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

***na Strandberg, Project Manager*
Kvinnoforum/Foundation of Women's Forum, Sweden**

* **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.**

“Conceptualising Empowerment as a Transformative Strategy for Poverty Eradication and the Implications for Measuring Progress.”

Prepared by Nina Strandberg, Project Manager, Kvinnoforum/Foundation of Women's Forum, Sweden for the Expert Group Meeting on "Empowerment of women throughout the life cycle as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication" New Delhi, India, 26-29 November 2001

Overall Aim

Through this paper I wish to contribute to the discussion on empowerment definitions by elaborating on the concept of empowerment as used and conceptualised in the activities of my organisation, Kvinnoforum¹, and by trying to conceptualise it as a transformative

Poverty reduction initiatives that address basic needs and issues of infrastructure may facilitate women's empowerment – providing safe water close to the home reduces the time required to carry out household chores which are often the tasks of women, and liberates time for women to participate in income-generating activities and girls to go to school. However, these initiatives will have no impact if they are not coupled with addressing the value systems that forbid women to take part in activities outside the home or girls to go to school. In those cases, the liberated time will quickly be filled by new domestic tasks.

While the link between women's empowerment and human development is clear, the relationship is not altogether casual and subordination of women does not arise out of poverty per se. Baden et al has pointed out that “[c]ollapsing gender concerns into a poverty agenda narrows the scope for a gender analysis which can fully address how and why gender inequalities are reproduced, not just among the ‘poor’, but in society as a whole”. Women's empowerment is a goal in itself and broader than human development in the same way as human development is broader than empowerment. However, there is considerable overlap between the concepts and the one can be used instrumentally to contribute to the forwarding of the other. In the following I will briefly try to tease out some of the differences and similarities between the concepts and point to the advantages of an empowerment approach by conceptualising empowerment as a transformative process, that is, a process of changing the underlying power relations that render women disempowered.

The exercise of conceptualising or defining empowerment is crucial for purposes of monitoring and evaluation when empowerment of women is used as a means to contribute towards poverty eradication. If, to quote the aide mémoire, “the success of anti-poverty policies and programmes depend on the extent to which these policies and programmes empower people living in poverty in general and women in particular”, then empowerment itself must also be measured. Unless empowerment levels are measured it will impossible to say anything about the correlation between women's empowerment and poverty reduction or to determine if the methods employed actually succeed in empowering women.

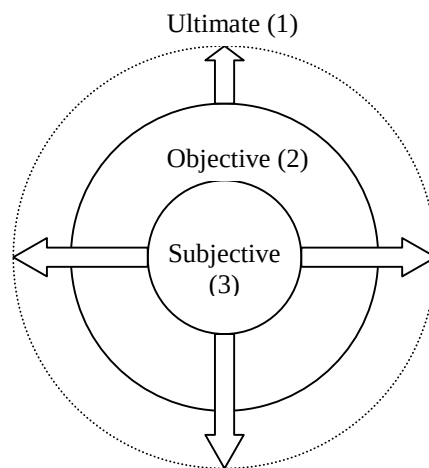
Defining Women's Empowerment

It has been said that “empowerment is like obscenity, y

results that are comparable between regions or countries, the definition should include general aspects that are relevant in any context. Kvinnoforum has attempted to contribute to this process by conceptualising empowerment as a transformative process:

Empowerment as a transformative process

Empowerment can overall be defined . Control and ownership requires an array of opportunities to choose among and this understanding of empowerment overlaps with the concept of human development when defined as “a process of enlarging people’s choices”⁵. Both concepts describe processes, but where human development entails choices, empowerment is the the ability to choose among these enlarged choices.⁶ The difference can be visualised by a model⁷ of the subjective and objective activity space i.e. the space available for taking ownership of ones life:



The space for women’s activity and agency is limited by a number of factors; women’s own ideas of what is possible for them to do, laws regulating what is legal or illegal for women to do and societal norms for what women should and should not do. The inner circle (3) delimits women’s activity by their own ideas of what is possible for thef

themselves. As such, it is also an approach to societal change that treats women as agents of change and constitutes a bottom-up perspective where women themselves identify the problem to be solved, how to solve it and act accordingly. If poverty reduction initiatives are to have a transformative impact in the long run, they must enable women to take ownership of the process itself. A development initiative can provide resources such as land or micro credits to women in a community, but unless women are empowered the gendered power relations at individual, household and community level may restrain women's abilities to maximise their use of the outcomes of the initiative. E.g. an increase in women's personal assets through a micro credit scheme may result in the partner/husband feeling challenged in his role as provider for the family and attempt to control these resources.

This does not mean that women solely are responsible for their empowerment and that governments can abdicate from responsibility, which has sometimes been the case in conservative rhetoric on empowerment. Nor does it mean that women can do it on their own. Responsibility is shared but as outsiders, development agencies, governments and NGOs can only facilitate processes of empowerment. E.g. human rights can be given to women but unless they are empowered, women will not be able to utilise these rights. In line with Jo Rowlands and based on the organisations own practice, Kvinnoforum has found it useful to distinguish between the process of empowerment itself and the factors that either encourage or inhibit these processes.⁸ Empowerment in itself is by Kvinnoforum seen as consisting of three core elements existing on individual and group level and to some extent also on societal level;

Core Elements of Empowerment

Kvinnoforum has found Naila Kabeer's definition of agency as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them", useful.⁹ The sense of agency is the internal aspect of feelinge.02 1 TTf12 h1.

wish to change these circumstances and ultimately, empowerment processes should lead to protest against all structures that subordinate them. While gender awareness is essentially an individual element of empowerment it also exists on group and societal level. It can for example be seen in how groups of women motivate their actions and how they analyse their situation. E.g. “we come together because we want to stop violence against women” or “we demand safety on public transport because we have equal right to freedom of movement” etc. Gender awareness on the societal level is expressed through the extent to which public discourse uses gender as an analytical category and acknowledges that there are structures in society working to women’s disadvantage.

This element – awareness of gendered power structures - is what differentiates women’s empowerment from empowerment of other disadvantaged groups, apart from the difference in who is the target group. Unless this aspect is taken into account the underlying power structures of women’s disempowerment will not be addressed. Women may still be empowered to some extent e.g. gaining more self esteem, increased participation in decision making structures but if women are to be able to realise their full potential they must be freed from e.g. societal norms restricting their activity space, subservient role in the family, lack of political rights, limiting gender roles etc. It may therefore be fruitful to distinguish between gendered empowerment of women and women’s empowerment.

Living in societies where women are subordinated and subject to different kinds of oppression often leads to a naturalisation of the prevailing power relations to the extent that the powerless see their own powerlessness as natural or justified. This is sometime referred to as self-oppression or internalised oppression in feminist theory and ridding oneself of internalised oppression is by many theorists seen as basic to empowerment. Unless women feel that they are valuable and worthy of a better life, they will not be able to formulate goals for a better life, let alone act to change their situation. Self esteem and self-confidence is easily understandable on the individual level. It can be illustrated on the group level as confidence in the group’s right to exist and in the sense of belonging – gaining strength from shared experiences and a common will to change.

For empowerment to be transformative it must be seen as a process existing on all levels - individual, group and societal. Unless the gendered power structures that subordinate women on the societal level are addressed, individual women cannot take full control over their lives. And unless a group of women feel worthy of safety and able to act together, a law prohibiting violence against women will have little effect on women’s ability to change their

contains aspects of self-respect and “ the ability to mix with others without being ashamed to appear in public”¹⁰ and are as such elements of empowerment itself.

What is to be Measured¹¹

When aiming to measure whether empowerment has taken place in a particular context one may approach empowerment as a holistic process of gaining control over ones life or by approaching it as a set of elements e.g. agency, self esteem etc that can be measured individually. Approaching empowerment as a holistic process involves looking at women's

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Element of empowerment	Examples of indicators on different levels
Gender awareness	- Individual – the extent to which women agree or disagree to statements like "has the fact that you are a woman affected your possibilities of succeeding in your own business" and "Are the preconditions of male and female entrepreneur"

Working with an empowerment approach to gendered poverty reduction would mean that women play a central role in defining what needs to be done and how it should be done, they need to participate in the carrying out of the work and be among the beneficiaries. It also means looking at other aspects of women's lives than strictly economic or welfare aspects and try to set a holistic empowerment process in motion. Defining empowerment as a process that must be driven by the women means that development agencies and development workers can only facilitate women's empowerment by trying to provide encouraging factors or take away inhibiting factors. It is very difficult, even impossible, to know à priori what stops women in a particular context from realising their full potential (violence, ill-health, restriction of movement) and by assisting the women in analysing their situation it is possible to identify the inhibiting factors, perhaps in unexpected areas. Examples of encouraging factors may be; create spaces and opportunities to meet, initiate discussions on women's human rights, encourage sharing of experiences, exposure to new kinds of activities so that women can realise their different capabilities, general support etc. Examples of inhibiting factors may be; violence, women's low status, no access to decision making structures, lack of resources, lack of skills etc. Initiatives must make sure to contribute to the abolishment of these inhibiting factors through pressure, discussions, negotiations etc.

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In order to ensure that empowerment processes are not limited to the indivi

It is imperative that the gender analysis does not halt with making sure that the outcomes and benefits of an initiative are evenly distributed among men and women. If a long-term transformation is aimed for, then underlying power relations determining the unequal distribution of benefits must be challenged. If the analys

Literature

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