

## **Women's Empowerment and Education: linking knowledge to transformative action**

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### **Introduction**

Derided by institutions and governments when it first appeared three decades ago, the concept of women's empowerment has now become highly esteemed, though judging from available literature, it is still much more in use in the women's movement and among international development agencies than in the academic world. Women's empowerment figures explicitly as a fundamental piece of the policies adopted by international development agencies, but in contrast is given weak treatment by educational publications. A review of article titles in three prestigious comparative education journals (*Comparative Education Review*, *Compare*, and the *European Journal of Education*) over the past 10 years identified a total of three articles using 'empowerment' in their title.

This article examines empowerment as a theory of social change and addresses the realities of women in both developing and industrialised countries which, though different in degree, present significant commonalities that cut national boundaries and even levels of socioeconomic development. It comprises five parts: the first discusses the concept of empowerment and its theoretical architecture; the second deals with the role of formal education in the empowering of girls; the third examines the contributions of non-formal education to empowering adult women; the fourth considers the role of women-led NGOs as key actors in the promotion of empowerment; and the fifth provides examples of successful instances of the implementation of empowerment through education. The article concludes with an assessment of the possibilities for and challenges to making empowerment a concrete reality.

### **A Theory of Social Emancipation**

Empowerment has received theoretical and practical attention from several scholars and activists. Some describe it as an end point; others as a process. In reality, process and outcomes are intertwined. Here, I focus on three conceptualisations. Amartya Sen has contributed theoretical attention to women's empowerment by describing it as 'one of the central issues in the process of development for many countries in the world today' (1999, p. 202). Sen criticised national development efforts of the past for their concentration on aspects of well-being which treated women as 'passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help' (p. 191). He wanted instead to recognise women as 'active agents of change' through their own agency. For Sen, empowerment is the acquisition by women of 'agency and voice' (p. 193). These assertions, together with his concepts of capabilities (the aggregate of resources and human capital as prerequisites to agency, i.e. the conditions under which choices are made by individuals) and functionings (the ways of being and doing), highlight the importance of individual agency. Yet, his 'capabilities' do not focus on gender and he does not elaborate on how subjects can gain 'agency' in their lives. Specifically, Sen's capability approach is silent on the capability to

exercise freedom (Deneulin & Stewart, cited in Iversen, 2003). Iversen argues that the problem facing women is not 'what you are able to do or be with the goods at your disposal' but whether 'your command over goods may be circumscribed in the first place' (p. 105). Martha Nussbaum (2000; 2003) builds on Sen's capabilities by identifying 10 concrete aspects of social life that are essential for a decent life for women and men. But she does not consider conditions that affect women in particular and, like Sen, she does not elucidate the possible mechanisms by which women may attain these conditions. My proposed theoretical framework does not overlap with the capabilities approach because: (1) it is not a list of social values, but rather a set of *empirically* demonstrated conditions and sites for social change, and (2) it centres on the macro- and micro- dynamics that must be in place to enable *women's* individual and collective agency.

An important thinker on the question of women's empowerment is Naila Kabeer (c.2000), who recognises three levels of empowerment: the 'deeper' level, or the understanding of structural relations such as the interaction between class, caste, and gender; the intermediate level, or awareness of institutional rules and resources; and the immediate level, or the set of individual resources, agency, and achievements. Her proposal thus corrects the tendency to discuss empowerment at the immediate and intermediate levels without touching deeper cause-effect relationships. Kabeer's conceptualisation of empowerment is also sensitive to the need for subsequent action. She asserts that empowerment is 'the expansion of people's ability to make strategic choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them' (p. 19). It is in the development of such 'ability' that education can play a major role.

On the basis of empirical findings generated by both feminist researchers and the women's movements in various parts of the world, I propose a holistic theory of women's empowerment and place education (knowledge) among several other components. I do so because I maintain that education and schooling have been overestimated as pillars of social change. I define empowerment as a set of knowledge, skills, and conditions that women must possess in order to understand their world and act upon it. Empowerment is thus *inseparable from subsequent action* — at both the individual and collective levels. I see women's empowerment not as a new form of domination (men subordinate to women), but as an attribute, a leverage that guarantees that gender equality will be initiated, respected, and maintained. In an earlier conceptualisation (Stromquist, 1999, 2002), I described women's empowerment as having four key interlocking dimensions: the economic dimension, or some measure of financial autonomy; the political dimension, or the ability to be represented or represent oneself at various venues of decision-making; the knowledge dimension or awareness of one's reality, including possibilities and obstacles to women's equality; and the psychological dimension, or the sense that one's self has value and deserves a good and fair existence. While I still consider these dimensions as crucial, I think that the mechanism and venues to make them a reality merit greater development. A major shift in my earlier conceptualisation was to move from awareness to action, where there is a need not only for individual agency, but also for engaging in collective forms of support, organisation, and mobilisation; it includes the recognition that organisations working on gender issues at micro and national levels must play a crucial role in women's empowerment. I also endorse the notion of empowerment proposed by Srilatha Batliwala: 'a spiral process, changing consciousness, identifying areas to target for change,

planning strategies, acting for change, and analyzing actions and outcomes' (1994, p. 130; see also Leon, 1997). In my proposed theory of empowerment, education continues to be considered a major force, but its need to be connected to economic, political, and psychological conditions is stressed.

Change in the social relations of gender takes a particular form, that of social emancipation. To understand potential alterations to gender relations, one needs a theory of social change that centres on modifications in both oppressing and oppressed groups. To counter such asymmetries — as in any other process of human liberation —, the social actors who feel the negative aspects of domination most deeply are those who are most likely to play a role in challenging their condition and status (Marx, 1969 [1848]; Douglass, 1857; Gramsci, 1973 [1929–1935]; Freire, 1972 Houston & Ngculu, 2014). A phrase by slavery abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1857) captures the situation well: 'Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will'. In other words, women — as a group negatively affected by the *status quo* — must assume a key role in advancing their cause, with knowledge as an indispensable ingredient. A second element in my proposed empowerment theory thus recognises the key role of both individual and collective agency in the process of social change.

Gender theories have emerged to provide explanations for women's subordination *vis-à-vis* men.<sup>1</sup> The concept of empowerment has emerged as an inductively-created theory of change since it started with the women's movement, not feminist theoreticians. Oppressed/oppressor are terms linked to the notion of empowerment, as it is the oppressed who need to become empowered in order to challenge the oppressor. At its highest level, empowerment is political (Staudt, 2002) because it seeks to share power, assumes that there will be resistance to change by those who will be asked to share power (men), and relies on action by those seeking social alteration (women). Empowerment acknowledges that, although increasingly there are many men who are sympathetic to women's claims for advancement, on average, they are more inclined to prevent rather than to support changes in the social relations of gender.

I propose yet a third element. Given the nature of the social distinctions imposed on women and men, a women's empowerment theory requires acknowledgement of the existence of private and public spheres, as well as an understanding of everyday life. In both private and public venues, there are material and ideological forces that create, sustain, and reproduce gender asymmetries. The private sphere comprises the plethora of recurrent activities in the home linked to cooking, washing, cleaning, administering the household, and serving as the emotional pillar and care provider for children and the elderly. It also includes the area of sexuality — a vital space for both the expression and control of human desire. Empowerment links structural conditions to the possibility of agency, noting their supportive or non-supportive roles. As a theory of social change, it cannot stop at empowerment of individual women, but must seek ways of translating it into collective action. It must also be multidimensional, as it comprises four critical components (below) in which macro and micro levels intersect and interact. In this article, I do not address issues regarding the measurement of empowerment. Let it be said, however, that, given its complex and interactive nature, empowerment cannot be reduced to a few quantitative indicators, but requires a descriptive account of how various dimensions support each other.

### **Economic Empowerment**

Any discussion of economic empowerment for women must consider both macro- and micro-levels of access to material goods and financial resources. The over-reliance on macro-level indicators by international development agencies (IDAs) produces an incomplete and perhaps even erroneous picture of women's economic empowerment, since their incorporation into the labour force, particularly those at the lower ends of the social hierarchy, tends to place them in stagnant positions.

Access to material goods is fundamental to enjoy economic and social rights. A strong correlation exists between economic development and women's legal rights, such as property rights, access to bank loans, protection from violence, and abortion policies (Duflo, 2012). It has been argued that 'the gender gap in ownership and control of property is the single most critical contributor to the gender gap in economic well-being, social status, and empowerment' (Agarwal, cited in Robeyns, 2003, p. 64). There is considerable evidence that technological improvements, made possible by economic development, benefit women's conditions considerably. Industrialisation, through the introduction of infrastructures such as electricity, drinking water, and domestic appliances helps women by reducing housework time (World Bank, 2011; Duflo, 2012). Access to contraceptives has enabled them to gain greater control over their bodies (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008; Duflo, 2012). Reducing poverty helps women, since they are the most vulnerable within poor households and are the managers of the poorest households. Still, it is clear that economic development by itself is by no means sufficient to reduce gender inequalities. Some of the fastest growing national economies, such as China, South Korea, Taiwan, and India, show a lower number of girls than boys, the result of abortions and infanticide (Duflo, 2012) and a clear indication of the poor status of women.

One of the most widely-used indicators of empowerment is the proportion of women in paid employment in non-agricultural sectors (inscribed in the Millennium Development Goals proposed by the UN in 2000). Their control over and access to money are crucial in creating greater equality and social welfare, as women with access to financial resources are more able, for instance, to discourage domestic violence (Dijkstra & Hammer, 2000). On the other hand, many of the jobs that women occupy in most countries are low-status and low-paying. For a variety of reasons, ranging from household constraints to interrupted work trajectories, to occupations in which most women work, to discrimination in the labour force, women earn less than men in all countries in all occupations, including those that are female-dominated. In the US, for instance, men with a high school diploma or equivalent earn on average more than women with an associate degree (two years of college); men with a bachelor's degree earn as much as women with a master's degree; and men with master's degrees earn more than women with doctoral degrees (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). The gender gap within nations (imperfectly measured as it currently is) continues to exist and, even among the best performers (all five Nordic countries), the gap has closed to only 83% (100% being parity; WEF, 2014).

At the micro or household level, economic empowerment is enabled through women's income, which makes them less dependent on their husbands' decision-making and more capable of making autonomous decisions. Unfortunately,

because of the domestic division of labour, especially among poor women, remunerated work tends to impose double burdens, leading to survival strategies rather than to circumstances that enable women to move into upper employment categories or develop self-controlled micro-businesses. Under the dominant neoliberal régime of today, unremunerated work is considered not important, since the market focuses on economic exchanges that lead to profit; this way, processes within the household go unattended in public policy. This is a major challenge to the successful design and implementation of economic empowerment strategies today.

### **Political Empowerment**

As in the case of economic empowerment, women's political empowerment must be attentive to macro and micro considerations. At the macro level, being elected a political representative at any level allows women to gain a voice that can be used for their advancement and the improvement of gender relations in society. Too often, IDAs employ indicators of political empowerment that focus exclusively on macro levels.

#### *Micro/household empowerment*

A crucial political dynamic remains unremunerated work at the household level. This has been recognised not only in feminist theories, but increasingly also by economists (Cohen, 2004; Chioda, 2011; Duflo, 2012). Women nearly everywhere perform more work in the household than men, an imbalance that emerges early in their lives and increases as girls become older. Thus, accounts of rural adolescents in India show that by the time girls are between 14 and 17 years old, they engage two and five times more than boys in household work. Conversely, girls engage between half and a quarter of the time that boys spend on homework (Kelly & Bhabha, 2014). These household conditions, which are extremely difficult to negotiate and in which mothers themselves reproduce a rigid sexual division of labour among their children, contribute to reduce adult women's possibilities of power development in later years. The problem does not go away in advanced industrialised countries. A longitudinal survey of men and women in academic positions in a leading research university in the US found that family formation — marriage and childbirth — accounted for the largest loss of women during the time between receiving a Ph.D. degree and acquiring tenure in the sciences (Goulder, Frasch, & Mason, 2009).

The household must be considered a major target of social change for several reasons: domestic violence is the most pervasive act of male domination; unremunerated women's work at home creates financial and psychological dependence on male partners; time constraints at home shape women's availability for their enlightenment, organisation, and mobilisation for social change; and, in many countries, women's lack of control over their bodies (particularly the ability to regulate their fertility) prevents them from negotiating their freedom. In this respect, I must remark that A. Sen's recognition of the micro-political environment affecting women's empowerment is weak, as he states that it will be necessary to change '*attitudes* of the family . . . toward outside economic activities' (1999, p. 202, emphasis added), yet he does not elaborate on ingrained ideological and material forces in society that prevent gender transformation from becoming a reality.

The research literature has consistently shown that the gendered division of labour (with women predominantly at home and men primarily in public arenas) was a key factor in the production of gender inequality, both in its economic/material aspects and in the social construction of gender identities (Cohen, 2004). Feminist scholars have recognised the multidimensional, complex, and contradictory nature of care-giving in women's identity and gender equity. Care is an essential part of social life, but also a source of degradation and marginalisation (Schildberg, 2014). From a feminist perspective, the expansion of agency requires major changes in both domestic and unpaid work (Robeyns, 2003). These changes should not focus on the revalorisation of care, but rather on the *sharing* of caring responsibilities. Studies on Central American countries have found that women with access to childcare were 10% to 30% more likely to be in the labour force (Vakis, Muñoz, & Coello, c. 2011). Moreover, longitudinal data for the US show less gender inequality in couples' housework when women are employed (Cohen, 2004).

The considerable and continuous time demands placed upon women, especially poor women, are not sufficiently recognised by either government or IDAs. This partly accrues from a superficial understanding of housework and how it connects to activities beyond the household. Until 1993, for example, the US Current Population Survey identified women working at home as 'keeping house', an expression that suggests leisure rather than work; moreover, this category was excluded from labour force statistics (Cohen, 2004). A consistent cross-national finding is that at all levels of income, and regardless of the national level of industrialisation, women do the majority of housework and care-giving (Cohen, 2004; World Bank, 2011). Time-use analyses indicate that the amount of time women spend on housework ranges from about 30% more than men in Cambodia to 70% more in Sweden and to 10 times more in Iraq (Duflo, 2012; see also Aguirre & Ferrari, 2014). The proportion for Sweden is revealing: even in highly egalitarian societies, women spend more time than men in household and caring tasks. And high education levels do not seem to reduce the gender division of household tasks: data for Colombia for 2008 found that men with a university education engaged in more hours of remunerated activities than women with similar levels of education (45 vs. 40 hours per week) and, conversely, significantly less in non-remunerated activities (10 vs. 25 hours) (Villamizar, 2011). At the lower end of the social scale, i.e. among persons without literacy skills, data from 95 countries indicate that women participate more than men in adult literacy programmes in 75 countries (UIL, 2013, p. 119). Since women constitute about two-thirds of the world's illiterates, these statistics suggest that they have enough motivation to enrol in literacy programmes but later run into domestic constraints to complete such programmes and attain literacy.

The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean concluded that 'the gender division of labor between women and men and the differential use of time is a fundamental factor for the economic, social and political subordination of women' (CEPAL, 2010, p. 6). It asserts that correcting this 'requires political will by government'. This emphasises action by the State but, unwittingly, minimises the fact that political will can be shaped by pressure from collective bodies, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Agency cannot be expressed independently of conditions in the household. Sometimes state action can foster women's agency; most often, it does not.

The framing of women's inequality as a matter of human rights has served to position the plight of women on a high moral level, as well as on a universal basis, which can then be applied across nations and cultures. The demand for human rights implies action by individuals or groups who ask for state redress. States participate actively in the social construction of gender through laws, policies, and rules. Extensive empirical research, however, demonstrates that the State is far from being a fair arbiter of social, economic, and political rights linked to gender. Although there are governments that are willing to consider women's human rights and to recognise the active presence of social and women's organisations (Ranaboldo *et al.*, 2013), action lags significantly. Many States have not yet recognised violence against women as a violation of human rights. The contradiction between legal attributes of States and their actual behaviour tends to be obscured in strategies that focus excessively on women's human rights without supporting the provision of emancipatory knowledge.

### **Knowledge Empowerment**

Knowledge widens people's mental horizons, enabling them to see both larger pictures and more detailed accounts of social phenomena. It plays a critical role in identifying the oppressing groups and the multiple mechanisms available to them for social control. The knowledge needed to counter gender oppression, however, is not general knowledge. It must be knowledge that is pertinent to identifying the conditions of subordination that women experience and exploring how such conditions can be contested. As is well known, the acquisition and transmission of systematic knowledge operate through two main modalities: formal education or schooling and non-formal education.

#### *Formal education*

Over time, the formal school curriculum has accumulated relevant knowledge content to ensure social stability and progress. Formal education enables women to obtain better paid jobs and in so doing supports the economic dimension of empowerment, as well as allowing women to cross the boundaries between private and public spheres. However, from a transformational gender perspective, it can be asserted that schools fail to address indispensable gender-related knowledge. Why? An optimistic explanation would be that the failure occurs because other priorities take over; for instance, given globalisation forces, with the emergence of the knowledge economy and the putative need for schooling to produce workers, greater attention is now being paid to knowledge dealing with science and technology than to social skills. A more skeptical explanation would be, as Freire observes, that the interests of the oppressor lie in 'changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them' (1972, p. 60).

Educational researchers and educators alike are certain that schooling alone does not foster social change and even less so in the social relations of gender. US educator Ira Shor (1992) remarks that knowledge is the power to know and to understand, but not necessarily the power to do or change. An example that invites sober thinking is that of Japan, a country with one of the largest proportions of tertiary-educated women but one in which about 32% of women are out of the labour market due to cultural factors that link them to home and children. Unable to participate equally with men in the labour force, women with tertiary education in Japan earn only 48% of the income of men with similar levels of education

(OECD, 2014). For schooling to contribute to the questioning of gender relations, there must be access to gender-related knowledge and classroom/school experiences that validate girls' identities and support an understanding of the asymmetrical conditions affecting women and men. In other words, the curriculum should be designed so that it brings relevant gender issues to the consciousness of both girls and boys and deals with a deeper understanding of the functioning of gender in society, as suggested by Kabeer. In many countries, however, while 'family life education' and 'sex education' courses are provided, they seldom address sexuality, sexual feelings, or even gender roles and expectations. A gender-sensitive curriculum must make room for the discussion of issues such as sex education (including sexuality and contraceptives), the formation of masculinity and femininity, domestic violence, early and forced marriages (particularly urgent in Africa and South Asia), men and women's responsibilities regarding childcare and household management, and an overall understanding of how gender ideologies (patriarchal norms and practices) shape everyday life. It should also foster an understanding of legal structures and practices affecting gender issues, from property rights to abortion; this includes knowledge of national legislation and its implementation, as well as knowledge of international agreements and conventions (particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in force since 1981). In this context, removing stereotypes from books and teacher practices is a crucial first step. But even more important are the modifications to the curriculum and the provision of gender training for school administrators and teachers — measures that are still not implemented by many governments.

Formal education deals with the knowledge and, indirectly, the psychological dimensions of empowerment by increasing the students' sense of self-esteem, efficacy, and future life aspirations. A large body of empirical evidence shows that educated women tend to engage in better decision-making about their private lives. Because of the pupils' young ages in primary and secondary schools, their social environment does not yet touch the political and economic dimensions of women's lives. Although formal knowledge can introduce key aspects regarding gender awareness — such as women's rights to protection from domestic violence and rape and to goods enjoyed by men such as access to property, land, and credit —, it must be recognised that this knowledge remains abstract for many girls. It is mainly as these young people move through life that they feel the impact of structural constraints. Women are older at the university level and have had multiple experiences with their gender identity. In principle, they could be subjects for greater absorption of gender knowledge. However, university women tend to focus on their programme of studies and seldom venture into gender-related courses. For example, the US, a country with about 11.7 million women enrolled in tertiary education in 2014, has fewer than 900 gender studies' programmes at that level (Korenman, 2014). Hence, it can be estimated with confidence that less than 1% of female college students participate in gender-related courses and thus fail to develop significant levels of gender consciousness.

Schools often offer a safe space for access to knowledge and reflection. Schools and classrooms, however, are not always girl-friendly and can create environments that are either unsupportive or explicitly hostile through the exercise of sexual harassment, a situation that is common in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Schools as sites of violence have been documented in large-scale surveys in five Asian countries (Plan & ICRW, 2015). Students report frequent instances of emotional and

physical violence in which both girls and boys are victims and perpetrators. These experiences are often hidden from teachers and parents; a common student response to violence is to do nothing. A considerable degree of sexual violence at the university level, primarily through dating relationships, has been documented in Canada in a national survey (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993) and increasingly today by the US press. From a distance, however, policy-makers tend to see formal educational settings as positive environments that contribute only to the empowering of girls and young women (Warner, Stoebenau, & Glinski, 2014). The Millennium Development Goals identify years of schooling of women compared to men as a key indicator of women's empowerment (UN, 2008). The two other indicators are 'share of women in wage employment in non-agricultural sector' and 'proportion of seats held by women in national parliament'. Conversely, it has been noted that time use data are not included in current female indicators of empowerment (Dijkstra & Hammer, 2000). The easy equation of schooling and women's empowerment is not warranted.

#### *Non-formal education (NFE)*

Gender awareness programmes are needed for all women, regardless of social class. In developing countries, most non-formal education programmes for adult women focus on the poor and literacy is usually the main entry point for the development of gender awareness. UNESCO and other organisations consider literacy as part of a 'paradigm for inclusion and empowerment' (UIL, 2013, p. 153). Indeed, UNESCO has been engaged in a 'Literacy Initiative for Empowerment' (LIFE, in effect 2006–2015), aimed at both women and men. Literacy classes with open questions and class discussion can be effective in empowering women when they create a space to develop the personal agency and critical reflection that enable women to recognise the feminised burden of care and domestic responsibilities (Nabi, 2014; Eldred, 2013). NFE programmes touch upon the knowledge, political, and psychological dimensions, as they often increase feelings of self-esteem and provide the skills to participate in public venues. They address the economic dimension less frequently. Transformative non-formal education programmes are usually run by NGOs and primarily by women-led NGOs.

Programmes that have empowering consequences for women are those that provide a safe space, foster discussion, and encourage participants to think critically about gender social norms; they also support individual agency and group cohesion (Warner *et al.*, 2014). It is often through access to the public sphere and by engaging in group discussions that individual experiences can be shared and social networks developed. Women with even minimal progress in literacy report gains in self-confidence (Stromquist, 2007, showing findings from Brazil). Research shows that greater social interaction tends to increase communication among female programme beneficiaries and community members and leaders, and that this interaction 'can promote knowledge exchange and induce important changes in behaviors and attitudes' (Vakis *et al.*, c. 2011, pp. 76–77). A more recent study of literacy programmes covering Nepal, Indonesia, India, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Brazil, Pakistan, Turkey, and Bolivia was conducted by Eldred (2013) under the auspices of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). Eldred, who defined empowerment as 'the process of supporting people to become more aware of power relationships and systems and understand that just and fair

balances of power contribute to more rewarding relationships' (p. 13), found that literacy experiences had positive outcomes (although empowerment was diffusely assessed through various accounts) and that valuing women's experience, discussion in circles and small groups, and the use of native language and bilingual approaches contributed greatly to their empowerment. Based on data collected from 55 projects dealing with gender issues in 15 countries, researchers found that one of the strongest predictors of women's empowerment was the ability to organise and learn from their experience (Pathways of Women's Empowerment, c. 2011). They also found that 'women's organizations and movements are vital in building constituencies for gender justice' (p. 9). In the UK context, it has been found that adult learning programmes could facilitate women's decisions to break away from abusive relationships with their partners (Schuller, Bynner, & Hammond, 2004).

The emancipatory aspects of literacy continues to receive limited governmental attention. A study conducted by UNESCO found that of 129 countries reporting on literacy activities following the implementation of adult education policies in recent years, only 18 indicated that an empowerment/autonomy approach was being used in their literacy programmes (UIL, 2013). The same report observed: 'The more we move towards concrete policy targets and goals, and to practical priorities, a functionalist perspective with a clear focus on the work sector and employability emerges' (UIL, 2013, p. 52). Adult literacy programmes account for an average of less than 1% of national budgets (UNESCO, 2012), which suggests that state support of empowerment through literacy is very limited. Governments and donor agencies funding NGOs expect quick returns on literacy. Yet, the effects of literacy may be felt only after several years and, as shown in studies in various parts of the world, these include women developing a sense of becoming valued family members, gaining increased decision-making, and learning to negotiate with husbands, mothers-in-law, and community members (Nabi, 2014, showing findings from India).

### **Psychological Empowerment**

While at first sight psychological empowerment may seem a cross-cutting dimension and thus not deserving separate consideration, it is significant and must receive specific treatment at all times. Women need to feel self-confident, have strong self-esteem, and develop self-assertiveness in order to press for change and feel competent enough to enter public spaces. They must share these attributes with other women so that individual actions may foster collective actions that will challenge existing power relations. How do women attain these positive psychological attributes? Empirical evidence has determined that these can only be developed through collective experiences in group participation, joint efforts, and be validated in subsequent successes in conducting those actions. In this regard, the connection between psychological empowerment and local spaces emerges as critical.

Social geographers who have been studying the actual and potential use of space for many years hold that the most productive level for action by newly-incorporated social actors is the local level. This is particularly true for women because local spaces are small and thus closer to home, which creates considerable logistic advantages. Local venues are also more flexible in terms of who can participate in agenda-setting (Ranaboldo *et al.*, 2013; Massolo, 2002). Action at

the local level will also enable community-based NGOs led by women to emerge and gain the experience that improves performance over time. These NGOs not only provide important knowledge opportunities through NFE, but also link the private to the public sphere and provide an opportunity for the articulation of women's interests beyond party politics and government (Oxaal, 1997).

Women's empowerment is a complex undertaking that needs action in many dimensions to produce a visible and sustainable effect. It also requires macro- and micro-level action. Moreover, it demands the active participation of organisations that are deeply committed to the emancipation of women so that collective action may result in tangible policy outputs. The engagement of organisations is fundamental to promote institutional change and support changes in everyday life and personal conduct (Connell, 2005; Ibrahim & Tiwari, 2014).

### **The Role of NGOs**

A major counterweight to weak state responses is the women-led NGOs and feminist organisations which, notwithstanding their diversity, are central to empowerment strategies (Sen & Grown, 1987). NGOs, as is well known, operate at international and national/local levels. Those at national/local level are numerous but have little access to financial resources. Many function as substantial sources for the multidimensional provision of empowerment. Amartya Sen's ideas on development as human freedom and on the critical role of capabilities are very influential among IDAs and they have contributed to the recognition of the critical importance of agency. Yet, he does not consider the process by which collective agency may build upon the aggregation of individual and social capabilities (Parpart, Rai, & Staudt, 2002; Ibrahim, 2006).

Many critics argue that NGO staff members, not having been democratically elected, lack legitimacy as spokespersons for others and thus cannot claim to represent them. In response to this, Ballón & Valderrama (2004, p. 22, citing Chiriboga) contend that two different forms of representation exist: (1) that which derives from a political mandate, and (2) that which emerges as the result of a voluntary commitment to the promotion and defence of a given public good. Such a representation, though not gained by electoral process, nevertheless acquires legitimacy by acting on behalf of those who are disenfranchised or otherwise unable to act and thus, in part because of the organisation's particular capabilities, is able to influence the public agenda. Of course, this type of representation carries the risk of abuse, as do electoral procedures, but these are few and often self-correcting. Women-led NGOs are agents that are part of this second kind of representation, one that works well for subordinated groups. Despite their importance for the empowerment of women, these NGOs receive limited funding from IDAs. According to OECD (2012), of the US\$23,495 million invested in support of gender equality and women's empowerment in 2011, US\$504 million (or 2.1%) went to 'women's organizations and institutions'. Even in the case of donor countries that have been traditional supporters of women's groups, the share of funds that goes to them is low. The Netherlands, for instance, which is by far one of the greatest supporters of women's groups, allocated only 10.5% of their 'gender equality and women's empowerment' aid to them (OECD, 2012). Most of the international assistance is allocated to sub-Saharan African countries (rightly so, as they constitute the area in greatest need of assistance) with the bulk given to small-scale, short-term projects which do not permit institutional growth and

maturation. And yet, the women's movement in the global South could not exist without international support. International assistance creates global pressure and brings attention to an issue that is otherwise forgotten or discarded as a problem. Shor (1992), an educator with wide experience in mobilisation for change, reminds us that, in the struggle against inequality and for democracy, social movements for civil rights are indispensable.

There have been many efforts to provide an education with explicitly empowering objectives. Below, I review three of the most substantial.

### **Efforts to Foster Empowerment through Education**

There have been efforts to modify the schooling content and experience so that classrooms and schools may promote girls' empowerment. A notable innovation has been put in place by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), a region-wide NGO led by women in Africa and centred on education. For several years, FAWE has implemented the Tuseme clubs (Swahili for 'let's speak out'), an extra-curricular programme. After selecting a particular school, the Tuseme programme trains facilitators and teachers with whom it develops an action plan at the school level to provide student workshops for communication and life skills, festivals, dance, drama, and the creation of a school newspaper (FAWE, c. 2000). FAWE's 'theatre for development' plays a key role in enabling students to examine specific problems affecting the community and subsequently to engage in a post-performance debriefing where the audience reacts to the play and thus facilitates gender consciousness. An important predecessor of this approach was the 'theatre of the oppressed', developed by a Brazilian theatre director and activist, who, in the early 1970s, designed this experience to foster dialogue and critical thinking among oppressed groups. Tuseme clubs generally operate in middle schools and, while open to both girls and boys, they centre on the development of girls' confidence, self-esteem, and assertiveness by engaging in problem-solving on a number of issues involving gender relations that are of concern to young people, such as sexual harassment, academic performance, early marriage, and female genital mutilation (FAWE, 2006, p. 6). Tuseme clubs have been effective in increasing gender awareness among girls and protecting them from negative social norms; the main obstacle they face is the governments' reluctance to bring them to scale.

Empowerment efforts through non-formal education (NFE) have been more numerous and more successful. An important NFE empowerment intervention has been CARE's leadership model, tested in 28 countries throughout the world since 2009. It is based on three domains: agency (aspirations, resources, capabilities, attitudes, and achievements), structures (policies, laws, unwritten rules), and relationships (power relations). It provides a space for the development of supportive relationships so that girls learn how to make decisions and act as leaders under the mentoring of caring adults. CARE's leadership model has been experimented in Bangladesh, Egypt, Honduras, India, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and Yemen, where 190,000 girls and 136,000 boys were reached through extracurricular activities in local schools or through community groups. An evaluation of the model in these eight countries, based on self-reported data from girls after two years of project participation and treatment/control comparisons, explored outcomes related to such issues as adolescent pregnancy and sexual abuse and rape in schools and communities. The girls reported significant gains in their endorsement

of statements about equal rights for women and men. Additional changes among the girls concerned their preference for avoiding early marriage (Mol, Kintz, & Janoch, forthcoming).

Another evaluation of empowerment efforts was made by Warner *et al.* (2014), who conducted case studies of four large NFE programmes carried out in Egypt, Ethiopia, India, and Bangladesh. The interventions sought primarily to reduce the number of child marriages. Different approaches were put in place by these programmes, some focusing on the improvement of economic and sexual health, others on the improvement of communication, yet others seeking the re-entry of girls into formal schooling. For the most part, the programmes were successful in decreasing girls' preference to marry under 18 years of age and in identifying risks associated with early marriage. The study found that the strategy with the greatest impact by far was the provision of information, skills, and supportive networks.

A third NFE programme of significance is based on the curriculum and pedagogy offered by the Tutorial Learning System (*Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial*, SAT) first developed in Colombia by FUNDAEC, an NGO focused on training and education. SAT is now being implemented in several countries in Latin America and Africa, with a curriculum that offers an alternative high school diploma and treats gender as an explicit curriculum component, while emphasising critical thinking, discussion, and debate (Murphy-Graham, 2012). A qualitative evaluation of SAT based on 10 women who had participated in the programme for at least three years (and compared with non-participant women) found that they had increased their levels of self-confidence and critical analysis as well as their ability to negotiate spousal relations. Taken as the main indicators of empowerment were the women's subsequent participation in higher education, creating a small business, or negotiating spousal relations (Murphy-Graham, 2012).

As can be seen, the implementation of empowerment has tended to be unidimensional, focusing on the acquisition of emancipatory knowledge, often limited to influencing girls' preferences and opposing child marriage. While this knowledge should by no means be minimised, chances that it will transcend in the absence of the other empowerment dimensions are slim, especially as the girls become adults, marry, have children, and perpetuate the cycle.

## Conclusions

At its best, empowerment is a rich concept embedded in a theory of social change that maps the dimensions in which to operate and the mechanisms by which emancipatory gender outcomes may be attained. To enable social action, attention must therefore be paid to four critical dimensions of empowerment — dimensions that interact with each other, resulting in synergistic outcomes.

Women's empowerment implies a theory of social change that calls for a strong protagonism by women. Empowerment is based upon individual self-discovery, self-assertiveness, and critical learning about one's world, as well as upon collective organisation. While women's empowerment recognises the fundamental role of individual and collective agency, it is sensitive to structural conditions that work as impediments to the transformation of gender relations. Empowerment theory is complex, and thus requires simultaneous multisectoral action, which governments and IDAs seldom foster.

The role of knowledge in women's empowerment is crucial. As has been noted in other sections of this article, the knowledge that women need is that which

prepares them not only for the labour market, but also for understanding and challenging their social world. Formal education has still a long way to go before its potential for transformation is fully deployed. Not only is the young age of the students a factor in the limited role that formal education plays in fostering women's empowerment, but there are also many structures that continue to divert schooling from gender consciousness efforts, especially today when academic achievement is narrowly linked to reading, math, and science — and away from life skills, including gender-sensitive learning and teaching. NFE has a stronger record in fostering attitudes and skills that question the dominant gender order. The financial support that NFE receives today, however, is not congruent with the role it can potentially play in promoting women's empowerment. Yet, as fundamental as knowledge is, there also exist other dimensions of social life — the economic, the political, and the psychological — which must be closely attended to.

Increasing women's emancipatory engagement requires external support. At the local, national, and regional levels, women-led organisations have played a key role in facilitating both individual and collective agency. They have enabled women to gain emancipatory education and engage in collective efforts that have crossed the private/public boundary that used to keep them relegated to the household. The importance of women-led NGOs cannot be overemphasised. Given the reluctant support by national governments in developing countries, women's emancipatory action needs international assistance to engage in substantial and sustained gender action. Just by their mere existence, global gender policies greatly facilitate attention to gender inequalities and provide economic backing from friendly sources.

IDAs today explicitly endorse the notion of women's empowerment; yet, their empowerment policies generally do not attempt any supportive linkages between macro and micro conditions affecting women. International assistance often materialises in the form of unidimensional projects, usually with a narrow sectoral focus and limited funds. IDAs continue to see governments in developing countries as fully supportive of women's issues and thus consider such governments their almost exclusive interlocutors. IDAs fund women-led NGOs only through small, short-term projects which do not permit the institutional growth and learning of such bodies. Because public agencies usually fragment empowerment and reduce it to minimal expression, a wide distance emerges between the promise of the challenging theory and the actual programmatic forms of empowerment.

While the knowledge dimension of empowerment is fundamental, from a feminist perspective, knowledge is valuable insofar as it leads to action. Action requires knowledge that is specific to gender conditions as well as protective education settings that foster new gender practices. Today, women's empowerment remains a promising theoretical premise that has not received concomitant operationalisation and support to reach its full range of possibilities — hence, the imperative to question its empty normative meaning and demand that it be taken seriously as a theory of change in the social relations of gender.

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## NOTE

1. Over time, and rightly so, efforts towards gender equality have been expanded to include the existence and the need for rights of other forms of sexual identity (i.e. gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer). Here, I concentrate on women and men, with no intention of treating these two categories as essentialist or fixed.

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