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Towards A Framework For Assessing Empowerment

Sarah Mosedale

Abstract

When policymakers and practitioners decide that "empowerment" – usually of women or the poor – is a development goal what do they mean? And how do they determine the extent to which it has been achieved? Despite empowerment having become a widely used term in this context there is no accepted method for measuring and tracking changes.

Presumably if we want to see people empowered we consider them to be currently dis-empowered i.e. disadvantaged by the way power relations presently shape their choices, opportunities and well-being. If this is what we mean then we would benefit from being better informed about the debates which have shaped and refined the concept of power and its operation. Many sociologists, political scientists and anthropologists have discussed power but little of this debate appears to have percolated into development studies.

Therefore in this paper I briefly review how the concept of power was debated and refined during the second half of the twentieth century and discuss how power relations might be described and evaluated in a particular context. I then consider how the empowerment of women has been discussed within development studies and make some suggestions as to how it might be assessed.

Towards a framework for assessing empowerment

Sarah Mosedale, EDIAIS

1. Introduction

1.1 What is empowerment?

'Empowering women' has become a frequently cited goal of development interventions. However, while there is now a significant body of literature discussing how women's empowerment has been or might be evaluated, there are still major difficulties in so doing. Furthermore many projects and programmes which espouse the empowerment of women show little if any evidence of attempts even to define what this means in their own context let alone to assess whether and to what extent they have succeeded.

Different people use empowerment to mean different things. However there are four aspects which seem to be generally accepted in the literature on women's empowerment.

Firstly to be empowered one must have been disempowered. It is relevant to speak of empowering women, for example, because, as a group, they are disempowered relative to men.

Secondly empowerment cannot be bestowed by a third party. Rather those who would become empowered must claim it. Development agencies cannot therefore empower women – the most they can achieve is to facilitate women empowering themselves. They may be able to create conditions favourable to empowerment but they cannot make it happen.

Thirdly, definitions of empowerment usually include a sense of people making decisions on matters which are important in their lives and being able to carry them out. Reflection, analysis and action are involved in this process which may happen on an individual or a collective level. There is some evidence that while women's own struggles for empowerment have tended to be collective efforts, empowerment-orientated development interventions often focus more on the level of the individual.

Finally empowerment is an ongoing process rather than a product. There is no final goal. One does not arrive at a stage of being empowered in some absolute sense. People are empowered, or disempowered, relative to others or, importantly, relative to themselves at a previous time.

1.2 Women and empowerment

While the reasons for any particular woman's powerlessness (or power) are many and varied, considering women *per se* necessarily involves questioning what we/they have in common in this respect. The common factor is that, as women, they are all constrained by "the norms, beliefs, customs and values through which societies differentiate between women and men" (Kabeer 2000, 22). The specific ways in which this operates vary culturally and over time. In one situation it might reveal itself in women's lower incomes relative to men, in another it might be seen in the relative survival rates of girl and boy children and in a third by severe restrictions on women's mobility. Virtually everywhere it can be seen in domestic violence, male-dominated decision fora and women's inferior access to assets of many kinds.

A woman's level of empowerment will vary, sometimes enormously, according to other criteria such as her class or caste, ethnicity, relative wealth, age, family position etc and any analysis of women's power or lack of it must appreciate these other contributory dimensions. Nevertheless, focusing on the empowerment of women as a group requires an analysis of gender relations i.e. the ways in which power relations between the sexes are constructed and maintained.

Since gender relations vary both geographically and over time they always have to be investigated in context. It also follows that they are not immutable. At the same time particular manifestations of gender relations are often fiercely defended and regarded as "natural" or God-given. While many development interventions involve challenges to existing power relations it tends to be those which challenge power relations between men and women which are most strongly contested.

While there has been criticism of attempts to "import" Northern feminisms to the South it is patronising and incorrect to assume that feminism is a Northern concept. Women of the South have their own history of organisation and struggle against gender-based injustices. Also, gender analysis arising from the second wave of feminism in the North has benefited from extensive criticism of its initial lack of attention to class and ethnicity and its Eurocentricity and there has now been some twenty years of dialogue and joint action between Northern and Southern feminists.

1.3 Problems for agencies
There are those who argue that empowerment lies beyond the sphere of what can be measured. Others consider attempts to do so to be dangerous in terms of the centre asserting control of the periphery. Certainly measuring processes is more complicated than measuring products and there are obvious contradictions inherent in any attempt to prescribe empowerment. However I would argue that, though difficult, measurement must be undertaken for there can be little point in funding an activity if it is impossible to tell whether or not it has been successful.

Although I argue that the measurement of empowerment has to be undertaken I do not assume that it will be non-problematic. Indeed it is not difficult to see difficulties for agencies which wish to facilitate empowerment and to measure impact. Some of these are practical – if women themselves are to determine what they wish to change about their situation and how they wish to do it then how are agencies to plan, budget for and monitor activities? This is not a new problem however. It has been extensively explored by those pursuing "participatory" models of development who have tested and refined iterative methods of planning, implementing and evaluating interventions which focus on the knowledge and preferences of the intended "beneficiaries".

Such participatory methods have been important within development discourse and practice for some thirty years and there is a sizable body of literature and experience detailing and criticising them. A good deal of refinement has been carried out, of methodologies such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and participatory learning and action (PLA), in response to criticisms that earlier versions tended to reproduce existing local power relations and to fail to engage the most disadvantaged, particularly women whose access to public space is often the most circumscribed. Participatory methodologies for agreeing locally relevant indicators of poverty, including wealth ranking, have informed participatory methodologies for agreeing indicators of empowerment.

However difficulties for agencies seeking to facilitate empowerment go beyond the "merely" practical. Funding agencies are necessarily in a position of power in relation

to activities which they fund. How does this power relationship affect agencies' ability to facilitate the empowerment of women? If participants themselves will largely determine aims, objectives and means the agency has no guarantee that it will like the results.

That women's empowerment can threaten state interests is illustrated by an example from India where women, tired of abuse from drunken husbands and the loss of much of their meagre household income organised to close down all the liquor shops in Andhra Pradesh. They raided them and poured away the alcohol, hijacked delivery trucks, burned down shops and humiliated shop owners and drunken men. The movement was catalysed by a story used in a literacy programme that described a young heroine who did this. The government responded by removing the story from the literacy programme (Stein 1997; 36).

When planning projects and programmes with a view to working towards women's empowerment, agencies need to consider "the extent to which the agency itself is able to accommodate the empowerment of women and to what extent such empowerment is actually threatening to the state and/or the agency" (Mosedale 1998, 52). Again this problem is not limited to agencies seeking to foster empowerment; much development practice seeks to improve the lot of the poor and has the potential to come into conflict with the interests of the relatively privileged.

2. Models of power

It is often remarked that more effort should be made, particularly by those promoting empowerment, to understand the concept of power. Many sociologists, political scientists and anthropologists have discussed power but little of these debates appears to have percolated into development studies. Jo Rowlands, in *Questioning Empowerment*, notes that "it is in its avoidance of discussing power that the fundamental weakness of the literature on women and development lies" (Rowlands 1997; v). Her intention is to "encourage more precise usage and to explore how a more disciplined use of the concept of empowerment might provide a useful tool for activism, gender planning, project planning and evaluation" (Rowlands 1997; vi). Here I attempt therefore to introduce what seem to me to be some of the most pertinent debates.

2.1 Three faces of power
Within the social sciences power was first typified as *power over*. As Robert Dahl defined it "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 1957, 202-203). "In this approach, power is understood as a product of conflicts between actors to determine who wins and who loses on key, clearly recognised issues, in a relatively open system in which there are established decision-making arenas" (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001).

Subsequently a second dimension or face of power was recognised - the ability to prevent certain people or issues from getting to the decision-making arena in the first place. Bachrach and Baratz argued that political scientists must focus "both on who gets what, when and how and who gets left out and how" (Bachrach and Baratz 1970, 105). This dimension of power is concerned with the rules and methods of legitimising some voices and discrediting others.

Stephen Lukes then suggested that perhaps "the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict arising in the first place" (Lukes 1974, 24). From this perspective the powerful may win conflicts not only by doing so in open conflict or by preventing opposing voices from being heard. They may also get their own way by so

manipulating the consciousnesses of the less powerful as to make them incapable of seeing that a conflict exists. As Sen observes "There is much evidence in history that acute inequalities often survive precisely by making allies out of the deprived. The underdog comes to accept the legitimacy of the unequal order and becomes an implicit accomplice" (Sen 1990, 26).

These three dimensions (or faces) of *power over* therefore consist of one party getting their own way against the interests of another party either by winning in open conflict, preventing their opponent being heard or preventing their potential opponent from even realising that there is a conflict of interests. These are all examples of a zero sum game i.e. by definition one person's gain is another's loss (even if, as in the third dimension above, the loser may not even be aware of her loss).

2.2 Non zero-sum models of power
Other forms of power also appear in the literature where one person's gain is not necessarily another's loss. These tend to be referred to as *power within, power to* and *power with*.

Power within, for example, refers to assets such as self-esteem and self-confidence. In a sense all power starts from here – such assets are necessary before anything else can be achieved. "[A] woman who is subjected to violent abuse when she expresses her own opinions may start to withhold her opinions and eventually come to believe she has no opinions of her own. When control becomes internalised in this way, overt use of power over is no longer necessary" (Rowlands 1998; 12). The internalisation of such feelings of worthlessness is a well-recognised feature of women's oppression and therefore many development interventions seek to bring about changes at this level.

Joke Schrijvers uses the term "autonomy" and defines it to mean, "a fundamental criticism of the existing social, economic and political order…an anti-hierarchical concept, which stimulates critical and creative thinking and action… transformation which comes from within, which springs from inner resources of one's own as an individual or a collectivity" (Scrijvers, 1991, 5-6 *quoted in* Stromquist, 1995, 15-16)

Power to is defined as "generative or productive power (sometimes incorporating or manifesting as forms of resistance or manipulation) which creates new possibilities and actions without domination" (Rowlands 1997; 13). In other words this is power which increases the boundaries of what is achievable for one person without *necessarily* tightening the boundaries of what is achievable for another party. For example if you learn to read it makes many more things possible for you. It does not restrict me (except, I suppose, from using your illiteracy to benefit myself).

Power with refers to collective action, recognising that more can be achieved by a group acting together than by individuals alone. Many interventions aiming to empower women note the importance of creating opportunities for women to spend time with other women reflecting on their situation, recognising the strengths they do posses and devising strategies to achieve positive change.

To develop critical minds women need a place where new ideas can be discussed and new demands arise. For Sara Evans, the prerequisites for developing an "insurgent collective identity" are:
- Social spaces where people can develop an independent sense of worth as opposed to their usual status as second-class or inferior citizens
- Role models – seeing people breaking out of patterns of passivity

- An ideology that explains the sources of oppression, justifies revolt, and imagines a qualitatively different future
- A threat to the newfound sense of self which forces the individual to confront inherited cultural definitions
- A network through which a new interpretation can spread, activating a social movement

(Evans 1979, 219-220).

2.3 De-facing power

Clarissa Rile Hayward, writing in 1998, criticises the fundamental choice of question which theorists on the nature of power have sought to answer i.e. the question "What does it mean to say that A has power over B?" She points out some problematic assumptions that this approach involves – not least the distinction between free action and action shaped by the action of others. In developing their description of how A prevails over B through the mechanisms of first, second and third-dimensional power, theorists have maintained this distinction as central to their understanding of how power shapes human freedom.

Hayward argues that "any definition of the line dividing free action form action that is in part the product of power's exercise itself serves the political function of privileging as natural, chosen or true some realm of social action" (Hayward 1998, 26). She illustrates this with reference to a scenario outlined by Jeffrey Isaac (Isaac, 1987). He argues that a teacher going to school to give a lecture exercises the power of a teacher. Yet tomorrow the students might boycott class and conduct their own teach-in. Isaac offers this as an example of the fact that, although the structure of education requires teachers to be dominant and students subordinate, the way this relationship is worked out in concrete practice is contingent and dependent on the way particular groups and individuals choose to deal with their circumstances. This view, in considering the boycott as "free choice" removes it from the category of what may be considered interesting and worth analysing in terms of power relations.

Hayward however contests this view. She argues that whether or not a given student takes part in the boycott probably "depends upon social influences that are themselves unchosen: her parents' childrearing practices for example, or norms prevailing among her peers at school" (Hayward, 1998, 26). "Once one acknowledges that identity itself is in part a product of power relations, that fields of action are necessarily bound, for example, through processes of acculturation and identity formation, it becomes necessary to reject a view of power that presupposes the possibility of distinguishing free action from action shaped by the action of others" (Hayward, 1998, 26).

Hayward suggests that power might be more usefully thought of "not as instruments powerful agents use to prevent the powerless from acting freely, but rather as social boundaries that, together, define fields of action for all actors" Hayward, 1998, 27). Mechanisms include laws, rules, norms, customs, social identities and standards that both constrain and enable action. Whereas those using the three faces of power model think of freedom as independent action, using Hayward's model, freedom is defined as "the capacity to act upon the boundaries that constrain and enable social action by, for example, changing their shape or direction" (Hayward, 1998, 27).

Under this view the appropriate focus of the study of power remains the same – i.e. "patterned asymmetries in the ways in which power – that is, the network of social limits which defines fields of action – shapes freedom" (Hayward 1998, 28). But instead of asking how power is distributed and whether A has power over B the

question is "How do power's mechanisms define the (im)possible, the (im)probable, the natural, the normal, what counts as a problem?… Do fields of social possibility vary systematically, for example, among groups or across social settings?" (Hayward, 1998, 28).

Any limit to action that is at least partly the product of human action then becomes a valid subject for critical analysis. This obviously includes limits to action that no particular agent A might be plausibly held to "have" or to "use". In her example of American public education Hayward would include such limits to action as "the local school district, municipal boundaries, zooming regulations, tax and housing policies, a firmly entrenched tradition of local control over public schooling and a decidedly narrow constitutional interpretation of the role of states in providing education" (Hayward, 1998, 30).

By this view power relations are not only inescapable but necessary for promoting a range of social goods. Rather than asking whether the actions of some are constrained by the action of others we should look for significant differences in social entitlement and constraint and consider how entrenched or mutable such differences might be. The greater and more asymmetrical are the social limits that define what is possible within a given power relation then the closer that relation approximates a state of domination. "Critical questions about how power shapes freedom are not, then, reduced to questions about distribution and individual choice. Rather, they are questions about the differential impact of social limits to human action on people's capacities to participate in shaping their lives and in shaping the conditions of their collective existence" (Hayward 1998, 32).

Hayward takes pains to explain that she does not reject the critical project that has driven the power debate. She sees her contribution as mainly methodological and offers defacing power as a contribution to the project of identifying and criticising differential forms of social constraint on freedom in order to inform strategies for changing them.

2.4 Foucault and feminism
 "Few thinkers have influenced contemporary feminist scholarship on the themes of power, sexuality and the subject to the extent that Michel Foucault has" (Deveaux 1996, 211). Foucault's development of his model of power involves recognising the existence of multiple power relations. Power is considered to *circulate* and to be *exercised* rather than *possessed. R*esistance, where individuals contest fixed identities and relations in ways which may be subtle, is seen as an inevitable companion of power.

Feminists have both critically analysed and built on this model. The exploration of women's day-to-day experience of and resistance to power relations has been productive both in demonstrating the diverse sources of women's subjugation and in celebrating and spreading resistance. Indeed consciousness-raising groups in the UK, from the 1970s on, used the sharing of exactly such lived experiences to great effect in changing awareness and motivating collective action for change. The feminist assertion that "the personal is political" was part of the process of recognising that power was exercised in personal relationships (and not just between men and women) as well as in more public arenas.

Indeed the recognition that women's day-to-day struggles and cooperation with the men in their lives (not just husbands and lovers but fathers, brothers, sons etc) involved power relations challenged an important aspect of the agenda-setting aspect of male power i.e. that which defined what went on in the family as "private".

This breaking down of women's isolation within the family and the concomitant taboos against breaking this imposed silence were an important constituent of "second wave Western feminism" and can be observed in many different cultural settings today.

Foucault described the modern paradigm of power as having two axes. One, which emphasises a disciplined, useful body, is the "anatamo-politics of the human body". In the other, the "bio-politics of the population", the state's attention turns to reproduction i.e. health, birth and mortality. Foucault's "docile bodies" thesis is taken up by some feminists who find his account of self-surveillance useful in describing women's internalisation of patriarchal standards of femininity. As Foucault describes the process "There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. A superb formula: power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be at minimal cost" (Foucault 1980, 96).

Foucault's own analysis did not extend to recognising that bodily experiences are different for men and women or to considering that the (usually female) problematic conditions of anorexia and bulimia might be "located on a continuum with feminine normalising phenomena such as the use of makeup, fashion and dieting, all of which contribute to the construction of docile, feminine bodies" (Bordo 1989, 23 *paraphrased in* Deveaux, 216). And, since he did not focus on women, Foucault failed to recognise "the subjective and deeply interiorised effects upon women ourselves both of the emotional care we give and of the care we fail to get in return" (Bartky 1991, 111).

Foucault's model has been criticised for overlooking the broader, structural aspects of power and resistance. By refusing to engage in normative discussions Foucault's theory "undermines attempts at social change by obscuring the systematic nature of gender oppression"…"power, being everywhere, is ultimately nowhere" (Hartsock, N. 1990, 170).

Collins argues that these two conceptions of power – the dialectical relationship linking oppression and activism where groups with more power oppress those with less and the concept of power as an intangible entity which circulates and to which individuals stand in varying relationships - are more usefully regarded as complementary than competing (Collins 2000, 275). Dialectical approaches indicate the need to develop group-based identity and strategies whereas the circulation model directs attention to "how domination and resistance shape and are shaped by individual agency" (Collins 2000, 275). Collins proposes a model of power (and resistance) in four domains – the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal domains.

The structural domain of power is where social organisations are organised to reproduce women's subordination over time. This includes the police, the legal system, schools, labour markets, banking, insurance and the media. Within this domain power cannot accrue to individuals without transforming the social institutions that foster their exclusion. In the disciplinary domain power relations are managed through bureaucratic hierarchies and techniques of surveillance. "Bureaucracies, regardless of the policies they promote, remain dedicated to disciplining and controlling their workforce and clientele" (Collins 2000, 281). The hegemonic domain of power deals with ideology, culture and consciousness and is important in involving women in supporting the own subordination and that of other groups. The interpersonal domain of power "functions through routinized day-to-day practices of

how people treat one another… such practices are systematic, recurrent and so familiar that they often go unnoticed" (Collins 2000, 287).

2.5 Understanding power relations – an example
The model of power towards which I am moving is complex and fluid. It includes structural faultlines based on, for example, sex and class where membership of a particular group (women, peasants) has significant implications for the shape of the power structure within which an individual operates. This is not to say that membership of such a group is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for the particular geometry of any individual's position in this power structure. This would be to deny people any individual or collective agency which is obviously absurd. However it is to accept that group membership constrains a person's possibilities and defines some boundaries, which being socially constructed can therefore be changed. The extent to which an individual presses against, or accepts, these boundaries and the extent to which change is opposed (and the power of those opposing it) all contribute to the shape and durability of these boundaries.

I also recognise that people have more or less power depending on their specific situation and that they can be relatively powerless in one situation and relatively powerful in another. On a micro level I see each person at the centre of their own space of freedom, a space defined by, and defining, the shifting contours of the multiple containers which circumscribe their lives.

The part of the empowerment debate which I intend to focus on, as both the most interesting and the most under-researched, is that model of women's empowerment which asserts that its function is to radically change oppressive gender relations. In other words the model of power which I wish to use is strongly influenced by Hayward in that what is of interest is how women can build "the capacity to participate effectively in shaping the social limits that define what is possible" (Hayward 1998, 32). The question which I wish to consider particularly closely is how we may know whether or not such changes are being achieved in the field by development interventions which seek to empower women in this way.

Assessing empowerment then requires identifying and mapping power relations i.e. the social constraints to action, including the amount of freedom of action or room to manoeuvre contained within each boundary and the strength of resistance to change of the boundaries. Changes over time could then be identified. But how is this to be done?

Attempting to map the entire network of constraints to action in any situation would be a horribly complex task and one probably best not attempted. Instead assessment would focus on an action or group of actions identified as most significant by those constrained.

Let us consider education as an example. Firstly we could discuss whether this is an area in which the constraints to action are significantly different for women and men. For any particular situation (country, region, village, family) we could compare primary school enrolment or completion rates for boys and girls, look at literacy levels for each group, consider relative rates of entry to secondary or tertiary education and so on. We would of course find that in many contexts girls were significantly disadvantaged relative to boys.

I now consider the situation where a girl wishes to expand her own freedom of action in order to start going to school. Starting from a "three faces of power" perspective questions relating to open, suppressed or avoided conflict can be asked. Informed by

the "de-faced" model of course we can also consider constraints which are not consciously imposed by any identifiable agent. We can also consider non-zero sum power relations.

Power over:
Is there an open conflict? In this case a girl wants to go to school but other, more powerful, people or social mores act so as to prevent her. Who? Why?
For example – her parents (mother or father or both?)
- because her labour is needed at home
- because they cannot afford books/uniform
- because they can see no benefit or consider that costs outweigh benefits
- because any economic benefits from her education will benefit her future husband's family not her birth family
- because it is not socially acceptable for girls to be educated
- because they fear losing her or her rejecting them if she becomes educated

For each of these (or other) reasons, questions could be asked as to how immutable such opposition is. For example: How much is her labour needed at home? What extra input would be needed from elsewhere to allow her to be freed from this requirement?

Is there a suppressed conflict? Is it impossible for the girl to say what she wants? Why?
For example
- because she is afraid of being punished
- because she is afraid of being mocked
- because, believing they are too poor, she does not wish to embarrass her parents
- because she is afraid of causing conflict between her parents
- because she knows it is not considered appropriate for girls to express their wishes
- because she wants to be good

Is it impossible for the girl to even develop the desire to go to school? Why?
- because she has never heard of a girl going to school
- because she cannot conceive of herself as being someone who could learn to read and write
- because she cannot imagine any benefits of being educated
- because she has been socialised so as to have very little perception of herself as an individual
- because she entirely models herself on her (uneducated) mother
- because she has internalised her community's beliefs that this is inappropriate for girls
- because she believes it will damage her marriage prospects

Power within
What does a girl need in order to pursue education? For example:
- ability to analyse her situation and think of improvements
- belief that her actions can have effects
- curiosity about the wider world
- confidence that she could learn
- some consciousness of the benefits of education

Power with

Are there any potential allies? For example:
- other girls who want to go to school
- other girls who do go to school
- sympathetic family member
- mothers or fathers who want their daughters to go to school or already send their daughters to school
- teachers who are trying to encourage parents to send girls to school
- projects which offer benefits to those who educate their daughters

Social values, norms

What are the factors that limit girls' choices about education? For example (taken from the UK before women gained widespread access to education):
- belief that women's role is domestic/childcare and does not require formal education
- belief that women's reproductive abilities will be damaged by education
- belief that education will cause women to challenge their socially ascribed gender roles
- belief that education will threaten institution of marriage

How do such values differ for girls from e.g. rural / urban background, peasant / working class / middle class, minority / majority ethnic groups etc?

3. Empowerment

3.1 Empowerment in development studies

As already noted there is no single, widely accepted definition of empowerment. On the one hand it is argued that "it is only by a focus on change to existing patterns of power and its use that any meaningful change can be brought about" (Oakley 2001; 14). On the other hand it can be said to involve "recognising the capacities of such groups [the marginalized and oppressed] to take action and to play an active role in development initiatives" (Oakley 2001; 14).

Oakley identifies five key uses of the term empowerment in development studies. These are: empowerment as participation, empowerment as democratisation, empowerment as capacity building, empowerment through economic improvement and empowerment and the individual (Oakley 2001; 43). He considers the link between empowerment and participation as the strongest in practice, The World Bank, for example, "began to recognise several stages of participation: information sharing, consultation, collaboration and finally, empowerment" (World Bank 1998; 19).

In this primarily project-based view of empowerment the term is depoliticised, divorced from power structures and inequalities. Oakley cites Oxfam as an example of the more radical view which identifies empowerment as "essentially concerned with analysing and addressing the dynamics of oppression" and "explicitly rejects the notion that 'participation' in development in donor-funded projects is a sign of 'empowerment'" (Oakley 2001; 43).

Empowerment as democratisation is concerned with macro-level political activity. Empowerment is seen as the basis on which democratic structures and practices can be built. This approach leads to strategies of support for civil society structures and grassroots organisations. Capacity-building in general is often regarded as

empowering, although there are many approaches, some of which seem little more than training.

Empowerment through economic improvement is an approach which (unsurprisingly given women's well-documented relative lack of economic power) has been extensively used with women. Based on the assumption that women's relative powerlessness is primarily a function of their poverty, such interventions often focus on microfinance and small business development activities, targeted at women.

Empowerment at the individual level is strongly influenced by Freire's work and includes consciousness raising and the development of a critical faculty (Freire 1974).

However, despite its having "identified empowerment as a… primary development assistance goal… neither the World Bank nor any other major development agency has developed a rigorous method for measuring and tracking changes in levels of empowerment" (Malhotra, A. *et al* 2002, 3).

3.2 Women's empowerment in development studies

UNIFEM (the United Nations Development Fund for Women) considers that women's economic empowerment is essential for any strategy of poverty alleviation and defines this as "having access to and control over the means to make a living on a sustainable and long term basis, and receiving the material benefits of this access and control. Such a definition goes beyond short-term goals of increasing women's access to income and looks for longer term sustainable benefits, not only in terms of changes to laws and policies that constrain women's participation in and benefits from development, but also in terms of power relationships at the household, community and market levels" (Carr, nd, 2).

Here empowerment is linked specifically to women and this too is now common in development discourse. The Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration declares the United Nation's determination to "intensify efforts to ensure equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all women and girls who face multiple barriers to their empowerment and advancement because of such factors as their race, age, language, culture, religion or disability or because they are indigenous people" (United Nations, 1985; para 32).

In the 1970s when women's empowerment was first invoked by Third World feminist and women's organisations "it was explicitly used to frame and facilitate the struggle for social justice and women's equality through a transformation of economic, social and political structures at national and international levels" (Bisnath and Elson nd; 1). Among feminists there is concern that, in moving from the margins to the mainstream, there has been "an attempt to co-opt the gender and development approach by 'including' it in development discourse, smothering the politics as part of the terms of 'inclusion' and thereby keeping the development process non-threatening" (Porter and Verghese 1999; 131).

In the 1990s many agencies used the term "women's empowerment" in association with a wide variety of strategies including those which focused on "enlarging the choices and productivity of individual women, for the most part, in isolation from a feminist agenda; and in the context of a withdrawal of state responsibility for broad-based economic and social support" (Bisnath 2001, 11). It is frequently cited, for example, in the context of providing micro credit to women and there is an extensive literature debating the effectiveness (or not) of this strategy in terms of empowering women. It does seem clear that many women have benefited from increased access

to and control over cash but evidence also indicates that "female targeting without adequate support networks and empowerment strategies will merely shift the burden of household debt and household subsistence onto women" (Mayoux 2002; 7).

For Bina Agarwa "if… self-help groups were de-linked from their single point focus on credit and invested with more transformative agendas such as finding innovative ways of improving women's situation economically, challenging social inequality, improving women's voice in the public sphere and so on, they could prove more effective vehicles for empowerment" (Agarwal 2001, 7). She argues that any strategy that seeks women's empowerment should have, as a central component the enhancement of women's ability to function collectively in their own interest.

In an influential paper in 1994, Srilatha Batliwala discusses how women's empowerment has become a popular development concept. The interaction between feminism and Freire's popular education (which completely ignored gender) produced women struggling to demonstrate and change how gender is constructed socially and to build alternatives. Failures in development interventions were in part ascribed to approaches which did not recognise the underlying factors perpetuating women's oppression and exploitation. Batliwala chooses to sidestep the debate about power and to define it simply as "control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology" (Batliwala 1994, 128). "The process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power may then be termed *empowerment*" (Batliwala 1994, 130).

Batliwala points out that empowerment is not a necessary result of economic strength. (Rich women suffer domestic abuse and rape too.) The process of empowerment involves, first, women recognising the ideology that legitimises male domination and understanding how it perpetuates their oppression.

Batliwala recognises that women have been led to participate in their own oppression and therefore external change agents, which may take a variety of forms, are deemed necessary for empowerment. Women need access to a new body of ideas and information that not only changes their consciousness and self-image but also encourages action. Batliwala conceptualises empowerment as thus "a spiral, changing consciousness, identifying areas to target for change, planning strategies, acting for change, and analyzing activities and outcomes" (Batliwala 1994, 132).

She identifies three strategies for women's empowerment in development interventions. These are the *integrated development* approach which ascribes women's powerlessness to their greater poverty, ill health etc and therefore aims to help meet women's basic survival needs. The *economic development* approach focuses on building around women's strengths as waged workers and promoting the view that further empowerment will be a spin off of economic empowerment. The *consciousness-raising and organising* approach "is based on a more complex understanding of gender relations and women's status" (Batliwala 1994, 135). Strategies focus on organising women to recognise and challenge gender and class-based discrimination in all aspects of life whether public or private.

Batliwala is quite prescriptive as to what organising for women's empowerment involves. After the poorest and most oppressed women of a particular area have been identified, activists are trained to develop forums where women can "look at themselves and their environment in new ways, develop a positive self-image, recognise their strengths, and explode sexist misconceptions" (Batliwala 1994, 136). By developing a critical analysis of the ideology of gender women become aware not just of their "condition" but also their "position". Resistance from men occurs when

women challenge patriarchal family relations – for Batliwala such challenges are a test of how far the empowerment process has reached into women's lives. She quotes Kannabiran, an activist, as saying "the family is the last frontier of change in gender relations… You know [empowerment] has occurred when it crosses the threshold of the home" (Batliwala 1994, 131).

According to Nelly Stromquist, empowerment is a socio-political concept that must include cognitive, psychological, economic and political components. The cognitive component refers to women's understanding of the causes of their subordination. It involves "understanding the self and the need to make choices that may go against cultural or social expectations" (Stromquist 1995, 14). It includes knowledge about legal rights and sexuality (beyond family planning techniques). The psychological component includes women believing that they can act at personal and social levels to improve their condition. It involves an escape from "learned helplessness" and the development of self-esteem and confidence. For the economic component Stromquist argues that, although work outside the home often implies a double burden, access to such work increases economic independence and therefore independence in general. The political component includes the ability to imagine one's situation and mobilise for social change. "Collective action is fundamental to the aim of attaining social transformation" (Stromquist 1995, 15).

Susil Sirivardana described a "core methodology of social mobilisation in women's empowerment" (Sirivardana 2001) which has been practised in South Asia over some twenty-five years and which has some points in common with Batliwala's prescription. It too focuses on helping poor women "to critically understand their reality and the causes creating structural poverty… and at the same time, helping them to transform and reconstruct their reality in conditions of autonomy" (Sirivardana 2001, 6). It too is used in groups rather than with individuals and involves building up women's own knowledge of their situation. An external facilitator engages with the poorest and begins to investigate the social reality of the village with them. Through collective action and reflection, both savings groups and later, broader organisations of the poor, emerge, as do internal facilitators.

Rowlands considers empowerment in the context of social work and education where "there is broad agreement… that empowerment is a process; that it involves some degree of personal development, but that this is not sufficient; and that it involves moving from insight to action" (Rowlands 1997; 15).

She developed a model of women's empowerment with three dimensions– personal, close relationships and collective. At each level inhibiting and encouraging factors influence a set of core values and lead to changes. The importance of context is understood and the model is intended to be used to identify specific items within each category appropriate to local circumstances. For example at the level of personal experience/history the core values she identified during her Honduras-based research were: self-confidence; self-esteem; sense of agency; sense of "self" in wider context and dignity. Inhibiting factors included machismo, fatalism, active opposition by partner, health problems and poverty. Encouraging factors included activity outside the home, being part of a group, travel, time for self and literacy. Changes were expressed as increased ability to: hold and express opinions; learn, analyse and act; organise own time and obtain and control resources.

Kabeer, in an influential paper, suggests that "empowerment…refers to the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer 1999; 437). This definition makes clear that only those previously denied such abilities can be considered to be empowered and also

that the choices in question are strategic. Kabeer defines strategic choices as ones "which are critical for people to live the lives they want (such as choice of livelihood, whether and who to marry, whether to have children etc)" as opposed to "less consequential choices which may be important for the quality of one's life but do not constitute its defining parameters" (Kabeer 1999, 437). It is worth noting that this use of the term "strategic" is different from that popularised by Moser where women's "strategic" interests are those which challenge their subordination as women while their "practical" interests are those which help them to carry out their gender-assigned roles more easily.

Having analysed a number of studies of women's empowerment, Kabeer goes on to argue that the ability to exercise such choice is made up of three interrelated and indivisible elements – resources, agency and achievements – all of which need attention before assertions about empowerment can be made. Intuitively this is attractive – it is not difficult to imagine scenarios where the presence of only one or two of these elements would not demonstrate empowerment. For example a benevolent dictator could provide enhanced food resources which led to achievements such as improved nutrition without having any impact on the recipient's ability to make strategic life choices.

Resources are identified as not only material but also human and social and as including future claims and expectations as well as actual allocations. Access to such resources "will reflect the rules and norms which govern distribution and exchange in different institutional areas" (Kabeer 1999; 437).

Agency is the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. As well as observable action it includes an individual's sense of agency (or power within). Usually thought of as 'decision-making', agency can also involve "bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance" (Kabeer 1999; 438).

In *The Power to Choose* Kabeer discusses how agency has been dealt with in the social sciences. Economists have used rational choice theory which assumes individuals will be consistent in their preferences over the full range of possible choices. This theory – that all decision-making could be explained in terms of a rational choice calculation - was greeted with incredulity by some. Attempts to critique such sweeping claims have led to an alternative economics which discards the idea of "rational economic man" in favour of "imperfectly rational, somewhat economic, person" (Folbre 1994, 20 *quoted in* Kabeer 2000, 20).

A realistic evaluation of the effort that would be involved in actually examining all one's possible choices, weighing them up correctly and then rationally making the best choice has also helped lead to an analysis which takes into account "inertness" or non-decisionmaking. Many aspects of behaviour are in fact governed by rules and norms, some of which have a role in defining and maintaining the social order. Prominent among such norms are those which determine appropriate behaviour for men and women. These gendered identities are developed throughout life and cannot easily be shaken off because of some relatively minor change. Nevertheless as Agarwal points out "social norms are not immutable, and are themselves subject to bargaining and change, even if the time horizon for changing some types of norms may be a long one. Indeed a good deal of what is socially passed off as natural and indisputable, including women's roles and modes of behaviour may be the outcomes of past ideological struggles" (Agarwal 1997, 19).

4 Conclusion
This paper is fuelled by a desire to make a contribution to remedying some of the more brutal injustices being meted out to women today. When we read of, or meet, women whose survival strategies include hiding small piles of money in different places so that they can fool their husbands, after a beating, that they are surrendering all their savings to him (Risseeuw, C. 1988, 278) do we not want to change such situations?

To attract the attention of policymakers it has been necessary to make the case (which has been done effectively elsewhere so does not need repeating here) that empowering women has many beneficial spin offs which nicely fit with development priorities. It is of course equally valid to argue that such gross asymmetries of power between men and women are themselves legitimate targets for change.

It is evident that the term empowerment has become a buzzword within development studies and is used to add glamour (rather than value) to interventions which actually seek to achieve a variety of economic and social outcomes, which, though they may be extremely desirable in themselves, do not necessarily challenge existing patterns of power.

In contrast I therefore define women's empowerment as the process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to men, from being and doing. Or, if you like, women's empowerment is the process by which women redefine gender roles in ways which extend their possibilities for being and doing.

This is very closely related to Kabeer's definition ("women's empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer 1999, 435) but has two important differences.

First it emphasises the gendered nature of women's disempowerment. When we speak of women's empowerment we are defining individuals as "women" and in that case we are considering the ways in which they are disempowered *as women*. This is not to deny that women have multiple identities and are also farmers, workers, traders etc. and will choose at times to work together with men to improve their mutual situation. (Of course struggles with men for common goals as peasants, workers, colonial subjects etc. will, as has been shown many times in history, need to be combined with struggle around gender roles too if women are not to find themselves still disadvantaged as women once the common struggle is over.) Women's gendered identities disempower them in their public roles as well as within the home. Therefore women can act to challenge gender roles as part of any collective struggle they are involved in.

The second difference from Kabeer's definition is perhaps more subtle but, I think, real. Her definition involves focusing on individuals acquiring an ability to choose whereas mine focuses on redefining and extending the limits of what is possible. It therefore has more of an emphasis on women achieving a change that expands options not only for themselves but also for women in general both now and in the future.

Assessing empowerment
I suggest that a framework for assessing empowerment should include the following components.

Identifying constraints to action
This is the core of the framework and fulfils a number of functions. Because identifying constraints is necessarily a participative process it contributes towards building an understanding among the women involved of how they are discriminated against on the basis of their gender (and a desire for, and belief in the possibility of, change).

When carried out for a particular action (as in the example given in section 2.5 of attending school) it can be used to identify a baseline – i.e. to define the state of gendered power relations before any action is taken. By repeating the process at a later date change can be identified. It can therefore be determined whether power relations have shifted towards becoming more equitable.

Identifying how women's agency has developed
In a sense this is a mirror image to identifying constraints. If constraints to action are loosened then, by definition, possibilities for action (agency) are increased. And, *vice versa,* if possibilities for action are increased then constraints have loosened.

However we are interested not only in possibilities for action but in actual action taken. For example women's rights to land tenure might be made more equal to men's through legislation – a good thing in itself of course. And it will certainly reduce formal constraints on women's action. But will women take advantage of the new legislation or will social pressures prevent them from doing so? In this case there has been little impact on women's agency or empowerment.

Analysing changes in women's agency will involve considering both the individual and collective level. It will involve seeking answers to question such as:
- How have women's views about gender changed?
- How have their feelings about themselves changed (self-confidence, self-worth, potential etc.)
- What can women do now that they wanted to do but could not do before?
- Do women believe that it will be easier for their daughters to do these things now?
- What new or existing resources (broadly defined) were used to achieve this?
- How have women worked with each other to achieve this?
- In what way did external assistance contribute?

Identifying how women's agency changed constraints to action
Practitioners of impact assessment are familiar with the complexities of attribution i.e. determining whether observed changes are a result of an intervention or caused by some external factor. The necessity to consider this as part of the assessment exists in this case too but the attribution question has also to be faced at an extra level when considering empowerment.

Because we define empowerment as the process by which *women* redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do etc., we have to question whether or not any identified relaxation of constraints has come about as a result of women's actions or for some other reason. If it is because of women's action then it is a straightforward example of empowerment – women have succeeded in expanding the realm of what is possible for them. On the other hand, have constraints been loosened by some means other than women's action? In this case we cannot talk of empowerment because as is generally agreed empowerment cannot be bestowed but must be won. Nevertheless the loosening of constraints could represent a real improvement in the situation of women – and theoretically eventually such

improvements could result in a situation where women were no longer disempowered – i.e. a situation where empowerment would no longer be a matter for concern. The point is that, while any improvement in power relations is welcome and valuable in itself, it is only when this comes about as a result of women's action that empowerment would be the appropriate term to use.

Questions we could investigate include:
- What actions did women take, individually or collectively to challenge constraints to action?
- How did women support each other and learn from each others actions?
- How did women resist such constraints either overtly or covertly?
- What opposition did women encounter?
- To what extent and how was opposition overcome?
- How secure do women think their newly expanded freedoms of action are?
- What action, if any, do they intend to take to defend their improved position?

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APPENDIX

This was developed by participants on training programmes which were part of the UNDP funded project "Expansion of Skills-based Literacy Programme of Women" better known as "Educate to Empower".

The profile of the empowered woman (Aksomkool 1995, 55-56)

The empowered woman appreciates the time she spends on domestic work and outside the home. She is aware that overwork is harmful to her physical and mental condition and that health is vital. She is able to question her double responsibility and seeks help from others to have enough leisure to spend on learning and participating in the social and political life of the community.

The empowered woman appreciates the value of her contribution, whether remunerated or not. She is aware that she has tremendous potential to contribute to the progress of her family, community and nation. With that understanding, she is confident of her worth, is open-minded and can appreciate others.

Aware of her productivity, she seeks to improve her skills and knowledge continuously. She has enough information sources (such as extension services, available and relevant technology) and makes sure she benefits from them. She appreciates the knowledge gained from reading and reads regularly.

The empowered woman understands that she is a human being and can control her own life. Hence, she could and should question the family and social practices which negatively affect her. She seeks to get scientific insights into superstitions, and challenges those which are unjust to women.

She has freedom of movement and expression on a par with men. She appreciates her strengths and weaknesses and seeks self-improvement.

She can lead and serve as a positive role model for other women.

The empowered woman is aware of her rights as a citizen and protects them actively. She is convinced of her equality with men. She knows which laws and legal processes treat women unfairly and seeks to use her legal knowledge to protect her own and other women's rights.

The empowered woman respects herself and dares take credit and responsibility for her contribution and action. She looks for options and makes informed decisions. She dares to be different and creative.

The empowered woman appreciates and supports other women. She is aware that organisation means strength and seeks to strengthen her organisational, management and leadership skills.

The empowered woman is aware that her health is related to the number of children she has. She respects the dignity of womanhood and appreciates daughters in the same way she does sons.

The empowered woman nurtures herself. She wants everybody to understand that, as a human being, she is entitled to happiness in the same way that others are.

She has a zest for life.