analysis of women's position should therefore be based on the realities of their lives rather than on a generalized assumption that they are oppressed.

Taking it as given then that successfully organising for empowerment requires analysis of women's particular situation rather than an assumption of oppression, is it possible to identify any universal values?

This is attempted by Martha Nussbaum who takes the charge of cultural imperialism sufficiently seriously to devote some eighty pages of *Women and Human Development: the Capabilities Approach* to a defence of such values. In seeking to construct a universal framework to assess women's quality of life she recognizes the objection that 'the particular

categories we choose are likely to reflect our own immersion in a particular theoretical tradition and may be, in some respects, quite the wrong ones for the assessment of Indian lives' (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 40). This is a particularly serious challenge as many development interventions have failed due to a failure to properly appreciate the local circumstances.

Nussbaum investigates, and refutes, three ways she identifies that it can be argued that 'certain very general values, such as the dignity of the person, the integrity of the body, basic political rights and liberties, basic economic opportunities, and so forth, are not appropriate norms to be used in assessing women's lives in developing countries' (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 41). She calls these the argument from culture, the argument from diversity and the argument from paternalism.

The argument from culture states that Indian norms (both Hindu and Muslim) of female modesty, deference, obedience and self-sacrifice have defined women's lives for centuries and should not be assumed to be incapable of constructing good and flourishing lives for women. Also Western women have a hard time too with their high divorce rate and exhausting careerism. It is patronising for feminists to assume that only lives like their own can be fruitful.

Firstly, Nussbaum's framework allows women to choose a 'traditional' life if they want to. Secondly, this argument ignores 'countertraditions of female defiance and strength' of which Nussbaum gives various examples in the Indian context. Thirdly, change is a constitutive element of all cultures, not just Western. Fourthly arguing, from cultural relativism, that normative values need to come from within the society to which they are applied, 'has no bite in the modern world, where the ideas of every culture turn up inside every other, through the internet and the media' (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 49). Confusing cultural relativism with respect for diversity ignores the fact that most cultures have exhibited considerable intolerance of (as well as some respect for) diversity and prevents us from adopting any more general norm of tolerance that could help us limit the intolerance of cultures (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 49). And also 'if divorce and career difficulties are painful, as they surely are, they are a lot less painful than being unable to work when one is starving because one will be beaten if one goes outdoors, or being unable to leave an abusive marriage because of illiteracy and lack of employable skills' (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 42).

The argument from diversity argues that our world benefits from, for example, the richness of different languages, and then extends this to entire cultural systems. But unlike languages, cultural practices frequently harm people so we have to ask whether they are worth preserving. Also 'we might add that it is not clear that there is interesting diversity in the practices of male dominance that feminists have most contested. Getting beaten up and being malnourished have depressing similarities everywhere; denials of land rights, political voice, and employment opportunities do also' (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 51).

The argument from paternalism says that when we use universal norms as benchmarks for societies we are telling people what is good for them and showing too little respect for people's freedom as agents. Being aware of this danger gives us a good reason to prefer a form of universalism that is compatible with the most significant freedoms and choices. However any system of law is paternalistic in keeping some people from doing some things that they want to do and this is not a credible argument against law itself. Also many existing value systems are highly paternalistic towards women. For 'their own good' they treat women as unequal under the law, as lacking full civic capacity and not having the same rights of association, property ownership and employment as men.

Problems for Agencies

Although I argue that the assessment of empowerment has to be undertaken I do not assume that it will be non-problematic. Indeed it is not difficult to see difficulties for agencies which wish to facilitate empowerment and to measure impact. Some of these are practical—if women themselves are to determine what they wish to change about their situation and how they wish to do it then how are agencies to plan, budget for and monitor activities? This is not a new problem however. It has been extensively explored by those pursuing 'participatory' models of development who have tested and refined iterative methods of planning, implementing and evaluating interventions which focus on the knowledge and preferences of the intended 'beneficiaries'.

Such participatory methods have been important within development discourse and practice for some thirty years and have been refined in response to criticisms that earlier versions tended to reproduce existing local power relations and to fail to engage the most disadvantaged, particularly women whose access to public space is often the most circumscribed. Participatory methodologies for agreeing locally relevant indicators of poverty, including wealth ranking, can be used to agree locally relevant indicators of empowerment.

However difficulties for agencies seeking to facilitate empowerment go beyond the 'merely' practical. Funding agencies are necessarily in a position of power in relation to activities which they fund. How does this power relationship affect agencies' ability to facilitate the empowerment of women? When planning projects and programmes with a view to working towards women's empowerment, agencies need to consider 'the extent to which the agency itself is able to accommodate the empowerment of women and to what extent such empowerment is actually threatening to the state and/or the agency' (Mosedale, 1998, p. 52).

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

UNIFEM (the United Nations Development Fund for Women) defines women's economic empowerment as 'having access to and control over the means to make a living on a sustainable and long term basis, and receiving the material benefits of this access and control. Such a definition goes beyond short-term goals of increasing women's access to income and looks for longer term sustainable benefits, not only in terms of changes to laws and policies that constrain women's participation in and benefits from development, but also in terms of power relationships at the household, community and market levels' (Carr 2000, p. 2).

In the 1970s when women's empowerment was first invoked by Third World feminist and women's organizations 'it was explicitly used to frame and facilitate the struggle for social justice and women's equality through a transformation of economic, social and political structures at national and international levels' (Bisnath and Elson, nd p. 1). But in the 1990s many agencies used the term 'women's empowerment' in association with a wide variety of strategies including those which focused on 'enlarging the choices and productivity of individual women, for the most part, in isolation from a feminist agenda; and in the context of a withdrawal of state responsibility for broad-based economic and social support' (Bisnath, 2001, p. 11). It is frequently cited, for example, in the context of providing micro credit to women and there is an extensive literature debating the effectiveness (or not) of this strategy in terms of empowering women. It does seem clear

that many women have benefited from increased access to and control over cash but evidence also indicates that 'female targeting without adequate support networks and empowerment strategies will merely shift the burden of household debt and household subsistence onto women' (Mayoux, 2002, p. 7).

For Bina Agarwal 'if... self-help groups were de-linked from their single point focus on credit and invested with more transformative agendas such as finding innovative ways of improving women's situation economically, challenging social inequality, improving women's voice in the public sphere and so on, they could prove more effective vehicles for empowerment' (Agarwal, 2001, p. 7). She argues that any strategy that seeks women's empowerment should have, as a central component the enhancement of women's ability to function collectively in their own interest.

Srilatha Batliwala discusses how the interaction between feminism and Freire's popular education (which completely ignored gender) produced women struggling to demonstrate how gender is constructed socially and to build alternatives. Failures in development interventions were in part ascribed to approaches which did not recognize the underlying factors perpetuating women's oppression and exploitation. Batliwala points out that empowerment is not a necessary result of economic strength. (Rich women suffer domestic abuse and rape too.) The process of empowerment involves, first, women recognising the ideology that legitimizes male domination and understanding how it perpetuates their oppression.

Batliwala recognizes that women have been led to participate in their own oppression and therefore sees external change agents as necessary for empowerment. Women need access to a new body of ideas and information that not only changes their consciousness and self-image but also encourages action. Empowerment is conceptualized as 'a spiral, changing consciousness, identifying areas to target for change, planning strategies, acting for change, and analyzing activities and outcomes' (Batliwala, 1994, p. 132).

For Nelly Stromquist, empowerment is a socio-political concept that includes cognitive, psychological, economic and political components. The cognitive component refers to women's understanding of the causes of their subordination. It involves 'understanding the self and the need to make choices that may go against cultural or social expectations' (Stromquist, 1995, p. 14). It includes knowledge about legal rights and sexuality (beyond family planning techniques). The psychological component includes women believing that they can act at personal and social levels to improve their condition. It involves an escape from 'learned helplessness' and the development of self-esteem and confidence. For the economic component she argues that, although work outside the home often implies a double burden, access to such work increases economic independence and therefore independence in general. The political component includes the ability to imagine one's situation and mobilize for social change. 'Collective action is fundamental to the aim of attaining social transformation' (Stromquist, 1995, p. 15).

Jo Rowlands considers empowerment in the context of social work and education where 'there is broad agreement... that empowerment is a process; that it involves some degree of personal development, but that this is not sufficient; and that it involves moving from insight to action' (Rowlands, 1997, p. 15).

She developed a model of women's empowerment with three dimensions—personal, close relationships and collective. At each level inhibiting and encouraging factors influence a set of core values and lead to changes. The importance of context is understood and the model is intended to be used to identify specific items within each category appropriate to local circumstances. For example at the level of personal experience/history

the core values she identified during her Honduras-based research were: self-confidence; self-esteem; sense of agency; sense of 'self' in wider context and dignity. Inhibiting factors included machismo, fatalism, active opposition by partner, health problems and poverty. Encouraging factors included activity outside the home, being part of a group, travel, time for self and literacy. Changes were expressed as increased ability to: hold and express opinions; learn, analyse and act; organize own time and obtain and control resources.

Naila Kabeer suggests that 'empowerment . . . refers to the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability' (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). This definition makes clear that only those previously denied such abilities can be considered to be empowered and also that the choices in question are strategic. Kabeer defines strategic choices as ones 'which are critical for people to live the lives they want (such as choice of livelihood, whether and who to marry, whether to have children etc)' as opposed to 'less consequential choices which may be important for the quality of one's life but do not constitute its defining parameters' (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). It is worth noting that this use of the term 'strategic' is different from that popularized by Moser where women's 'strategic' interests are those which challenge their subordination as women while their 'practical' interests are those which help them to carry out their gender-assigned roles more easily.

Having analysed a number of studies of women's empowerment, Kabeer goes on to argue that the ability to exercise such choice is made up of three interrelated and indivisible elements—resources, agency and achievements—all of which need attention before assertions about empowerment can be made. Resources are identified as not only material but also human and social and as including future claims and expectations as well as actual allocations. Access to such resources 'will reflect the rules and norms which govern distribution and exchange in different institutional areas' (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437).

Agency is the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. As well as observable action it includes an individual's sense of agency (or power within). Usually thought of as 'decision-making', agency can also involve 'bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance' (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438).

Kabeer recognizes that many aspects of behaviour are in fact governed by rules and norms, some of which have a role in defining and maintaining the social order. Prominent among such norms are those which determine appropriate behaviour for men and women. These gendered identities are developed throughout life and cannot easily be shaken off because of some relatively minor change. Nevertheless as Agarwal points out 'social norms are not immutable, and are themselves subject to bargaining and change, even if the time horizon for changing some types of norms may be a long one. Indeed a good deal of what is socially passed off as natural and indisputable, including women's roles and modes of behaviour may be the outcomes of past ideological struggles' (Agarwal, 1997, p. 19).

MODELS OF POWER

Having briefly reviewed the empowerment of women as it is employed within development studies I want to develop a conceptual framework for assessing empowerment. To do this it is necessary first to examine the underlying concept of power.

Within the social sciences power was first typified as *power over*. A has power over B to the extent that s/he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do (Dahl, 1957, pp. 202–203). Here power arises from clearly understood conflicts between people. Subsequently

a second dimension or face of power was recognized—the ability to prevent certain people or issues from getting to the decision-making arena in the first place. This dimension of power is concerned with the rules and methods of legitimising some voices and discrediting others. It was then suggested that perhaps the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict arising in the first place (Lukes, 1974, p. 24). From this perspective the powerful may also get their own way by so manipulating the consciousnesses of the less powerful as to make them incapable of seeing that a conflict exists.

Often of course it is not necessary for powerful individuals to prevent women from doing things they want to do because social norms and customs already achieve this. Hayward suggests that, instead of asking how power is distributed and whether A has power over B, we should ask ‘How do power’s mechanisms define the (im)possible, the (im)probable, the natural, the normal, what counts as a problem? . . . Do fields of social possibility vary systematically, for example, among groups or across social settings?’ (Hayward, 1998, p. 28).

Here power relations are understood as not only inescapable but necessary for promoting a range of social goods. Rather than asking whether the actions of some are constrained by the action of others we should look for significant differences in social entitlement and constraint and consider how entrenched or mutable such differences might be. The greater and more asymmetrical are the social limits that define what is possible within a given power relation then the closer that relation approximates a state of domination. ‘Critical questions about how power shapes freedom are not, then, reduced to questions about distribution and individual choice. Rather, they are questions about the differential impact of social limits to human action on people’s capacities to participate in shaping their lives and in shaping the conditions of their collective existence’ (Hayward, 1998, p. 32).

The three dimensions (or faces) of *power over* are all examples of a zero-sum game i.e. by definition one person’s gain is another’s loss (even if, as in the third dimension above, the loser may not even be aware of her loss). Other forms of power are also recognized where one person’s gain is not necessarily another’s loss. These tend to be referred to as *power within*, *power to* and *power with*.

Power within, for example, refers to assets such as self-esteem and self-confidence. In a sense all power starts from here—such assets are necessary before anything else can be achieved. The internalization of such feelings of worthlessness is a well-recognized feature of women’s oppression and therefore many development interventions seek to bring about changes at this level.

Power to is power which increases the boundaries of what is achievable for one person without *necessarily* tightening the boundaries of what is achievable for another party. Learning to read is a good example.

Power with refers to collective action, recognizing that more can be achieved by a group acting together than by individuals alone. Many interventions aiming to empower women note the importance of creating opportunities for women to spend time with other women reflecting on their situation, recognising the strengths they do possess and devising strategies to achieve positive change.

To develop critical minds women need a place where new ideas can be discussed and new demands arise. For Sara Evans, the prerequisites for developing an ‘insurgent collective identity’ are:

- social spaces where people can develop an independent sense of worth as opposed to their usual status as second-class or inferior citizens

- role models—seeing people breaking out of patterns of passivity
- an ideology that explains the sources of oppression, justifies revolt, and imagines a qualitatively different future
- a threat to the newfound sense of self which forces the individual to confront inherited cultural definitions
- a network through which a new interpretation can spread, activating a social movement. (Evans, 1979, pp. 219–220).

In Foucault's model of power, power is considered to circulate and to be exercised rather than possessed (Foucault, 1980). Resistance, where individuals contest fixed identities and relations in ways which may be subtle, is here seen as an inevitable companion of power. The exploration of women's day-to-day experience of and resistance to power relations has been productive both in demonstrating the diverse sources of women's subjugation and in celebrating and spreading resistance. Indeed consciousness-raising groups in the UK, from the 1970s on, used the sharing of exactly such lived experiences to great effect in changing awareness and motivating collective action for change. The feminist assertion that 'the personal is political' was part of the process of recognising that power was exercised in personal relationships (and not just between men and women) as well as in more public arenas.

Indeed the recognition that women's day-to-day struggles involved power relations challenged an important aspect of the agenda-setting aspect of male power i.e. that which defined what went on in the family as 'private'. This breaking down of women's isolation within the family and the concomitant taboos against breaking this imposed silence were an important constituent of 'second wave Western feminism' and can be observed in many different cultural settings today.

The model of power towards which I am moving is complex and fluid. It includes structural faultlines based on, for example, sex and class where membership of a particular group (women, peasants) has significant implications for the shape of the power structure within which an individual operates. This is not to say that membership of such a group is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for the particular geometry of any individual's position in this power structure. That would be to deny people any individual or collective agency which is obviously absurd. However it is to accept that group membership constrains a person's possibilities and defines some boundaries, which being socially constructed can therefore be changed. The extent to which an individual presses against, or accepts, these boundaries and the extent to which change is opposed (and the power of those opposing it) all contribute to the shape and durability of these boundaries.

I also recognize that people have more or less power depending on their specific situation and that they can be relatively powerless in one situation and relatively powerful in another. On a micro level I see each person at the centre of their own space of freedom, a space defined by, and defining, the shifting contours of the multiple containers which circumscribe their lives.

The part of the empowerment debate which I intend to focus on, as both the most interesting and the most under-researched, is that model of women's empowerment which asserts that its function is to radically change oppressive gender relations. In other words the model of power which I wish to use is strongly influenced by Hayward in that what is of interest is how women can build 'the capacity to participate effectively in shaping the social limits that define what is possible' (Hayward, 1998, p. 32). The question which I

wish to consider particularly closely is how we may know whether or not such changes are being achieved in the field by development interventions which seek to empower women in this way.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING EMPOWERMENT

There is a danger of the term empowerment becoming a buzzword within certain circles in development policy and practice and of its being used to add glamour (rather than value) to interventions which actually seek to achieve a variety of economic and social outcomes, which, though they may be extremely desirable in themselves, do not necessarily challenge existing patterns of power.

I define women's empowerment as the process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to men, from being and doing. Alternatively, women's empowerment is the process by which women redefine gender roles in ways which extend their possibilities for being and doing.

This is very closely related to Kabeer's definition ('women's empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability' (Kabeer, 1999, p. 435) but has two important differences.

First it emphasizes the gendered nature of women's disempowerment. When we speak of women's empowerment we are defining individuals as 'women' and in that case we are considering the ways in which they are disempowered *as women*. This is not to deny that women have multiple identities and are also farmers, workers, traders etc. and will choose at times to work together with men to improve their mutual situation. (Of course struggles with men for common goals as peasants, workers, colonial subjects etc. will, as has been shown many times in history, need to be combined with struggle around gender roles too if women are not to find themselves still disadvantaged as women once the common struggle is over.) Women's gendered identities disempower them in their public roles as well as within the home. Therefore women can act to challenge gender roles as part of any collective struggle they are involved in.

The second difference from Kabeer's definition is perhaps more subtle but, I think, real. Her definition involves focusing on individuals acquiring an ability to choose whereas mine focuses on redefining and extending the limits of what is possible. It therefore has more of an emphasis on women achieving a change that expands options not only for themselves but also for women in general both now and in the future.

I suggest that a framework for assessing empowerment should include the following components.

Identifying Constraints to Action

This is the core of the framework and fulfils a number of functions. Firstly it provides a baseline—i.e. defines the state of gendered power relations before any action is taken. By repeating the process at a later date change can be identified. It can therefore be determined whether power relations have shifted towards becoming more equitable. This cannot of course be assumed to be the result of any particular intervention—as ever this must be demonstrated. Secondly, because identifying constraints is necessarily a

participative process, it contributes towards building an understanding among the women involved of how they are discriminated against on the basis of their gender (and a desire for, and belief in the possibility of, change).

Attempting to map the entire network of constraints to action in any situation would be a horribly complex task and one probably best not attempted. Instead assessment would focus on an action or group of actions identified as most significant by those constrained.

Inevitably, when people are oppressed, their own perceptions of their situation are shaped by the ideology which supports the oppression they face. Various aspects of their situation may be considered by them to be not only unchangeable but fair. Opportunities may be considered to be 'not for the likes of us'. Ill treatment, such as being beaten by one's husband, may be considered reasonable (within certain limits). Actions may be considered desirable which in fact act against women's own interests. For example, women may think that using credit to contribute to dowries will make a valuable contribution to their daughters' futures. But this may result in the size of dowries spiralling upwards (Mayoux, 1998) thus worsening the situation for women in general.

It is necessary therefore, when using participatory methods for empowerment, at the same time as appreciating the need for action to be firmly rooted in the local context, to avoid considering women's own perceptions to be unchallengeable. Instead the participatory process of identifying constraints must include opportunities for women to reflect on their situation and *develop* their awareness of their own interests. The facilitator is part of this process rather than an objective outsider. She 'has information that can help people in their change efforts and has the obligation to question perspectives that are based on poor information or negative stereotypes. The challenge is *how and when* to deliver additional information so as not to derail the empowering process of analysis. Facilitators need to use their information in a way that promotes critical thinking in the learning/action process' (VeneKlasen and Miller, 2002, p. 71).

Feminism is not monolithic and therefore, even with the best information available, opinions vary as to how women's situation should best be described and improved. What happens when the facilitator does not believe that the action proposed by the women themselves will have an empowering effect? This is a dilemma for any agency seeking to facilitate empowerment. Ultimately, of course, if the agency is convinced that the proposed action will actually be harmful it has the power to decline to get involved. However this should be a last resort. Inevitably a commitment to empowerment does entail a certain amount of loss of control and the agency needs to be careful that this is not its real objection. If the women concerned are strongly committed to a particular course of action, there is usually a good case to be made for supporting them. Much can be learned from the experience of organising for change and, even if it is not initially successful, it may provide a good foundation for subsequent activities. Making links with women's groups within the same country who are agitating for positive change is likely to be productive, particularly if they involve women of a similar class or caste. Becoming aware of such current initiatives should be part of the facilitator's preparation.

Returning to the process of identifying constraints to action, let us take education as an example. Firstly we could discuss whether this is an area in which the constraints are significantly different for women and men. For any particular situation (country, region, village, family) we could compare primary school enrolment or completion rates for boys and girls, look at literacy levels for each group, consider relative rates of entry to

secondary or tertiary education and so on. We would of course find that in many contexts girls were significantly disadvantaged relative to boys.

We now look at the possibility of a girl going to school. Starting from a 'three faces of power' perspective questions relating to open, suppressed or avoided conflict can be asked. We can then consider constraints which are not consciously imposed by any identifiable agent but which are imposed through generally understood norms and ideas of social propriety. We can also consider non-zero sum power relations.

Power over

Is there an open conflict? In this case a girl wants to go to school but other, more powerful, people or social mores act so as to prevent her. Who? Why?

For example—her parents (mother or father or both?)

- because her labour is needed at home
- because they cannot afford books/uniform
- because they can see no benefit or consider that costs outweigh benefits
- because any economic benefits from her education will benefit her future husband's family not her birth family
- because it is not socially acceptable for girls to be educated
- because they fear losing her or her rejecting them if she becomes educated.

For each of these (or other) reasons, questions could be asked as to how immutable such opposition is. For example: How much is her labour needed at home? What extra input would be needed from elsewhere to allow her to be freed from this requirement?

Is there a suppressed conflict? Is it impossible for the girl to say what she wants? Why?

For example

- because she is afraid of being punished
- because she is afraid of being mocked
- because, believing they are too poor, she does not wish to embarrass her parents
- because she is afraid of causing conflict between her parents
- because she knows it is not considered appropriate for girls to express their wishes
- because she wants to be good.

Is it impossible for the girl to even develop the desire to go to school? Why?

- because she has never heard of a girl going to school
- because she cannot conceive of herself as being someone who could learn to read and write
- because she cannot imagine any benefits of being educated
- because she has been socialized so as to have very little perception of herself as an individual
- because she entirely models herself on her (uneducated) mother
- because she has internalized her community's beliefs that this is inappropriate for girls
- because she believes it will damage her marriage prospects.

Power within

What does a girl need in order to pursue education? For example:

- ability to analyse her situation and think of improvements
- belief that her actions can have effects

- curiosity about the wider world
- confidence that she could learn
- some consciousness of the benefits of education.

Power with

Are there any potential allies? For example:

- other girls who want to go to school
- other girls who do go to school
- sympathetic family member
- mothers or fathers who want their daughters to go to school or already send their daughters to school
- teachers who are trying to encourage parents to send girls to school
- projects which offer benefits to those who educate their daughters.

Social values, norms

What are the factors that limit girls' choices about education? For example (taken from the UK before women gained widespread access to education):

- belief that women's role is domestic/child care and does not require formal education
- belief that women's reproductive abilities will be damaged by education
- belief that education will cause women to challenge their socially ascribed gender roles
- belief that education will threaten the institution of marriage.

How do such values differ for girls from e.g. rural/urban background, peasant/working class/middle class, minority/majority ethnic groups etc?

Identifying How Women's Agency Has Developed

In a sense this is a mirror image to identifying constraints. If constraints to action are loosened then, by definition, possibilities for action (agency) are increased. And, *vice versa*, if possibilities for action are increased then constraints have loosened.

However we are interested not only in possibilities for action but in actual action taken. For example women's rights to land tenure might be made more equal to men's through legislation—a good thing in itself of course. And it will certainly reduce formal constraints on women's action. But will women take advantage of the new legislation or will social pressures prevent them from doing so? In this case there has been little impact on women's agency or empowerment.

Analysing changes in women's agency will involve considering both the individual and collective level. It will involve seeking answers to question such as:

- How have women's views about gender changed?
- How have their feelings about themselves changed (self-confidence, self-worth, potential etc.)?
- What can women do now that they wanted to do but could not do before?
- Do women believe that it will be easier for their daughters to do these things now?
- What new or existing resources (broadly defined) were used to achieve this?
- How have women worked with each other to achieve this?
- Did external assistance contribute? If so, how?

Identifying How Women's Agency Changed Constraints to Action

We have to question whether or not any identified relaxation of constraints has come about as a result of women's actions or for some other reason. If it is because of women's action then it is a straightforward example of empowerment—women have succeeded in expanding the realm of what is possible for them. On the other hand, have constraints been loosened by some means other than women's action? In this case we cannot talk of empowerment because as is generally agreed empowerment cannot be bestowed but must be won. While any improvement in power relations is welcome and valuable in itself, it is only when this comes about as a result of women's action that empowerment would be the appropriate term to use. Such action may be individual or collective. It may be the result of one woman refusing to suffer in silence any longer. It may be the result of an action by an international organization which has been influenced by women's protest, lobbying and advocacy.

Questions we could investigate include:

- What actions did women take, individually or collectively to challenge constraints to action?
- How did women support each other and learn from each other's actions?
- How did women resist such constraints either overtly or covertly?
- What opposition did women encounter?
- To what extent and how was opposition overcome?
- How secure do women think their newly expanded freedoms of action are?
- What action, if any, do they intend to take to defend their improved position?

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