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as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication”
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Topic 2: Empowerment of women as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication

***“Poverty, Empowerment and Gendered life cycles:
Latin American perspectives”***

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* The views expressed in this paper, which has been reproduced as received, are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Introduction

It is becoming increasingly clear that the models of poverty that have dominated our discussion over many years are far too static and unidimensional. This meeting, which addresses women's empowerment, poverty and gender inequality, and paths towards a more dynamic framework focused on life-cycles, is welcome and far overdue. This meeting suggests that we are close to producing the changes needed in research paradigms and alternative action by g

a. *Symbolic versus “real” power*

It is perplexingly common, in human societies, that women possess and use power of various types, yet they are constructed, symbolically or ideologically,

rewards of their high investments in “social assets”. This literature directs our attention to the world of social relationships and social exchanges as being an important arena in which to examine the nexus between poverty (or its absence), life cycle, and women’s empowerment.

2. Gendered life cycles, poverty cycles, and dynamic distributions of power

Our mandate here is to link power to the concept and to the lived reality of poverty. We must locate “empowerment” within a framework of development and of expanding economic opportunities. This privileges definitions of power that bring to the fore the capacity to act, resolve problems, create and transform. Moving out of poverty involves better management of a wide range of resources in new (and old; e.g. family) groups and combinations. Becoming empowered implies gaining control over the factors that influence livelihood strategies and thus reducing vulnerability.

A thought experiment:

One way of entering into the complex issues we have before us is through a thought experiment. What might be some of the components of “power to” that are relevant to avoiding or overcoming poverty, from the perspective of the individual woman actor?

- Smoothing out shocks and crises
- Managing relations in groups whose cooperation is necessary for successful livelihood strategies
- Developing one’s own capabilities and functionings as these are relevant to livelihood success
- Raising one’s bargaining capacity (including self-esteem and self-confidence); obtaining better terms of trade
- Heightening the degree of control over “fields” of actors and events (information, prediction, technology, control of resources in demand by others)
- Eliminating violence and coercion from exchange relationships
- Facilitating transfer of knowledge and skills to children, associates, and assistants and to expand the scope, effectiveness, and productivity of one’s livelihood activities

What might be relevant dimensions of power and empowerment, from a societal perspective? What would be an empowering environment for women?

- Institutions and rule regimes shaped to serve and encourage women’s livelihood activities
- Broad dissemination of information, knowledge and understanding of the circumstances of one’s life and the real-world social and economic forces that constrain and enable one’s activities
- Public goods that facilitate livelihood activities and personal development of women (as well as men)

A case study (Andean Latin America):

How do these imagined factors map onto real life, at least in one setting? Looking in detail at the social context, including family and kinship organization, custom and norms, we can

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- Building and maintaining a far-flung social network is an important social insurance mechanism for individuals and households, and it is explicitly recognized as such by the poor. Where women are restricted in their movements and cannot get their husbands' "permission" to participate in local organizations, they lose opportunities for "bridging ties" (as used in the "social capital" literature) to wealthy and well-placed potential helpers, and they have less access to circuits of information. Such restrictions are relaxed or disappear in the case of older married women who have proved their trustworthiness (from a jealous husband's point of view). These women become increasingly involved with local organizations and projects, and they effectively cu

3. Intergenerational transfers and the risks of being young

Women's empowerment through the life cycle alludes to relations between the generations as well as relations between the genders. One would hope that the battle for empowerment need not be fought again in every generation. This would require that some of older women's power and empowerment be transferable to younger women. The younger women recipients might be their daughters and other direct heirs, co-workers and associates, or women that hold them as models and reference points.

In mestizo Latin America, both men and women inherit property and social position from their parents. In traditional Andean villages, young women as well as young men receive animals, land and assistance with a dwelling. By staying close to relatives, they can count on a degree of protection in case of abuse or need. Daughters that do not marry can become independent household heads and members of the community assembly. Young married women, however, come under the authority of their husbands, mothers-in-law and other members of the husband's family. The moment of formation of a new household and the early years of child-bearing are probably the lowest point for women's empowerment in the entire life cycle.

In urban poverty settings, some of the vulnerabilities of young women's position in rural towns and villages are reinforced and some

by their fathers-in-law. From their point of view, a young wife, especially if she has no other children, can easily be replaced.

Conclusion: The period in women's life cycle that spans adolescence and young wife- and mother- hood is particularly critical from a perspective of empowerment and merits special attention in policymaking.

4. Visualizing complex, dynamic gender systems

Gender systems are complex sociocultural institutions that are under permanent dispute and are consequently undergoing continuous change. In this they are no different from any other human institution. Also like other institutions, they have both material and symbolic dimensions; in fact, these tend to be densely interwoven and almost impossible to separate, analytically or in lived experience.

Most discussions of women's empowerment—like most discussions of gender and development—focus attention on the material dimensions of gender roles and relations. This can lead to serious errors. Power is embedded (“situated” – Wartenberg 1992) in social fields and structures whose many symbolic layers must be accounted for. The representations women and men make of domains of action, sociopolitical structures, relationships and actors must be considered.

Gender systems are systems of classification. They create mental maps that assist actors in orienting their attitudes and action, and they create “schema”: sets of expectations about alters and one's self. Many gender categories combine gender identities with life-cycle chronology in ways that are highly charged with meaning and shot through with stereotypes: teen-age girl (dangerous, rebellious, may go astray, easily fooled and victimized), young mother (inexperienced, “tied down” and domesticated), mature man (experienced, powerful, predatory). Such labels are variously ascribed, self-assigned, accepted, contested, rejected, and modified as part of the daily politics of gender.

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The tension between “real” and “sy-

who have their wealth to excuse their failings. Where women's power is camouflaged and cannot be legitimately "seen", it is different from and less than men's power.

The "power to name" and "power to imagine" are also important here. Who has the power to convince others of the rightness or inevitability of what she has imagined and of the world she has named and structured? Who defines the scale of values for a society? Young (1990) creates a list of "five face of oppression" that includes "cultural imperialism" (being persuaded to believe that someone else's lifestyle and values are superior to one's own). She recalls W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness" to describe the predicament of oppressed groups under these conditions (Young, 1990:60):

Double consciousness arises when the oppressed subject refuses to coincide with these devalued, objectified, stereotyped visions of herself or himself. While the subject desires recognition as human, capable of activity, full of hope and possibility, she receives from the dominant culture only the judgment that she is different, marked, or inferior.

Conclusion: "Real" power and "symbolic" power are intimately interrelated. Our present research base is not geared to testing hypotheses relating devaluation and symbolic oppression directly to poverty, such as would be needed to guide priorities for action.

5. Empowerment strategies

In the normal course of events, in most societies, empowerment will take place—at least in certain domains of women's lives—over the life cycle. How can this be made a more risk-proof, generalized, steady and accumulative process under the rapidly changing

in traditional cultures and developing nations. These include burial societies, rotating savings societies, dancing groups, “societies of lamentation” of a wide variety, religious groups, organizations to sponsor festivals, sports associations, and many others that reflect women’s own response to their needs for company, advice, support, aesthetic expression, play and mutual benefit, within the framework of the specific values and conditions of their local and national societies. March and Taqqu rightfully caution us against interventions

4. Explore the potential of women's informal associations, enhancing their capacity to strengthen women's subjective sense of empowerment and the objective access they have to a diversity of resources. Take lessons from such associations about possible new formats for organizing women around livelihood issues in culturally appropriate ways controlled by ("owned") and understandable to the women themselves.
5. Support women's livelihood strategies in all their variety, with special attention to policies tending towards dignifying, renaming, and resignifying activities and occupations, especially those associated with caring work.
6. Promote images of decisive, competent, re

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