

*Journal of International Development*

*J. Int. Dev.* **28**, 342–359 (2016)

Published online 28 March 2016 in Wiley Online Library

(wileyonlinelibrary.com) DOI: 10.1002/jid.3210

# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: WHAT WORKS?

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**Abstract:** With radical roots in the 1980s, women's empowerment is now a mainstream development concern. Much of the narrative focuses on instrumental gains—what women can do for development rather than what development can do for women. Empowerment is treated as a destination reached through development's equivalent of motorways: programmes rolled out over any terrain. But in the process, pathways women are travelling in their own individual or collective journeys of empowerment remain hidden. Revisiting foundational feminist work on empowerment, this article draws on findings from multi-country research programme, Pathways of Women's Empowerment, to explore what works to support these journeys. © 2016 UNU-WIDER. *Journal of International Development* published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

**Keywords:** gender; women's empowerment; power

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Empowerment has become one of the most elastic of international development's many buzzwords (Batiwala, 2007; Cornwall & Eade, 2011). Once used to describe grassroots struggles to confront and transform unjust and unequal power relations, it has become a term used by an expansive discourse coalition of corporations, global non-governmental organizations, banks, philanthropists and development donors. In the process, many insights from feminist conceptual work carried out in the 1980s and 1990s have been lost. In this article, I revisit foundational feminist thinking about empowerment before moving to consider the principal findings from a multi-country, multi-disciplinary and multi-perspectival programme of research on women's empowerment that brought together more than 60 researchers from a diversity of countries, including Afghanistan, Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Costa Rica, Egypt, Ghana, India, Nigeria, Palestine, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sudan and the UK.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For further information and an archive of publications, films and other outputs from the programme, see <http://www.pathways-of-empowerment.org>

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Funded with generous support from the British, Norwegian and Swedish governments, the Pathways of Women's Empowerment programme (Pathways) set out to explore the contours of women's empowerment in settings, in which very different cultural, economic and political constraints on women's autonomy and agency manifest in persistent gender inequalities.

Pathways sought to understand under what conditions the 'motorways' of mainstream development policies for women and girls might work in favour of greater justice and equality and the broader democratization of power relations in society. Through an interdisciplinary approach that brought into dialogue the social sciences, arts and humanities, researchers associated with Pathways explored women's lived experiences of empowerment and the effects and effectiveness of interventions that sought to enhance women's rights, power and agency. We sought out the 'hidden pathways' that women travel in their journeys of empowerment, with the aim of making the lessons they offer more visible. We wanted to find out about women's experiences as travellers, individually and together, and to learn what supported them as they made these journeys. We were interested in the short cuts that might be taken by those who know the way. And we wanted to understand better the hidden pathways that women may be taking that are completely out of sight from those who travel on the tarmac. We recognized that understanding empowerment was far more complex than reducing dimensions of women's experience to a set of measurable indicators: in our methods, we sought to generate both the kind of data that could allow us to gain an understanding of larger-scale patterns in women's experiences of change and the finely-grained qualitative studies that would permit insight into why and how change happens.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I identify some of the key insights that emerged from this body of work and reflect on implications for policy and practice.

## 2 WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN DEVELOPMENT

The concept of empowerment has a long history in social change work. Feminist consciousness-raising and collective action informed early applications in international development in the 1970s. Women's empowerment came to be articulated in the 1980s and 1990s as a radical approach concerned with transforming power relations in favour of women's rights and greater equality between women and men (Batliwala, 1993, 2007). In these writings, empowerment was cast as an unfolding process of changes in consciousness and collective power. There was an insistence that empowerment was not something that could be bestowed by others, but about recognizing inequalities in power, asserting the right to have rights and acting to press for and bring about structural change in favour of greater equality (Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997; Sen, 1997).

By 1994, Srilatha Batliwala argued that the growing talk of women's empowerment was in danger of losing the concept's transformative edge. She called for a more precise understanding of both power and empowerment. Defining power 'as control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology' (1994: 129), she cast empowerment as 'the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power' (1994: 130). Far from being limited to purely local, 'grassroots', participation, Batliwala pressed for the potential for what she called an 'empowerment

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<sup>2</sup>For methodological reflections on the research carried out in the Pathways programme, see the special issue of *International Women's Studies Forum* edited by Sohela Nazneen and Maheen Sultan.

spiral' to mobilize larger-scale transformative political action. The centrality of power and control to this conception of empowerment is complemented by a primary focus not on individual self-assertion, but on the structural basis of gender inequalities. With it came a focus on collective action—'power with'—and the development of 'power within' and 'power to' (cf. Rowlands, 1997). Empowerment becomes within this perspective an unfolding, iterative process that is fundamentally about shifts in power relations.

Writings from this era emphasize the relational nature of empowerment. They highlight the complex reciprocal relationship between women's 'self-understanding' (Kabeer, 1994) and 'capacity for self-expression' (Sen, 1997), and women's access to and control over material resources. Gita Sen draws on Batliwala to argue:

Empowerment is, first and foremost, about power; changing power relations in favour of those who previously exercised little power over their own lives. Batliwala (1993) defines power as having two central aspects—control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, financial, and the self), and control over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). If power means control, then empowerment therefore is the process of gaining control. (1997: 2)

Feminist conceptual work from this period makes it clear that empowerment is not something that can be done *to* or *for* anyone else. Jo Rowlands, for example, argues that a feminist understanding of power is deeply concerned with 'the dynamics of oppression and internalized oppression' (1996: 87) and that empowerment, '... must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy ... decision-making space... so that the people affected come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and have influence' (1996: 87). As described in Batliwala (1993) and Kabeer's (1994) accounts of grassroots conscientization and mobilization in India and Bangladesh, such processes engage people in making sense of their worlds, their relationships, their assumptions and beliefs, practices and values with potentially transformational effects.

Looking back, the writings on empowerment from the 1990s offer us three important insights. These complicate the narratives about women's empowerment in contemporary mainstream development. First, these writings suggest a version of empowerment that is fundamentally about changing power relations. What they give us—building on work in other areas of social action from popular education to primary health care—is an account of power and empowerment in which change involves building critical consciousness. It is this process of changing the way people see and experience their worlds that can raise awareness of inequalities, stimulate indignation about injustice and generate the impetus to act together to change society. There are important lessons here for contemporary development policy and practice about methodology and process, as well as about understandings of power. Second, they offer a view in which empowerment is relational. Current metrics and rubrics strip away its relational dimensions. Yet any account of the lived experience of empowerment and disempowerment must embrace the essential sociality of the concept. There is in this an intimate imbrication of the personal and political. Third, these writings insist that empowerment is a process, not a fixed state nor an end-point, let alone an easily measurable outcome to which targets can be attached. Empowerment can be temporary, and some pathways of empowerment can lead women into experiences of disempowerment, from which they may or may not surface empowered. What empowers one woman might not empower another: there are no one-size-fits-all recipes for empowerment. And empowering experiences

in one area of a woman's life do not automatically translate into greater capacity to exercise agency and transform power relations in another part of her life.

The process of empowerment can usefully be captured in the metaphor of a journey travelled along pathways, one on which women can travel alone or in the company of others, through terrain that may be pitted with thorny thickets, fast-flowing rivers, mud and marshes, and along paths that can double-back on themselves, meander on winding side-routes and lead to dead-ends, as well as opening up new vistas, expanding horizons and extending possibilities. With this conception of empowerment comes a perspective on the contribution that external actors can make: clearing obstacles from commonly travelled paths; supporting stopping places for women to gather to reflect on their journeys and gain tips, route-maps, courage and the company of others; and providing sign-posts, stiles, bridges and sustenance for those making these journeys. This encourages an approach that looks at different dimensions and sites of empowerment in a more holistic way, one that aims to understand the relational dynamics of power and positive change at a variety of levels, in different spaces and over time.

Setting the discourses and definitions of women's empowerment that are used by today's mainstream development institutions in the context of this earlier generation of thinking about empowerment reveals some of the limits of current approaches. The World Bank, for example, has taken up Naila Kabeer's (1999) influential work on women's empowerment. But in the process, her emphasis on the relational nature of empowerment has fallen out of the frame. What we find, instead, is an emphasis on 'assets' and on 'opportunity structures' (Alsop, Heinsohn, & Somma, 2005):

Empowerment is the process of enhancing 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 individual and collective assets and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets.<sup>3</sup>

If we take account of these insights, it becomes evident that providing women with loans, business opportunities and the means to generate income may enable them to better manage their poverty, but to be *transformative*, to address the root causes of poverty and the deep structural basis of gender inequality, calls for more than facilitating women's access to assets or creating enabling institutions, laws and policies. Two vital levers are needed. The first is processes that produce *shifts in consciousness*. This includes overturning limiting normative beliefs and expectations that keep women locked into situations of subordination and dependency, challenging restrictive cultural and social norms and contesting the institutions of everyday life that sustain inequity. Batliwala emphasizes the following:

One unique feature of this approach is the stress placed on changing women's self-image: ... unless women are liberated from their existing perception of themselves as weak, inferior and limited beings, no amount of external interventions ... will enable them to challenge existing power equations in society, the community or the family. (1993: 31)

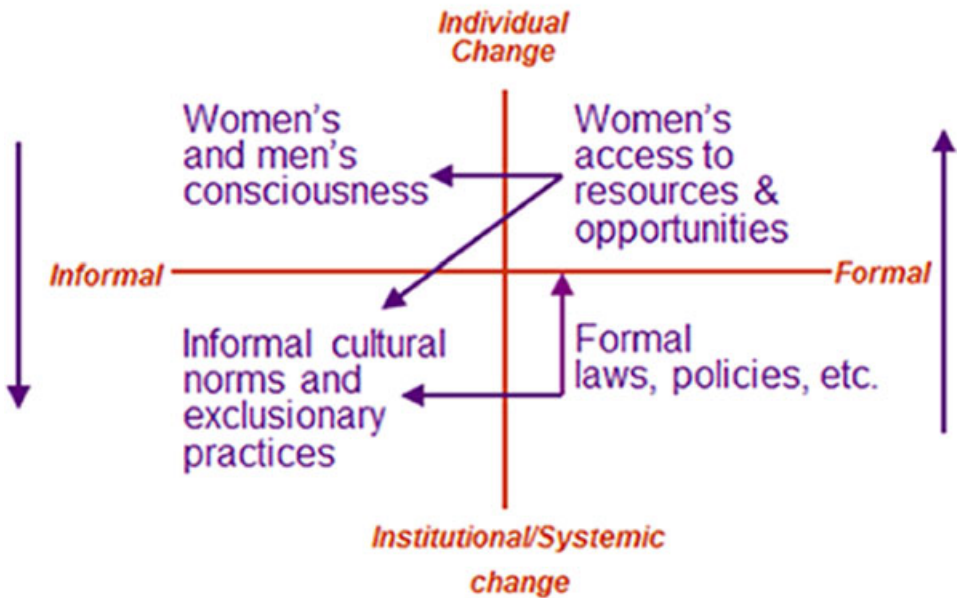
The second is engagement with culturally embedded normative beliefs, understandings and ideas about gender, power and change. This takes the process of change beyond the level of the individual to address commonly held and taken for granted assumptions that

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<sup>3</sup><http://go.worldbank.org/V45HD4P100>.

undergird gendered inequalities in any particular cultural context. Changing notions of what a woman or a man should be or do, and challenging understandings of gender identities and relations can take a variety of forms. It can range from formally instituted training courses that expose participants to different ways of framing their social worlds, providing them with a new language and lenses through which to view their realities. It can also include women coming together with other women to share experiences, experience and offer solidarity, shifting in the process the way they come to think of themselves and their entitlements not only as individuals but also as people who share something in common. Ultimately, it is about enabling people to stand back and inspect critically the beliefs about themselves and others they take for granted, and then using this expanded understanding to inform an analysis of what needs to change and how they can be part of that process of change. The framework developed by Gender at Work (Kelleher & Rao, n.d.; Sandler & Rao, 2012) captures very effectively these dimensions of change and the interrelationship between them:

### What Are We Trying To Change?



In what follows, I apply some of these insights, drawing on a series of case studies from research carried out by the Pathways programme to explore further some of the dynamics of empowerment in practice.

### 3 BUILDING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

There are no one-size-fits-all interventions that can produce in all women the effect of feeling more control over their lives. But Pathways researchers found again and again that where empowerment initiatives include a dimension to actively engage women in critical,

conscious, reflection on their own circumstances and to share that process with other women—what Paulo Freire called *conscientização* and what feminists might describe as ‘consciousness raising’—there can be a marked enhancement of a programme or project’s transformative effects. This is illustrated in this first case study, from Brazil. It tells of an employment training programme called *Chapeu de Palha Mulher* that was designed by a feminist bureaucrat with the positional power to convene state agencies and civil society organizations in the delivery of the programme, as well as to mount the resources to finance the institutional inputs required. *Chapeu de Palha Mulher* reconfigured an existing safety net programme aimed at alleviating the hunger of seasonal sugar cane workers in rural areas of the State of Pernambuco. Pathways used documentary film and interviews with the programme’s designers, implementers and women beneficiaries to investigate the ways of working and some of the impacts of the programme.

### **Empowering Skills Training: *Chapeu de Palha Mulher***

For generations of workers in the sugar cane plantations of north-eastern Brazil, the long months between harvests have been a time of hunger. *Chapeu de Palha Mulher* makes use of an existing safety net programme to avert hunger between the harvests to change women’s prospects, with transformational effects. Established in 2007, the programme has now trained more than 50 000 women and is expanding to other areas in the State. Pathways’ research took the form of qualitative research on the design and implementation of the programme, complemented by an independent quantitative evaluation commissioned by the State Secretariat and a documentary, *A Quiet Revolution*, which sought to explore women’s experiences of the programme.

*Chapeu de Palha Mulher* seeks to channel social policies to households through women without instrumentalizing them. It has three components: all participants must attend a mandatory three-month course on ‘public policies’. Then they make a selection from a series of vocational training courses, including in non-traditional jobs like welding, soldering, electrical work and taxi driving, which give access to a growing employment market. The state government negotiated with training colleges to lower the bar for women’s entry into courses, citing their historic disadvantage and exclusion, giving thousands of women access to an education previously denied to them. Stipends for attending courses complement existing benefits to provide women with a basic income during the time of hunger, and the programme provides childcare, transportation and food to facilitate access.

The programme works through a unique partnership between the state and civil society. One of the state’s leading feminist organizations designed, facilitated and trained others to facilitate the rights and citizenship training and has used its capillary networks in remote rural areas to strengthen local women’s organizations. The State Secretariat has worked with the local state institutions to create a sustainable basis for the programme, creating local women’s secretariats in the most patriarchal rural districts. The methodology for the public policies course draws on feminist consciousness-raising, gender training and popular education practices.

In a State Secretariat survey, women responded that not only had the programme brought them income and training that could lead them into employment. It had also opened their eyes to their rights as citizens and brought them a sense of personal

transformation. Many spoke of a life constrained to 'house, husband, children' before. Women also talked of how limiting the belief was that certain jobs are 'men's jobs' and that women lack the knowledge, strength or capacity to do them. Admitting women to learn skills such as welding and plumbing has also challenged attitudes within government training institutions, creating the basis for sustainable change.

Most striking has been the impact of the public policies course on their sense of entitlement as citizens, and rights as women. Interviewees spoke of never before having known that they had a right to have these rights. This part of the programme has led to them making choices for the vocational training that they might never have previously considered, and to making changes in their lives that might have been unimaginable. Reflecting on change that the programme has brought, Marcilene, who is training in soldering, talks of how she left a violent husband and a job in which she was being exploited, because of the predictability of the stipend she receives from the programme and the cash transfer she receives from the state. The programme has also taught her that she has as much of a right as anyone else to leisure and pleasure. 'I used to just work all the time', she says, 'but now I know that I have a right to take some time for myself, and go to the beach with my children at the weekend, just to relax'.

Source: *A Quiet Revolution*, directed by Christina Daniels; 'Empowering Skills Training', Pathways Policy Briefing, 2011.

The process of consciousness-raising has long been part of feminist practice. This example demonstrates how it can be seen as a vital 'ingredient' that can lend a transformative quality to economic empowerment initiatives. By building both power within and power with (Rowlands, 1997), working with critical consciousness can expand women's horizons of possibility and with it, the potential transformative impact of access to independent income.

#### 4 ENGAGING FRONT-LINE INTERMEDIARIES

An important lesson about what works concerns those involved in the doing of empowerment interventions: those who are the intermediaries and implementers of policies, projects and programmes. The best of laws and policies and most beautifully designed programmes can falter and fail if those who deal with putting them into practice are not themselves engaged and empowered as agents of change. Those at the front-line of programme or project implementation play a vital supportive role in women's empowerment. And this can be obscured by the focus on individual women that is characteristic of mainstream narratives of empowerment (Sholkamy, 2010).

The second case study is Egypt's conditional cash transfer programme, run by the Ministry of Solidarity and draws on an action research project carried out by Hania Sholkamy, of the American University in Cairo's Social Research Center. The Egyptian conditional cash transfer programme was designed through a process that sought the insight and experiences of an international group of feminist social policy experts, drawing on progressive social policy experiments in Latin America.<sup>4</sup> The programme sought to

<sup>4</sup>Pathways and DFID Brazil provided the initial financial support for this process, which was led by Hania Sholkamy, convener of the Pathways Middle East hub.

instil a sense of citizenship in women, who come to see the transfer as an entitlement rather than a hand out. It recognized the significance of supportive relationships as part of the process of transformation. In its focus on intermediaries—the social workers who visit and enrol the women—it places the quality of relationships at the heart of the intervention. Most importantly, it combined material support with processes that seek transformations in women's own subjectivities and in their individual and collective agency.

Initial research revealed that relationships of respect and of solidarity between front-line workers and the women with whom they work can break with paternalism and institute a sense of proximity between women that can stimulate other forms of collective engagement. Applying these principles to the design of a cash transfer programme with feminist principles, Hania Sholkamy (2011) was able to follow the implementation of the programme, using ethnographic research to document the effects of transformed relationships marked with respect. Her research demonstrates just how important the relationships between those who are the 'beneficiaries' of such programmes and those who implement them at the front line are in delivering some of the transformative effects of the programme—including amongst the front-line workers themselves. Their empowerment is rarely in itself the object of development intervention. But as Sholkamy's study shows, empowering front-line workers and enabling them to grow in their own capacity to act as agents of change can significantly increase the effectiveness of interventions.

**Feminist Social Protection in Egypt: 'Steady money, state support and respect can equal women's empowerment in Egypt'**

A pilot conditional cash transfer programme was carried out in the Cairo neighbourhood of Ain el Sira from 2008 to 2012 by the Egyptian Ministry of Social Solidarity and its partners, with technical and research support from the American University in Cairo and the Pathways programme. It aimed to test a feminist approach to social protection. The programme began with ethnographic research to gain a closer understanding of what mattered to women themselves. This revealed not just the need for income to supplement meagre household incomes but also the failures of state provision and mistreatment by service providers and a desire for decent work and better living conditions.

The programme built in an active role for social workers in supporting women to access state services and recognize their entitlements to such services as citizens. It sought to value women's care work: it was clearly stated that the cash transfer compensates women for time spent attending programme meetings and social worker visits. Women were not required to provide proof of unemployment and were encouraged to see the transfer as a means to engage in work on better terms.

A key innovation was the 'bankerization' of payments through cash cards that women could use in ATM machines to withdraw funds and accounts that allowed them to save and strategize about their spending. Social workers underwent training that promoted the values of rights and justice and were trained as facilitators and supporters who could accompany rather than direct or instruct. The programme permitted women to make decisions that would otherwise have been the prerogative of men, allowing them to invest resources in their children's education, clothing, nutrition and home improvements. The reliability of the transfers allowed women to plan.



After two years of payments, women reported a number of improvements in their lives. One of the most striking was a remarkable decrease in reported domestic violence. A third of those interviewed reported that abuse had stopped. The reason is that cash had helped reduce stress in households, as men were not being pressed to give women cash for urgent needs. Cash payments had also not had any negative effects on women's desire or ability to work, but now women reported working out of choice, rather than desperation. The cash transfer gave them security, so they were able to look for less demeaning work.

Hania Sholkamy describes a feminist approach to social protection as 'one that defines, targets and alleviates poverty as the women who are living in deprivation define it' (2014: 138). Her research shows that a programme design explicitly seeking to enhance women's identities as citizens and restore to them the accountability of the state was an important factor in generating positive effects. By starting with women's own desires and supporting them to make choices and fulfil the obligations that they value, the programme's empowering effects came about through acknowledging and recognizing their roles both as caregivers and as breadwinners.

Source: Sholkamy (2011, 2014)

Similar findings in respect to the significance of front-line workers—including the significance for *their* empowerment as workers for the effectiveness of their work—emerge in a number of other Pathways studies, including research on 'lady health workers' in Pakistan (Khan, 2014) and Bangladesh (Kabeer, 2011).

## 5 BUILDING COLLECTIVE POWER

Pathways' research on work shows the importance for women's economic empowerment of the regularity and predictability of income and of flows of resources that provide women with the security to plan and to act. It also emphasizes just how significant symbolic and social resources are to women's empowerment. Kabeer, Sudarshan and Milward's (2013) moving collection of narratives of women organizing women workers in the informal economy shows again and again the symbolic violence faced by women in stigmatized jobs—rag pickers, domestic workers, sex workers. Common themes running through the cases of informal sector organizing included the following: the power of collectivization in ending the isolation women in this sector experience and confronting their exploitation and stigmatization; the significance of collective critical analysis in changing women workers' consciousness of their right to have rights, and capacity to exercise voice to claim those rights; and the role played by the organizations and individuals who accompanied and supported the process of organizing.

Collectivization and movement-building may result in better wages, but before these material gains come the solace of solidarity, the courage in collectivity, the sociality of shared struggle. And these gains, and the struggles waged to secure them, include vital resources of respect and recognition. A focus on enhancing women's assets and resources alone misses a crucial dimension of the process of empowerment in feminist economic empowerment initiatives: that which is wrought out of coming together with and spending time with others, in breaking with isolation, and in contesting the beliefs and expectations that perpetuate the injustice suffered by women living in poverty and working in low-income jobs.

The third case study is from India and draws on Meena Seshu's (2013) inspiring account of the Indian sex worker collective *Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad* (VAMP). VAMP's story is of the long, slow and hard process of social change, through which women, men and trans\* people who are on the receiving end of multiple forms of stigmatization and exclusion by mainstream society came together to realize their collective power, and claim their rights as human beings. The struggle for recognition as human beings with rights has framed VAMP's activism as focused on changing *society*, rather than remaining victim to societal imposition of its mores onto them. The story of VAMP demonstrates the power of collective action that can transform the conditions in which women work, and with it their lives and livelihoods.

### Save us from Saviours

The Indian sex workers' collective VAMP (*Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad*), which now counts more than 5000 members, began with regular group meetings that brought sex workers together to critically analyse the obstacles in their lives. Meena Seshu, who was originally trained as a social worker, had begun working in a conventional way in their community. Slowly, she came to recognize that a different approach was needed. It was evident that clients were the least of their problems, and often a source of affectionate relationships as well as income. Most of the difficulties the sex workers faced came from outside their community. High on the list was maltreatment by the police, whose collusion with foreign 'rescuers' seeking to 'save' sex workers caused an enormous amount of suffering and abuse of their human rights. The discrimination that the sex workers had to endure had all manner of material effects, from the higher prices charged by the vegetable sellers plying their wares in the sex work area to workers who preferred to buy from them than face the stares of going into town, to the effects of prejudice on their children's education to difficulties in accessing public services.

The story of VAMP's success is instructive. The first step was developing a critical consciousness of their situation, which allowed sex workers and their children to reclaim their dignity and sense of self-esteem and respect for themselves and each other. The second was the process of building capacity to work together collectively and creating relationships of solidarity within a community that had once been fractious and divided. Sex workers have a regular, independent income: but many sex workers were not saving and managing their money, and VAMP has helped them to do this, and thus to gain similar benefits to those found in other economic empowerment initiatives. Underpinning these achievements and making them possible—the vital ingredient if there is one—was feminist leadership, and a feminist organization, the non-governmental organization SANGRAM, that has provided resources, accompaniment and support.

VAMP have been able to eradicate the presence of under-age sex workers in the communities, in which they work, and have established a hostel where those who are not able to return home can live safely and pursue their studies. Members are able to insist on condom use, call for help with difficult clients or local thugs and mobilize to hold the state to account for police attacks on sex workers. Sex workers interviewed in for a documentary and a subsequent Pathways study spoke of how much control they felt over their own lives, 'I'm as free as a bird', said one, and others spoke of how powerful they felt within their relationships with men, no longer willing to put up with

anything less. VAMP's slogan 'Save us from Saviours' sends an important message to international development agencies: empowerment is not something that can be given by others, nor do women find empowerment by complying with outsiders' beliefs about what they ought to be or do.

Source: Seshu (2013), and the film *Save us from Saviours* ([www.saveusfromsaviours.net](http://www.saveusfromsaviours.net)). This case study illustrates a broader point that is affirmed time and again in Pathways' work, and more broadly in the literature on feminist activism: when women are able to come together and organize themselves to make demands, build constituencies and alliances, they are more likely both to succeed in making changes for other women and also experience for themselves the empowering effects of mobilization (Htun & Weldon, 2010; Nazneen and Sultan 2014; Cornwall, 2014).

## 6 THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

The fourth case is from Bangladesh and is of the landless women's organization Saptagram. Naila Kabeer and Lopita Huq's (2014) study tells a salutary tale about the hazards of scaling up funding too fast, and also a powerful story of what works. It underscores a key theme emerging from a number of other Pathways studies, including the Egyptian, Brazilian and Indian cases cited earlier in this article: the significance of those who mediate empowerment work, whether front-line workers, women's organizers and women leaders. Kabeer and Huq's analysis not only emphasizes relationships as a vital factor in efforts to support women's empowerment. The cautionary tale of what happens when a project or an organization becomes a donor darling also offers important lessons for those concerned with supporting positive social change in favour of women's empowerment and gender justice.

### Relationships Matter

Women's organizations play a vital role in supporting women's empowerment. A key dimension of this role are the relationships of trust, loyalty and love that often bind these organizations together and are part of the story of their effectiveness. Naila Kabeer and Lopita Huq tell the story of a Bangladeshi landless women's organization, Saptagram, set up to provide poor women with the basic economic security to take action against injustice. Rejecting the popular micro-credit model, Saptagram opted for a savings-led model that brought women together weekly in groups. Joint savings were banked, loans given by Saptagram for collective projects, along with training and support. The organization's success proved its downfall: deluged with donor funding, it faltered and failed, and with the death of its charismatic founder-leader, Rokeya Rahman Kabeer, everyone expected the organization to follow. But it didn't die. It gradually regenerated itself, led by members. Kabeer and Huq offer a number of vital lessons.

Saptagram's work was structured around three core elements: building women's economic self-reliance through group savings and lending; building women's critical consciousness and agency through group discussions, training and cultural activities; and building relationships of solidarity amongst the landless women. There were tangible gains in women's living standards, from home improvements to investments

in small businesses, but most significant were the more intangible shifts in attitude, esteem and confidence that the programme had stimulated. Women spoke of being able to stand on their own two feet and reduce their dependence on others, and of learning to speak for themselves. Interviews with members revealed how far Saptagram's courses had transformed their perceptions of themselves, expanded their horizons and made them more confident about interacting with others, including those who had previously intimidated them.

The women who returned to Saptagram to regenerate it after its near demise spoke of how their love of the organization that had changed their lives brought them back. As one put it, 'when we loved someone first, is it possible to love someone else later?' Staff of the organization spoke, too, of love so strong that many workers carried on when the organization stalled with no salaries, paying their own travel expenses, and who through sheer persistence brought it back to life.

What made the difference? One woman interviewed, Rabeya, said, 'we were in a dark room with our eyes closed. Saptagram came and opened our eyes. It gave us strength' (Kabeer & Huq, 2014: 254). Saptagram's impact was founded on their recognition of the vital role of consciousness in social change. As important were the relationships Saptagram built amongst women who were previously unable to act in concert to defend their rights and fight injustice. Solidarity and collective action proved key drivers of change and real gains were made in employment rights and access to public services as well as in women's domestic relationships.

Victim of its own success and drowned by donor funding, Saptagram plunged into disarray. Its phoenix-like return demonstrates that sustainable social action depends, above all, on creating relationships of solidarity that are mutually transformative. Once again, we see here the conjuncture of empowering 'ingredients'—feminist leadership, training initiatives that build critical consciousness and the capacity for collective action, and an economic element that enables women to create changes in their everyday relationships and claim rights in their economic activities. This story also brings out the relational dimensions of successful empowerment initiatives, and of solidarity, trust and respect.

Source: Kabeer and Huq (2014)

As Rosalind Eyben (2011) has so powerfully argued, *relationships matter*. Time and again, Pathways' studies of movements and organizations showed the significance of the relational dimensions of development work that seeks to promote positive social change [see, for example, Mukhopadhyay *et al.* (2011), Cornwall & Edwards (2014) and Nazneen and Sultan (2014)].

## 7 IMAGINING WOMEN DIFFERENTLY

Part of what enables women to step away from the expectations that limit them comes from seeing themselves and their options in a different light. Where imaginative use has been made of vehicles like soap operas and online forums, prejudices can be challenged and

perspectives changed. Role models that inspire, challenge and strengthen others are invaluable. Despite technical difficulties in measuring the impact, development agencies should not give up on the potential of these activities. (Eyben, 2011:9)

Recognizing representation as a pathway of empowerment and disempowerment took Pathways into working with creative communications as a way to challenge stereotypes, especially in relation to female sexuality. Tessa Lewin (2010) writes of how development images of the 'cardboard woman' are brakes on more transformative approaches to women's empowerment. Rather than being able to envisage women in all their complexity and diversity, the consumers of development's glossies, adverts and reports meet monochromatic narratives of heroines and victims. Popular culture is hugely significant in shaping the conditions under which women may experience something as empowering. And yet the popular media is a powerful vehicle for even more limiting representations of women, extending into hostile, misogynistic and derogatory portrayals shot through with sexist stereotyping.

Changing these representations is a form of social action that can have a powerful impact on women's sense of their own power. Surprisingly, little attention has been given by mainstream development to the significance of representation, beyond engagement with the use of popular communications—from soap operas to songs to comics—in health promotion (Obregon & Waisbord, 2012; Hassen, 2002). This neglect of the significance of the domain of representation reflects both an over-emphasis on the material at the cost of the cultural. It is exacerbated by the limits placed on transformative development initiatives by the current obsession with quantification of impact; it is much harder to count the effects of a television programme or a hit song on women's lives than the number of female bodies in a local council or the number of loans repaid.

But this does not mean that the imaginaries produced by popular culture are not having a profound impact on women's and girls' sense of themselves and their horizons of possibility. Pathways researchers Aanmona Priyadarshani and Samia Rahim (2010) explored how television opens up 'different worlds, both familiar and unfamiliar' (2014: 281) in the lives of Bangladeshi women in the slums of Dhaka. Viewing romances on screen challenged traditional understandings of intimate relationships; women took from television watching lessons in how to manage mothers-in-law and husbands, lending them relational agency and tactics for enlarging their domestic room for manoeuvre. Naila Kabeer (personal communication) describes how in a study she conducted with colleagues in Afghanistan (Kabeer, Khan & Adparvar, 2011), women spoke of how access to television had opened up their worlds, giving them a glimpse of distant lives that expanded their sense of the possible.

When considering what works to support women's empowerment, it is therefore important not to neglect the significance of the arena of cultural production. The fifth and final case study in this article describes an intervention in popular culture that sought to change representations of women in the popular music that is widely listened to amongst people from all walks of life. Led by Akosua Adomako and Awo Asiedu of the University of Ghana, an action research project worked with popular artistes to generate a process of reflection on popular song lyrics that sought, through critical examination of the meanings of those lyrics, to change the ways in which those artistes represented women in their own songs.

### **Populating Ghanaian Popular Music with New Images of Women**

'Across Africa', researchers Akosua Adomako and Awo Asiedu write, music is constantly heard booming from shops, restaurants, taxis, buses, lorries and other public sites, and it plays a significant part in the everyday lives of people across age, class,

religion, ethnicity and social occasion. Events such as marriage and naming ceremonies, funerals, and public and state functions such as lectures and the commissioning of projects, are deemed incomplete without music. Thus, the whole society is exposed to the songs and hence the messages musicians convey. People draw inspirational, educational and emotional messages from music and the lyrics are repeated in daily conversations. Musicians frequently become powerful public figures capable of conveying ideas that serve to comprise popular culture through their lyrical and verbal pronouncements (2012: 260).

Ghanaian popular music is a source of misogynist and sexist stereotypes of women. It fills the airwaves with disempowering and derogatory narratives. Working with renowned musicologist John Collins, Adomako and Asiedu traced these narratives through generations of popular music in a process that sought to stimulate reflection amongst popular artistes of the effects of their representations, with the intention of changing narratives of women's sexuality in popular music.

An exhaustive analysis of themes and tropes generated a long list of negative stereotypes. These principally concerned women's sexuality, portraying them as voracious, unscrupulous, fickle and greedy or as passive objects of male desire. Focus groups were convened with a range of different people, from the taxi drivers who stay tuned to their radios all day, to the DJs playing tunes and the artistes who compose them. This led to discussions about the impact of these representations on men's behaviour towards women. Adomako and Asiedu cite a taxi driver, for example, who admitted:

I have also personally used the words in [a] song to insult a woman who proved stubborn when I wanted to propose to her. I used those words until she agreed. . . . If this song had not come out, I don't think it would even have occurred to me to use those words. (Taxi driver, cited in Adomako & Asiedu, 2012: 270)

What would it take to transform these versions of women? A competition was launched to find a song that challenged these representations. A panel of judges—musicians, music producers, gender researchers, music scholars and consumers of music—was convened. Workshops with popular artistes focused on analyzing and rewriting lyrics to reflect more empowering perceptions of women. The winning songs were chosen on the basis of the lyrics, musical quality and innovation. The media attention sparked by the project helped make more visible the issues the project sought to address. It stimulated debate and raised awareness of how the lyrics of popular music shape perceptions of women—and showed that alternatives in which women were represented positively could be just as successful. Adomako and Asiedu reflect on the impact of engaging the music industry in reflection through this process, noting that, 'soon after the winning song's launch a television presenter remarked, 'I have never thought of music in such terms. This launch will make me more aware when I listen to music' (2012: 273).

Source: Adomako and Asiedu (2012)

As the power of popular culture as a force for positive social change becomes more evident, there is much scope for creative engagement. Pathways' work with participatory

photography, animation, film and creative writing suggests the potential that might be tapped (Lewin, 2010; Cornwall, Capibaribe, & Gonçalves, 2010; Ali, 2014)

## 8 CONCLUSION

It is a short step from thinking of governments or agencies as ‘empowering’ people through programmes to viewing empowerment as another handout, something governments do for or on behalf of people. The danger here is that the focus will shift entirely to the provision of access to external resources, assets or services and away from methodologies that will create spaces for people to build confidence and self-esteem. (Gita Sen, 1997: 3)

Gita Sen’s words from 1997 ring true almost 20 years later. The focus has indeed shifted to the provision of resources, assets or services and away from the kind of empowering methodologies that engage critical consciousness, question taken for granted norms and make, in doing so, a vital contribution to shifting power relations. Indeed, it is commonplace for contemporary ‘empowerment’ initiatives to begin and end with increasing women’s access to resources rather than—precisely as Sen highlights—with changing how they may have been taught to see themselves as women, as citizens and as human beings. The assumption often underpins these initiatives that once women have access to economic resources, they will be able to make changes in other areas of their lives. This may of course happen (cf. Kabeer, 2008, 2011). Yet it remains a contingent rather than necessary outcome. For all that they acquire spending power by becoming the entrepreneurs that development intervention would turn them into, women may find themselves unable to envisage the kinds of changes that could bring them greater empowerment, precisely because prevailing social norms and limiting self-beliefs conspire to restrict their ability to re-imagine the horizons of the possible. As Hania Sholkamy observes:

Alleviating poverty and enabling women to make some income can better lives, but the enabling environment that confirms the right to work, to property, to safety, to voice, to sexuality and to freedom is not created by sewing machines or micro-credit alone. (2010: 257)

The feminist slogan ‘the personal is the political’ roots the process of empowerment in an expansion of women’s consciousness and capacity to act to transform their worlds. The case studies drawn upon in this article underscore the importance of working at the level of individual consciousness to expand women’s sense of their own possibilities and critical recognition of the societal dimensions of the obstacles they currently face. Feminists have long argued that empowerment is not something that can be done to or for women (Rowlands, 1997; Kabeer, 1999; Batliwala, 2007). It is when women recognize their power within and act together with other women to exercise power with, that they gain power to act as agents; when they act in concert to tackle injustice and inequalities, this becomes ‘power for’ positive social change.<sup>5</sup> Fundamental to this is a process that engages women in thinking differently—about themselves, about the situations they are in, about their social worlds, relationships and horizons. Alongside power within generating power

<sup>5</sup>I am grateful to Lisa Veneklasen for this point.

to, these studies also demonstrate the importance of power with: of women organizing in collectivities of various kinds, brought together by external initiatives or coming together in collective action. A growing body of evidence shows the significance of women's organizing and women's rights organizations as a force for positive change, both through grassroots organizing and their influence in securing laws and policies that promote gender equality (Htun & Weldon, 2010).

What, then, are the lessons for development institutions who seek to lend support to women's empowerment? Pathways research on donor funding to strengthen the organizational capacity of women's rights organizations carried out by Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay, Rosalind Eyben and colleagues in Bangladesh and Ghana highlighted the increased effectiveness of external financing that donors might achieve by enabling women's rights organizations to set their own agendas; providing institutional support, and medium to longer term financing rather than short-term project-based grants; investing time in building and maintaining supportive relationships with women's rights organizations; using this proximity to ensure that such organizations were sufficiently grounded in and representative of their core constituencies; and drawing on these organizations as a source of knowledge for policy dialogue (Mukhopadhyay *et al.*, 2011). Key findings pointed to the need for a shift of perspective and practice. Mukhopadhyay *et al.* suggest recognition of the key role women's rights organizations play in achieving gender equality objectives, the need to treat these organizations as innovators not contractors, and acknowledging that real change cannot be reduced to short-run project cycles and depends on solidarity, which can be jeopardized by practices such as competitive bidding. Rather than impose upon women's organizations a fixed set of goals and expectations, then, what works to strengthen them is investment in their capacity to respond creatively to emerging opportunities, more trust in their knowledge, and sensitive, supportive accompaniment. Arguably, one of the best uses of donor funding would be to amplify the resources of women's funds like Mama Cash that play such a vital role in nurturing and sustaining women's organizations and their role in creating an enabling environment for women's empowerment.

The contribution that external actors can make includes clearing obstacles from commonly travelled paths; supporting stopping places for women to gather to reflect on their journeys and gain tips, route-maps, courage and the company of others; and providing sign-posts, stiles, bridges and sustenance for those making these journeys. To do this effectively, Pathways research in and on global development institutions (Eyben & Turquet, 2014) suggests that what is needed is to take to heart the lessons about the significance of relationships, and for donor organizations to invest in hiring more staff to work on the gender equality and women's empowerment portfolio, and build greater knowledge and skills amongst staff as the supporters of transformative development practice. These measures would be geared at strengthening donors' capacities for analysis and responsiveness, as well as to improve their effectiveness in targeting their resources at interventions and institutions that can make a difference on the ground. This virtuous circle of investment, directed inwards as well as outwards, could deliver far more effective results for women's rights and empowerment. Transformative development practice would, then, come to be about restoring empathy to a sector ever more distant from lived experience. Such a vision for change would encompass a methodological plurality and willingness to experiment creatively with ways of communicating—of listening and learning, as well as of engaging in dialogue—that can be in itself a catalyst of change.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper draws on work developed and carried out with members of the Pathways consortium, based on work funded by the British Government's Department for International Development (DfID), the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (Sida). I would like to express my appreciation to everyone in the network and our funders for their contributions. I am especially grateful to Jenny Edwards, Rosalind Eyben, Naila Kabeer, Takyiwa Manuh, Cecilia Sardenberg, Hania Sholkamy, Maheen Sultan and Tessa Lewin, who played such a key role in the collective management of the programme. I would like to thank Jenny Edwards, Rosalind Eyben, Caren Grown, Andrea Lynch, Joanne Sandler and Lisa VeneKlasen for their comments on earlier versions of this paper, and Kirsty Milward for cutting it down to size.

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