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Upfront

Introduction: Women's Empowerment: Contentions and contestations

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ABSTRACT *Andrea Cornwall and Nana Akua Anyidoho critically examine empowerment in an introduction to how to go beyond mainstream interpretations of empowerment to discover what is happening in women's lives that is bringing about positive change.*

KEYWORDS *development; gender equality; bodies; desire; culture; feminist*

Introduction

In the past few years 'women's empowerment' has gained growing visibility as a development issue. Its advocates have, arguably, been more successful than ever before in mobilizing development's main players to pay attention and to commit resources to women. 'Empowering women and girls' has not only soared to the top of the development agenda, it has also caught the imagination of the philanthropic wing of big business, and is energetically promoted by myriad organizations running the gamut of affiliations and ideologies. Everyone, it seems, can find something in the term that resonates with the world as they would like to make it. And yet, many feminists and gender equality activists, including a number of contributors to this collection, express a profound sense of unease about this term, and the way it is put to use by some those who are most enthusiastic in its promotion.

This Special Issue of *Development* picks up some of the contentions and contestations that have accompanied the uptake of 'women's empowerment' by the development industry. Contributors reflect on their own personal and political engagement with the term and what it has come to represent, on the ways development institutions have taken up and used it, and its place in relation to wider development trends and goals. It is a collaborative initiative of *Development* and *Pathways of Women's Empowerment*, a five-year research and communications initiative funded by Department for International Development (DFID) and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Pathways* is a network of academics, practitioners and activists based in Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, West Africa, the UK and the US. Thematic programmes on body, voice and work convene cross-regional research and communications work that seeks to understand better the pathways to greater justice and equality for all. *Pathways*' starting point is that empowerment is a journey not a destination, and that better understanding of women's individual and collective journeys can help inform activism and policy

(www.pathwaysofempowerment.org; Cornwall, 2007). Our work critically assesses policy interventions and institutional mechanisms aimed at enhancing women's empowerment, and looks beyond the well-trodden development paths to discover what is happening in women's lives that is bringing about positive change.

In this overview we highlight some of the themes suggested by contributors to this lively and diverse collection, and invite further dialogue.

The rise and rise of 'women's empowerment'

The promotion of 'women's empowerment' by mainstream development institutions reflects the resurgence of the Women in Development approach that characterized liberal feminist attempts to get the development industry to take more notice of women. Promises of 'lifting' families and communities out of poverty harness a highly essentialist narrative, representing women as hard working, peaceful, caring, altruistic and inherently virtous. Packaging these and other gender myths as policy imperatives, mainstream development's accounts of the merits of investing in and 'empowering' women and girls present a win-win solution. Its softened edges make 'women's empowerment' eminently more palatable to a broad-based development constituency than the harder talk of 'gender equality'. Conservatives welcome the emphasis on women as the custodians of the family, enriching communities and their societies through their own efforts. The new philanthropists like the focus on women entrepreneurs, and the marketing potential of the educated girl child as the hope for the future. And there is certainly a share of feminists and gender equality advocates who applaud the fact that at least development agencies are now directing more attention (and resources) to women.

But others are troubled by the apparent ease with which an idea that originated in the radical proposition of mobilizing women to transform structural inequities (Batliwala, 2007) has become so saccharine. We might ask: what is it about 'women's empowerment' – a term, after all, that has 'power' at its core – that has made it so palatable? One answer, offered by a senior DFID bureaucrat, is that what we're actually dealing with in all the hyperbole about women's empowerment is 'em-ment' – 'empowerment with the power taken out'. What's left is a simulacrum, a copy of a copy that has elements of the 'real thing' but none of its bite (Batliwala, 2007): 'empowerment lite' (Cornwall, 2007). This is why, at the same time, the term is linked to a profound sense of disappointment for feminists who bemoan dilution of a gender agenda that began with demands for radical and collective transformation of economic, political and societal relations, and has ended up with the idea that, as Hania Sholkamy's sub-title puts it, 'raising chicks can change patriarchy'.

For many feminists, 'women's empowerment' represents a sorry – but not unfamiliar – tale of how a once-radical concept was stolen by the high priests of neo-liberalism only to be foisted onto women in the global south as their putative salvation. Like a pernicious disease, it is associated with having come from somewhere else, its origins most often attributed by its critics to the international financial institution famed for its linguistic kleptomania. In contrast to indigenous notions of empowerment that promised transformation through mobilization and collective action, this alien 'empowerment' is individualist, instrumental, neo-liberal. It peddles in gender myths that sustain an image of the 'good woman' as the deserving object of development assistance.

Does the depoliticized and instrumental version of empowerment that has become currency in the development mainstream also reflect a willing compromise of principles for pragmatic gains? We are struck by the extent to which feminist and gender equality activists have bought into the mainstream women's empowerment narrative, seeing it as a Trojan Horse for other more transformative projects or as a way of redistributing at least some of development's resources to women. They may see convenience in adopting some of the language and ideas associated with it for reasons of legitimacy, using it as a way of framing work in which they are already involved. It is worth remembering that the discourse of women's empowerment has brought a new acceptability, an urgency even, to issues that were once barely

countenanced as 'development' issues: violence against women, inequity in women's access to land, credit and other resources, and low levels of women's representation in formal political institutions. And yet, development's response to the women's empowerment agenda is a source of intense frustration and anger, as reflected in many of the contributions to this collection.

The range and strength of reaction to 'women's empowerment' is in stark contrast to the ennui that has come to accompany 'gender equality' (Molyneux, 2004). How did 'gender equality' become so unbearably dull that no one cares to talk about it much these days? What has happened to the concern with transforming inequitable power relations that was part of the original Gender and Development agenda, and so central to the original feminist vision of 'women's empowerment'? What does this signify for feminism's 'broader emancipatory project' (Fraser, 2009)? And what role can 'women's empowerment' play in *that*?

Situating empowerment

To talk of 'women's empowerment' in the abstract begs many questions: How does the word 'empowerment' translate across languages, contexts and cultures? What does it mean in the lives of diverse women whose experiences of power, of oppression, of liberty, of pleasure, and of the injuries of discrimination and structural violence may be so very different? And what does it come to mean in contexts with distinctively different histories and configurations of state–society relations, of expressions of citizenship, of social mobilization and political engagement, of the rise and wane of religious and ethnic identifications, and of gendered identities and relations. Talk of 'empowering women and girls' raises more questions still – which women and girls? With what kind of empowerment and who is doing the 'empowering'?

A wealth of insight into precisely these questions emerges from the contributions to this collection. Development's slogans, mantras and magic bullets are insistently acontextual and ahistorical: lacking a place or a time, they gain a spurious universality. Our contributors bring space, history, politics and location back into the picture. They challenge representations of women as abject victims or as heroic figures – a mainstay of gender and development as well as mainstream development discourse. Viviene Taylor points us to the 'adaptive character of patriarchy and new and changing forms of oppression' evident across the world. As Patricia McFadden comments, the subject of development discourses of women's empowerment is invariably 'women of colour who are economically excluded and politically marginalized'. This not only occludes the racial and class dimensions of disempowerment, but it also implicitly creates a particular kind of object for development's interventions: those who are 'poor, powerless and pregnant' (Win, 2004), and who live in particular parts of the globe. As Rosalind Petchesky contends, asking 'which women are we talking about when we talk about power' is also a reminder of the kind of women who disappear from the frame – the iconic image of the 'empowered woman' is a smiling black or brown member of a self-help group for rural women with low incomes, rather than a wealthy white businesswoman helping herself to whatever pleasures she fancies.

Marina Blagojevic's account of how empowerment as a utopian ideal of self-reliance gave way in Serbia to the reality of growing dependence on donors in the new 'semi-periphery' echoes a theme emerging from numerous other locations. Sohela Nazneen, Maheen Sultan and Naomi Hossain's study of discourses of empowerment in Bangladesh identifies a 'truncated vision of women's empowerment' and 'residual instrumentalism' in the approach of aid agencies, whose shared language of women's empowerment is at odds with the concerns of national organizations – women's organizations, NGOs and political parties – with rights, dignity and liberation. The myopia of international development institutions is seen again in Hussainatu Abdullah and Aisha Fofana-Ibrahim's analysis of contradictions in the UN's discourses on women and empowerment in post-conflict Sierra Leone. And it is invoked once again in Rosalind Eyben's ethnographic account of a high-level donor meeting, which draws attention to how the conduct of such 'global' gatherings precludes certain kinds of meaning-making.

The anaemic forms of 'empowerment' that are promoted by international development agencies and their national government partners do not acknowledge global inequities. This raises the question of how women can be empowered within disempowering structures and systems. A number of contributors highlight alternative currents and pre-existing practices that are concerned precisely with these broader structural issues. Cecilia Sardenberg's account of discourses of empowerment in Brazil juxtaposes the notion of 'empowerment' linked to external institutions like the World Bank with notions of autonomy and solidarity that resonate with grassroots social movements' struggles for rights and recognition. Writing from the Palestinian Occupied Territories, Eileen Kuttab finds in the practice of resistance and community organizing a vision of empowerment that brings power back into the picture. Kuttab draws on the philosopher Judith Butler to help us to imagine the possibilities of empowerment under occupation, bringing the notion of resistance back into the heart of how 'empowerment' is conceived.

Shaping discourses of empowerment

The interplay between the versions of women's empowerment that emerge in the framings of global statements, events and policy prescriptions, and the situated practice of development actors – and indeed women themselves as they negotiate empowerment in their everyday lives (Cornwall and Edwards, 2010) – emerges as in itself an important site for closer attention.

Critiques of mainstream development's appropriation of 'women's empowerment' assume that the development industry – imagined as singular – is able to simply impose its own systems of meaning and practice on aid recipient countries. Yet it is not a one-way street. As Anyidoho and Manuh, writing on Ghana, point out, Ghanaians have been active contributors to 'global' gender and development debates, and to the shaping of 'global' development discourses, just as 'local' organizations have absorbed, appropriated and refracted these discourses. Millie Thayer's fascinating study of the travel of feminist concepts and ideas between Brazil and the US draws attention to the complexity of these kinds of interactions, which she describes as a 'variegated web of transnational relations' (2000: 203). These transnational interactions complicate simplistic labelling of discursive positions as 'global' and 'local'. Tactical appropriation may characterize the adoption of 'empowerment' by organizations that fill the term with their own meanings, and use it as a means of pursuing their own projects. This is indeed what the *Pathways* programme has done, making as much use as possible of the discursive elasticity of the term; each regional hub has set their own agenda, using their interpretations of the term to create a diverse and plural research agenda.

Eyben's article also reminds us that the notion of a unilateral imposition of fixed ideas would suggest that the aid establishment is much more coherent and cohesive than it actually is. The 'local' in the 'global' is therefore not only the way global discourses play out in the Global South, but also the local cultural forms that powerful actors from the Global North bring to the process of discourse-making. Donors from contexts with traditions of solidarity and social democracy, as Gita Sen reminds us, go about the business of aid in quite different ways from those from contexts where the emphasis in on individual entrepreneurialism. It is hardly surprising, looking at the current configurations of influence and power within the development industry, that the narrative of women's empowerment that has become so dominant in recent years focuses so heavily on the individual female entrepreneur and fails to address broader structural issues. Rosalind Eyben (personal communication) has pointed out, for example, how the neglect of the care economy in the US is strongly mirrored in the World Bank's approach to gender equality and women's economic empowerment, which then influences how other donors think – even when this is contrary to what their own governments are thinking and doing in domestic policy.

As interesting as the noise that is being made about certain aspects of women's empowerment are the absences, the silences and the gaps. A number of contributors highlight the narrowness of the economic and political empowerment

agendas. Much is left out. When it comes to the body, we hear barely a whisper. Women's bodies, desires and pleasures are left almost completely unaddressed by mainstream women's empowerment policies and programmes. Jerker Edström and Susie Jolly highlight some of the consequences of a failure to recognize women's sexuality and sexual agency. As they and other contributors make clear, we need to go beyond images of victims in need of saving, and beyond the heteronormative figure of the hard-working, compliant wife as the handmaiden of development's good intentions. We also, as Raewyn Connell reminds us, need to recognize that not all men benefit from the 'patriarchal dividend' and that there are alliances to be built that go beyond the normative restrictions of essentialist identity politics.

Many contributors call for the need to get away from the zero-sum thinking that pervades mainstream women's empowerment rhetoric. Several highlight the need for far more concerted efforts to challenge the normative reinforcement of the gender binary that is an implicit, and sometimes explicit, part of contemporary gender and development and women's empowerment discourse. As part of that, we need to challenge the idea, as Chloe Schwenke puts it, that women *qua* women do have a 'unique perspective', and to insistently bring race, class and other dimensions of difference back into the conversation. It is almost as if all the debates about the category 'woman' and gender that happened in the 1980s and 1990s were left far behind in the rush to find the magic bullets that could revive the gender agenda. The naïve essentialism that pervades the current gender and development discourse is crying out for the kind of honest discussion and reflexive critique that Wendy Harcourt's account of the debate at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) captures so powerfully.

Re-empowering 'empowerment'

What, then, is to be done with this term that is causing feminists so much trouble? Development's dustbin is full of words that have been discarded, or which have disappeared, as times have moved on. What would we lose if we were to dump 'empowerment'? Some would say ditch it and go back to 'gender'. Others would say side-step it and talk instead about accountability, about power, about rights, about solidarity and about pleasure – using these as frameworks for the kinds of demands that Lydia Alpizar Duran, Susie Jolly, Gita Sen and others lay out so eloquently. Others still argue for a re-articulation of the links between empowerment, marginalization and resistance. For Alan Greig, this is about a politics of engagement that demands accountability from the powerful. For Tessa Lewin, it is about challenging representations of women in development, harnessing the activist potential of new communication technologies. And for Eileen Kuttab and Cecilia Sardenberg, it is about recognizing the power in resistance, and rearticulating an approach to empowerment that is about autonomy and liberation.

Amidst the despair about what's become of development's appropriation of empowerment, there remains a strong sense of its more radical possibilities. In the interviews, commentaries and reflections in this collection, the feminist and radical roots of empowerment are asserted time and again. Contributors, and many of those with whom they interacted, reaffirm the connection between individual consciousness and mobilization for collective transformation that has always been an insistent part of feminist narratives of social change. Putting 'power' back into empowerment, as Batliwala (2007) has argued, calls for a re-articulation of these elements. We need to question the associations of empowerment with something good, something progressive, something beneficial. Asking 'empowerment of whom, by whom, and for what?' takes us beyond what Ros Petchesky calls 'uterine politics'. Asking 'what kind of power?' as Jacqueline Pitanguy and Khawar Mumtaz urge, takes us beyond the limiting essentialisms about women's vulnerability and male power that offer us so little scope for making sense of intersecting axes of oppression, nor potentials for alliances.

To re-appropriate the notion of 'empowerment' for emancipatory politics, we need to restore the complexity and the explanatory power of the concepts of power, agency, class and gender. We need

to breathe new life into them, animating them with the rich conceptual and political debates that have gone in on the social sciences during a time when development thinking seems to have stood still. And we need to re-articulate – if not 're-empower', as Cecilia Sardenberg urges – a feminist vision of empowerment that is not so easily reduced to obedient women cheerfully shouldering ever more of development's burdens. To do that, we need to go beyond the idea that empowerment of women can be in any way sufficient to change the inequitable world we live in, and move the debate back to a broader concern with justice.

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