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Transforming Development Knowledge

CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

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Introduction: Connecting Perspectives on Women's Empowerment

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Abstract With the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on gender equality and women's empowerment, debates around empowerment of women find themselves at a critical juncture of donor preferences, programmatic and movement activity and the lived experiences of women. This introductory article summarises some of the primary debates surrounding women's empowerment across three lines: economic empowerment and its links with poverty reduction – focusing on the intersections between paid work and unpaid care work; social empowerment in terms of changes in gender norms and values; and political empowerment and mobilisation. The interconnectedness of these three domains of empowerment is important to bear in mind while looking ahead – especially with high levels of intersecting inequalities and power structures that prevent the realisation of empowerment. We conclude that a process of collective notion of empowerment that focuses on addressing structural inequality and accords primacy to women's own agency, would go a long way towards expanding women's opportunities and choices – in other words, realising women's empowerment in a meaningful way.

1 Introduction

Debates around 'women's empowerment' have been both multifarious and complex, with different meanings, purposes and values ascribed to the empowerment of women and girls. While some of these debates are on the nature of women's empowerment ('is it a process or a goal?'; 'how much does economic empowerment matter?'), others are on its purpose ('is empowerment a means to some broader development goal?' or 'does empowerment have intrinsic value?'). Women's empowerment has been conceptualised primarily along two lines: (1) as a goal, with aims and targets – mostly by the development industry; or (2) as a continuous process of change in which women empower themselves and challenge patriarchal structures and institutions – mostly by social movements and scholars (Nazneen, Darkwah and Sultan 2014; Cornwall and Edwards 2014). Another significant debate centres around the purpose of women's empowerment. One view sees empowerment as individualised and instrumental, which Sardenberg (Sardenberg 2008, this *IDS Bulletin*)

termed as 'liberal' empowerment. In this approach, empowerment is a means to achieve developmental goals – for example poverty reduction. On the other hand, 'liberating' empowerment is more collective in nature – it is the 'process by which women attain autonomy and self determination' (*ibid*.). The liberating empowerment is an end in itself, yet it also is an instrument for challenging patriarchal norms and institutions (*ibid*.), even though attaining autonomy and self-determination may not be enough to challenge these structures.

It is widely accepted that there is a strong link between women's empowerment, gender equality and development.

> Women's location at the intersection between production and reproduction, between making a living and caring for the family, makes the organisation of gender relations central to the nexus between economic growth and human development, and hence central to the development agenda (Kabeer 2015a).

Women's standing in society has major implications for its economic, social and political functioning. For example, the failure of social institutions to support women's autonomy, bargaining power in households and private returns of investments in girls, is linked with lower female education, higher fertility and higher child mortality rates. Klasen and Lamanna (2009) link higher gender gaps in education and employment to considerable reductions in economic growth in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. This Archive Collection presents some of the leading articles that have appeared in *IDS Bulletins* over the last 48 years, seminally influencing the debates on the link between women's empowerment, gender equality and poverty.

The focus of this Archive Collection is reflective of the critical juncture that the understanding and realisation of women's empowerment finds itself in. This juncture is formed on one side of donor institutions in the development industry pumping large amounts of resources in to programmatic activities aimed to achieve empowerment of women and girls; at the same time as positing the realisation of this empowerment as the conduit for economic growth and poverty reduction. On the other side, for the first time ever, there has been international agreement on the goal of gender equality as a stand-alone goal – of which women's empowerment forms a critical component. Finally, struggles on the ground for gender equality bring to the fore real challenges and debates on how women can realise and progress towards an ideal of empowerment. It therefore becomes crucial to understand how ideas around empowerment have evolved, and the influential role that authors contributing to the *IDS Bulletin* over the years have played in this. In this introductory article, we set out the primary debates surrounding women's empowerment, delineating these across three lines: (1) economic empowerment and links with poverty reduction and work/unpaid care work participation; (2) social empowerment in terms of changing gender norms and values; and (3) political empowerment

and mobilisation. We end by examining future directions for women's empowerment, including debates regarding a growing concern around inequality and the relevance of women's empowerment to it, and assessing the potential contribution of the SDGs to strengthening empowerment processes.

1.1 Expanding the boundaries of economic empowerment

The **economic component of empowerment** has been viewed both as a precondition for achieving empowerment as well as the indicator for the achievement of this goal. Debates concerning economic empowerment have centred around the links between poverty and gender. Poverty analysis was initially not sensitive to gender issues, but contributions from feminists have challenged this, highlighting both inequities in intra-household distribution of resources, and focusing on reducing poverty levels of female-headed households. The gendered nature of poverty has been widely accepted, resulting in anti-poverty programming focused on women, along with the prevalence of sex-disaggregated indicators. However, feminist perspectives on linking gender and poverty issues have also highlighted the contradictions between reducing poverty and increasing women's empowerment. Razavi (1997, this *IDS Bulletin*) shows how increasing household incomes do not necessarily translate into better wellbeing for females in the household. She demonstrates how, with increasing income, twin-sided forces of expanding constraints on women's paid work and restrictions on their control over income are often at play (*ibid.*).

The other significant critique of women-focused anti-poverty programmes is how these programmes see women only as mothers or wives, who 'offer a means to' reducing poverty, increasing education levels and so on (Jackson 1996). This instrumental approach and 'the conflation of gender concerns with poverty matters allows issues of gender discrimination and injustice… to disappear from the agenda' (Kabeer 1997, this *IDS Bulletin*). Moving beyond the simplistic income-based poverty reduction agenda and women's role in it, to acknowledging the critical vulnerabilities that women face (Razavi 1997, this *IDS Bulletin*), recognising their differential experiences of poverty, and tackling the underlying causes of deprivation towards an expanded notion of wellbeing (Kabeer 1997, this *IDS Bulletin*), therefore is critical for realising women's empowerment.

A primary measure of economic empowerment has been the level of income that is earned by women, primarily through their participation in the labour market. There has been a lot of work delineating the gendered nature of markets, and the discrimination that women face in the labour market. It is therefore important to focus on creation of opportunities and removal of barriers for women to participate within the labour market (*ibid.*), including a focus on broadening the choice of sectors that women can productively engage in. Equally important, though under-researched, is to understand the disproportionate levels of **unpaid care work** that women undertake, and the effect that this has on their labour force participation. Pervasive social norms and sticky gender roles across both

the developing and the developed world dictate what roles women do at home and their participation levels outside the home in social, political and economic life. There is a strong correlation between women's life stages and their entry/retention into the labour market (Chopra 2015). Further, care responsibilities often impact on the location and type of job – women with young children prefer working close to or at home with flexible hours – something that only the informal economy provides. The impact of this can be severely debilitating, leading to women working in low-paid, irregular, high risk and often unsafe jobs. Combined with lack of recognition of and support for their unpaid care work responsibilities, this leads to a vicious cycle of poverty and vulnerability that women find themselves in, thereby 'limiting the extent of their economic empowerment – both individually and inter-generationally' (*ibid.*).

It is therefore important, as Vinkenburg (2015, this *IDS Bulletin*) argues, to recognise that 'women's economic empowerment can only be achieved by critically re-examining such norms and their impact' and through a concerted effort to put critical conditions (such as child care, flexibility in place and time of work) in place that allow families to effectively combine paid work and unpaid care work. We need a broader notion of economic empowerment that 'comprises both the market economy where women participate in the labour market, and the care economy which sustains and nurtures the market economy' (Chopra 2015). At the same time, we also need to focus on collective empowerment for economic justice that promotes gender equality – thereby necessitating a need to understand and work to change the macroeconomic factors affecting women's opportunities for economic empowerment.

1.2 Challenging social norms

Economic empowerment is one of three intertwined and essential components of empowerment – the other two being social and political empowerment, which often (but not always) go hand in hand with economic empowerment. Further, even when economic empowerment is considered as a key strategy in addressing gender inequality, the focus has been mostly on the individual women, with provision of loans, job quotas and government schemes. However, we know that by itself economic empowerment, especially of the individual woman, is not the sole solution to overcome traditional patriarchal gender norms and values. Policies aimed at achieving gender equitable development outcomes need to take into account and promote ways to reduce gender inequalities in social institutions (Branisa, Klasen and Ziegler 2013).

Sardenberg (2010, this *IDS Bulletin*) impressively demonstrates how economic empowerment does not necessarily lead to a break in traditional gender roles. Following generations of families in a working class neighbourhood in Salvador for almost 20 years shows that traditional family ideals still prevail, even where women are economically independent and support each other. However, economic independence does give women the opportunity to leave abusive or avoid unsatisfying relationships altogether, thus contributing to **social empowerment**.

Social institutions, laws, norms, traditions, and codes of conduct have been shown to be 'the most important single factor determining women's participation in economic activities outside the household (Morrisson and Jütting 2005), as well as determining access to material and economic resources. Yet women's unequal access to and representation by the most powerful institution – the state – is still proving to be an insurmountable challenge, necessitating a focus on political empowerment.

1.3 Changing power relations

Empowerment as a political process requires not only a change in power relations at the family and community levels, but also at societal level in terms of the recognition of the needs and rights of women on an equal footing to men. It also requires a change in gender equality policies of the state, posing a structural challenge to existing power relations. Htun and Weldon's (2010) study examines the making of gender equality policies in 71 countries, putting forward a typology that draws data from three different types of policies – violence against women, abortion, and parental leave – each raising different challenges. These challenges arise from the societal structures within which these policies are being made, the type of issue that they seek to challenge (status vs class policies); and the social institution that these policies aim to challenge (doctrinal vs non-doctrinal issues). They find that the actors (such as women's movements, religious organisations and Left parties) that are relevant in effecting change vary according to both the type of issue (whether the policy improves women's lives or whether it addresses class inequalities amongst women) and whether it challenges the doctrine of a dominant religion or tradition/culture.

Evidence has shown that **women's political participation** has positive impacts on child outcomes, the quality of governance and that generally, women invest more in development priorities of women (Duflo 2012; Beaman *et al.* 2006). Importantly, women's participation in leadership positions exerts role model effects on younger generations (Beaman *et al.* 2012) that change aspirations and thus have in turn the power to (slowly) change gender roles over time. As one of the most visible active steps to encourage or visibly increase women's political participation after the right to vote, quotas for women have been introduced in parliaments and local governments around the world. Tadros' (2010) introduction to 'Quotas – Add Women and Stir' (2010, this *IDS Bulletin*) offers a great reflection on quota and non-quota strategies to empower women. Several questions are raised, such as on the motivations behind increasing women's political participation which would inherently feed back into the effectiveness and quality of their participation, for example whether they are given a platform and can take the opportunity to actively contribute and can make a difference to women's rights and gender equality. Tadros also questions the positionality of the women who are brought into political positions. Another aspect to consider in terms of providing quotas for women is to understand whether quotas can and should be used as proxies for understanding governments' commitments to gender equality. The issue of family support for women's participation

in politics also becomes essential for women's political empowerment, especially as a lack of recognition of and support for their unpaid care work can inhibit women's participation.

1.4 Addressing insecurities and structural violence

Any process of change creates and is propelled by ruptures in the current order, often symptomatised by reactions and pushbacks from the power-holders. A growing concern over the last decade has been **violence against women and girls**. This violence can be seen both as a reaction against processes that set out to change the existing gender relations, and as a way of maintaining the current social order that keeps women and girls in socially subordinate gender roles. Insecurities, even with varying degrees of severity, across time and space, shape processes of women's empowerment, for example through violence and insecurity during armed conflict and authoritarian rule; sanctioned forms of structural violence or insecurity backed by religious, cultural and customary practices and laws; cultural constructions of gender and sexuality; and everyday forms of insecurity such as domestic violence, any forms of harassment, and physical or verbal abuse (Hossain 2012).

However, in many instances, opposition and resistance to these different types of insecurities awaken and nourish powerful and effective individual and collective resistance and movements, which further the cause of empowerment of women (*ibid.*). Examples of changes, challenges and opportunities arising during and after armed conflict are given in Abdullah *et al.* (2010, this *IDS Bulletin*). Similar to accounts in many other countries that experienced violent conflict, women in Sierra Leone took on new political, economic and social roles during the conflict. However, opportunities created during that time have not been fully carried over into the post-conflict period, with women being marginalised in the peace process and political space, a persistent gender gap in the public sphere and positions of authority, and restricted access to productive and financial resources. Furthermore, the legacies of sexual violations during the war are still experienced by many women in post-conflict settings. With respect to structural violence, Uma Chakravarti's case studies (2008, this *IDS Bulletin*) emphasise women's constant exposure to institutionalised violence, and the role the state plays in perpetuating and facilitating violence. At the same time, the state can also play a critical role in furthering women's empowerment and fighting structural violence.

2 Conclusion

Even as women's empowerment remains a complex concept that defies precise definitions and easy measurements, its importance is widely accepted. This introductory article has shown some of the critical thinking and debates around the issue, reflecting on the interconnectedness of the economic, social and political components of empowerment. Casting an eye to the future, there seem to be two relevant debates that merit further unpacking – that of inequality, and the question of how the SDGs can contribute to furthering processes of women's empowerment and gender equality.

There has been an increasing focus on **inequality**, which is relevant to the concerns of women's empowerment in two significant ways. Firstly, these inequalities are experienced in different ways by women – in fact these experiences which stem also from intersecting elements of identities which include caste, class and race are perpetuated by the cross-cutting aspect of gender relations. Kabeer (1997, this *IDS Bulletin*) discusses not only the differential experiences of poverty, but also the 'kinds of claims and entitlements which women and men mobilise, the goals they prioritise and the forms of agency they can exercise in negotiating meanings and challenging distributions'.

Secondly, inequalities are themselves produced and reproduced through social norms, of which gender roles and social relations in a variety of sites and spaces (home, market, institutions, state) are critical. Gender roles and norms dictate amongst other things, the aspirations and expectations of boys and girls, the choices and opportunities available to different genders, for example the kinds of jobs and their wages available and accessible to them, and the differential access to intra-household resources. Gender roles and social relations dictate the types and level of participation of women in political and civic life. Access to education, health and social life is all mediated by gender roles and relations. These examples are reflective of the links and intersections between economic, political and social inequality on one side, and gender inequalities on the other side. Needless to say, women's empowerment is an important step towards reducing inequalities in the economic, social and political spheres.

There have been attempts to reduce inequalities in the gender arena through **international commitments** in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is significant that although the MDGs had a goal on gender quality and empowerment of women, the indicators for this goal were restricted to 'a very narrow definition of human capabilities as its vision and no reference to human rights' (Kabeer 2015b), thereby not being able to address the complex processes of tackling inequality and furthering empowerment. In practice, the achievement of the MDGs was slow, especially for the most vulnerable women, with their intersecting identities of gender, caste, class, race and ethnicity. Gita Sen (2013, this *IDS Bulletin*) takes stock of the extent to which MDG progress has reached women and girls. She outlines that although some progress has been made, women continue to face more poverty, lower rates of education, access to health services, equal pay for comparable work and lower political participation. Looking forward, the SDG's stand-alone goal on gender equality, women's empowerment and women's rights, as well as the inclusion of gender concerns into other key goals, marks progress in the understanding and acceptance of the multifaceted nature of empowerment. Although a watered-down version of feminist demands, Goal 5 is positive in its incorporation of critical aspects such as recognition of care work; reduction of violence against women and girls in both private and public spaces; and enhancement of political, economic and public participation,

at the same time as recognition of women's rights over productive resources, amongst others. However, the focus on economic growth in the SDGs rather than redistribution of resources, and the inability to recognise reproductive and sexual health and rights in their entirety, is problematic for the holistic realisation of the empowerment agenda.

2.1 Opening spaces for women's empowerment

Looking ahead, Gita Sen (2013, this *IDS Bulletin*) calls for championing an 'issue-focused goal with people-focused targets' approach that addresses the dimensions of legal empowerment, political participation, access to economic resources, human development and social protection. It is important to understand empowerment of women and girls as a political and feminist re-visioning of the world (Chakravarti 2008, this *IDS Bulletin*), at the same time as providing enough space for women to redefine their identities and understand and work on the structures of power, rather than see empowerment as a technical process that the development industry can solve. Even with hard-won policies and laws promoting women's empowerment in place, Cornwall and Edwards (2010, this *IDS Bulletin*) bring to attention the struggles that implementation of these policies and laws entail. Further, they stress the contextual and contingent nature of empowerment processes that involve 'constant negotiation and compromise, with uncertain outcomes'.

The realisation of empowerment calls, therefore, for more attention to both the structural inequalities that women face, and the lived realities of challenging these. Empowerment is necessarily about expanding opportunities and acquiring the power to make choices – both in terms of what women can do, the menu of options available to them, and also about extending their imaginations about what they could do. For economic empowerment, this translates into expanding the choice of work – whether to undertake paid work, where to work, which sector to work – and negotiating the conditions of its payment/remuneration as well as work conditions and safety. This necessitates, therefore, a broader conception of economic empowerment beyond just labour force participation, to take into account the care economy, and providing support for recognition of women's unpaid care work, redistribution through public service provision, and reduction of the drudgery of this work. At the same time, social empowerment implies a recognition of, and working to expand the scope of familial and societal relationships within which women operate, and the way that women see themselves, rather than a focus on individual trajectories disconnected from their contexts. Political empowerment then, would include the choice of whether to participate in decision-making processes and structures, and expanding the conditions under which active participation of women takes place, i.e. women are able to influence both the agenda and outcomes towards promoting gender equity. Finally, along with addressing the structural aspects that restrict and slow down empowerment processes, it is critical to take into account women's own perspectives and decisions on empowerment processes and outcomes, including love, care, leisure, pleasure and relationships (Cornwall and Edwards 2010, this *IDS Bulletin*).

The articles chosen for this special Archive Collection demonstrate the depth and breadth of a nuanced analysis of empowerment that has come out of academic scholars writing at the cutting edge of this field. However, it needs to be noted that our policy tools and strategies have not matched this conceptual advancement, therefore leaving big gaps in policy and programming aimed at furthering processes and outcomes for women's empowerment. It is therefore critical to remember that empowerment – implying an expansion of opportunities and the power to make choices in the intertwined domains of economic, social and political aspects – can only be realised through a collective, rather than individualised notion of empowerment that focuses on addressing structural inequality and inequitable power relations, and gives primacy to women's agency in negotiating and challenging these structures.

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