pathways
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Supporting Pathways of Women's Empowerment:
A Brief Guide for International Development Organisations

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The views expressed in this document are not necessarily those of our funders.

Photos: Page 1: Photo from the Changing Images of Women in Bangladesh photography competition, photo: Badran Nahar Ruba. Page 8: Mona, a mechanic in Ain el-Sira, photo: Amanda Kerdahi Matt

Supporting Pathways of Women's Empowerment: A Brief Guide for International Development Organisations

Most international development organisations include women's empowerment and gender equality as a key objective. But what empowerment means and how best to support it remains a matter of debate. This brief informs that debate with empirical evidence from a five-year international research programme.[1] Pathways researchers from West Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and the UK[2] used quantitative surveys, ethnographic fieldwork, participatory action research, life-histories, storytelling and film-making to discover how empowerment happens.[3]

Although other than in a few projects, the research was not directly investigating international development activities, Pathways findings carry significant implications for development practice in relation to:

- Facilitating locally generated changes to the political economy
- Supporting the power of women organising
- Getting to grips with policy implementation
- Designing for multiplier empowerment effects
- Being imaginative: engaging with popular culture and media
- Securing value for money in supporting women's empowerment.

What is empowerment and when does it happen?

Empowerment has multiple meanings relating to power, participation, capability, autonomy, choice and freedom. Pathways researchers found that the presence and significance of these meanings varied greatly among different actors and contexts (Sardenberg, Nazneen et al 2010, Kuttab 2010, Abdullah and Fofana-Ibrahim, Anyidoho and Manuh - all 2010) but that dignity, self-esteem and respect are highly valued by women everywhere.

Research using textual analysis and interviews found that staff in international development agencies vary also in their understandings of empowerment (Eyben and Napier-Moore 2009). Based on this analysis, Pathways researchers (Eyben, Kabeer and Cornwall 2008) have proposed a definition of empowerment that can be used by international development organisations and that has been adapted for the present brief (Box 1).

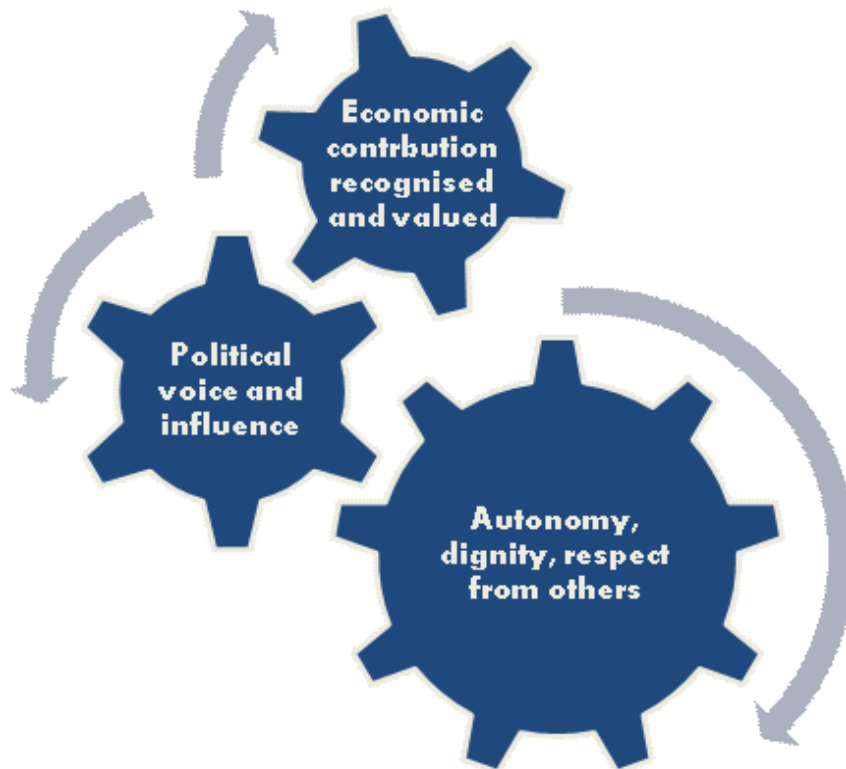This definition's utility is its recognition of both agency and structural power relations that can constrain or support autonomy and choice. The incorporation of power into 'empowerment' highlights the need for a political economy approach to supporting women's empowerment.

At the same time, while a useful concept in development practice, donors should be careful when speaking of empowerment, as in many languages there is no direct translation and referring to it in English makes it treated with some suspicion as an imported word associated with foreign agendas (Kuttab 2010, Sardenberg 2010).

While care is also needed in how we qualify empowerment - to avoid reducing abstract tools for thought into concrete realities - for planning and design purposes it is useful to distinguish between 'social', 'political' and 'economic' empowerment. This helps us appreciate the potential for these different dimensions of empowerment to be mutually reinforcing.

**Figure 1 Different dimensions of empowerment are mutually reinforcing**

- *Social* empowerment is about changing society so that women's place within it is respected and recognised on the terms by which they want to live, not on terms dictated by others. A sense of autonomy and self-value is fundamental to be able to make choices independently – over sexual relationships, marriage, and having children. Valuing and respecting women is vital if they are to participate in politics, demand a fair return on their work and access public services such as health and education.
- *Economic* empowerment is about women's capacity to contribute to and benefit from economic activities on terms which recognise the value of their contribution, respect their dignity and make it possible for them to negotiate a fairer distribution of returns.
- *Political* empowerment concerns equity of representation in political institutions and enhanced voice of the least vocal so that women engage in making the decisions that affect their lives and the lives of others like them. They are able to speak about, as well as speak for, themselves, gaining a right to engage in the democratic process.

Bangladesh provides a good example of the mutual reinforcement of different dimensions of empowerment. It has experienced one of the most rapid fertility declines on record; it has closed the gender gap in primary education and reduced it at the secondary level; and it has lowered its under-five mortality and maternal mortality rates. The explanation for this remarkable performance are government policies, an extremely active civil society, including women's rights organisations, and an admittedly fragile but nevertheless functioning democracy with large numbers of women now going into politics at the local level and beyond. This is combined with opportunities for many more women to engage in forms of work that offer regular and relatively independent incomes. This results in them investing in their own health and education, as well as in that of their children, as evidence in the graph below (Figure 2), one of the findings from a large-scale quantitative survey undertaken by Pathways researchers (Kabeer et al 2011).

Figure 2 The correlation between kinds of work and women's health choices in Bangladesh
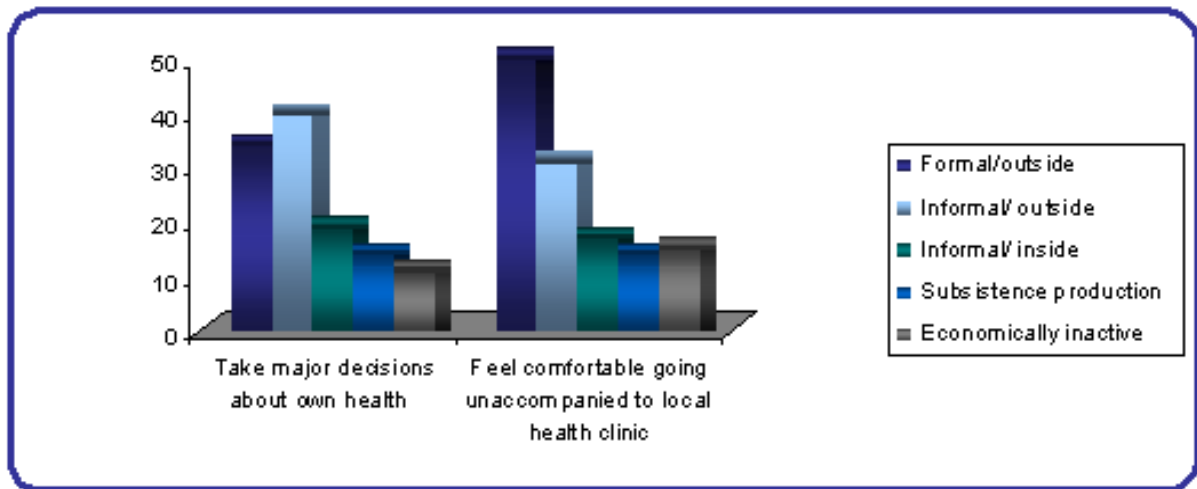
Empowerment can be a consequence of multiple factors, one of these being exposure to different realities. Research that used focus group discussions, household interviews and participant observation with women watching television in Bangladesh found they choose, judge and discard what they see in relation to the possibilities in their own lives. Role models on TV provide viewers with hopes of an alternative reality. Watching TV also gives women the leisure that their everyday lives may otherwise deny them, time to think and to dream that can be vital for their empowerment (Priyadarshini and Rahim 2010). Thus, deliberate policy interventions may be just one element or, as in this case, entirely absent in an empowerment process. Even when policies do support empowerment, their effectiveness in one context does not necessarily transfer to another time or place (Box 4).

Even if effective policies are context specific, it may still be useful to learn from what has worked elsewhere, provided good ideas from abroad are grounded in their own local reality. Pathways demonstrated how to achieve this through an action research pilot project for an Egyptian conditional cash transfer scheme (Box 10), which incorporated lessons from experience in Latin America (Sholkamy 2010).

Box 4 Education: a pathway of women's empowerment in Ghana?

Girls' education is often regarded as one of the most important pathways of empowerment. Pathways quantitative research with 600 women from three age groups in Ghana tested the proposition that higher levels of education are associated with more indicators of empowerment. While this was the case for older women, it was less so for younger ones who are finding it harder than their mothers to get decent jobs in the formal sector of the economy. More educated women compete for fewer opportunities, leaving younger women with less control over their lives than that enjoyed by educated women of the previous generation. (Darkwah 2010)

What can development agencies do?

Donor support to government policies and direct financing of programmes and projects do not by themselves empower women but they can enable and support people's own efforts.

Agencies can improve their practice – and avoid undermining locally generated empowerment processes – by adopting the following six steps:

- Facilitating locally generated changes to the political economy
- Supporting the power of women organising
- Getting to grips with policy implementation
- Designing for multiplier empowerment effects
- Going beyond comfort zones: responding to what women want
- Securing value for money in support of women's empowerment

Box 5 Changing power relations in Bangladesh

Saptagram is a landless women's organisation in rural Bangladesh whose core strategy for positive social change has been to transform women's consciousness and capabilities. Women benefit materially from their involvement with Saptagram, by learning about the environment, family planning and child health. More importantly this has been the opportunity for them to build relationships of solidarity and mutual support based on shared experiences of class and gender oppression. They have drawn on the power of this solidarity to confront inequitable structures of power relations within their community. They have used their solidarity to demand a fairer distribution of government services, and to raise awareness about domestic violence. (Kabeer and Huq 2010)

Key Message One

Facilitating locally generated changes to the political economy

Support from international agencies is more likely to be effective when harnessed to already initiated, locally-owned processes.

Donor-supported empowerment processes have the greatest chances of success when women face pressing challenges, are motivated to envision and enact change and when political opportunities become available. Thus respecting the knowledge, experience and perspectives of people local to a country or regions must be a central component of thorough and regular political economy analysis of gender inequality. Such an analysis can point to where empowerment is already in process and identify whether, when and how to play a supportive role.

Good political economy analysis is not only about formal governance institutions, but also goes behind the facade to understand how informal, less visible, power structures can block or promote change.

Box 6 Quotas and women's political representation in Latin America

The use of quota systems to increase women's political representation and to further women's political empowerment is increasing worldwide and continued support for this intervention is essential. But many more factors beyond the introduction of quotas influence how power is mediated. Quotas are not an adequate indicator. An analytical survey of the quantitative data in Latin America found that once in office women representatives are often faced with patriarchal political structures that limit their political activity. There is also no guarantee that women representatives will act in favour of women's rights. This highlights the need for a strong feminist movement with grassroots support. (Alcântara Costa 2010)

Women's empowerment through grass-roots organisations and popular participation is one of the most important steps towards changing historical relations of inequality and exclusion. Support is needed to these organisations to equip their members with the knowledge, skills and opportunities to learn to engage step-by-step with national political processes. At the same time, policy makers may need support to facilitate women's political participation e.g. through legislation ensuring women and the organisations that represent them have a seat at the table.

Finally, international development agencies can be more effective at supporting locally owned processes of empowerment when staff learn to be reflexive about their own power and are able to map how power operates within the international development system (Rao forthcoming).

Key Message Two

Supporting the power of women organising

Women's organising is key to securing government policies and private sector practices that make a difference to women's lives.

Without supporting an enabling environment for empowerment it is difficult for development agencies to achieve their sectoral policy objectives. Women's collective action can make demands for change and hold authorities to account for delivering on existing laws and policies. Collective action is especially important for women who experience other, non-gendered forms of discrimination, for example because of their poverty, sexual orientation, disability, religion or race.

Pathways research in Ghana found that successful women's organising does not happen overnight. The return to multi-party politics in the 1980's aided the development of women's organisations. From 2000 onwards a pattern of organising on particular issues such as violence against women, women's political participation and women's legal rights became clearly established along with a stronger presence of women's rights advocacy on a national stage. This period also marked prominent campaigns such as that on the passage of a law on domestic violence and the writing of the women's national manifesto (Apusigah et al 2011 forthcoming). The same research identified the

Box 7 Improving the quality of support to women's rights organisations (WROs)

Head office gender specialists interviewed in a Pathways research project about the effect of external financing on women's rights organisations wanted their donor agencies to improve the quality of their support by:

- Letting WROs own the agenda

- Providing medium-to-long term financing, including institutional support

- Being sufficiently in touch with the WROs to ensure that those they are supporting are 'well anchored and representative'

- Understanding the political context of the organisations' work

- Investing time in managing the relationship with WROs because that is what matters most

- Being better at articulating women's rights as a theory of change

- Using WROs as a source of knowledge for policy dialogue

(Mukhopadhyay et al. 2011)

importance of external financing in supporting such collective action but found that short term and fluctuating project-related rather than core funding, combined with the donor pooling of funds – with a decrease in direct relationships - and growing emphasis on inter-organisational competition for increasingly scarce funds are detrimental to securing social transformational outcomes.

Effective women's organising can also empower women workers in an increasingly commercialised global economy. Global sourcing is providing women with a path out of unpaid family labour and access to independent incomes. But even within global production chains, there is a long way to go for women to achieve equitable rights as workers. Pathways research undertook

qualitative case studies of women's organisations – supported by big international NGOs – who were representing respectively garment workers and fruit pickers and engaging successfully with the global corporate sector. It was found that given the changing gender dynamics of global production networks, innovative strategies are possible and openings can be found to raise women's voices in the corridors of corporate power (Barrientos 2009).

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Box 8 Lady Health Workers in Pakistan

The Lady Health Workers programme is a major public sector initiative to provide reproductive healthcare to women. It employs almost 100,000 women as community health workers. They provide information, basic services and access to further care. Thanks to the programme, women are more visible and mobile within the community. They receive training, are knowledgeable and gain respect. They also have their own income. This challenges gender imbalances in the home and the community. Government-run advertisements on television in support of the programme were critical in helping the women to gain credibility. (Khan 2010)

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Key Message Three

Getting to grips with policy implementation

Development agencies should not only help establish policies that facilitate empowerment but also enable their implementation. This includes supporting front-line workers, fostering public debate and facilitating monitoring of performance.

Pathways research found that front-line workers, such as Lady Health Visitors in Pakistan are very important in creating the enabling conditions for women's empowerment. Their own attitudes towards those they work with are crucial in ensuring that health and social services are a conduit rather than a block to women expanding their horizons.

Fostering public debate can strengthen the implementation of laws and policies affecting

women. In the last decade, new family laws in Egypt have included legal provision for women to initiate divorce. A Pathways ethnographic study involving participatory observation of family courts, an analysis of court records and interviews with stakeholders, found the implementation of the reforms to be uneven. For the new family laws to be effective the stigma and opposition associated with divorce needs to be countered through broader societal debate on marriage and on women's and men's rights, roles and responsibilities within it (Al-Sharmani 2010).

Women's organising has an important part to play in monitoring the implementation of laws and policies affecting women and thus in holding the state accountable - as in the example of Pathways researchers in Brazil who are undertaking an action research project to monitor the application of new domestic violence legislation (Sardenberg et al 2010). Box 9 provides a case of how women's organisations sought to monitor the implementation of United Nations commitments to involve women in peace-building.

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Box 9 Monitoring the implementation of peace-building frameworks in Sierra Leone

The brutalities and atrocities that women and children were subjected to during Sierra Leone's 11 years civil war resulted in a groundswell of activism by women's organisations demanding the protection and promotion of women's rights as part of peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction. Sierra Leone's peace consolidation policies and programmes are pursued within the international peace-building framework and resolutions such as Resolution 1325. Pathways research found that while this framework has a transformational edge, its application in Sierra Leone is disjointed and full of loopholes. International organisations must apply their commitments more systematically, along with support to women's organisations to monitor and hold to account those charged with implementing women's empowerment within the post-conflict peace-building framework. (Abdullah et al. 2010)

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Key Message Four

Designing for multiplier empowerment effects

All programmes and services, including infrastructure development, that aim to benefit people in poverty can be designed to facilitate women's empowerment and encourage multiplier effects.

Careful attention to project design can encourage and strengthen empowerment processes taking advantage of the possibility of multiple entry points so that supporting empowerment in one domain - economic, social or political - can have wider positive effects. Lack of attention can however have adverse disempowering effects even when the intervention aims to be empowering. The design of conditional cash transfer and micro-finance programmes for women is a case in point.

Enhancing the possibility of such multiplier effects needs understanding and relations between different kinds of empowerment need optimising

Box 10 Transformative conditional cash transfers in Egypt

CCTs provide mothers of school age children in extreme poverty with a cash subsidy conditional on children's attendance at school and health clinics and can give them a steady source of income. Such transfers are not necessarily empowering unless designed to encourage a more equitable sharing of caring responsibilities within the household and to avoid increasing women's time burden through the lost labour of children or reinforcing existing gender divisions of labour in which fathers are not involved in child-rearing responsibilities. These lessons from CCT programmes in Latin America have been taken on board in the design of a Pathways action research project in Egypt which worked with the Ministry of Social Solidarity to implement a gender-sensitive pilot in Cairo and prepare for the launch of a CCT programme in over 4000 households in rural Upper Egypt. (Molyneux 2008; Sholkamy REF

For example in a cash transfer programme in Malawi (evaluated by Stephen Devereux) Pathways researchers noted a case of multiplier effects. The Dowa Emergency Cash Transfers (DECT) project, implemented by Concern Worldwide in 2006/07, subcontracted Opportunity International Bank Malawi (OIBM) to deliver cash transfers to drought-afflicted rural communities through a mobile banking system. Devereux's study found that women beneficiaries receiving identity documents to access their entitlements felt strongly empowered by the legal recognition these documents represented. In focus group discussions, several women stated passionately that before the project it was as if they did not exist in the eyes of the state, but now they had their 'papers' their government could no longer ignore them (Eyben et al 2008).

Donors can also introduce negative multiplier effects. Policy changes in areas not directly associated with women's empowerment should therefore be checked for their potential negative impact on the enabling environment for empowerment. Pathways historical research into Ghana's capacity to implement gender equality commitments found that a donor-encouraged scaling back of the civil service in the 1990's had a serious impact on the state's capacity, just when it was signing up to the commitments of the Beijing UN women's conference, a conference that had been largely funded by international development organisations (Manuh et al. forthcoming).

Key Message Five

Going beyond comfort zones: responding to what women want

Development organisations should be both more responsive and more imaginative in their support to empowerment, responding creatively to women's and girls' lived experience and aspirations.

Donors do not like talking about it, but again and again it comes up as an issue. Sexuality is an important lens on women's empowerment that donors should be more aware of, and open to using in order to understand the constraints and opportunities in women's lives.

In many places changing ideals about sexuality are giving young women greater capacity to make their own choices about whom they have relationships with. However in times of disruptive change insecurity can prompt a retreat to 'tradition' or 'culture' as fears about security and stability are projected onto the bodies of citizens, particularly women.

Pathways research in a West Bank community found just as an Israeli checkpoint has restricted young women and made it difficult to attend college and go to work, the broader political and security crisis in Palestine has created a wider restrictive environment context in which moral panics about unmarried women, 'irregular' marriages and the transmission of sexuality-related messages through satellite television and mobile phone technologies has led to tighter social control of young women. These restrictions extended to accessing information about their bodies.

In discussing NGO training for Palestinian youth on democracy, the young women complained, 'Really we are bored from always hearing the same subject, communications workshops, democracy. Learning about our bodies would be better'. (Johnson 2010)

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 their potential of these activities.

Box 11 Women make their own films in Bangladesh

Pathways researchers ran workshops in Dhaka and the Chittagong Hill Tracts where participants made their own short films with a first person audio narrative, illustrated with a slide show of photographs or sketches. The process of women creating their own story follows in the tradition of the work of Freire and others, who see the development of personal critical consciousness as a necessary precursor to action for social change. In articulating their stories, the women developed technical and creative skills and confidence. The collaborative nature of the workshops and the sharing of each other's stories, helped the women develop a sense of solidarity and to use film to share this more widely including for advocacy on particular policy issues. (Rahim 2010)

Key Message Six

Securing value for money in support of women's empowerment

Value for money is about maximising economy, efficiency, effectiveness. Because women's empowerment is about transformative processes, this means designing interventions that reap long term and sustainable development dividends.

Donors can support empowerment processes through all of their aid instruments, from budget support to micro-level projects.

Even where the objectives may not seem directly related to empowerment, such as the construction of an irrigation system or rural roads, an intervention can be designed so that women's empowerment is supported in its planning, management and delivery. Equally important in a project with empowerment objectives is to design for multiplier effects - for example, an investment in economic empowerment can facilitate transformative change through social and political empowerment. This is easier to achieve

if interventions are informed by a theory of change, costing the most appropriate approaches in relation to that theory, monitoring progress, assessing what is working and not working and learning and adapting accordingly.

On this basis, agencies need to consider which combination of approaches maximises potential multiplier effects in any specific context (what works in one place and time may not work in another) and identify the combination that potentially offers the best value for money in terms of quality and sustainability of impact.

Ensuring that budgets reflect the real costs of an intervention means including what is required to implement such an adaptive learning strategy within supportive relationships with partners, characterised by mutual respect, solidarity, responsiveness and helpfulness.

Mutually satisfactory relationships with partners makes possible the establishment and implementation of integrated financial and programmatic monitoring, evaluation and learning processes that enable all involved to review progress together and consider the value for money being achieved.

Donors need to value empowerment outcomes, their contribution to the sustainability of programme impact and their multiplier effects beyond the programme in order to be able

to properly balance the importance of short- and long-term impacts in programme design and management. Developing indicators for empowerment outcomes and their effects and including them, with relevant objectives, in project or programme M&E or results frameworks is a practical way of doing this.

Conclusion

Empowerment is complex and multidimensional and it takes time to change a deeply-embedded gendered political economy that constrains women's agency. To be able to properly balance the importance of short- and long-term results, development agencies need to value empowerment outcomes, their contribution to the sustainability of programme impact and their multiplier effects beyond the programme. Supporting women's empowerment is a long-term agenda that requires identifying and helping to strengthen locally generated transformative processes. Effectively supporting women's empowerment requires good grounded analysis, flexibility, imagination, investing in relationships, responsiveness and modesty in ambition.

Notes

1 This brief was drafted by Rosalind Eyben with inputs from Andrea Cornwall and Cathy Shutt. While she acknowledges with gratitude very useful feedback on the draft from Teresa Durand, Liz Fajber, Clare Ferguson, Charlotte Heath and Joanne Sandler all responsibility for content rests with the author.

2 The Pathways of Women's Empowerment Consortium, funded by the UK Department for International Development, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Norway and Sweden, and UNIFEM (now UN Women), has convened and supported around 60 researchers between 2006-2011 who work on issues of economic, legal and political empowerment, sexuality and reproductive rights, movement building and advocacy for women's rights in Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Egypt, Palestine, Sudan, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan. The consortium is co-ordinated by the Institute of Development Studies, UK and is collectively managed with four regional

> ### Box 12 Investing in relationships to secure value for money
>
> Women's rights organisations in Bangladesh highlighted to Pathways researchers what makes a good donor: mutual respect, solidarity, responsiveness and helpfulness.
>
> Donors' negative qualities were: being top-down, not giving the organisation a 'decent hearing', no transparency in decision-making, wanting too much publicity, imposing their decisions, being bureaucratic and inflexible, and thinking too much of themselves. (Nazeen et al 2011)

hubs - BRAC Development Institute, BRAC University, Bangladesh, University of Ghana, Nucleus for Interdisciplinary Women's Studies, Federal University of Bahia, Brazil, Social Research Center, American University in Cairo. Pathways has also made global policy spaces a site for research, and staff in international aid agencies have taken part as research subjects and contributors to workshops.

3 A more detailed presentation and analysis of Pathways findings (2006-2011) are available in a Research Synthesis Report at www.pathwaysofempowerment.org

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