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# **Women Empowerment:**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of women empowerment was the outcome of several important critiques and debates generated by the women's movement throughout the world, and particularly in the developing countries. In essence, the 1980s saw the rise of stringent feminist critiques of development strategies and grassroots interventions: mainly for these strategies having generally failed to make any significant dent in the status of women. The failure was ascribed to the adaptation and the application of such approaches as welfare, antipoverty, and to some extent the efficiency approach. Presently, the users of the term 'empowerment' tend to assume an understanding of the meaning within some particular context. Often no clear explanation of empowerment is given. We believe that some of the confusion arises because the root concept – power –itself is disputed, and so is understood and experienced in different ways by different people. In fact, the underlying assumption of many interest groups or institutions (such as the World Bank and the UN) unfortunately is that economic empowerment automatically converts to women's empowerment.

As the following epistemic quest of empowerment unfolds in six sections, the major issue reflected upon is the concept of empowerment in its importance to women's development. We begin in the next section by exploring the definitions of empowerment and then dissects the concept of power in section 3: the concept is discussed in the subsequent sections from different perspectives of power, feminism and personal autonomy and agency in the family framework. We consider three approaches here: theory of human needs, self-determination theory and capability approach. The last section concludes the paper.

# **Women Empowerment:**

## **An Epistemic Quest**

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### **1. What is Empowerment?**

A review of definitions of empowerment reveals both diversity and commonality, because of the variation in terminology used to encompass the concept. The literature contains a range of terms, concepts and data that may be relevant for assessing ‘empowerment’; thus, various studies have aimed at measuring women’s

- i) “autonomy” (for example, Dyson and Moore 1983; Basu and Basu 1991; Jeejebhoy and Sathar 2001),
- ii) “agency,” (for example, Pillai and Alkire 2007)
- iii) “status” (for example, Gage 1995; Tzannatos 1999),
- iv) “women’s land rights” (for example, Quisumbing et al. 1999),
- v) “domestic economic power” (for example, Mason 1998),
- vi) “bargaining power” (for example, Beegle et al. 1998; Hoddinott and Haddad 1995; Quisumbing and de la Briere 2000)
- vii) “power” (for example, Agarwal 1997; Beegle et al., 1998; Pulerwitz et al. 2000),
- viii) “patriarchy” (for example, Malhotra et al. 1995),
- ix) “gender equality” (World Bank 2001a & 2000b), or
- x) “gender discrimination”.

Notwithstanding the similarities in the concepts underlying many of these terms, we think that the concept of empowerment can be distinguished from others based on its unique definitional elements. Thus, the first essential element of empowerment is that it is a process “whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own ‘socio-political’ subordination.” (Keller and Mbwewe 1991; also see Kabeer 2001; Chen 1992; Rowlands 1995, Oxaal and Baden 1997). None of the other concepts explicitly encompasses a progression from one state (gender inequality) to another (gender equality). Much of the emphasis on empowerment as a process is found in the conceptual literature, but this understanding is also beginning to be incorporated into the frameworks of empirical studies. For example, even as Jejeebhoy (2000) considers autonomy and empowerment to be fairly similar, she argues that the former is a static state – and thus measurable by most available indicators – while the latter is a change over time, and not so easily measurable.

The second element of empowerment that distinguishes it from other concepts is agency – in other words, women themselves must be significant actors in the process of change that is being described or measured (Gita Sen 1993; Mehra 1997). Thus, hypothetically there could be an improvement in indicators of gender equality, but unless the intervening processes involve women as agents of that change rather than merely as its recipients, we would not consider it empowerment. However desirable, it would merely be an improvement in outcomes from one point in time to another. The importance of agency in the discourse on empowerment emerges from ‘bottom up’ rather than ‘top down’ approaches toward development (Oxaal and Baden 1997; Rowlands 1995; Narayan et al. 2000a; 2000b). At the institutional and aggregate levels, it emphasizes the importance of participation and ‘social inclusion’ (Friedmann 1992; Chambers 1997; Narayan et al. 2000a; 2000b) At the micro level, it is embedded in the idea of self-efficacy and the significance of the realization by individual women that they can be the agents of change in their own lives.

Further, Ellen McWhirter (1991) identifies empowerment as the process by which

people, organizations, or groups who are powerless become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life, develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives and exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others. Following McWhirter's (1991) definition of empowerment, it becomes apparent that empowerment has a specific focus in women's development in the developing countries. According to her, a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources, will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination in the households.

Empowerment, according to the World Bank, is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions which both build the individual and collective assets of the poor and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context that govern the use of these assets (World Bank Poverty Analysis 2003). Furthermore, the World Bank 2003 Annual Report and other World Bank reports since the early 1990s, recognize that empowerment is very vital to overall progress in development as it "ensures that all people have the ability to shape their own lives by providing opportunity and security and fostering effective participation and social inclusion" (The World Bank Annual report 2003).<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, some commentators found the World Bank shifting slightly to a revised neo-liberal model, stressing market-friendly state intervention and good governance (see Peet and Hartwick 1999). Gradually the concept of empowerment, especially through microcredit schemes became the catchphrase for every women's development programme initiated by the World Bank in the developing countries.

In its written statement, the World Bank has maintained its commitment to a gender mainstreaming strategy, but evidence emerging from developing countries indicates its policies do not achieve this. The World Bank has been criticized for paying only lip service to women's issues by different quarters, especially the feminist organizations who maintain that the World Bank's development programmes mainly support male interests. As

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.worldbank.org/html/extpb/2003/download\\_report.html](http://www.worldbank.org/html/extpb/2003/download_report.html). Accessed on 25 March 2009.

Marina Lazreg (2002) has noted, “the World Bank is subsuming the concrete under the abstract, practice under theory, resulting in the blurring, if not the obliteration of the difference, or the often noted lack of fit between theories and practices of development”. Therefore, the question is: “How does the World Bank plan to challenge the existing socio-cultural practices or patriarchal structures that are at the root of women’s disempowerment while in the pursuit of the “efficiency approach?” (sought to increase women’s productivity in order to enhance their quality of lives). And how empowering are World Bank policies and programmes when they are implemented in the form of ‘power-over’?

It is unfortunate that with the increasing dominance of the ‘financial sustainability paradigm’ by institutions like the World Bank, the UN and other international donors, definitions of empowerment have become diluted to mean insignificant increases in individual income and ‘self-confidence’.

## **2. Power and Empowerment**

At the core of the concept of empowerment is the idea of power. Power can be understood as operating in different ways and its conceptualisation varies from context to context. In fact, some explanation is grounded in an understanding that power will be seen and understood differently by people who inhabit various positions in power structures. Power in a traditional sense denotes a force exercised by individuals or groups. Foucault (1982) observed that “power is a set of actions that act on other possible actions – it functions in the field of the possible or inscribes itself in the behaviour of actors by inciting, inducing, seducing, facilitating or hindering, expanding or limiting”. In sum, Foucault’s model of power involves recognizing the existence of multiple power relations. “Power”, he wrote, “is considered to circulate and to be exercised rather than possessed”. Foucault maintains ‘resistance’, where individuals contest fixed identities and relations in ways which may be subtle, is seen as an inevitable companion of power. Max Weber (1922) on the other hand placed ‘power’ as the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests (cited in Presser and Sen 2000). According to Janet Townsend *et al.* (1999) in reference to power relations within a household: “Power consists primarily in being able to take a decision, which will affect

someone else, or in acting to force, confine, forbid or prevent. Whoever exercises such power subordinates and degrades, forces actions, exercises control and assumes the right to punish, seize material property, infringe symbolic rights and dominate in every respect.”

They pointed out that such understanding of power is very common and considered ‘natural’ in Latin America or Africa with a long history of colonialism, dictatorships and military government. Lukes (1974) on the other hand pointed out that “The most effective and insidious use of power is to prevail by shaping people’s perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial.”

Hence, when a control becomes internalized, it is no longer necessary to assert power overtly. Indeed, there is overwhelming evidence to show that a group of people, especially women who live in a predominantly patriarchal society, can be denied power or basic rights. Because what patriarchal institutions tolerate, expect, and reward is ‘different forms of obedience’ – such as conformity and uniformity – all inspired and maintained by fear (French 1985; cited in Rowan-Campbell 1999). For instance, when a woman is constantly subjected to violent abuse, cultural constraints or self-invalidations as a result of her surroundings, she often fails to express her own view because internalized oppression directly or indirectly influences her ability to protest. Indeed, some form of power or exercise of power is sometimes visible and sometimes invisible: that is to say, power is not always overt, and the reasons for decisions are not always easily visible. There are overwhelming debates on the notion of power; however, its discussion here would dwell mainly on its relationship to women’s empowerment.

Rowlands (1997) has noted that such definitions focus with varying degrees of subtlety on the ability of one person or group to get another person or group to do something against their will. Such power could be described as ‘zero-sum’: the more power one person has, the less the other has.

The definition of power in relation to domination and obedience as stated above, contrasts with views in generative terms, such as the power some people have of



stimulating activity in others. This form of power is not zero-sum; an increase in one person's power does not necessarily weaken that of another (Rowlands 1997, Page and Czuba 1999). The term 'empowerment' refers to 'power-to' and it is achieved by increasing one's ability to resist and challenge 'power-over'. It implies more than a forced change of power in which there is a destruction of previous structures and values. It entails an increase of consciousness. For example, the commonly held belief in micro-credit

**Table 1: Concepts of Power**

<b>Concepts of power</b>	<b>Practical Applications</b>
Power Over	Related directly or indirectly to domination and subordination, it controls people and is associated with conflict between powerful and powerless groups.
Power To	Creative or productive, increasing individual's capacity for leadership, it generates ability so that people can make decisions and solve problems on their own. It shows new possibilities and actions without domination.
Power Within	Self-esteem and confidence, self-respect and self-acceptance and acceptance of others; it generates individual critical analytical skills
Power With	Enabling women to examine and articulate their collective interests, to organize to achieve them and to link with other women's and men's organizations for change.

Sources: Rowlands (1995), Kabeer (1994), Mayoux (2005)

schemes is that providing women with access to credit is a powerful tool which stimulates activities in women and directly leads to their empowerment and subsequently promotes gender equity. Hence, growth of capital and its control not only sensitizes poor women, but augments their 'power' relation in the household and community. Consequently, the concept of power seems to come in more than one essence as this is

clearly reflected in feminist understanding. Table 1 above is a summary of feminist understanding of power:

These multiple connotations of power further unveil the complexity surrounding the concept of empowerment, and how it can be stimulated. For example, taking the concept of empowerment beyond simply control of resources, Naila Kabeer (1994) observes that empowerment as a concept with theoretical and practical potential merits being more than an empty terminology. Deconstructing the perception of power, she maintains: “The multidimensional nature of power suggests that empowerment strategies for women must build on ‘the power within’ as a necessary adjunct to improving their ability to control resources, to determine agendas and make decisions.”

She reasons that power from within needs “experiential recognition and analysis” of issues to do with women’s own subordination and how it is maintained. For instance, she notes: “For women in particular, in societies where deeply-entrenched and internalized cultural rules, norms and values not only tend to devalue their worth and well-being but also to militate against recognition by women themselves of what is often described as ‘lack of equity in the ruling arrangement’. The power of social conditioning in shaping the ‘choices’ that women make, to the extent that they may be resigned to, and indeed actively promote, the distribution of resources which discriminate against themselves and their daughters, cannot be underestimated.” (Kabeer 1996)

She further points out that such power ‘cannot be given; it has to be self-generated’. That is to be understood as the need to move beyond project participation into the realm of policymaking. Indeed, certain aspects of culture or norms enable women in some communities to negotiate and maintain some degrees of power within their families or lineages. This understanding creates possibilities to avoid making absolute claims about the outcomes of empowerment process.

Now we turn to examine the different understandings of empowerment, especially as perceived by feminist scholars.

### **3. Empowerment: Feminist Understanding**

The meaning of empowerment can be seen to relate to the user's understanding of power. In fact, the idea of empowerment is increasingly employed as a tool for understanding what is needed to transform the condition of poor (especially women) or underprivileged people (see Sen and Grown 1987). As Rowlands (1999) noted, in this context, there is broad agreement that empowerment is a process; that it involves some degree of personal development; but it is not necessarily sufficient in itself; it also involves moving from insight to action.

Indeed, many feminists, especially those who are categorically classified as Western feminists, uphold the assumption of empowerment through speech (giving voice). These feminists (especially those within the WID fold with the earlier equity approach; see Pillai, Asalatha and Ponnuswamy 2009) argue that cultivating women's voice endorses their creativity and promotes more active and collaborative improvement in their lives. Thus, they encourage poor women to engage in dialogue across differences, and to apply knowledge which is accumulated through interactions to address issues that disempowered them. Marianne Marchand, for example, in her 1995 book, draws attention to the significance of "witness accounts" as a positive way for women to express their "feelings" about development. These interpretations of empowerment are concerned with the processes by which people become aware of their own interests and how these relate to those of others, in order for both to participate from a position of greater strength in decision-making and to actually influence such decisions. In contrast, Marnia Lazreg (2002) argues that: "Encouraging voice evinces a desire for power, a will to power, the power to carve out spaces for others by convening them to talk about themselves under the fiction of polyphony and multiple authorship which are meant to aid local women to acquire voice."

Thus, building on Bourdieu's theoretical vocabulary, Lazreg (2002) argues that ideas and theories of development belong to a system of relations between individuals and groups representing 'force' that position themselves for a struggle over their relevance, legitimacy and/or practical applications. This means that whoever engages the field of development from the perspective of gender must also critically engage their own interest

as part of the force that sustains it and reproduces it. “The implication being that these women are solicited, cajoled, encouraged to speak because of a need to create discursive spaces which allow women (especially in the developing countries) to be heard”. Importantly, Lazreg questioned the abilities of some feminists to transform ‘development-as-usual’ by uncovering its simplicity using a totalising, evolutionary and patronising view of peoples of the developing countries. The ‘giving voices’ to women presumes that these women were/are mute; yet, these women have always spoken about their misery or happiness. Although these stories often attract advice, and sometimes counselling, they neither change the home front nor contribute to women’s empowerment. Indeed, Lazreg lamented the transformation of women’s lives into a discourse, and the indignities of making other women speak for ‘us’. She notes that this form of analysis cannot account for women’s poverty and struggles to survive, pointing to the limits of discourse analysis and its inability to resolve the view that female subjectivity is socially constructed (Lazreg 2002).

Further, some groups of feminists have argued that empowerment corresponds to women challenging existing power structures which subordinate them. For instance, according to an article in the *Oxfam Handbook of Relief and Development*: “Empowerment involves challenging the forms of oppression that compel millions of people to play a part in their society on terms which are inequitable, or in ways which deny their human rights.” (Eade and Williams 1995: 8).

In contrast, some feminists from the developing countries (Kabeer 1997, Lazreg 2002, Izugbara 2004) have argued against these sweeping generalizations of women’s oppression, and the need to liberate women from “Themselves”, their men, their culture and their former colonizers to be more or less ‘like Us’. The implication here is that women in the developing countries are positioned “as a symptom of the over-determined effects and resistances to multiple oppressions and exploitative processes, hence the role of the feminists as liberators” (Lazreg 2002). Furthermore, there is no doubt that when feminists in the North involve themselves in the cause of women in the South, they can be open to accusations of cultural imperialism, especially if they suggest that women in cultures other than ‘our own’ are disadvantaged or oppressed by the elements of their culture. There is a need to change or transform such culture to accommodate or protect women’s interest, but based on the fact that feminists in the North are a product of western social history their

solutions are not always appropriate in this non-western context and are thus perceived as patronizing. Claims of gender equality are historically embedded in a moral order that is constructed predominantly in terms of equality, individual rights and personal choice. However, DAWN stresses the need for economic and social change, empowerment of women, and progressive changes in public-private relations to benefit women (Sen and Grown 1987).

Empowerment according to DAWN is essentially a radical transformation of the life and livelihood of the poor and of the marginalized members of human society, especially women. Srilatha Batliwala (1995) has made a detailed analysis of women's empowerment programmes, based on her analysis of Integrated Rural Development (IRD) in India. Women's empowerment, she argues, is the process, and the outcome of the process, by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources, and challenge the ideology of patriarchy and gender-based discrimination against women in all the institutions and structures of society. Unlike Oxfam, Batliwala stresses that empowerment is a spiral, not a cycle or linear, which leads to greater and greater changes. These changes are consciousness-raising, problem identification, action for change and analysis of that action whose outcome leads to higher levels of consciousness and more effective strategies. In other words, the empowerment spiral transforms every person involved: the individual (including the change agent), the collective, and the environment although not necessarily at the same pace or depth. By this definition, therefore, empowerment cannot be a top-down or one-way process, nor merely a change of consciousness or equality, but a visible manifestation of that change which the world around is forced to acknowledge. Batliwala argues that empowerment therefore means making informed choices within an expanding framework of information, knowledge and analysis of available options. After all, choices can only be made within the menu of known or experienced possibilities (for example; being able to trade or farm without restrictions, sell or purchase directly or indirectly from primary users or sellers). Empowerment is thus a process which must enable women to discover new possibilities, new options and a growing repertoire of choices.

Likewise, Caroline Moser (1989) addresses empowerment as the control of resources; but she pays more attention to the individual's level rather than the group's level. The focus here

is on women's right to make choices and their capacity to control and be in charge of their life. Moser has also argued that empowerment is the capacity for women to increase their own self-reliance and internal strength. In addition, Moser (*ibid.*) recognizes the significance for women to determine choices in their lives and to influence the direction of change through ability to gain control over material and nonmaterial resources.

In sum, DAWN explains that it is the experiences lived by poor women throughout developing countries in their struggle to ensure the basic survival of their families and themselves that provides the clearest lens for an understanding of the diversity of empowerment and development processes. DAWN affirms that it is their aspirations and struggles for a future free of the multiple oppressions of gender, class, race and nation, which can form the basis for the new visions and strategies (Sen and Grown 1987). Accordingly, the perspective of poor women is grounded in their social location and is regarded as centred on the problems of poverty and inequality. The group (DAWN) further stresses that empowerment entails a critical reflection and conceptualization of the southern feminist perspective, thereby rejecting the monolithic viewpoint of Western feminists, while affirming heterogeneity and diverse feminisms.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, DAWN recognized the common opposition to gender oppression. Accordingly, empowerment represents the transformation of power relations throughout society, increased wellbeing, community development, self-sufficiency, expansion of individual choices and capacities for self-reliance. Overall, it goes without saying that 'voice' remains an important part among other factors of empowerment. However, it should not be made to take precedence over resources and other substantial issues pointed out by DAWN. As Parpart (2002) clearly states: "Ironically, giving people voice does not always empower the poor, especially women... The power associated with gossip and information, the ability to decide when, where and with whom it will be shared, reminds us that giving 'voice' to women (or men), especially in public, is not always empowering... Moreover seeking the 'voices' of Third world women has too often become a means for building the careers of development 'experts' rather than an empathetic attempt to bridge cultural and material divides."

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Chandra Mohanty (1989) contests an inclination to reduce the heterogeneity of developing countries women into a monolithic subject, a habit that is conceived of as a discursive colonization.

#### 4. Empowerment and Autonomy

In a famous essay first published in 1958, Isaiah Berlin divided freedom (liberty) into negative and positive (Berlin 1969). In the first case liberty seems to be a mere *absence* of something (i.e. of obstacles, barriers, constraints or interference from others), whereas in the second case it seems to require the *presence* of something (i.e. of control, self-mastery, self-determination or self-realization). The negative concept of liberty is involved in the answer to the question “What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?”, and the positive concept in the answer to the question: “What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?” (Berlin 1969).

To promote negative freedom is to promote the existence of a sphere of action within which the individual is sovereign, and within which she can pursue her own projects subject only to the constraint that she respect the spheres of others. The defenders of the negative concept of freedom compare the development of an individual to that of a plant: individuals, like plants, must be allowed to grow, in the sense of developing their own faculties to the full and according to their own inner logic. Personal growth is something that cannot be imposed from without, but must come from within the individual.

Critics, however, have objected that this ideal looks much more like a positive concept of liberty than a negative one. Positive liberty consists in exactly this growth of the individual: the free individual is one that develops, determines and changes her own desires and interests autonomously and from within. This is not liberty as the mere absence of obstacles, but liberty as autonomy or self-realization. There is no guarantee that the mere absence of state interference should ensure such growth. This in turn suggests that freedom in its totality should include both the negative and positive spheres: absence of constraints along with the presence of the conditions for self-determination. And this constitutes autonomy in our view, even though some conceptions of positive freedom are often taken as equivalent to what is often meant by autonomy.

It should be noted that some feminists dismiss autonomy as an androcentric relic of modernism (Jaggar 1983; Addelson 1994; Hekman 1995; Card 1996), while others assert women's need for self-determination (de Laetis 1986; King 1988; Lugones and Spelman 1983; Govier 1993). In the light of the history of figuring women as driven by their reproductive biology and in need of rational male guidance and the history of women's enforced economic dependence on men or relegation to poorly paid, often despised forms of labor, feminists can hardly ignore the topic of self-determination. Thus, a number of feminist philosophers take up this challenge and present accounts of autonomy that do not devalue the interpersonal capacities and social contributions that are conventionally coded feminine (Nedelsky 1989; Meyers 1989 and 2000; Benhabib 1995 and 1999; Weir 1995). In feminist accounts, autonomy is not conflated with self-sufficiency and free will, but rather it is seen to be facilitated by supportive relationships and also to be a matter of degree.

### *The theory of human needs*

Autonomy has a central role in the theory of human needs (THN) developed by Doyal and Gough (1991) to assess quality of life according to the degree to which a series of needs has been satisfied. The first universal goal, according to this theory, is to achieve full social participation, which requires satisfying two universal needs: (a) physical health, and (b) autonomy as freedom of agency, and the second universal goal is to promote critical participation by fulfilling the two previous needs and developing critical autonomy.

Autonomy as freedom of agency at the first level has the following elements:

- Level of *understanding* a person has about herself, her culture and what is expected of her as an individual within it.
- The *psychological capacity* she has to formulate options for herself.
- The objective *opportunities* enabling her to act accordingly.

And critical autonomy at the second level has the following elements:

- The capacity to compare cultural rules, to reflect upon the rules of one's own



- culture and to work with others to change them.
- The capacity to move to another culture if everything else fails (*in extremis*).

### *Self-determination theory*

Another theory of autonomy is the self-determination theory (SDT) – a theory of relative autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 1985), which considers three basic psychological needs, namely, those for autonomy, relatedness and competence. Autonomy is the universal urge to be the causal agents of one's own life and to act in harmony with one's integrated self; relatedness is the universal desire to interact, be connected to, and experience caring for others; and competence is that which seeks to control the outcome and experience mastery. When these three needs are supported and satisfied within a social context, people experience more vitality, self-motivation, and well-being. Conversely, the thwarting or frustration of these basic needs leads to diminished self-motivation and greater ill-being; in fact, need-thwarting is entailed in the aetiology of many forms of psychopathology (see Ryan et al. 2006).

SDT has been developed and researched through a set of five mini-theories, which together comprise the theory's formal framework:

1. Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) concerns *intrinsic motivation*, motivation that is based on the satisfactions of doing something for its own sake, and that applies to activities such as play, sport, and leisure. CET stresses the importance of autonomy and competence to intrinsic motion, and argues that events that are perceived to detract from these will diminish intrinsic motivation. CET specifically addresses how factors such as rewards, deadlines, feedback and pressure affect feelings of autonomy and competence and thus enhance or undermine intrinsic motivation. For instance CET explains why some reward structures, for example, financial incentives, actually detract from subsequent motivation, a phenomenon that is often called 'the undermining effect of rewards' (Deci, Koestner and Ryan, 1999).

2. Organismic Integration Theory (OIT), addresses the process of internalization of various extrinsic motives. Here the focus is on the continuum of internalization, extending from (i) external regulation, to (ii) introjection (for example, engaging in behaviors to avoid guilt or feel approval), to (iii) identification, to (iv) integration. These forms of regulation, which can be simultaneously operative, differ in their relative autonomy, with external regulation being the least autonomous form of extrinsic motivation and integrated regulation the most autonomous. SDT research show that the more autonomous the person's motivation, the greater their persistence, performance, and wellbeing at an activity or within a domain. OIT further suggests that internalization and integration is facilitated by contextual supports for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. That is, individuals are more likely to internalize and integrate a practice or value if they experience choice with respect to it, efficacy in engaging in it, and connection with those who convey it. Considerable research across the globe shows that greater internalization of cultural practices is associated with greater wellness and performance (Ryan and Deci, 2000).
3. Causality Orientations Theory (COT) describes individual differences in how people orient to different aspects of the environment in regulating behaviour. COT describes and assesses three types of causality-orientations: the autonomy-orientation in which persons act out of interest in and valuing of what is occurring; the control-orientation in which the focus is on rewards, gains, and approval; and the impersonal- or amotivated-orientation characterized by lack of personal control or competence (see Table 4.4). COT is also used to explain how primes or prior stimuli activate certain orientations in people, affecting subsequent motivation.
4. Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) elaborates on the concept of basic needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) by connecting them directly with wellbeing. Therefore, contexts that support versus thwart these needs should invariantly impact wellness. The theory argues that all three needs are essential

and that if any is thwarted there will be distinct functional costs. Research on BPNT shows that aggregate need satisfaction predicts individual differences in health and wellness, as well as within-person fluctuations in wellness across time.

5. Goal Contents Theory (GCT), grows out of the distinctions between intrinsic and extrinsic goals and their impact on motivation and wellness. Research has shown that materialism and other extrinsic goals such as fame or image do not tend to enhance need satisfaction, and thus do not foster wellbeing, even when one is successful at attaining them (Kasser and Ryan, 1996; Niemiec et al. 2009). In contrast, goals such as intimate relationships, personal growth, or contributing to one's community are conducive to need satisfaction, and therefore facilitate health and wellness. GCT has also been applied to how goals are framed. Evidence suggests that goals framed toward intrinsic aims are better adhered to than those focused on extrinsic outcomes (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

Contexts and events can influence motivation when people engage in project activities. Ellerman (2006) uses a foreground/background model to explain motivation and autonomy. Autonomy is supported, he explains, when internal motivation is in the foreground, although extrinsic motivation could be in the background. For instance, people could work in self-construction activities for the welfare of their community (in the foreground) but also be receiving a minimum payment (in the background). If the subsistence need was threatened because the tough work conditions made it impossible for people to carry out other activities, the extrinsic motivation would pass into the foreground because it would be *what* helps satisfy that need. It is then possible to introduce extrinsic motivation as long as it does not change the locus of causality.

Given these frameworks, empowerment may be taken as an ongoing process whereby one is empowered by her gradual development actions. The essence is to be able to gain ability, informed authority and agency to make decisions and implement changes at a higher level than previously allowed or thought possible. The key issues arising from this illustration are:

- (i) A substantial degree of independence or freedom especially from husband;  
and
- (ii) Adequate options to make political and socio-economic choices

Both are major characteristics of personal autonomy and a reflection of DAWN's perception of empowerment, which centres on women's 'personal autonomy'. In essence, the ideal of personal autonomy as envisaged in the empirical studies is the vision of people controlling, to some degree, their own destiny, fashioning it through successive decisions throughout their lives. This form of personal autonomy is a shift from DAWN or WID's understanding of absolute personal autonomy. This is because in the developing world, women's crucial economic contributions do not diminish men's status as household heads; as wives, women still show deference to their husband and see to most domestic needs of the family.

The above idea foregrounds the basis on which most women participate in economic activities or even in microcredit schemes. It connotes the idea of empowerment as understood by the developing world women. In part it forms the basis of the definition of empowerment in this study. Thus, perceptibly, personal autonomy does not stand aloof from DAWN's suggestion. It is embedded in the notion of 'family'. This version of empowerment places emphasis on the wellbeing of women and their families, especially children's future rather than simply individual's achievements: say, unrestricted personal mobility (which is said to enhance their economic participation) separately from their husbands especially during the early stage of their marriage; freedom to make choices; and a degree of financial security in the event of husband's death. Further, here the financial security includes the assurance that family properties and capital are not acceded to in-laws or other relatives of the husband on his death. Empowerment at this level is not embedded in individualistic motives of these women. Indeed, accomplishments are often located in the wellbeing of their children. It also suggests economic gains allow them to help and provide for their children, contribute to their lineages and maintain a strong financial independence from their husband.

In view of this, empowerment here is seen as the power (that is, ‘power within’) to control one’s life; to take decisions or make choices which influence one’s life as well as that of their family. That is, power that ensures the wellbeing of their family and protects them from the overbearing dominance of husband and to some extent society. This form of empowerment, although different from the mainstream definition, nonetheless exhibits many characteristics of virtuous spiral as described by Linda Catherine Mayoux (2006). These include increased status and changing roles for women, income under women’s control, increased wellbeing of children, women’s participation in decisions about saving and credit use, and their ability to negotiate change in gender relations.

### **5. Empowerment, Autonomy and Agency**

Another element related to the concept of empowerment is ‘human agency’, usually defined (i) as the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power, and (ii) as a person or thing through which power is exerted or an end is achieved. How can one have the ability to act with power?

According to Amartya Sen, one can attain agency through the acquisition of certain capabilities and freedoms. In *Development as Freedom*, Sen defines an agent “as someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives ... particularly the agency role of the individual as a member of the public and as a participant in economic, social, and political actions...” (Sen 1999). According to his capabilities approach to development, those who lack certain fundamental freedoms are not able to lead the lives they wish to lead. In environments in which people are faced with lack of physical well-being, economic freedom, a political voice, or disenfranchisement, a person may not be able to exercise her agency to engage in opportunities or make decisions that further fulfill her life goals. There is a strong relationship between agency and the social, economic, and political environment in which a person lives. Sen notes that our individual agency is inextricably tied to and “constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us” and that we must recognize the “force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom,” or our autonomy (Sen 1999). Without the basic freedoms, a person is not able to fully exercise his or her opportunities to live a full and

valued life. With these freedoms in place, a person can exercise her agency in determining the scope and direction of her life. Thus agency has a crucial role, given its transformative potential. Agency is “the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world” (Sen 1999). He proposes that the situation of individuals can be evaluated in respect of either their agency or well-being. In the first case, individuals are seen as doers and judges; while, in the second case, they are seen as beneficiaries whose interests and advantages must be considered (Sen 1985).

Sen (1985; 1996; 2002/2003) classifies freedom into two types: ‘process’ and ‘opportunity’ freedom. Process freedom is the control that a person has over the process of choice. The person has relevant options and takes decisions, although she might not achieve her goals. Opportunity freedom is the power that a person has to achieve her goals because either the person makes successful choices or the outcomes are caused by others. For instance, if a project provides a water system without the participation of users in any of the project stages, their opportunity freedom, but not their process freedom, increases.

For Sen, individuals can make choices considering whatever objectives they have; Sen uses another term ‘functionings’ to refer to the capabilities that a person actually uses or participates in. Capabilities, then, are the full set of functionings that are feasible for a given person. Functionings are valuable partly because they are the result of choice. Both negative and positive freedom are relevant (Sen, 1996) as reflected by his analysis of process and opportunity freedom, respectively. However, capabilities refer to freedom “in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you want to lead” (Sen 1987). Thus capabilities can have intrinsic value by adding worthwhile options or positive freedoms to one’s life (Sen 1999; Crocker 1992, 1995).

Sen focuses on “substantive freedoms” as key to relieving poverty and other challenges that people in poor countries face. Besides poverty, “tyranny, poor economic opportunities ... social deprivation” are the “major sources of unfreedom” (Sen 1999). He identifies five types of freedoms that he views as “instrumental” (Sen 1999). These include “political freedoms,” “economical facilities,” “social opportunities,” “transparency guarantees” and “protective security” (Sen 1999). These freedoms are both

an end and a means in facilitating economic development and, for our purposes, quality of life. Identifying access to freedoms and capabilities, allows us to compare the economic and societal successes across cultures.

Martha Nussbaum expands on Sen's freedoms and functionings; the guiding thought behind her approach is "one that lies at the heart of [John] Rawls' project...the idea of the citizen as a free and dignified human being." (Nussbaum 1999). She affirms a "liberal" view that is compatible with the feminist affirmation of the value of women as persons. "At the heart of this tradition [of liberal political thought] is a twofold intuition about human beings: namely, that all, just by being human, are of equal dignity and worth, no matter where they are situated in society, and that the primary source of this worth is a power of moral choice within them, a power that consists in the ability to plan a life in accordance with one's own evaluation of ends." (Nussbaum 1999). She develops ten capabilities that allow people to achieve their fullest potential. These include:

1. *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length .....; not dying prematurely ....

2. *Bodily health*. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; being adequately nourished .....; being able to have adequate shelter ....

3. *Bodily integrity*. Being able to move freely from place to place; being able to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault .....; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction

4. *Senses, imagination, thought*. Being able to use the senses; being able to imagine, to think, and to reason – and to do these things in .... a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education .....; being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing, and producing expressive works and events of one's own choice .....; being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech and freedom of religious exercise; being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain

5. *Emotions*. Being able to have attachments to things and persons outside ourselves; being able to love those who love and care for us; being able to grieve at their absence, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger; not having one's emotional developing blighted by fear or anxiety .....

6. *Practical reason*. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life. (This entails protection for liberty of conscience.)

7. *Affiliation*. Being able to live for and in relation to others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; being able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; having the capability for both justice and friendship. .... Being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others.

8. *Other species*. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.

9. *Play*. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.

10. *Control over one's environment*. (A) *Political*: being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the rights of political participation, free speech and freedom of association .... (B) *Material*: being able to hold property (both land and movable goods); having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others .

Nussbaum classifies capabilities into three types: "basic capabilities," "internal capabilities," and "combined capabilities".

Basic capabilities are the innate equipment of individuals that is the necessary basis for developing more advanced capabilities. She points out that most infants have the basic capabilities for practical reason and imagination, though without a good deal more development and education they cannot use it. Healthy children have basic capabilities in



all the ten areas in the above list.

Internal capabilities are states of persons that are sufficient conditions for the exercise of the corresponding function (given suitable complement of external conditions). Internal capabilities build on pre-existing basic capabilities by processes such as exercise, education, and training. Most adults have the internal capabilities of use of speech, capabilities that would not exist without the informal education that occurs along with socialization. Many internal capabilities require a more structured educational environment.

Combined capabilities are defined as internal capabilities plus the external conditions that make the exercise of a function a live option. The aim of public policy is the promotion of combined capabilities; this requires two kinds of efforts (1) the promotion of internal capabilities (say, by education or training) and (2) the making available of the external institutional and material conditions.

The list of capabilities is made up of combined capabilities and the items on this list are necessary as “a basic social minimum” for “what [people] are able to do or be” (Nussbaum 2000). These capabilities are so fundamentally universal to living a fully human life that Nussbaum believes they should be inculcated into the constitutions of every democracy in the world. While Sen and Nussbaum agree on the use of freedoms or capabilities for cross-cultural comparison, Nussbaum’s primary concern is with the universal application of capabilities and the foundational ability to support democracy and human dignity in societies (Nussbaum 2000; Sen 1999).

An essential feature of the Sennian concept of freedom in the feminist perspective is the idea that a fundamental shift in perceptions, or ‘inner transformation’, is essential to the formulation of choices. That is, women should be able to define self-interest and choice, and consider themselves as not only able, but entitled to make choices (Amartya Sen 1999; Gita Sen 1993, Kabeer 2001; Rowlands 1995; Nussbaum 2000; Chen 1992). Kabeer (2001) goes a step further and describes this process in terms of “thinking outside the system” and challenging the status quo. She offers a useful definition of empowerment that effectively captures what is common to these definitions and that can

be applied across the range of contexts that development assistance is concerned with: “The expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (Kabeer 2001).

We employ this definition as a reference point in this study. Although brief, this definition is specific enough to distinguish it from the general concept of ‘power’, as exercised by dominant individuals or groups. Kabeer’s definition is especially attractive because it contains two elements which help distinguish empowerment from other closely related concepts: (i) the idea of process, or change from a condition of disempowerment, and (ii) the idea of human agency and choice, which she qualifies by denoting empowerment to imply “choices made from the vantage point of real alternatives” without “punishingly high costs” (Kabeer 2001).

### *The Process of Empowerment*

There are various attempts in the literature to develop a comprehensive understanding of empowerment through breaking the process down into key components. Thus Kabeer’s (2001) understanding of ‘choice’ comprises three inter-related components: “resources, which form the conditions under which choices are made; agency, which is at the heart of the process through which choices are made, and achievements, which are the outcomes of choices.” The World Bank’s report on “Engendering Development,” (2001a) defines rights, resources, and voice as the three critical components of gender equality. Chen (1992) describes “resources, perceptions, relationships, and power” as the main components of empowerment, and Batliwala (1994) characterizes empowerment as “control over resources and ideology.” UNICEF uses the Women’s Empowerment Framework constructed by Sara Longwe, which encompasses welfare, access to resources, awareness-raising, participation, and control (UNICEF 1994).

Resources and agency (in various forms and by various names, for example, control, awareness, voice, power), were the two most common components of empowerment emphasized in the literature. In many discussions, however, resources are treated not as empowerment per se, but as catalysts for empowerment or conditions under which empowerment is likely to occur. In the context of policy and evaluation, it may be more

useful to think of resources as ‘enabling factors’; that is, as potentially critical inputs to foster an empowerment process, rather than as part of empowerment itself. And, in fact, many of the variables that have traditionally been used as ‘proxies’ for empowerment, such as education and employment, might be better described as ‘enabling factors’ or ‘sources’ of empowerment (Kishor 2000a). Although many empirical studies have used variables such as education and employment as proxies for empowerment, there is a growing understanding that this equation is problematic (Govindasamy and Malhotra 1996; Malhotra and Mather 1997; Kishor 1995; Mason 1998).

The second component, agency, is at the heart of many conceptualizations of empowerment. Human agency is a central concept in Amartya Sen’s (1999) characterization of development as the process of removing various types of ‘unfreedoms’ that constrain individual choice and agency. Kabeer (2001) draws on Sen’s understanding of agency as well as his conceptualization of the links between individual agency with public action. Among the various concepts and terms we encountered in the literature on empowerment, ‘agency’ probably comes closest to capturing what the majority of writers are referring to. It encompasses the ability to formulate strategic choices, and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes.

Some characterizations of empowerment have included an additional component, which Kabeer refers to as ‘achievements’ and Longwe as ‘welfare’. And, in international policy processes, women’s empowerment is implicitly equated with specific (usually national level) achievements such as political participation, legal reform, and economic security. In the context of evaluation, we would argue that achievements are best treated as outcomes of empowerment, not as empowerment *per se* (just as resources may be more usefully construed as enabling factors or catalysts for empowerment).

Identifying agency as the essence of women’s empowerment does not suggest that all improvements in women’s position must be brought about through the actions of women themselves or that empowering themselves is the responsibility of individual women. There is ample justification for governments and multilaterals to promote policies that strengthen gender equality through various means, including legal and political reform, and interventions to give women (and other socially excluded groups) greater access to

resources (for example, World Bank 2001a). National and international institutions have the responsibility for ensuring the inclusion of disadvantaged populations socially, economically, and politically. The major reason for the emphasis on agency as the defining criterion is because of the many examples in the literature of cases in which giving women's access to resources does not lead to their greater control over resources, where changes in legal statutes have little influence on practice, and where female political leaders do not necessarily work to promote women's interests. Thus while resources – economic, social and political – are often critical in ensuring that women are empowered, they are not always sufficient. Without women's individual or collective ability to recognize and utilize resources in their own interests, resources cannot bring about empowerment.

Having argued that 'agency' should be treated as the essence of empowerment, and resources and achievements as enabling conditions and outcomes, respectively, another caveat is necessary. While distinctions such as those between "resources, agency and achievements" (Kabeer 2001) or "sources versus evidence" of empowerment seem clear at the conceptual level, it is not always easy to completely separate them in developing empowerment indicators. And too, a given variable may function as an indicator of women's access to resources (or an enabling factor) in one context, of women's agency in another, and may represent an achievement in still other contexts. For example, microcredit programs and employment opportunities are often seen as resources for women's empowerment. But if a woman seeks to gain access to microcredit, or to get a job, then getting the job or joining the credit program might be best characterized as a manifestation of women's agency, and the benefits she draws as a result – income, discretionary spending, healthcare, etc. – as achievements. In some contexts, women's economic contribution is treated as an enabling factor and used to predict other outcomes such as control over important decisions and even the outcomes of decisions such as family size or contraceptive use. But in other contexts women's economic contribution would be more accurately described as a form of agency or, again even an achievement. Similarly, assets owned could function as sources of empowerment (for example, Kishor 2000a) but they could also constitute evidence that empowerment had been achieved. The meaning of any empowerment indicator will always depend on its inter-relationships with other variables.

Empowerment is a dynamic process. Separating the process into components (such as enabling factors, agency and outcomes) may be useful in identifying policy interventions to support empowerment, and for evaluating the impact of such interventions, but it is important to realize that a framework for research or evaluation of a specific policy or intervention will refer to only one phase of the process. Which phase it refers to depends on the context, the interventions being assessed, and the outcomes of interest.

## **6. Conclusion**

We have seen that empowerment is generally conceived as a multidimensional process, which operates at different and interlinked levels and is based on an analysis of power relations. Power therefore is often related to our ability to make others do what we want, regardless of their own wishes or interests (see Weber, 1922). Usually as illustrated above, many social scientists associate power with influence, domination and control, and often treat power as a commodity or structure divorced from human action. Envisaged in this way, power can be viewed as unchanging or unchangeable. Nonetheless, power exists within the context of a relationship between people, families and communities. Besides, empowerment is a social process, since it occurs in relationship to others. By implication, since power is created in relationships, power and power relationships can change. Therefore, the concept of empowerment also depends upon power that can expand, change or identify in a different medium. Thus, understanding power as zero-sum, as something that you get at somebody else's expense, reduces the complexity of power and empowerment for that matter. Empowerment as a process of change, then, becomes a meaningful concept. There is no doubt that empowerment has a broader meaning and can be perceived differently. An empowered woman is one who has control of the decision-making, which impacts on the day-to-day wellbeing of her family. This concept of empowerment is entirely different from individualistic personal autonomy as presented by the DAWN in the 1980s. We have further pointed out that these power relations function in different spheres of life (for instance in economic, social, and political spheres) and at different levels such as individual, household, community, and institutional.

Though the feminist theoretical analyses indicate that empowerment is a useful concept

because it emphasizes the idea of women as active agents rather than passive recipients of development strategies, it is conceptually complex and methodologically challenging to measure and analyze, especially in the context of assessing the effectiveness of particular interventions. Although empowerment through income-generating activities has attracted various critiques, it cannot be discounted that in some cases microcredit stimulates or sustains an enterprise's growth. However, often women accessing microcredit schemes show little awareness and readiness to challenge gender inequality, patriarchy, and lack of control over their personal and community resources. As Izugbara (2004) points out, the empowerment that the scheme promotes rarely goes beyond marginal improvement in small areas of women's life, with its limited resources and within the conditions permitted by local patriarchal structures and institutions. The inherently complex and potentially conflict-ridden nature of empowerment itself means that any intervention, whether a microcredit scheme or other measures, will inevitably make only a limited contribution in isolation.

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