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## **Women's empowerment: what works and why?**

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**Abstract:** Revisiting foundational feminist work on the concept of empowerment from the 1980s and 1990s, this paper draws on the findings of a multi-country research programme, ‘Pathways of Women’s Empowerment’, to explore pathways of positive change in women’s lives, in diverse contexts, and to draw together some lessons for policy and practice. It begins with an account of women’s empowerment in development, tracing some key ideas that have shaped feminist engagement with empowerment in theory and practice. It then introduces the Pathways programme and its methodological approach, before turning to each of Pathways’ themes, exploring key findings from our research and highlighting examples of ‘what works’. It goes on to narrate a series of stories of change that illustrate some of the dynamics and dimensions of change identified in our key conclusions. Drawing out the principal lessons, the paper concludes with reflections on implications for development policy and practice.

**Keywords:** women’s empowerment, gender equality, social policy

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## 1 Introduction

With radical roots in the 1980s, women's empowerment has now become a mainstream development concern. Harnessed by corporations, global NGOs, development's philanthropic as well as government donors, multinational agencies and banks, it has become akin to a panacea: empowering girls and women is championed as a means to lift economies, drive growth, improve infant and child health, enhance women's skills as mothers as well as to open up opportunities for women's economic and political engagement. Much of the narrative of women's empowerment in international development focuses on the instrumental gains of empowering women and girls—what they can do for development. Empowerment is treated as a destination that can be reached through development's equivalent of motorways: fast-track programmes that can be rolled out over any terrain. But in the process the hidden pathways women are travelling in their own individual or collective journeys of empowerment remain out of view. Much can be gained from reversing a focus on empowerment as an outcome and paying closer attention to women's experiences of travels along diverse pathways of empowerment.

Revisiting foundational feminist work on the concept of empowerment from the 1980s and 1990s, this paper draws on the findings of a multi-country research programme, *Pathways of Women's Empowerment*, to explore pathways of positive change in women's lives, in diverse contexts, and to draw together some lessons for policy and practice. It begins with an account of women's empowerment in development, tracing some key ideas that have shaped feminist engagement with empowerment in theory and practice. It then introduces the *Pathways* programme and its methodological approach, before turning to each of *Pathways*' themes, exploring key findings from our research and highlighting examples of 'what works'. It goes on to narrate a series of stories of change that illustrate some of the dynamics and dimensions of change identified in our key conclusions. Drawing out the principal lessons, the paper concludes with reflections on implications for development policy and practice.

## 2 Women's empowerment in development

The concept of empowerment has a long history in social change work. Feminist consciousness-raising and collective action informed early applications of the concept to international development in the 1970s and it came to be articulated in the 1980s and 1990s as a radical approach concerned with transforming power relations in favour of women's rights and greater equality between women and men (Batliwala 1993, 2007). In writings of the 1980s and early 1990s, empowerment was cast as an unfolding process; a journey that women could take that would lead to changes in consciousness and collective power. Common to many writings was an insistence that empowerment was not something that could be bestowed by others, but was about recognizing inequalities in power, asserting the right to have rights and acting to press for and bring about structural change in favour of greater equality (Batliwala 1993; Kabeer 1994; Rowlands 1997; Sen 1997).

As early as 1994, Srilatha Batliwala expressed concern about the growing popularity of the term. She argued that empowerment was in danger of losing its transformative edge and called for a more precise understanding of both power and empowerment. Defining power 'as control over material assets, intellectual resources, and ideology' (1994: 129), Batliwala defined empowerment as 'the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power' (1994: 130). Far from being limited to purely local, 'grassroots', participation—as it was in the discourses of the day (Moore 2001)—Batliwala pressed for the

potential of what she called an ‘empowerment spiral’ to mobilize larger-scale transformative political action. Batliwala’s insistent emphasis on power and control—rather than simply with self-mastery and self-assertion—resonates with the emphases in foundational writings of Gender and Development (GAD), and their pre-occupation with the structural basis of gender inequalities. There was a strong narrative of empowerment as bound up with both collective action (‘power with’) and the development of ‘power within’ and ‘power to’ at the level of consciousness. These two facets—consciousness and collective action—are represented in writings from this period as deeply mutually imbricated. Empowerment is cast as an unfolding, iterative process that is fundamentally about shifts in power relations. Gita Sen draws on Srilatha Batliwala to argue:

Empowerment is, first and foremost, about power; changing power relations in favour of those who previously exercised little power over their own lives. Batliwala (1993) defines power as having two central aspects – control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, financial, and the self), and control over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). If power means control, then empowerment therefore is the process of gaining control (1997: 2).

Feminist work from this period emphasizes that empowerment is *relational*, and that there is a complex reciprocal relationship between women’s ‘self-understanding’ (Kabeer 1994) and ‘capacity for self-expression’ (Sen 1997) and their access to and control over material resources. That is to say, providing women with loans, business opportunities and means to generate income may enable them to better manage their poverty. But to see the kind of changes that can transform the root causes of that poverty and begin to address the deep structural basis of gender inequality, the conditions need to be fostered for shifts in consciousness so that women understand their situations and come together to bring about change that can benefit not only them, but also other women.

Jo Rowlands argues that a feminist understanding of power is deeply concerned with ‘the dynamics of oppression and internalized oppression’ (1997: 87) and that empowerment, ‘... must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy ... decision-making space... so that the people affected come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and have influence’ (1997: 87). Crucially, the process of empowerment is conceived as taking place as much through collective action leading to greater voice and confidence, as through a process of undoing internalized oppression and developing a sense of oneself which can stimulate people to come together to act.

Rowlands, like other feminist writers on empowerment, makes it clear that empowerment is not something that can be done to or for anyone else. However, building on ideas about the development of critical consciousness of Paulo Freire (1972) and others in the popular education movement, a feminist approach to empowerment involved intensive engagement with processes of facilitation. Bringing women together in a group might have an empowering effect, but feminists recognized that facilitation could also stimulate critical consciousness and mobilization. As described in Batliwala’s (1993) and Kabeer’s (1994) accounts of grassroots conscientization and mobilization in India and Bangladesh, such processes can engage people in making sense of their worlds, their relationships, their assumptions and beliefs, practices and values with potentially transformatory effects. Batliwala notes:

One unique feature of this approach is the stress placed on changing women’s self-image: ... unless women are liberated from their existing perception of themselves as weak, inferior and limited beings, no amount of external interventions ... will enable

them to challenge existing power equations in society, the community or the family (1993: 31).

By transforming understandings of reality, this can awaken indignation about injustice and stimulate the impetus to act together to change society. This understanding of empowerment as the entwining of the personal and political complemented prevalent understandings of ‘gender’ in development that were equally concerned with transforming oppressive power relations to address the structural basis of gender inequality.

Feminist writings on empowerment from the 1990s offer three important insights. First, empowerment is about changing power relations, not just about people gaining more confidence to be able to act on the world with more impact, but about recognizing that the inequalities of everyday lives are neither natural nor acceptable. Second, empowerment is relational: it is about the relations of power in which people are located, within which they may experience disempowerment or come to acquire the ‘ability to make strategic life choices’ (Kabeer 1999). This becomes important when we look at contemporary discourses of women’s empowerment in which social and gender relations come to be curiously absent. Third, empowerment is a process. It is not a fixed state nor an end-point, let alone a measurable outcome to which targets can be attached. It is a process that can be captured in the metaphor of a journey along pathways that can be travelled individually or together with others, in which the nature of the terrain comes to be as significant in determining progress. The work of external actors is not ‘empowering women’ but clearing some of the obstacles from this path, providing sign-posts, stiles, bridges and sustenance for those making these journeys.

So what do we find of these insights in contemporary development policy? The versions of empowerment that appear here and in the promotional material produced by international development agencies primarily concern the acquisition of material means through which women empower themselves as individuals and of the benefits that come when they put their earning power to the service of their families, communities and national economies. An apparently disparate array of corporate and development actors—the likes of Walmart, Oxfam, DfID, the Nike Foundation, Plan International and the IMF—are all apparently purveying the same message, sometimes even in the same words. We see a familiar series of tropes, most commonly the pronouncement of the intrinsic value of women’s empowerment before proceeding to the real business at hand: ‘unleashing potential’ and harnessing the power of billions of women workers and their transformative economic effects as the producers and consumers who will drive growth.

To give some examples: an article published by the US State Department quotes a speech by Hillary Clinton on 11 November 2011: ‘When we liberate the economic potential of women, we elevate the economic performance of communities, nations and indeed the world... This is simply smart economics’.<sup>1</sup> The ‘smart economics’ message ripples through development institutions, corporations and corporate NGOs in ways that render their discourses indistinguishable. It is used in a speech by Zimbabwean Deputy Prime Minister Mutambara on ‘womanomics’ and on a blog on Coca-Cola’s site quoting CEO Muhtar Kent as saying, ‘each time you create a woman entrepreneur, the community gets stronger... and as a result of stronger communities, you have a stronger business.’<sup>2</sup> After all, as Alyse Nelson, CEO of Vital

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<sup>1</sup> <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2011/11/20111112122328nehpets0.6628687.html> (accessed 18 June 2013).

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.sundaynews.co.zw/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=34839:dpm-mutambara-calls-for-womens-empowerment&catid=38:local-news&Itemid=131](http://www.sundaynews.co.zw/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=34839:dpm-mutambara-calls-for-womens-empowerment&catid=38:local-news&Itemid=131) (accessed 18 June 2013) and <http://www.coca->

Voices, points out on the Coca-Cola blog, women control US\$20 trillion of annual consumer spending.<sup>3</sup>

In a variant of the infamous invented UN statistic that has become such a powerful travelling fiction, a Coca-Cola infographic informs us that women do 66 per cent of the world's work, get 10 per cent of the world's income, but invest 90 per cent of their income into family and community.<sup>4</sup> Very similar messages are used by corporate NGOs. Oxfam invites people to 'Fight hunger. Invest in women'. Plan International approvingly cites World Bank President Zoelick's statement that 'investing in adolescent girls is precisely the catalyst poor countries need' (cited in Chant and Sweetman 2012: 520). Nike's Girl Effect, whose charismatic marketing messages have had more influence on DfID policy than any evidence-based advocacy could ever hope to achieve, has distilled the investing in girls line to a 'simple' solution that promises to 'change the course of history'.<sup>5</sup> Analysing the marketing messages used by the multi-million dollar American NGO CARE, Katherine Austin-Evelyn (2011) writes:

This campaign utilises the smart economics approach to recruit interested investors, much like a bank or investment company would... by positioning African women as a 'resource' and the donor as an agent, capable of bringing that 'resource' to life, the campaign casts development as a simple capitalist venture and robs women of their agency and individuality.

Sylvia Chant traces the origins of the 'investment' discourse back to the 1980s, and the realization that women were picking up the pieces after structural adjustment took its toll on male employment and services. She cites the World Bank's 1995 flagship report *Enhancing Women's Participation in Economic Development* in which the 'investment in women' narrative appears in a very similar guise to today's policy narratives. This version of 'women's empowerment' is far more compelling to international donors and banks, and indeed to the public who are invited to 'invest in' rather than give charity to support women entrepreneurs and girls as 'agents of change'. This 'business case' for women's empowerment speaks in one breath about women being important in and of themselves and also a means to enhance economic efficiency, and moves quickly to the slippage of 'empowering women'.

Writing in 1997, Gita Sen cautioned that:

It is a short step from thinking of governments or agencies as 'empowering' people through programmes to viewing empowerment as another handout, something governments do for or on behalf of people. The danger here is that the focus will shift entirely to the provision of access to external resources, assets, or services, and away from methodologies that will create spaces for people to build confidence and self-esteem (1997: 3).

That very danger is all-too evident in today's 'empowerment lite' (Cornwall 1997) version. Important elements of the 1990s version of women's empowerment are sloughed away here; the chains of equivalence that once held 'women's empowerment' together with 'rights', 'equality',

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[colacompany.com/stories/smart-economics-cokes-muhtar-kent-explores-link-between-empowered-women-and-stronger-communities](http://colacompany.com/stories/smart-economics-cokes-muhtar-kent-explores-link-between-empowered-women-and-stronger-communities).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.coca-colacompany.com/opinions/alyse-nelson-president-and-ceo-vital-voices> (accessed 18 June 2013).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.coca-colacompany.com/stories/building-stronger-businesses-families-and-communities-one-woman-at-a-time-a-5by20-infographic> (accessed 18 June 2013).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.girleffect.org/why-girls/#&panel1-1> (accessed 12 June 2013).

‘justice’, ‘collective action’ are replaced with new attachments to ‘efficiency’, ‘investment’, ‘returns’. Economic empowerment gains hegemony, and with it a belief that women’s business success is enough to overcome all other barriers to equality; once women hold the purse strings, their spending power will automatically translate into a capacity to be those ‘agents of change’ in their communities and countries that we hear about in speeches by prominent development officials.

Concerns with the personal and the political that animated 1990s feminist visions of empowerment are all but invisible. We hear nothing about the processes in which women, together, develop a critical understanding of their situations and begin to question their role in their families, communities and societies. We hear virtually nothing about the place that mobilization might have in strategies for change. Instead, the vision that emerges is of legions of ‘empowered’ women workers generating wages while continuing to carry the principal responsibility for unpaid domestic care work and social reproduction.

Cecilia Sardenberg (2009) diagnoses the distinction between these two narratives of empowerment as ‘liberal’ and ‘liberating’ empowerment, drawing on the work of Ann Ferguson (2004). ‘Liberal’ empowerment is, ‘a process individuals engage in to have access to resources so as to achieve outcomes in their self-interest’ (Ferguson 2004: 1). Ferguson observes that ‘economic, legal and personal changes would be sufficient for individuals to become empowered, and such a process does not require the political organization of collectives in which such individuals are located’ (2004: 1). It is this version that dominates, not only in the discourse of development agencies but also in self-help, employee empowerment and other arenas in which the goal of empowerment is self-actualization. Power here is ‘power to’: a resource that can be gained, held and exercised. *Empowerment* becomes about the acquisition and exercise of ‘power to’. It is a reductionist version of ‘power to’ that forms the basis for the kind of metrics developed by development agencies, in which the individual exercise of decision-making becomes constitutive of ‘empowerment’.

Sardenberg defines ‘liberating empowerment’ as, ‘the increased material and personal power that comes about when groups of people organize themselves to challenge the status quo through some kind of self-organization of the group’ (Ferguson 2004: 1, cited in Sardenberg 2009: 15). While there are traces in Ferguson’s definition of power as an individuated resource, empowerment goes well beyond this and power comes to take shape as a relational construct and as constitutive of collective agency. ‘Power to’ as individual agency is *transformed* as it connects with power with and becomes relational agency. In this we see the relationship between consciousness and collective action that has been foundational to feminist approaches to empowerment.

This view of empowerment as relational has further implications. Kabeer’s (1994, 1999) conceptualization of empowerment centralizes the significance of relationships; in her study of solidarity within a landless women’s organization in rural Bangladesh with Lopita Huq (Kabeer and Huq 2014), the relational dimensions of empowerment are more than evident. And yet, as her work has come to be taken up by development agencies, it has been stripped of its relational dimension. The World Bank, for example, has adopted the following definition:

Empowerment is the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions which both build individual and collective assets,

and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets.<sup>6</sup>

Alsop et al.'s (2005) empowerment framework offers a guide to identifying, itemizing and measuring 'assets' and 'opportunity structures'. In doing so, the relational dimension of empowerment is stripped out, reduced to measurable outcomes. Gergen provides us with an analogous example in his exploration of relational agency through a metaphor of a baseball game:

What we traditionally view as 'independent' elements—the man with the bat, the bags, the men in the field—are not truly independent. They are all mutually defining... Alone they would [all] be virtually without meaning. It is when we bring all these elements into a mutually defining relationship that we can speak about 'playing baseball'. Let us then speak of the baseball game as a confluence, a form of life in this case that is constituted by an array of mutually defining 'entities' (Gergen 2009: 54).

Gergen's 'confluence' provides a useful way of conceiving of the interplay of elements in the process of empowerment. In what follows, I explore how far these reflections on empowerment resonate with emerging findings from the Pathways of Empowerment programme. I begin with a brief characterization of the programme's methodologies, before going on to look at each of its principal themes. Some of what we learnt about what works to support women's empowerment is identified, before thinking about the implications this suggests for donor support to women's empowerment.

### 3 Changing paths

The Pathways programme was established in 2006 as a consortium of feminist research centres in Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, West Africa and the UK, working in partnership with what was then UNIFEM.<sup>7</sup> We set out to identify what was changing in women's lives in diverse contexts, and to use this to explore what works to foster an approach to women's empowerment that can address persistent gender inequalities and injustice. Pathways sought to understand better under what conditions the 'motorways' of mainstream development policies for women and girls might work in favour of greater justice and equality and the broader democratization of power relations in society. It also sought out the 'hidden pathways' that women are travelling in their journeys of empowerment, with the aim of making the lessons they offer visible.

The diagnosis that Pathways made at the start of the programme formed the basis for our proposals for a new research programme consortium on women's empowerment in 2005:

There is a mismatch between public policy practice and the challenge of securing and sustaining tangible improvements in women's lives. Governments and international agencies have been largely travelling *motorways to nowhere* in changing power relations in favour of women living in poverty. Despite this in some places women are

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<sup>6</sup> <http://go.worldbank.org/V45HD4P100>.

<sup>7</sup> Pathways was initially funded by DfID, as a Research Programme Consortium (RPC), and subsequently by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Swedish International Development Co-operation (Sida). A number of other donors have supported Pathways' work over the last eight years, including the Ford Foundation, GTZ and BRAC.



achieving real gains. Our purpose is to discover how this has happened ... *We aim to make these pathways visible* for a radical shift in policy and practice that can build on these revealed successes.

The metaphor of pathways and motorways offered us rich scope for allusion. The word 'pathway' evokes trails made by people individually and collectively treading a route through vegetation, whilst motorways are designed to transport large numbers of vehicles from A to B, flattening the terrain to increase the speed of travel. A motorway is a fast track to a particular destination, but the idea of a pathway captures both the sense of a route and something of the experience of the journey itself. It was these journeys that we were interested in. We wanted to find out about women's experiences as travellers, individually and together, and to learn what supported them as they made these journeys. We were interested in the shortcuts that might be taken by those who know the way. And we wanted to understand better the hidden pathways that women may be taking that are completely out of sight from those who travel on the tarmac. Our research approach was deliberately eclectic. We recognized that understanding empowerment was far more complex than reducing dimensions of women's experience to a set of measurable indicators: we needed both the kind of data that could allow us to gain some broad-brush insights into patterns in women's experiences of change and the finely-grained qualitative studies that would permit insight into why and how change happens.

Pathways' approach grew out of an (auto)critique of the dominance of northern theorists and institutions in development—and more broadly social science—research. Rather than taking a more conventional route of gathering together individual research partners from the global south in what can often amount to contract research guided by the northern institution, in which the researchers make little contribution to the conceptual framing let alone deliberations about how to spend research programme budgets, we wanted to take a different approach. Pathways sought out research leaders who were nested in institutions in which there was a critical mass of feminist researchers, with a presence in national and international policy and feminist activist circles and networks in their regions. By creating 'hubs'—rather than dyadic, contract-based, research relationships between the northern institution and southern 'partner'—we aimed to create the basis for a global programme that could be owned and shaped collectively. The idea was that each hub would work not only in their own country, but in conjunction with others in the region; and we would have a 'global hub' that would focus on global development policy—rather than arrogating the site of 'the global' as being that of a UK-based institution like the Institute of Development Studies. DfID's Research Programme Consortium model served well, permitting us to spend nine months developing a programme rooted in local agendas and priorities. It provided the scope to build strong cross-hub thematic working groups in which individual projects came to be reshaped in dialogue across the regions. This allowed us to bring a more coherent overall shape to the strands of enquiry within the programme, and to build a collective sense of ownership. And DfID's requirement that at least 10 per cent of our budget be devoted to communications led to the establishment of a major communications strand to our work, which we interwove into our research rather than treating as a distinct, dissemination-oriented activity.

The Middle East hub's work engaged researchers from across North Africa, Palestine and Lebanon and focused on tracing the impacts of newly introduced programmes in Egypt through localized ethnographic research and policy dialogue, and on the use of performance and creative writing in working with transformation in gendered power relations. The Latin America hub engaged researchers in South and Central America in debate, and took studies from national level policy processes to the local political institutions and neighbourhoods of Salvador of Bahia, Brazil. In South Asia, researchers in the Bangladesh-based hub worked with partners in

Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. Their work included national-level survey analysis, study of women's political mobilization in a variety of institutional contexts, studies of the role that television and popular religion plays in women's intimate and public lives, and the use of film, photography and creative writing to understand the dynamics of empowerment. The West Africa hub, working in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, sought through its survey work to understand the intergenerational dynamics of broader economic changes, women's political representation and mobilization, and the role of popular culture in making and shaping narratives of sexuality. Our fifth global hub, focusing on global policy institutions and 'Aidland', combined action research by femocrats located within the international development apparatus with studies of shifting discourses and meanings of empowerment in development.

Pathways' focus was three-fold. One dimension sought to understand the impact of broader social, political and economic changes on women's lives. A national survey in Bangladesh traced the impacts of the seismic shifts that have taken place in the country over recent decades in women's working lives from the workplace to the household (Kabeer et al. 2011a; Kabeer et al. 2013). It sought to understand under what conditions work might be empowering for women. Sister surveys in Ghana and Egypt situated women's paid work in relation to other dynamics in the labour market, identifying changes in the implications of the pathways of empowerment offered by education in a changing labour market in Ghana and that of the decline in public sector employment for women in Egypt (Darkwah 2010; Kabeer et al. 2011a). Together, these studies demonstrated the importance for women's empowerment of access to regular, independent sources of income. Studies from across a series of transitional political contexts—Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, Ghana, Palestine, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sudan—mapped the changes wrought by changing political and social orders as countries previously under military rule and dictatorship came under democratic governance. These studies contributed both broad-brush analysis of the impact of political changes on women's capacity to voice demands, and more fine-grained contextual analysis of the structural and institutional barriers to women's effective political participation—reaching beyond the arena of formal politics to women's labour organizing, feminist and women's movements and activism on a range of rights issues (Nazneen and Sultan 2014; Tadros 2010, 2014).

A second dimension of Pathways' work was investigating policies and programmes that were specifically targeting women's empowerment, or otherwise concerned with women and gender equality. Empirical work addressed issues of body, voice and work, often in combination. One example was an ethnographic study of the design and implementation of the Egyptian Conditional Cash Transfer programme that sought to enquire into what it would take to create a feminist programme that could be genuinely empowering for women (Sholkamy 2011). Another example was action research on Brazil's ground breaking domestic violence legislation, Lei Maria da Penha. This focused on the investigations of a feminist observatory that was established to monitor the law (Sardenberg 2011). Further studies included ethnographic research on the implementation of family law reforms in Egypt (Al-Sharmani 2009, 2014), research on the Lady Health Worker programme in Pakistan (Khan 2010) and Manuh and Anyidoho's (2010) and Abdullah's (2014) studies of interventions in the field of women's political participation in Ghana and Sierra Leone, respectively.

A third dimension for Pathways was to understand those sources of empowerment and disempowerment in women's lives that pass below the gaze of international development agencies. Much of our research on sexuality fell into this category, most of which focused on the domain of culture. One example is Akosua Adomako and Awo Asiedu's (2012) study of the negative representations of women's sexuality in Ghanaian popular music and the action research project sought to engage popular artistes in changing these narratives. Another is

Aanmona Priyadarshini and Samia Rahim's (2014) study of the television watching habits of women in a Dhaka slum, which revealed dimensions of agency and desire that might well remain utterly hidden to those seeking to 'empower' them. Sexuality is often represented in development as a source of hazard and harm, rather than of pleasure and intimacy. Our work on sexuality sought to break with this limiting thinking, exploring the positive and political power of pleasure (Hawkins, Cornwall and Lewin 2011; Jolly et al. 2013).

Reflecting on the priorities and blind spots of international development institutions was in itself an objective of our study. Rather than simply assume that policy makers needed potted versions of our findings in order to be able to be prompted into action—an assumption that is common amongst researchers—we realized that another 'hidden pathway' lay in the transformational effects of reflective practice itself. A project that enlisted feminist bureaucrats in a range of international organizations in reflective workshops as they sought to grapple with the dilemmas they faced in support of women's empowerment and gender equality shed light on some of the challenges that are often hidden from activists and advocates (Eyben and Turquet 2013; Sandler and Rao 2012).

For Pathways, methodological pluralism was a vital part of our approach, for, as Tsikata and Darkwah observe:

The consensus that empowerment is context specific and processual has provided the possibility of gaining new insights into women's lives in different contexts. Realising this demands methodological innovations, but also the navigation of challenges (2014: 81).

In Bangladesh, Ghana and Brazil, survey work was informed by narrative biographical enquiry that pursued key themes through in-depth life histories; in Egypt, the use of a national survey was complemented by in-depth ethnographic research. Researchers used a range of qualitative methods: participant observation, focus groups, key informant interviews, purposively sampled semi-structured interviews, discourse and narrative analysis of documents, songs, TV programmes and films, digital storytelling and creative writing. The breadth of this methodological repertoire offered not only the means to triangulate, but also a wealth of in-depth case material from which other stories could be told. It is to some of these stories that I now turn.

#### **4 Pathways of change: work, body, voice**

One challenge of researching women's empowerment is that it is a composite and 'essentially contested' (Gallie 1956) concept. Rather than seek to tangle with definitional dilemmas, we decided to engage with three domains where feminist research, activism and policies and programming in the field of gender equality and women's empowerment converge.

The first is women's work, and women's 'economic empowerment'. Our interest was primarily in the empowering dimensions of women's increasing involvement in labour markets. This included addressing a substantial body of policy concern with increasing women's access to resources and capacity to exercise control over their lives, and 'strategic life choices' (Kabeer 1999, 2008). The second is women's voice, and 'political empowerment'. We were interested in women's pathways into politics, beyond a concern with barriers to substantive representation in formal political arenas, to the role of women's mobilization and movements in enhancing a collective political agency. Our enquiries led us not only to seek to understand pathways of legal change, but also what it takes to give laws 'teeth'—and bite. And our work with feminist

bureaucrats sought to tap into their struggles for influence and effectiveness in arenas in which fulsome rhetoric is not matched by the kind of resources and traction that can offer them substantive room for manoeuvre (Standing 2007; Eyben 2010, 2013; Eyben and Turquet 2013; Sandler and Rao 2012).

The third is the body and sexualities. Noting the rising attention given to violence against women, we sought to take a different track. Powerfully negative narratives of sexuality shape girls and women's abilities to exercise control over and enjoy their bodies. What would it take, we asked, to change the storyline and to challenge the limits placed upon women that so constrain their capacity to enjoy bodily and sexual autonomy? Here our focus was as much on the less visible pathways of empowerment—women watching TV and attending taleem (religious instruction) classes in Bangladesh (Priyadarshini and Rahim 2010; Huq 2010)—as well as on impact of the mainstream media in shaping and reinforcing societal normativities, as in Pereira and Bakare-Yusuf's (2014) study of the case of Nigerian actress Anita Hogan whose private sexual moments became public fodder. Taking the body as a starting point took us to an exploration of the power of a 'pleasure-based' approach as a pathway of empowerment that begins with reclaiming the positive, pleasurable dimensions of women's sexualities rather than focusing only on hazards and harms (Jolly et al. 2013).

In what follows, I offer a synthesis of key findings in each of these three areas and illustrative examples of 'what works' through a series of boxed case studies.

## **5 Work: paid work as a pathway of empowerment**

Women's economic empowerment has gained increasing attention in recent years. Corporations, donors and NGOs alike have focused on improving women's access to paid work as a fundamental driver of empowerment. Evidence from Pathways' research on work, led by Naila Kabeer points to some important qualifying conclusions. National surveys in Bangladesh, Egypt and Ghana show that paid work is most likely to empower women if it offers them a regular, dependable income over which they are able to exercise control (Kabeer et al. 2011a; Kabeer 2011). Where women had employment that gave them a sense of esteem, connection and recognition, there were further empowering effects.

Understanding generic and localized gender-related constraints is important, Kabeer (2011) argues, in exploring possibilities for women-to-women benefit from employment opportunities. The results from the work theme survey stress the quality of paid work as a key factor in achieving positive outcomes in other areas of their lives (Kabeer 2011). Women in formal employment fared much better than women in the informal sector across a range of outcomes. Kabeer writes:

... the transformative potential of formal paid work strongly underscores the need for better jobs for women. ... likely to include some form of contract that recognizes the relationship between women workers and their employers... predictability of work, regularity of income, legal rights and some degree of basic security that is not entirely dependent on one's income earning capacity... (2011: 13).

An important and unexpected finding from Ghana contextualizes the empowering effects of education. A national survey of three generations of Ghanaian women, with 600 respondents in different regions of the country, showed distinct generational differences in women's experiences. For older women, education guaranteed a pathway into valued formal sector jobs offering regular income and employment stability. Their granddaughters had none of those

certainties in a far more capricious and uncertain labour market; younger women experienced less control over their lives than educated women in their mothers' and grandmothers' generations (Darkwah 2010).

**Box 1: Counting women's work**

In Bangladesh, Mahmud and Tasneem (2011) compared their estimates of women's economic activity with those of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). The Pathways estimates, using the ILO definition of work, were over twice those of BBS. One reason was that BBS staff were inflecting the ILO definition with their own presumptions about what counts as work in this 'local reality'. Mahmud and Tasneem's estimates were based on a focused account of women's paid work, and included income-generating activities that were invisible in the official version. Kabeer (2011) highlights the need to ensure that those collecting, processing and analysing data are sufficiently aware of broader definitions of work so that findings do not simply reflect the biases that have hampered data gathering on women's work in the past.

Source: Mahmud and Tasneem (2011); Kabeer (2011).

A series of research projects on initiatives that sought to empower women through various forms of income generation brought home how surveys often fail to capture important elements of the association between work and empowerment. In a study of the effects of a micro-enterprise programme in Afghanistan, Kabeer et al. (2011b) give the example of a woman who used a micro-loan to set up a hairdressing salon. This provided her not only with a regular income but with a space outside her home in which women would gather. It was the sociality of that space and the sense of connection it gave her that mattered. In Pakistan, Ayesha Khan's (2014) research on the Lady Health Workers programme, which has opened up employment for rural women as primary care workers, also shows the significance of recognition in shifting women's social position, and with it their self-esteem. Terezinha Gonçalves' (2010) study of the Brazilian domestic workers' movement explores the gains that the movement made as it sought to formalize and professionalize domestic work.

Many of these studies point to the significance of recognition—of women gaining an identity associated with their work, one for which they come to be valued as workers—in women's empowerment. Recognition also emerges as an important theme in the Pathways work theme project that brought together activists mobilizing women in the informal economy to reflect on what worked to strengthen women's collective agency (Kabeer, Sudarshan and Milward 2013). Common themes running through the cases of informal sector organizing included: the power of collectivization in ending the isolation women in this sector experience and confronting their exploitation and stigmatization; the significance of collective critical analysis in changing women workers' consciousness of their right to have rights, and capacity to exercise voice to claim those rights; and the role played by the organizations and individuals who accompanied and supported the process of organizing.

**Box 2: Save us from saviours**

One of the case studies in Pathways' *Organizing in the Informal Economy* project was the Indian sex workers' collective VAMP (*Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad*). The struggle for recognition as human beings with rights has framed VAMP's activism. Regular group meetings brought sex workers together to critically analyse the obstacles in their lives. It was evident that clients were the least of their problems, and often a source of affectionate relationships as well as income. Most difficulties the sex workers faced came from outside their community. High on the list was maltreatment by the police, whose collusion with foreign 'rescuers' seeking to 'save' sex workers caused suffering and abuse of their human rights. Social discrimination against sex workers had all manner of material effects, from the higher prices charged by vegetable sellers plying wares in the sex work area, to workers who preferred to buy from them than face going into town, to the effects of prejudice on their children's education and difficulties in accessing public services.

VAMP's slogan 'Save us from Saviours' sends an important message to international development agencies: women do not find empowerment by complying with outsiders' beliefs about what they ought to be or do. VAMP has been able to stop under-age sex work in their communities, and established a hostel where those unable to return home can live safely and pursue their studies. Members are able to insist on condom use, call for help with difficult clients or local thugs, and mobilize to hold the state to account for police attacks on sex workers. Sex workers interviewed spoke of how much control they felt over their own lives, 'I'm as free as a bird', said one, and others spoke of how powerful they felt within their relationships with men, no longer willing to put up with anything less.

Source: *Save us from Saviours* (directed by Kat Mansoor); Seshu (2013).

The story of VAMP's success is instructive. The first step was developing a critical consciousness which allowed sex workers and their children to reclaim their dignity and respect for themselves and each other. The second was the process of building capacity to work collectively and creating relationships of solidarity within a community that had once been fractious and divided. Sex workers have a regular, independent income: VAMP has helped them to save and manage their money, and thus to gain similar benefits to those found in other economic empowerment initiatives. Feminist leadership and a feminist organization that has provided resources, accompaniment and support was an important ingredient underpinning these achievements.

## 6 Voice: building constituencies for justice and equality

Exploring political empowerment took Pathways onto the well-trodden terrain of women's representation in formal politics and less explored pathways into women's domestic and family lives, religious institutions and local organizations in which women gained opportunities to learn leadership, and to the vital role played by feminist and women's organizations in amplifying women's voice. Another dimension focused on the legislative arena: Mulki Al-Sharmani's edited volume, *Feminist Activism and Legal Reform*, reflects on the extent to which the law is both a site of oppression and transformation. Tracing struggles for gender justice in contexts where there has been both incredible legal intransigence and some extraordinary gains, Pathways researchers illustrate that legal changes need to be monitored by feminist activists to ensure that laws take root and are actually implemented. This research explores the introduction of new laws that offer some particularly interesting lessons—the new family courts in Egypt (Al-Sharmani 2014);<sup>8</sup> civil society monitoring of the landmark 2006 domestic violence law in Brazil (de Aquino 2014); the intense contestation that accompanied the passing of domestic violence laws in Ghana; and the movement for a uniform family code in Bangladesh (Manuh and Dwamena-Aboagye 2014). The case of feminist engagement with Brazil's domestic violence law offers some particularly valuable lessons about what works.

### Box 3: Making law work for women

Brazil's domestic violence law, passed in 2006, is one of the most comprehensive in the world. Brazilian feminist organizations came together to create an observatory to monitor the law, and work with the Secretariats for Women's Policies from national to municipal level, to ensure the application of the law in local judiciaries where patriarchal attitudes prevail.

Pathways Brazil played a lead role in co-ordinating this initiative, and carried out action research involving a study of special police stations and courts for battered women, and a survey of women who sought to register complaints in battered women's police stations. The study generated a methodology for monitoring the implementation of domestic violence legislation that includes diagnostic surveys of police stations and courts, and the generation of quantitative data mapping uptake and application of the law, as well as case studies illustrating 'good practices' and failures.

<sup>8</sup> This research formed the basis for a documentary, *Kbul*, produced as part of Pathways' *Real World* series.

The study highlights the vital role of women's organizing in publicizing the law and raising awareness amongst women and men of forms of domestic violence not always recognized as abuse. By making private harms public, such organizing helps create a culture of unacceptability and accountability that can extend to those in state institutions who otherwise fail to fulfil obligations to protect women and prosecute male perpetrators. The research also highlighted the value of training of all service providers and the need for transformative training approaches that could challenge deep-seated prejudices and ingrained attitudes.

Source: Gomes et al. (2009); Sardenberg (2011).

One major focus for international organizations has been electoral reform to increase the representation of women in formal political institutions. In the post-Beijing era, quotas have become a universal instrument for increasing women's political representation, but these are blunt instruments with which to address gendered inequalities in political representation. Pathways research highlights a number of barriers to effective implementation. Much depends on the electoral system (Ballington 2012) and on political parties. In Costa Rica, Sagot's research revealed how political parties grudgingly accepted a 40 per cent quota and then employed counter-strategies to avoid it being implemented (Sagot 2010); in Brazil, Costa found a lack of effective sanctions to enforce compliance and of support to women candidates from political parties (Costa 2010, 2014). Research in Sierra Leone revealed the extent to which women candidates face violence and intimidation (Abdullah 2010, 2014). Research in Pakistan (Khattak 2010) shows how quotas can be used by political parties to extend political patronage, and as Jad (2010) shows for Palestine, there is no guarantee that women elected via quotas would be any more inclined towards gender equality than the men they displace.

Pathways research suggests that quotas should not be seen as a proxy for women's political empowerment, and can be used to bolster authoritarian regimes, as in Egypt under the Mubarak regime, where Tadros (2011) shows how the quota was manipulated to win more seats for the ruling party. Abbas shows for Sudan how quotas were used by a highly undemocratic regime to undermine the opposition's power base (Abbas 2010). Further, women politicians' class, religious and family interests may be more significant in shaping their political careers than any identification with gender justice. For example in Costa Rica, women legislators opposed a bill restricting the workday of domestic workers to eight hours, because of the effects it would have on professional women's careers—including their own (Sagot 2010). This underscores the importance of working with women politicians, not just regarding their arrival in politics as an automatic guarantee that they will represent women's interests. Brazil's 'feminist schools' offer an innovative idea with potential applicability to other contexts.

#### **Box 4: Brazil's feminist schools**

Most women's political empowerment programmes focus on training women to run for office and strengthening women's electoral prospects. Less attention is paid to the women who are already in office. Those who are more conservative may be seen as a barrier rather than as potential allies. Pathways research conducted by Ana Alice Costa in Bahia aimed to understand better women's pathways in as well as into politics. Findings pointed to the significance of women's familial relationships as a facilitator of, as well as a brake on their political ambitions, and to the significance of constituency building to connect women to female publics, both as a means of channelling demands and strengthening accountability. In particular, this study found inter-party caucuses bringing together politicians from across the political spectrum to advance legislative projects supporting women's rights were very significant.

This led to a retrospective study, still in progress, of an initiative seeking to train women in politics in the elements of feminist analysis that could transform their attitudes and their political effectiveness. *Mulher e Democracia*, a project that brought together three Brazilian feminist NGOs, ran a series of 'feminist schools' for women politicians in the national, state and local governments, and women leaders in local organizations. The 'schools' taught history, political economy and economics, and sought to provide women politicians with tools for feminist analysis in a group-based process, thus developing a unique approach

combining critical analysis and solidarity enhancing methodologies.

There is as yet only anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of this intervention, but it offers an inspiring innovation that is worth experimenting with. The vital ingredients of consciousness-raising alongside building relationships of solidarity between women across political lines can prove vital to the mobilization of support for women's rights within the political arena. Similar processes of feminist constituency-building are evident in Costa's repeat surveys of local councillors which show between 1992 and 2012 an increase from 3.1 to 13.8 per cent of those reporting a desire to represent and help women as their motive for entering politics (Costa 2014). Alongside this there was little change in women's perceptions of support from their parties, a perception backed up by Costa's (2010) analysis of how professed support by political parties for parity in politics vanishes in practice into a string of broken commitments. In this picture, the role played by women's movements in mobilizing demand, amplifying voice and opening up opportunities for women's political apprenticeship is an important constant.

Source: Costa (2010); Costa and Cornwall (2014).

Ultimately, Pathways research suggests that far greater attention needs to be paid to feminist constituency building, and to processes to democratize politics itself. This goes far beyond inserting women into unaccountable political institutions. Nazneen and Tasneem (2010) show for Bangladesh how training can open up a space to create connections that fortify women's candidature, whilst alternative campaign funding can facilitate poor women's participation in political processes. Examples of 'what works' invariably return us to a core theme of this paper: organizing at the grassroots to build networks and critical consciousness, challenge taken for granted beliefs about women and strengthen women's individual and collective capacity.

#### **Box 5: Building constituencies for accountable governance in India**

The Indian constitution guarantees women a third of seats in local government, but what works to transform reserved seats into greater responsiveness to women? Sharma and Sudarshan's research for Pathways in Uttarakhand suggests that to understand women's political voice, we need to go beyond focusing on elected women. Transformation in politics in favour of gender justice depends on collective processes strengthening the accountability of state institutions.

This research focuses on Uttarakhand Mahila Parishad (UMP), a woman's movement that has built a network of around 450 women's groups over the last 25 years. All women from the village are included in the group, no matter what their caste or class is, creating in the process an active community in which differences are recognized and negotiated. This process of working together has challenged deep-rooted prejudices, and enabled the women to build a sense of collective identity. Beginning in environmental and childcare activities, women have now begun to enter formal political spaces, contesting and winning seats in local government, and gaining valuable political experience by putting forward their own candidate for the state assembly.

Facilitators' emphasis on inclusivity and internal democracy has created spaces for women to learn leadership and organizing skills. Engagement with the state has evolved with this from talking to functionaries to mobilizing, and to public protests and direct action, such as blocking traffic. The groups are able to mobilize as a pressure group and this has helped to strengthen the political effectiveness of women representatives. Sharma and Sudarshan cite a CBO worker: 'These days any government official who comes to the village asks for the president of the WVG, not the *gram pradhan* [village head], because they know that these women will create trouble later if they are not consulted'.

A vital source of support has been the USNPSS (Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shiksha Sansthan) network, which has facilitated collective spaces from which women have been able to challenge prevailing norms, and contend with the fierce patriarchal character of social and political institutions. By building women's sense of active citizenship and creating deliberative spaces, the groups have supported women to expand their political aspirations and horizons, and made efforts to democratize village governance through inclusiveness in everyday decision-making for all. This has in turn strengthened women's capacity to exercise leadership as representatives in formal governance spaces.

Source: Sharma and Sudarshan (2010).



This body of work shows that political empowerment is about more than securing greater numbers of women in political office. Nazneen and Sultan's volume for Pathways, *Voicing Demands*, highlights the role that women's movements play in mobilizing voice, framing demands and opening up political space, but with the shrinkage of funding to feminist and women's organizations, we see diminishing capacity to provide this kind of support.

## 7 Changing narratives of sexuality

Pathways' third theme took the body as an entry point. Much of the emphasis in development discourses that relate the body to women's experiences of power and empowerment focuses on violence and violation, hazard and harm. Whilst recognizing the vital significance of this work, we wanted to explore less obvious dimensions of the relationships between women's bodies and their empowerment. Scoping workshops in regional hubs emphasized the pervasiveness of representations of women's bodies and sexualities in the media and popular culture. We came to focus our interest on these narratives (Pereira 2009, 2014).

There were two dimensions to this work. Some researchers explored different sites of sociality and everyday life in which narratives of sexuality circulate and shape women's experiences. Some projects had an action research dimension: in Egypt, Mona Ali and Sahar El-Mougy ran writing workshops for bloggers that transformed their narratives of female sexuality and produced powerful works of short fiction subsequently published in a newspaper reaching hundreds of thousands of readers (Ali 2014). In the process, they innovated a methodology relevant to other contexts for shifting mindsets and producing material that can engage others in re-examining their perspectives and prejudices.

### **Box 6: Reframing narratives of sexuality in the Egyptian blogosphere**

Using clips from well-loved Egyptian films, newspaper articles and popular songs, Pathways Middle East researcher Mona Ali and her colleagues developed a unique approach to gender training. Working with a mixed group of young Egyptian bloggers, they facilitated a process of critical appraisal of popular imaginaries of women. This led to the rewriting of these narratives to challenge stereotypes. They then took artefacts produced by researchers working on projects investigating conditional cash transfers and family courts, and gave them to the bloggers as inspiration from which to write short stories. These stories interrogated gender relations, power and empowerment in ways that were so nuanced, poignant and intimate they brought new insights to the research process. This process of moving into and out of the liminal realm of fiction provides a powerful methodology for changing narratives of sexuality, shifting the perspectives of contributors to Egypt's vibrant blogosphere in significant ways.

Source: Ali (2014).

Researchers also explored powerful influences in shaping societal attitudes towards women and their own everyday exercise of agency. Bangladesh researchers carried out a survey of women slum dwellers' TV viewing habits, gaining insights into how leisure and the moments of fantasy seized out of days of drudgery can be a vital pathway of empowerment for women living in poverty (Priyadarshini and Rahim 2010). Women interviewed reported learning new tactics for managing mothers-in-law and husbands, and gaining a window into other worlds and changed perspectives on what was possible for them as women. In Palestine, Penny Johnson's study of young women's sexualities revealed the contradictions of desire and restrictions on mobility, and shifting social and sexual expectations in a context in which young women navigate both the oppression of Israeli occupation and prevailing cultural norms. One woman Johnson interviewed, gave a vivid reminder of just how hidden the pathways of empowerment associated with sexuality are from the purview of conventional development: 'Really, we are bored from

always having the same subject, communications workshops, democracy. Learning about our bodies would be better' (Johnson 2010: 113).

**Box 7: Bringing a 'sexuality lens' to women's empowerment**

The word 'sexuality' is often interpreted narrowly in development to mean 'lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender' or as 'about sex', 'private', 'embarrassing' or 'difficult to talk about'. But if we understand 'sexuality' as being about choices not just concerning people's intimate lives but also, for women, which streets are safe to walk down, whether to stay in jobs in which there is routine sexual harassment, whether to go out of the house at all, whether wearing certain clothes means hassle from men, whether it's possible to find a room to rent alone, whether to give in to family pressure to marry, then we begin to see more clearly the far-reaching implications of sexuality for women's empowerment. This perspective opens up a more holistic understanding of the complexities of power and change in women's lives. This can focus attention on the difficult trade-offs women face between compliance and resistance, and the normative expectations that constrain women's choices.

Source: Hawkins et al. (2011); Sharma (2009).

The second dimension of work on sexuality and the body addressed how a more positive approach to sexuality can be a pathway of empowerment, focusing on sexuality education, and pleasure. Drawing together innovative examples of transformative practice from around the world, *Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure* (Jolly et al. 2013) offers a powerful array of examples of facilitating empowerment through sexuality education. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf notes:

Positioning women as weak or damaged subjects gives renewed legitimacy to patriarchally motivated discourses of control and protection. ... It thereby circumscribes the production of meaning and the development of alternative narratives that attempt to portray and articulate female lived experience—today and in years to come. But most debilitating of all, we lose our capacity to resist and change our situation and imagine new horizons of possibilities around sexual safety, choice, autonomy and pleasure (2013: 30-1).

Researchers directed enquiries at hidden or muted dimensions of women's sexualities, seeking to challenge the taken for granted assumptions and silences about sexuality that pervade feminist and women's activism, as well as the contexts of women's everyday lives. Jo Doezema's (2013) account of pleasure in sex work, for example, challenges how some feminists misrecognize the sexual agency of sex workers. Gulsah Seral's (2013) moving description of how Women for Women's Human Rights' training broke the silence on women's desire and pleasure, offers an inspiring example of an approach that works.

**Box 8: Empowering human rights training in Turkey**

The Turkish organization Women for Women's Human Rights designed the Human Rights Education Programme for Women (HREP) to raise women's critical awareness of laws that affect their lives. The programme aims to equip women with information and skills to put their rights into practice, as individuals and through solidarity networks. The training covers a range of topics, from legal literacy and democratic participation, violence against women, gender-sensitive parenting, community organizing and sexuality. WWHR trained a cohort of facilitators to implement the programme in partnership with local government. Some 10,000 women have benefited from the programme, which has also generated a number of new local women's organizations.

Beginning with human rights, women's human rights and relevant frameworks, the training moves from information provision to an exchange of ever more intimate experience. Women come to share their personal stories and recognize their commonalities. Sexuality is integral to the programme, and is addressed close to the end, once women have a framework for situating their experiences in a human rights context. After sessions on violence and reproductive rights, the training explores an affirming and empowering

perspective on sexual expression, pleasure and enjoyment. The facilitator takes the group through a process of finding a safe space to speak about negative experiences, moving from the personal to the political in their analysis and understanding.

Years of internalizing negative messages about their sexualities and bodies make this process difficult, but results have been extraordinary. In one example, the husband of one participant visited the training centre to thank the facilitator. He admitted that he had been opposed to his wife engaging in the training, but he now saw a transformation in his wife. Similar stories of transformation emerge from the narratives of women interviewed for impact evaluation. Assessments conducted in 2003 and 2011 showed that almost all participants observed an increase in self-confidence, and nearly 75 per cent reported participating more equally in family decision-making. Over half resumed their interrupted education, and about half began to participate more actively in the labour market.

Source: Ilkcaracan and Seral (2000); Seral (2013).

Lessons from this work include the importance of dialogue and of confronting the limiting attitudes that women may have about each other and their own bodies. Xiaopei He (2013) relates an initiative of the Chinese NGO Pink Space that brought together lesbians, sex workers, women living with HIV and the wives of gay men. At first, they were wary of each other, guarding their prejudices; but through critical collective analysis, they came to recognize those prejudices for what they were and to find in each other's experience a place for recognition and solidarity. This way of working is not oblivious to differences between women, as in the conventional gender equality and women's empowerment narrative, but takes those differences as an entry point for transformative social action. Breaking the silence on sexuality brings with it much else: an opportunity for building solidarity, for critical reflection and for reclaiming rights to bodies and sexualities that society may regard as 'bad', damaged and shameful.

## 8 Motorways and pathways

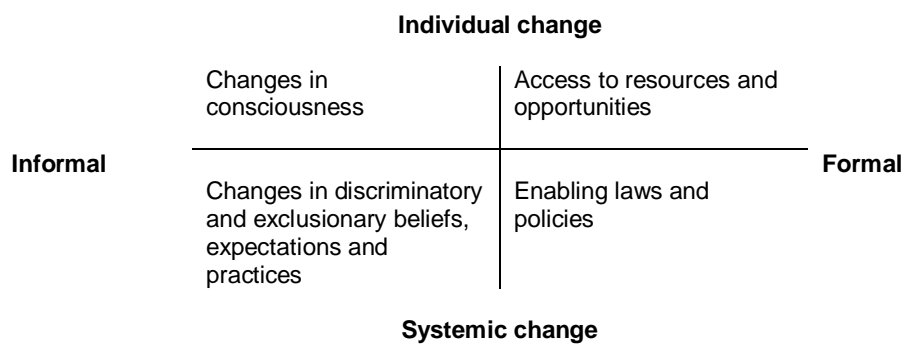
One of the most important lessons from Pathways' research is that there are no one-size-fits-all interventions that can produce in all women the effect of feeling more control over their lives. But where programmes include a dimension to actively engage women in critical, conscious, reflection on their own circumstances and to share that process with other women—what Paulo Freire called *conscientização* and what feminists might describe as 'consciousness raising'—this can make much more difference to women than simply lending them money, giving cash transfers or teaching a practical skill. This is an important finding, even if it is hardly a new insight.

Why is this so important? Because many 'empowerment' programmes begin with increasing women's access to resources rather than with changing how they may have been taught to see themselves as women, as citizens and as human beings. There is an assumption that once women have access to economic resources, they will be able to make changes in other areas of their lives. And this can happen, as Pathways' survey research has shown: where women have access to regular, dependable income that remains under their control, they are able to exercise greater decision-making (Kabeer et al. 2011a). Yet equally, despite marginal increases in spending power, women may find themselves unable to envisage the kinds of changes that could bring them greater empowerment, because prevailing social norms and limiting self-beliefs conspire to restrict their ability to re-imagine the horizons of the possible. And, equally, while much focus is placed on advocacy to change laws and policies, much else is needed to bring about societal change as an outcome. Mulki Al-Sharmani, drawing on Pathways researchers' work on legal activism, comments: 'legal reforms ... are not the end result. These reforms are only meaningful insofar as they actually lead to positive and substantive changes in the lives of those who are targeted by the new laws' (2010: 16). And this, she argues, comes to depend on societal dialogue,

awareness-raising and creating ‘sensibilities that are appreciative of justice, equality and acceptance and respect for others’ (2010: 16).

The Gender at Work framework, developed by Aruna Rao and David Kelleher (2005), highlights the significance of working with internalized beliefs, normative expectations and critical consciousness as a key driver of change. Applications of this model point to the directionality of change as residing in the reciprocal relationship between access to resources and opportunities and shifts in consciousness, both individual and collective. In the adapted version of the framework, below, I substitute for the original category of ‘informal cultural norms and exclusionary practices’ the broader ‘changing discriminatory and exclusionary beliefs, expectations and practices’, reflecting a discomfort with the use of the term ‘informal’ to describe pervasive cultural norms that may permeate every dimension of people’s lives.

Figure 1: Gender at work framework



Source: Adapted from Rao and Kelleher (2005).

A powerful insight that the application of this framework offers us is that what lies on the left hand side of the frame is a vital part of the change process; from this might be derived a hypothesis that effective change depends on working on both sides of the equation, and originates in and returns to the left hand side—to building critical consciousness and challenging and changing inequitable and discriminatory beliefs, expectations and practices—in achieving sustainable impact. In what follows, I draw on case studies from Pathways’ research to provide further substantiation of this understanding of how change happens.

### 8.1 Creating critical consciousness, realizing rights

Sholkamy’s (2011, 2014) account of the Egyptian conditional cash transfer programme reveals that the design of a programme according to feminist principles and an emphasis on consciousness-raising and collective action are the factors that make a difference. In doing so, it reiterates the point that emerges time and again from studies of successful economic empowerment initiatives (Kabeer 2008, 2011; Kabeer et al. 2013). Egypt’s Conditional Cash Transfer works to instil a sense of citizenship in women, who come to see it as an entitlement rather than a hand out. The programme recognizes the significance of supportive relationships as part of the process of transformation. In its focus on intermediaries—the social workers who visit and enrol the women—it places the quality of relationships at the heart of the intervention. Most importantly, it combines material support with seeking transformations in women’s own subjectivities and in their individual and collective agency.

**Box 9: Feminist social protection in Egypt: ‘Steady money, state support and respect can equal women’s empowerment in Egypt’**

A pilot conditional cash transfer programme was carried out in the Cairo neighbourhood of Ain el Sira from 2008-12 by the Egyptian Ministry of Social Solidarity and its partners, with technical and research support from the American University in Cairo and the Pathways programme. It aimed to test a feminist approach to social protection. The programme began with ethnographic research to gain a closer understanding of what mattered to women themselves. This revealed not just the need for income to supplement meagre household incomes, but also the failures of state provision and mistreatment by service providers, and a desire for decent work and better living conditions.

The programme therefore built in an active role for social workers in supporting women to access state services and recognize their entitlements to such services as citizens. It sought to value women’s care work: it was clearly stated that the cash transfer compensates women for time spent attending programme meetings and social worker visits. Women were not required to provide proof of unemployment, and were encouraged to see the transfer as a means to engage in work on better terms.

A key innovation was the ‘bankerization’ of payments through cash cards that women could use in ATM machines to withdraw funds, and accounts that allowed them to save and strategize about their spending. Social workers underwent training that promoted the values of rights and justice, and were trained as facilitators and supporters who could accompany rather than direct or instruct. The programme permitted women to make decisions that would otherwise have been the prerogative of men, allowing them to invest resources in their children’s education, clothing, nutrition and home improvements. The reliability of the transfers allowed women to plan.

After two years of payments, women reported a number of improvements in their lives. One of the most striking was a remarkable decrease in reported domestic violence. A third of those interviewed reported that abuse had stopped. The reason: cash had helped reduce stress in households as men were not being pressed to give women cash for urgent needs. Cash payments had also not had any negative effects on women’s desire or ability to work, but now women reported working out of choice, rather than desperation. The cash transfer gave them security, so they were able to look for less demeaning work.

Hania Sholkamy defines a feminist approach to social protection as ‘one that defines, targets and alleviates poverty as the women who are living in deprivation define it’ (2014: 138). Her research shows that a programme design explicitly seeking to enhance women’s identities as citizens and restore to them the accountability of the state was an important factor in generating positive effects. By starting with women’s own desires, and supporting them to make choices and fulfil the obligations that they value, the programme’s empowering effects came about through acknowledging and recognizing their roles both as caregivers and as breadwinners.

Source: Sholkamy (2011, 2014).

In Brazil, an employment training programme called *Chapeu de Palha Mulher* grew out of an existing safety net programme aimed at alleviating the hunger of seasonal sugar cane workers in rural areas of Pernambuco State. Pathways research used documentary film and interviews with the programme’s designers, implementers and women beneficiaries to investigate the ways of working and some impacts of the programme.

**Box 10: Empowering employment training in Pernambuco, Brazil**

For generations of workers in the sugar cane plantations of north-eastern Brazil, the long months between harvests have been a time of hunger. An innovative training programme, *Chapeu de Palha Mulher*, makes use of an existing safety net programme to avert hunger between the harvests to change women’s prospects, with transformational effects. Established in 2007, the programme has now trained more than 50,000 women and is expanding to other areas in the State. Pathways’ research took the form of qualitative research on the design and implementation of the programme, complemented by an independent quantitative evaluation commissioned by the State Secretariat and a documentary, *A Quiet Revolution*, which sought to explore women’s experiences of the programme.

*Chapeu de Palha Mulher* seeks to channel social policies to households through women without instrumentalizing them. It has three components: all participants must attend a mandatory three-month course on 'public policies'. Then they make a selection from a series of vocational training courses, including in non-traditional jobs like welding, soldering, electrical work and taxi driving which give access to a growing employment market. The state government negotiated with training colleges to lower the bar for women's entry into courses, citing their historic disadvantage and exclusion, giving thousands of women access to an education previously denied to them. Stipends for attending courses complement existing benefits to provide women with a basic income during the time of hunger, and the programme provides childcare, transportation and food to facilitate access.

The programme works through a unique partnership between the state and civil society. One of the state's leading feminist organizations designed, facilitated and trained others to facilitate the rights and citizenship training, and has used its capillary networks in remote rural areas to strengthen local women's organizations. The State Secretariat has worked with the local state institutions to create a sustainable basis for the programme, creating local women's secretariats in the most patriarchal rural districts. The methodology for the 'public policies' course draws on feminist consciousness-raising, gender training and popular education practices.

In a State Secretariat survey, women responded that not only had the programme brought them income and training that could lead them into employment. It had also opened their eyes to their rights as citizens, and brought them a sense of personal transformation. Many spoke of a life constrained to 'house, husband, children' before. Women also talked of how limiting the belief was that certain jobs are 'men's jobs' and that women lack the knowledge, strength or capacity to do them. Admitting women to learn skills such as welding and plumbing has also challenged attitudes within government training institutions, creating the basis for sustainable change.

Most striking has been the impact of the 'public policies' course on their sense of entitlement as citizens, and rights as women. Interviewees spoke of never before having known that they had a right to have these rights. This part of the programme has led to them making choices for the vocational training that they might never have previously considered, and to making changes in their lives that might have been unimaginable.

Reflecting on change that the programme has brought, Marcilene, who is training in soldering, talks of how she left a violent husband and a job in which she was being exploited, because of the predictability of the stipend she receives from the programme and the cash transfer she receives from the state. The programme has also taught her that she has as much of a right as anyone else to leisure and pleasure. 'I used to just work all the time', she says, 'but now I know that I have a right to take some time for myself, and go to the beach with my children at the weekend, just to relax'.

Source: *A Quiet Revolution* (directed by Christina Daniels); 'Empowering Skills Training', Pathways Policy Briefing, 2011.

These two cases in Egypt and Brazil have design principles in common that put women's human rights—rather than women's economic potential alone—at their heart. Both were conceived by feminists motivated by a desire to enhance women's critical consciousness, and awareness and exercise of their rights as citizens. An explicit concern with what can be found at the left hand side of the Gender at Work matrix—shifting internalized self-limiting beliefs, challenging restrictive social norms and strengthening women's collective consciousness and agency—distinguishes these programmes from conventional economic empowerment initiatives. Both are underpinned by a commitment to a feminist vision of citizenship that is about expanding women's capacity to imagine themselves as citizens with rights and entitlements, and to be able to lay claim to that which they are due.

Women's organizations play a key role in the implementation of these two programmes, especially in the Brazilian case where the grassroots connections, capacities in building feminist leadership and strengthening local women's organizing has been key to the programme's success and sustainability. Just how important women's mobilization is for positive change emerges time

and time again across the Pathways studies in domains as different as women's reproductive health, informal sector work and women's political effectiveness. Where women are able to come together and organize themselves to make demands, build constituencies and alliances, they are more likely both to succeed in making changes for other women and also experience for themselves the empowering effects of mobilization.

## 8.2 Feminists mediating change

Naila Kabeer and Lopita Huq's study of the Bangladeshi landless women's organization Saptagram tells a salutary tale about the hazards of scaling up funding too fast, and also a powerful story of what works. It underscores a key theme emerging from various Pathways studies: the significance of those who mediate empowerment work, the front-line workers, women's organizers and women leaders. Their analysis emphasizes relationships as a vital factor in efforts to support women's empowerment, and offers important lessons for those concerned with supporting positive social change in favour of women's empowerment and gender justice.

### **Box 11: The power of relationships**

Women's organizations play a vital role in supporting women's empowerment. A relatively neglected dimension of this role are the relationships of trust, loyalty and love that often bind these organizations together, and are part of the story of their effectiveness. Naila Kabeer and Lopita Huq tell the story of a Bangladeshi landless women's organization, Saptagram, set up to provide poor women with the basic economic security to take action against injustice. Rejecting the popular micro-credit model, Saptagram opted for a savings-led model that brought women together weekly in groups. Joint savings were banked, loans given by Saptagram for collective projects, along with training and support. The organization's success proved its downfall: deluged with donor funding, it faltered and failed, and with the death of its charismatic founder-leader, Rokeya Rahman Kabeer, everyone expected the organization to follow. But it didn't die. It gradually regenerated itself, led by members. Kabeer and Huq offer a number of vital lessons.

Saptagram's work was structured around three core elements: building women's economic self-reliance through group savings and lending; building women's critical consciousness and agency through group discussions, training and cultural activities; and building relationships of solidarity amongst the landless women. There were tangible gains in women's living standards, from home improvements to investments in small businesses, but most significant were the more intangible shifts in attitude, esteem and confidence that the programme had stimulated. Women spoke of being able to stand on their own two feet and reduce their dependence on others, and of learning to speak for themselves. Interviews with members revealed how far Saptagram's courses had transformed their perceptions of themselves, expanded their horizons and made them more confident about interacting with others, including those who had previously intimidated them.

The women who returned to Saptagram to regenerate it after its near demise spoke of how their love of the organization that had changed their lives brought them back. As one put it, 'when we loved someone first, is it possible to love someone else later?' Staff of the organization spoke, too, of love so strong that many workers carried on when the organization stalled with no salaries, paying their own travel expenses, and who through sheer persistence brought it back to life.

What made the difference? One woman interviewed, Rabeya, said, 'we were in a dark room with our eyes closed. Saptagram came and opened our eyes. It gave us strength' (Kabeer and Huq 2014: 254). Key to Saptagram's impact was an approach that took seriously the vital role of consciousness in social change. As important were the relationships Saptagram built amongst women who were previously unable to act in concert to defend their rights and fight injustice. Solidarity and collective action proved key drivers of change and real gains were made in employment rights and access to public services as well as in women's domestic relationships.

Source: Kabeer and Huq (2014).

Victim of its own success, drowned by donor funding, Saptagram plunged into disarray, but its phoenix-like return demonstrates that sustainable social action depends, above all, on creating relationships of solidarity that are mutually transformative. Once again, we see here the conjuncture of vital empowering ingredients—feminist leadership, training initiatives that build critical consciousness and the capacity for collective action, and an economic element that enables women to create changes in their everyday relationships and claim rights in their economic activities. But this story also brings out the relational dimensions of successful empowerment initiatives, and of solidarity, trust and respect.

### 8.3 Holding to account

Women’s organizations play a vital role as ‘civil society’ by channelling women’s demands into the public arena, and in mobilizing to hold the state and other institutions to account for failures to deliver on women’s rights commitments. For the laws, policies and conventions that women’s organizations advocate for, locally, nationally and transnationally, to have positive effects in women’s lives, women need to know they exist and the state and other authorities need to be reminded of their obligations. The example of the OBSERVE consortium’s observatory on Brazilian domestic violence legislation, described earlier, illustrates what feminist civil society organizations can do in mobilizing to monitor their governments and to make women aware of their rights. Pathways research on Resolution 1325 worked on another dimension of this: building awareness and demand amongst women, to strengthen the call from women’s civil society organizations for a meaningful role in the peace-building process.

#### **Box 12: Mobilizing women for the implementation of peace-building frameworks in Sierra Leone**

Sierra Leone’s emergence from 11 years of brutal civil war was accompanied by a clamour by women’s organizations for the protection and promotion of women’s rights as part of the peace building and post-conflict reconstruction processes. Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions emphasizing women’s role in peace-building provide internationally-agreed frameworks for women’s inclusion in the process of post-conflict reconstruction. Pathways research found that the transformational edge of international frameworks was blunted in application in Sierra Leone. It pointed to the need to build broader public awareness of Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions, and to equip women’s organizations with the means to monitor and hold to account those responsible for implementing commitments to women’s inclusion in post-conflict peace-building. Without tangible steps to provide this support, the language in these resolutions exists in a vacuum with little impact on women’s lives.

Pathways researchers in Sierra Leone used the results of research on the implementation failures of 1325 to address one of the critical limitations identified. They worked with local organizations to produce and disseminate simple, easy to follow, leaflets about Resolution 1325 to distribute to a wide audience of women. These served to inform women about the provisions of the Resolution and to make them aware of the demands that they could be making on authorities.

Source: Abdullah et al. (2010).

### 8.4 Changing representations of women

A further lesson of Pathways research is the significance of popular culture in shaping the conditions under which women may experience something as empowering. Given widespread recognition of the power of the media, it is notable that little attention has been given by mainstream development to the significance of representation: this reflects both an over-emphasis in development on the material at the cost of the cultural, and the limits placed on transformative development initiatives by the current obsession with impact quantification. It is much harder to count the effects of a television programme or a hit song on women’s lives than the number of female bodies in a local council or the number of loans repaid. But the diffuse impacts of representations of women are widely recognized. As Rosalind Eyben observes:



Part of what enables women to step away from the expectations that limit them comes from seeing themselves and their options in a different light. Where imaginative use has been made of vehicles like soap operas and online forums, prejudices can be challenged and perspectives changed. Role models that inspire, challenge and strengthen others are invaluable. Despite technical difficulties in measuring the impact, development agencies should not give up on the potential of these activities (2011: 9).

For Pathways, recognizing representation as a pathway of empowerment and disempowerment took us into working with creative communications as a way to challenge stereotypes. Tessa Lewin, who led this work, writes how development images of the ‘cardboard woman’ are brakes on more transformative approaches to women’s empowerment. Rather than being able to envisage women in all their complexity and diversity, the consumers of development’s glossies, adverts and reports are exposed to monochromatic narratives of heroines and victims (Lewin 2010). Changing these representations is in itself a form of social action that can have a powerful impact. Pathways’ *Real World* film series sought to do just this, producing short films and animations that could radically interrupt taken for granted images of women in development, and show other pathways and possibilities. By engaging the producers and consumers of popular culture directly in the process of alternative message-making, Pathways researchers in Brazil, Bangladesh, Egypt and Ghana sought to use visual communications—photography, digital stories, documentary film, performances of stories—as a pathway of change.

**Box 13: Populating Ghanaian popular music with new images of women**

Ghanaian popular music is a source of misogynist and sexist stereotypes of women, filling the airwaves with disempowering narratives about women. Pathways West Africa hub researchers Akosua Adomako and Awo Asiedu undertook an action research project aimed at tracing these narratives through generations of popular music and stimulating reflection amongst popular artistes of the effects of their representations, with the intention of changing narratives of women’s sexuality in popular music.

An exhaustive analysis of themes and tropes generated a long list of negative stereotypes. These principally concerned women’s sexuality, portraying them as voracious, unscrupulous, fickle and greedy or as passive objects of male desire. What would it take to transform these versions of women? Focus groups were convened with a range of different people, from the taxi drivers who stay tuned to their radios all day, to the DJs playing tunes and the artistes who compose them. A competition was launched to find a song that challenged these representations. A panel of judges—musicians, music producers, gender researchers, music scholars and consumers of music—was convened. The winning songs were chosen on the basis of the lyrics, musical quality and innovation. Workshops with popular artistes worked on analyzing and rewriting lyrics to reflect more empowering perceptions of women.

The media attention sparked by the project helped make more visible the issues the project sought to address. It stimulated debate and raised awareness of how the lyrics of popular music shape perceptions of women—and showed that alternatives in which women were represented positively could be just as successful.

Source: Adomako and Asiedu (2012).

## 9 Supporting women’s empowerment: lessons for donors

Women’s organizing inspired by feminist principles of equality and justice is vital to achieving positive social change. In her overview of the implications of Pathways’ research for donors, Rosalind Eyben underscores the significance of women’s organizing for securing policies and practices that make a difference to women’s lives:

Women's empowerment through grass-roots organisations and popular participation is one of the most important steps towards changing historical relations of inequality and exclusion (Eyben 2011: 6).

Pathways research has shown how external financing can both facilitate and weaken the capacity of women's organizations. Israh Jad's (2008) account of the NGOization of the Palestinian women's movement shows how the creep of donor agendas fundamentally affected the capacity of Palestinian women's organizations to maintain their grassroots organizing, with dramatic and detrimental effects on their political effectiveness. Kuttab (2014) confirms this analysis, and contrasts the stagnant NGO scene with vibrant local mobilization in pursuit of social justice in which new energies are being created and channelled. Cases of where donor funding deluges women's organizations, perverting their agendas and diverting their energies, offers salutary lessons for those who would seek to support women's empowerment. The story of Saptagram, told earlier in this paper, is a powerful example, revealing how little support the donors who flock to support 'success stories' offer organizations in managing their internal organizational challenges. This underscores the need for the kind of sensitive accompaniment associated more with women's funds than busy disbursement-driven bilaterals or multi-laterals.

A Pathways research project traced funding in Bangladesh and Ghana (Apusigah et al. 2011; Mukhopadhyay et al. 2011; Eyben 2011). The study demonstrated donor power in using resources to strengthen the organizational capacity of women's rights organizations, but also the negative effects of fickleness in funding agendas. All point to the significance of external financing for effective collective action, but raise a number of negative tendencies: short-term and fluctuating project-related funding, donor pooling of funds, and the growing use of competitive processes which undermine collaborative working relationships between organizations. In Bangladesh, interviews by Nazneen and Sultan (2011) with women's rights organizations revealed that qualities of mutual respect, solidarity, responsiveness and helpfulness are perceived to make a 'good donor'. Donors' negative qualities were being top-down, no transparency in decision-making, wanting too much publicity, imposing their decisions, being bureaucratic and inflexible, and thinking too much of themselves. Interviews carried out by Mukhopadhyay and colleagues amongst gender specialists in their head offices highlighted the increased effectiveness of external financing that donors might achieve by: enabling women's rights organizations to set their own agendas; providing institutional support, and medium to longer term financing rather than short-term project-based grants; investing time in building and maintaining supportive relationships with women's rights organizations; using this proximity to ensure that such organizations were sufficiently grounded in and representative of their core constituencies; and drawing on these organizations as a source of knowledge for policy dialogue (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2011).

In sum, key findings pointed to the need for a shift of perspective and practice: recognition of the key role women's rights organizations play in achieving gender equality objectives; the need to treat these organizations as innovators not contractors; and acknowledging that real change cannot be reduced to short-run project cycles and depends on solidarity, which can be jeopardized by practices such as competitive bidding (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2011). The discourse of 'value for money' that has come to be used as a means of judging interventions often fails to take a longer-term view and to look at the other dimensions of 'value' from funding that strengthens organizational capacity to support and facilitate transformational change. As Eyben points out:

Value for money is about maximising economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. Because women's empowerment is about transformative processes, this means

designing interventions that reap long-term and sustainable development dividends (2011: 9).

Achieving these long-term and sustainable ‘development dividends’ calls for a radical shift of perspective and practice, away from short-term pay-offs to longer-term gains of structural transformation.

## 10 Conclusion

Feminists have long argued that empowerment is not something that can be done to or for women (Rowlands 1997; Kabeer 1999; Batliwala 2007). The feminist slogan ‘the personal is the political’ roots the process of empowerment in an expansion of women’s consciousness and capacity to act to transform their worlds. It is when women recognize their ‘power within’ and act together with other women to exercise ‘power with’, that they gain ‘power to’ act as agents; when they act in concert to tackle injustice and inequalities, this becomes ‘power for’ positive social change.<sup>9</sup> Fundamental to this is a process that does more than ‘unlock women’s potential’ but incites them to think differently—about themselves, about the situations they are in, about their social worlds, relationships and horizons. Feminist experience has shown that this process may take diverse pathways. This calls for us to see empowerment less as a destination than as a journey.

Tracing these journeys, as they take place in different contexts at different times, can help to provide new insights into what it takes to bring about change that can advance social and gender justice. And this gives rise to an approach framed by lived experience rather than stereotypes, one that can countenance contradictions and celebrate plural visions of empowerment that fit with the contexts in which they are voiced. It is an approach that can restore to the concept of empowerment the ‘power to’ serve the struggle for a more just and equal world. Eileen Kuttub reminds us, in the context of Palestine:

Women want not only access to resources, but also control over them. They want not only to participate in decision-making through quotas for women, but to do so with full rights as equal citizens. Women don’t want to work in any employment opportunity, but to be employed in protected and decent work. In such a situation women become empowered and this is why this kind of empowerment cannot happen under colonial occupation and patriarchal domination (2014: 207).

If efforts to promote women’s empowerment are to be about more than accommodating women within highly unequal, inequitable and unfair societies and systems—and if it is to go beyond the self-limiting strictures of the earlier Women in Development approach that today’s ‘women and girls’ narratives mirror—then it needs to engage with the structural bases of inequality and discrimination. As Hania Sholkamy observes:

Alleviating poverty and enabling women to make some income can better lives, but the enabling environment that confirms the right to work, to property, to safety, to voice, to sexuality and to freedom is not created by sewing machines or micro-credit alone (2010: 257).

All the evidence points to the fact that donor-driven projects, policies and programmes are not the basis for meaningful, sustainable change. If donors want to make a difference to women’s

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<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Lisa VeneKlasen for this point.

lives, their best bets lie in directing their investments not to building more motorways themselves, but towards women's funds, who can use it to support local women's organizations in mobilizing demands and holding their states to account for delivering on commitments to women's rights. If a fraction of the funds currently funnelled to the accountancy giants were redirected to women's funds such as Mama Cash, we would see real gains for women's empowerment. What works, our surveys work found, is a regular, dependable source of income that is at the discretion of the organization to spend on activities they believe to be most effective in making a difference.

Rather than impose upon women's organizations a fixed set of goals and expectations, and instruments such as logical frameworks that drive a linear, results-focused, approach, what works to strengthen them is investment in their capacity to respond creatively to emerging opportunities, more trust in their knowledge, and sensitive, supportive accompaniment. To do this effectively, donor organizations need to invest in hiring more staff to work on the gender equality and women's empowerment portfolio, and in building greater knowledge and skills amongst staff as the supporters of transformative development practice. Internal learning processes, geared at strengthening donors' capacities for analysis and responsiveness, will be needed for such investment to produce returns. These would engage staff from across donor organizations in learning initiatives to connect their personal experiences of constraint and change with their practice as development professionals, creating safe spaces for agency personnel across the organization to develop capacities to listen, think and learn.

This virtuous circle of investment, directed inwards as well as outwards, could deliver far more effective results for women's rights than slimming down staff and cranking up disbursement pressure. Transformative development practice would, then, come to be about restoring empathy to a sector ever more distant from lived experience, reliant on 'evidence' that strips the humanity out of those whose lives' development purports to transform. This vision for change would encompass a methodological plurality and willingness to experiment creatively with ways of communicating—of listening and learning, as well as of engaging in dialogue—that can be in itself a catalyst of change. And this is perhaps one of the most powerful lessons from the Pathways programme: that engaging a broader constituency with change calls for ways of going beyond words, figures and text to invite the power of moving images, songs and stories to transform perspectives and incite imaginations.

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