"Empowerment is not a goal, but a foundational process that enables marginalised women to construct their own political agendas and form movements and struggles for achieving fundamental and lasting transformation in gender and social power structures."

Srilatha Batliwala[1]

Women's empowerment: Sharpening our focus

To meaningfully contribute to women's empowerment, development programs need to support transformation of the economic, political and social structures within which women in all their diversity live.* The historical roots of women's empowerment in the global south reflect this focus on political and social transformation. However, over time, the concept of women's empowerment has become less clear, the complexity of its measurement more apparent and a narrower instrumental[2] focus more widespread. In the 1990s, only a decade after the concept was introduced into development discourse, feminist Srilatha Batliwala wrote that the "*sharp political perspective from which it arose became diffused and diluted*".[3] With this historical perspective in mind, and given the continued use of 'empowerment' language with varied intent, how should development organisations understand, measure and support empowerment?

Fuzzy definitions and fuzzier interpretations

International development has been criticised for its buzzwords and "fuzzwords".[4] Empowerment, and more specifically women's empowerment, is among the most elastic[5], confusing[6] and fuzzy concepts.[7] For Cornwall & Rivas, the terminology of women's empowerment and gender equality has lost its political and conceptual bite,[8] whereby a:

"privileging of instrumentalist meanings of empowerment associated with efficiency and growth are crowding out more socially transformative meanings associated with rights and collective actions."[9]

This association of empowerment with efficiency, economic activity and growth speaks to a merging of empowerment with neoliberal development ideas. Yet this obscures decades of collective work by feminist scholars towards a shared, more political, conceptualisation. In particular, scholars such as Rowlands,[10] Kabeer,[11] Batliwala,[12] Cornwall[13] and others have argued that empowerment is not something that can be done to or for anyone else, but rather is an expansion of women's consciousness and capacity to act to transform their worlds. Importantly, and reflecting its linguistic roots, empowerment is often described as a process of transforming power relations between individuals and social groups:[14]

"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"[15]

Women's empowerment is also often described in terms of an individual's ability to make choices. According to Kabeer it can be explored through three interrelated dimensions: agency, which represents the process by which choices are made and individuals' sense of self-worth; *resources*, which are the medium through which agency is exercised; and *achievements*, which refer to the outcomes of agency.[16] But when development agencies try to operationalise empowerment as part of programming, this complex process can sometimes be reduced to a simple equation of 'choice + action = outcome'[17] and the focus shifts from process to end state.[18] Though this is not universal. Development programmes can (and sometimes do) recognise the complex process of empowerment, investigating, highlighting and responding to the structural factors that create inequality in the first place.[19,20]

An alternative to the 'end product' conception sees empowerment as a process that is ongoing, relational and context specific. As put forward by Mosedale, "[t]*here is no final goal. One does not arrive at a stage of being empowered in some absolute sense. People are empowered, or disempowered, relative to others or, importantly, relative to themselves at a previous time.*"[21] In other words, there is no end-state of empowerment. Rather, empowerment and disempowerment can co-exist with reference to different social relationships, and an individual can shift in their sense of personal power over time depending on multiple interrelated conditions and experiences.

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* In this article we write about 'women' with the intention of focusing on 'women in all their diversity' and recognise that even this terminology unintentionally excludes non-binary, third gender or otherwise gender diverse people. In drawing on existing literature and debates, many of these are framed with a focus on women (rather than people of all genders) in regards to the topic of leadership and voice.

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Measuring empowerment: what is telling and what is typical?

If empowerment is a process and there is no final goal, then how can development programs seeking to support women's empowerment measure progress? Consensus exists that empowerment is multidimensional and operates at multiple levels, but there is less agreement on which dimensions and levels to prioritise,[22] making its measurement complex.[23] 'Empowerment' is also not a homogenous process for all women, since women are not a homogenous group.[24] More marginalised groups, such as women with disabilities or sexual and gender minorities, may have vastly different experiences.

Empowerment is also a long-term, contextual and cumulative process, influenced by a range of factors at multiple levels. The impacts of women's empowerment projects can never be truly isolated, with any observed impact very likely to change over time and to vary for different groups of women.[25] This suggests that monitoring within a certain program-linked time frame may not show results, but this does not mean that incremental changes are not occurring. Furthermore, much of the routine data collected, reported and used is at population level, which obscures the importance of individual experiences in understanding empowerment.[26]

Various measures and indices have been introduced to quantify women's empowerment.[27] However, the multi-layered nature of empowerment, which takes us from individual self-perception to structural drivers shaping context, makes any simplified measure problematic.[28]

And quantitative indicators are only one part of the story. Qualitative data provides critical insight into the nuances and contradictions that can characterise empowerment, helps us understand how and why changes take place, and highlight the varied experiences of women with different experiences.[29] Reflecting this, mixed-methods[30] approaches to researching and evaluating empowerment are increasingly valued[31] and included in monitoring processes,[32] with complementary techniques offering "*new ways of exploring both what is 'telling' and what is 'typical'*".[33] As Rao and Woolcock assert, "*integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches in the measurement of empowerment can help yield insights that neither approach would produce on its own*".[34]

While there is no easy way to meaningfully measure women's empowerment in all its complexity, some argue for progress over perfection given that an "*attribute that is not measurable or measured tends to be overlooked*".[35] Designing a tool to assess power and social change across cultures and levels needs to be done with care, as "*forms of agency or achievements may indicate empowerment in some contexts and not in others*".[36] There is a need to continue integrating, testing and debating measurement approaches towards better understanding the process of empowerment and whether development interventions are achieving what they set out to do.

Women as underutilized, overutilized or both?

Perhaps the concept and measurement of empowerment is so complex because it is characterised by apparent contradictions. Women have often been depicted as 'untapped' resources in the quest for economic, social and political development.[37] Much of the empowerment and gender equality policy advancements have coincided with the rise of the neoliberal economic agenda characterized by "*market fundamentalism, deregulation, and corporate-led development*"[38] and investment in women as 'smart economics'.[39] However, these development interventions can actually demand more work from women in generating income, do not recognise their existing unpaid labour and result in men retaining or increasing power over women in a process that Chant has described the "*feminization of responsibility and obligation*".[40]

As noted by Khader, money is not the same thing as empowerment and increasing women's work is not going to magically reduce subordination based on their gender.[41] Gender is a relational phenomenon and thus "*moving towards gender equality means changing men's roles and self-conceptions as well as women's*".[42] An over-reliance and over-utilization of women and girls in poverty alleviation interventions – as well as taking short-term advantage of attitudes, norms and socio-economic structures that sustain gender inequality and constrain empowerment – cannot deliver the transformative promise at the heart of the idea of 'empowerment'. Such approaches leave male power insufficiently challenged, and inegalitarian gendered responsibilities for livelihoods and inequitable economic structures largely intact.[43]

Though if investment and change happen through 'smart economics'[44] activities that remove barriers and address empowerment holistically (actually engaging with questions of power) then an economic approach is not necessarily problematic. The key is to recognise that real empowerment can be constrained or enabled by diverse political, economic and social factors, and to ensure that approaching empowerment from one angle (whether economic or political) does not drive a narrow focus.

> If empowerment is a process and there is no final goal, then how can development programs seeking to support women's empowerment measure progress?

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Women's empowerment and WASH

What does this mean for water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions? Firstly, it is crucial that practitioners, policy makers and researchers are aware of these debates as we both pursue programs that aim to empower women and seek to understand their impacts. We must also continue to inform critical discussions about empowerment. Some of the questions we will be exploring through our Water for Women research project *Gender in WASH: Partnerships, Workforce and Impact Assessment* include:

- Is a woman who establishes a water supply or sanitation business with support from a WASH program actually 'empowered'? We need to critically question the lived experiences of women in these situations.

- What are we actually measuring when we are trying to understand empowerment outcomes for women involved in WASH programs? If empowerment is an ongoing process, rather than an end state to be achieved, how do we best measure improvements?

- The oft-cited claim that WASH programs involving women have better outcomes for the community at large needs to be critically questioned. If such projects increase women's workload, without shifting inequitable gendered responsibilities, can such projects be truly described as empowering? How can we ensure WASH programs engage with women and men, in all their diversity, in meaningful, equitable ways?

In asking these questions and contributing to debates, we hope to strengthen the WASH sector's engagement with empowerment towards more socially transformative approaches and outcomes.

Endnotes

1   Batliwala, S. (2015), *Engaging with Empowerment: An Intellectual and Experiential Journey*, Women's Unlimited.

2   Based on Chant (2008) and for the purposes of this article, instrumentalism involves pursuing gender equality as a means to achieve poverty reduction with a focus on efficiency considerations rather than a genuine focus on women's rights

3   Batliwala S. (2010) Chapter 10: Taking the power out of empowerment - an experiential account. In: Cornwall A and Eade D (eds) *Deconstructing development discourse: Buzzwords and fuzzwords*. Practical Action Publishing, Oxfam GB. p.113

4   Cornwall A and Eade D. (2010) *Deconstructing development discourse: Buzzwords and fuzzwords*: Oxfam GB.

5   Cornwall A. (2016) Women's empowerment: What works? *Journal of International Development* 28(3): 342-359.

6   Khader S. (2018) Can a goat change a woman's life? *ABC: Big Ideas*.

7   Batliwala S. (2010) Chapter 10: Taking the power out of empowerment - an experiential account. In: Cornwall A and Eade D (eds) *Deconstructing development discourse: Buzzwords and fuzzwords*. Practical Action Publishing, Oxfam GB.

8   Cornwall A and Rivas A-M. (2015) From 'gender equality and 'women's empowerment'to global justice: reclaiming a transformative agenda for gender and development. *Third World Quarterly* 36(2): 396-415.

9   Eyben R and Napier-Moore R. (2009) Choosing words with care? Shifting meanings of women's empowerment in international development. *Third World Quarterly* 30(2): 285-300.

10 Rowlands J. (1997) Questioning empowerment: *Working with women in Honduras*: Oxfam.

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13 Cornwall A. (2016) Women's empowerment: What works? *Journal of International Development* 28(3): 342-359.

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16 Kabeer N. (2005) Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1. *Gender & Development* 13(1): 13-24.

17 Cornwall A and Edwards J. (2010) Introduction: negotiating empowerment. *IDS bulletin* 41(2): 1-9.

18 Smyth I. (2010) Chapter 13- Talking of gender: words and meanings in development organisations. In: Cornwall A and Eade D (eds) *Deconstructing development discourse: Buzzwords and fuzzwords*. Oxfam GB.

19 van der Hoogte L and Kingms K. (2004) Promoting cultural diversity and the rights of women: the dilemmas of 'intersectionality' for development organisations. *Gender & Development* 12(1): 47-55.

20 Development organisations also tend to reproduce heteronormativity, assuming that disempowerment and empowerment only occur within social and economic structures with heterosexuality at their core, excluding families or social and economic relations that involve lesbians, bisexual and other queer women, see Jolly (2011). Cornwall and Jolly (2006) also highlight the 'persistent neglect' of sexuality in development, noting that this impacts sexual and gender minorities, but also people whose (hetero)sexuality is constrained by social norms. Other critics note the conservative morality of family and conformity that accompanies the neo-liberal economic agenda, for example "in criminalizing the survival strategies of poor women, and of poor women of color in particular", see Bernstein (2012). Cornwall A. and Jolly S. (2006) Introduction: Sexuality Matters *IDS bulletin* 37(5): 1-11; Jolly S. (2011) Why is development work so straight? Heteronormativity in the international development industry. *Development in Practice* 21(1): 18-28; Bernstein E. (2012) Carceral politics as gender justice? The "traffic in women" and neoliberal circuits of crime, sex, and rights. *Theory and Society* 41:233–259.

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27 Examples of measures and indices to quantify women's empowerment include (most recently) the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) and the Survey-based Women's emPowERment index (SWPER). Other indices that have looked to measure women's empowerment and gender equality include the SDG Gender Index, the Hunger Project's Women's Empowerment Index, and more foundational indices include the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM).

28 O'Hara C and Clement F. (2018) Power as agency: A critical reflection on the measurement of women's empowerment in the development sector. *World development* 106: 111-123.

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30 Mixed methods research represents research that involves collecting, analysing and interpreting quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or in a series of studies that investigate the same underlying phenomenon (Greene JC. (2007) *Mixed methods in social inquiry*: Jossey-Bass.

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33 Bowman KS, C. (2017) Introduction to Gender, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning. In: Sweetman CB, K. (ed) *Gender, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning*.

34 Rao VW, Michael. (2005) Chapter 13: Mixing Qualitative and Econometric Methods: Community Level Applications. In: Narayan D (ed) *Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Discplinary Perspectives*. Washington: The World Bank.

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