# Women's Empowerment and Development Interventions

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*The ideal approach in any intervention will be to ensure that concerns about gender equality are present in the ideas, information, vision and commitment of the different actors that conceptualize, design, implement, evaluate and learn from different stages of an intervention, in order to make an enormous difference to what the intervention is able to achieve.*

## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND THEORIES OF CHANGE

All development interventions operate, either explicitly or implicitly, with theories of change that make 'cause-and-effect' assumptions about the relationship between their activities and intended outcomes. However, because our understanding of social reality is never perfect and because this reality is constantly changing, in both anticipated and unanticipated ways, these assumptions need to be constantly subjected to reality checks.

There is a serious problem, however. Theories of change tend to reflect the world-view of those who formulate these interventions and *their* understanding of social reality. In a world that is characterized by an unequal distribution of power, this means that the world-views that underlie development interventions are not only partial and imperfect but are also likely to be biased. Most often, they are biased against those who do not exercise a great deal of voice or influence in either the formulation of these theories or their translation into interventions. In other words, development interventions do not always promote, or even seek to promote, greater justice in society.

Several decades of research and advocacy have shown that gender is one of the most pervasive examples of social inequality: women's needs, interests and experiences have been systematically excluded, misrepresented or subsumed, in development policy and planning, with those of men. This research also shows that interventions that seek to challenge gender inequalities can generate major gains— for women themselves, for their families and for society at large.  For these reasons, it is imperative that all development planners are, at the very least, aware of the gender-related impact of their interventions. However, this paper argues for more than simple awareness. It argues for a more pro-active empowerment agenda.

## A THEORY OF CHANGE: GENDERED ANALYSIS OF STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

To understand what is meant by empowerment, it is important to understand what is meant by power. Power can be conceptualized in terms of people's capacity to make strategic life choices and exercise influence. Empowerment then refers to the processes by which this capacity is acquired by those who have been hitherto denied it. People who exercise a great deal of choice in their lives, to the extent of imposing their choices on others, may be very *powerful* but they are not *empowered* in the sense in which the term is used here because they were not disempowered in the first place. Our theory of change, therefore, relates to change in power relations. It rests on the intertwined notions of *structure*—the institutionalized (and, hence, often invisible) constraints on human action that give rise to durable forms of inequality, and *agency*, the role of human actors and their efforts to reproduce, modify or transform structural inequality.

## GENDER AND THE STRUCTURES OF CONSTRAINT

Structures are constituted by the rules, norms, beliefs and practices that define social relationships among different groups in a society, assigning greater authority, influence and resources to some groups relative to others, and placing them in positions of dominance. As a result, dominant groups are not only better placed to exercise choice over their own lives but also to impose their choices on others. Relations of power take different forms and define different kinds of inequality. This means that whereas women may have certain interests in common as a group, they will also share other interests with men from the same class, caste or racial group. Gender-related structures are manifested in the lives of men and women in the form of different kinds of constraints on their actions. We describe the distinctions of three of these constraints.

**Gender-specific constraints:** These refer to norms, values and customs that apply to women and men by virtue of their gender. Whereas different societies have their own views about masculinity and femininity, most societies tend to associate men with more valued attributes, abilities and predispositions and women with less valued ones. They also ascribe primary bread-winning roles to men whereas women are expected to bear the main responsibility for unpaid reproductive work. Societies vary as to the extent they expect women to undertake productive or paid work. For example, women are expected to play an active and often independent role in farming in sub-Saharan Africa but have culturally restricted mobility outside the home in South Asia. These constraints help to explain the varying but widely observed asymmetries in

the distribution of men and women between sectors, occupations and activities.

**Gender-intensified constraints:** Associated with the norms and values that define gender identities and roles in different societies are gender inequalities in the distribution of valued resources. These may be defined by the norms and values in question: for instance, patrilineal norms of inheritance place women at a major disadvantage to men in the distribution of land and other property rights. Or these may reflect behavioural responses to the devaluation of women: for instance, discrimination against girls and women in the family distribution of food or access to education. We refer to these as *gender-intensified constraints*, to draw attention to the fact that both men and women from low-income households may be disadvantaged in their access to valued resources but these disadvantages are likely to be exacerbated by gender. Thus, data from different regions of the world, as encapsulated in the Millennium Development Goals Report 2010, show that whereas children from poorer wealth quintiles are far more likely to be out of school than children from wealthier quintiles, within each wealth quintile, girls are far more likely to be out of school than boys.

**Imposed gender constraints:** Gender-specific norms and values are generally rooted in the informal institutions of a society. The public spheres of state, market and civil society are purportedly impersonal and gender-neutral institutions. However, when their principal actors behave, consciously or unconsciously, in discriminatory ways, we can think in terms

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of a third category of *imposed gender constraints*. For instance, the legal system in many societies upholds customary forms of discrimination against women. In Democratic Republic of Congo, women need their husbands' permission to start a business and they run only 18 per cent of small businesses. In neighbouring Rwanda, women do not face such restrictions; they run 41 per cent of businesses. This very fact finds mention in the *Gender in Agriculture Source Book* prepared by World Bank, FAO and IFAD (2009). At the same time, it is perfectly possible for social actors, particularly those with authority, to adopt rules, norms and practices that serve to *offset* and *transform* long-standing gender inequalities. It has been pointed out, for example, that the adoption of the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women by the international community played a major role in empowering women's organizations in Latin America, to press for women's land rights in the region's transition to democracy (See Deere and Leon, 2001, *Empowering Women: Land and Property Rights in Latin America*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh).

## GENDER, AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT

The concept of *agency* shifts the focus from social structures to the capacity of different groups to exercise choices and pursue goals. Theories about agency provide important insights into the perspective of less empowered groups and their struggles to challenge structures and negotiate change. Hirschman's work on *Exit, Voice* and *Loyalty* (1970) provides a useful entry point into this discussion. We take 'voice' to refer to the

different ways in which women might seek, individually or collectively, to bring about desired forms of change in their lives and relationships. Their capacity for voice is closely related to their ability to 'exit', to either withdraw or withhold co-operation, in relation to an unfavourable situation or relationship.

The capacity for voice and exit will in turn depend on the resources that actors are able to mobilize. Such resources may be material in the sense of land, wages, equipment, housing and so on. They may be human both in the narrow sense of 'human capital' for market-related investments and the broader sense of human capabilities needed for critical reflection and analysis. Alternatively, access

to resources may be gained through the membership of social groups and networks. However, the relevance of these resources for women's voice and exit options does not lie in access alone but also in their strategic potential. Access to resources must promote some degree of security outside the existing arrangements if these are to promote women's empowerment.

The intermediate concept of 'loyalty' has received less attention in economic literature but it has a particular relevance to the analysis of power. The absence of protest with regard to an existing set of arrangements or the failure to leave can be given a benign interpretation as evidence of genuine

satisfaction with these arrangements. There are also more negative interpretations. It may reflect the power of prevailing ideologies about women's inferiority, which are internalized by both men and women. Or it may represent the capacity of more powerful groups to use coercive tactics to control the behaviour of others: the widespread incidence of domestic violence is an obvious example in the context of gender relations.

Mainstream theories of power have tended to deal with power in the negative sense of *power over*: the ability of dominant groups to impose their choices on others. By contrast, the processes of change associated with empowerment involve more positive concepts of power. First of all, empowerment has a cognitive dimension: *power within*. This involves changes in how women view themselves. Their sense of agency and self-worth is critical if they are to bring about change in other aspects of their lives. Second, empowerment has a behavioural dimension, reflecting women's increased ability to make strategic choices and exercise influence in the society they live in. This is *power to*.

Finally, there is a critical relational dimension to empowerment: *power with*. Women do not exist in isolation either from each other or from men in their society. Changes in individual women are unlikely to go very far in changing structures but women coming together to reflect, to question and to act on their subordinate status can be a powerful force for change. Equally, however, men's attitudes and behaviour to women in different spheres of lives will be critical to the kinds of change women are able to achieve. And men's willingness to ally themselves with women in their struggles for gender justice will provide a powerful reinforcement of the momentum for change.

## PLANNING AND LEARNING FROM INTERVENTIONS: 'CRITICAL MOMENTS' IN THE LIFE OF A PROJECT

This analysis of power highlights the need for a holistic approach to gender equality concerns within the planning process. It draws attention to the active role that development planners can play in providing an enabling environment for women's empowerment. Unfortunately, a large number of development interventions have been, and continue to be, *gender blind*: by knowingly or unknowingly ignoring the gender-related constraints on women's capacity for agency, they serve to reinforce these constraints. Gender bias has often taken the form of equating women primarily with their reproductive roles and responsibilities or in seeking to promote their productive roles without due attention to their reproductive responsibilities.

A gender-aware intervention seeks to design its goals and activities on the basis of well-informed analyses of the existing gender division of roles and responsibilities in particular contexts. In as much as it is based on factual knowledge, it is not difficult to achieve and will help to avoid intensifying existing constraints. Gender transformative interventions go farther by seeking to challenge given constraints although the deep-rooted character of these constraints means that transformation is unlikely to be a one-off event but a gradual and evolving process.

There are no blueprints for social transformation: the diversity of contexts and cultures rules this out. But any intervention that seeks to bring about structural change has to have a theory of change that is grounded in an understanding of local realities and its structure of constraint and opportunities. Just as women's cognitive capacities are a critical element in the processes involved in their empowerment, so too the cognitive dimension of development interventions—the way interventions 'think', the ideas, values, assumptions and information that shape their practice—is an important determinant of what they are able to achieve.

Bearing this in mind, we can distinguish a number of 'critical moments' in the life cycle of an intervention when the cognitive dimension of actions taken will have profound implications for its evolution at subsequent stages and, hence, the kinds of change that it is able to bring about. We will illustrate the significance of these moments with some examples.

The first critical moment is the conceptualization of an intervention, the formulation of its vision, mission and goals. Interventions may fail to acknowledge gender inequalities in their vision for change; these may ignore women's contribution or potential contribution to its goals and objectives; or these may overlook gender-related constraints on women's capacity to participate. For instance, agricultural extension services are frequently built on the assumption noted in the Ethiopian context that 'women don't farm', leading to their widely observed exclusion. Alternatively, they may be focused only on improving the productivity of crops, ignoring the post-harvest handling, processing and storage of crops in which women are more likely to be involved. This aspect finds mention in *Gender and Governance in Rural Services* published by World Bank and IFPRI in 2010.

In Ghana, a land conservation and smallholder rehabilitation project took the decision to recognize multiple types of water users in

the water user associations such that it went beyond farmers and the need for irrigation to include gardeners, livestock owners and fisherman thus allowing women to be involved. The *Gender in Agriculture Source Book by World Bank*, FAO and IFAD (2009) makes mention of the same.

Examples of how gender-awareness at the conceptualization stage can lead to very different responses in different contexts comes from the experience of public works programmes in South Asia (See Naila Kabeer, 2009, 'Building livelihoods and empowering women: A case study of PRADAN, India,' ALINE IDS, Brighton). In Bangladesh, where restrictions on women's public mobility made

it difficult for them to work alongside men in public works programmes, the response was to set up the Rural Maintenance Programme, which specifically targeted women from extremely poor households, who were willing to undertake waged work. In India, the new National Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), which guarantees 100 days employment to rural adults, explicitly included women among the intended beneficiaries and, as we see below, took measures to ensure their inclusion.

The *second critical moment* relates to the translation of goals and objectives into concrete design. The gender-blind conceptualization of goals and objectives

generally translates into gender-blind design. A classic example of this was when the 99 per cent of the beneficiaries of the Bolivian Social Emergency Fund, which was set up to provide temporary employment in the wake of structural adjustment, were men (Buvninic, 1996). By contrast, the gender-aware conceptualization of the NREGS was carried over into the design stage: a 30 per cent quota for women, crèches in projects with more than five women participants, equal remuneration rates and proximity of the projects to participants' place of residence. In many states in India, women's participation has exceeded the quota (See Sudarshan, R.M., R. Bhattacharya and G. Fernandez, 2010, 'Women's participation in the NREGA: Some observations from fieldwork in Himachal Pradesh, Kerala and Rajasthan', *IDS Bulletin* 41.4, 77–83). However, the focus on wage work has meant far lower rates of female participation in those states where women are largely constrained to self-employment.

The third *critical moment* relates to the implementation of the project—how it is put into practice. An example of the way in which gender blindness at the conceptualization stage can lead to gender-biased implementation comes from the small ruminant CRSP (Collaborative Research Support Program) in Peru, the aim of which was to improve management and health practices in relation to livestock. The men of the community regularly attended meetings, to discuss improved practices, but they constantly requested support for cropping systems. Only two years into the project, when a

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practice session for castration was set up, the men stated that women should have attended the meeting because women managed the animals.

By contrast, the decision of the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture to convene a panel of female farmers in Rwanda, to evaluate its new crop varieties, paid significant dividends. A study undertaken by Sperling and Scheidegger in 1997 titled 'Results, Methods and Institutional Issues in Participatory Selection: The Case of Beans in Rwanda' showed how the varieties selected by the women had production increases of up to 38 per cent over breeder-selected varieties and outperformed local mixtures 64–89 per cent of the time.

The fourth *critical moment* relates to the monitoring and evaluation efforts. The significance given to gender in such efforts, the methods used, the questions asked and the extent to which these are informed by gender analysis are all important if planners are to learn how an intervention is performing in relation to women's empowerment. It also helps establish the credibility of organizational claims about their own performance. Interestingly, despite the widespread claims about the empowerment potential of microfinance, very few microfinance organizations actually include indicators of women's empowerment in their monitoring efforts. Instead, these focus largely on loan disbursement and repayment rates and, in some cases, on enterprise-related indicators. Whereas there have been efforts to evaluate the empowerment impact of microfinance, it is evident that this varies considerably among

organizations, suggesting that it is not financial services alone that shape what organizations are able to achieve but the organizational strategy for delivering them. (See Kabeer, N., 2005, Direct social impacts of microfinance' and 'Wider impacts of micro-finance: Social exclusion and citizenship, in J. Copestake, M. Greeley, S. Johnson, N. Kabeer and A. Simanowitz, *Money with a Mission: Vol. 1. Microfinance and Poverty Reduction*, ITDG Publications.)

The fifth and final *critical moment* concerns the extent to which there are feedback mechanisms that allow information from different stages of the process of implementation to be used to modify practice. The presence of these mechanisms distinguishes learning organizations from those that fail to evolve over time. One example of these feedback mechanisms in operation is BRAC's Targeting the Ultra-Poor programme, set up in 2003, in response to findings from its own large research and evaluation division as well as external studies that the poorest sections of the population, destitute women and, often, female household heads were largely excluded from mainstream microfinance efforts. The effectiveness of the feedback mechanism was strengthened by the fact that these studies not only documented the exclusion of these groups but also the factors that explained their exclusion. This allowed BRAC to design a new programme that took account of these factors. Smillie's *Freedom from Want: The Remarkable Success Story of BRAC, the Global Grassroots Organization that is Winning the War Against Poverty* (2009) provides insights in this regard.

In the rest of this paper, we explore the relevance of the critical moments gender analysis in relation to the intervention supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Founda-

tion, written as a case study for the Agricultural Learning and Impact Network (ALINE) project. The goal of ALINE is to connect, build, analyse, influence and ultimately transform how the Foundation assesses agricultural development investments. The case study pertains to PRADAN, an organization that uses a livelihoods-based approach to work with women's self-help groups in India.

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF PRADAN's WORK

PRADAN was set up in 1983, to support the livelihoods of poor farmers in the rain-fed hilly areas of the poorer regions of India, which had been largely bypassed by the Green Revolution technology. PRADAN recognizes that the poorest households in rural India are caught in a 'poverty trap' and require livelihood support to enable them grow out of it. It focused on women from the outset because women were seen to be more responsible than men about family welfare and also because they were perceived to be the most marginalized members of already marginalized groups.

PRADAN is one of the pioneers of the Self-Help Group (SHG) approach (widely prevalent now in India), in which women come together in groups of around 20–30, meet regularly, save a certain amount in a common fund until they have enough capital to make small interest-bearing loans to each other or to others in the village. Groups are then linked to bank loans under the Government of India's SHG-Bank Linkage programme. In addition, group members, who are interested in further strengthening their livelihoods and have the necessary assets, participate in specific programmes that provide them with training and marketing support. Whereas there is considerable scope for discussion on organizational performance among the

staff, its computerized monitoring system is limited to tracking information on women's savings and credit activities.

An evaluation study carried out in 2005 was, therefore, one of the first opportunities for the organization to gain a systematic overview of its impact. (See Kabeer, N. and H. Noponen, 2005, 'Social and economic impacts of PRADAN's Self-Help Group microfinance and livelihoods promotion: Analysis from Jharkhand, India', Impact Working Paper No. 11, IDS Brighton.) The study found that the organization had considerable success in its livelihoods promotion efforts (diversification of activities, asset accumulation, etc.). It also found positive impact on women's public participation and livelihood skills, including knowing how to sign their names and calculate interest rates. However, the evidence was far more mixed in relation to the impact on intra-household power relations, including women's role in strategic areas of decision-making and the prevelance of domestic violence.

There was one qualification to this latter finding: women who had attended PRADAN's livelihoods programmes were far more likely to report positive impact on intra-household relations than those who had not. Whereas these programmes were focused on livelihood issues, these took a very participatory approach, encouraging women to reflect on their current livelihood options and to envisage what the future might look like. The intense social interactions in these group exercises as well as the attention to cognitive change may have made the difference in these women's lives.

The study fed into ongoing debates within PRADAN. Many of its own staff thought there was a need to combine the organization's livelihood efforts with greater attention to the empowerment of SHG members, to enable them to stand up to instances of injustice in their relations with others and to deal with those in authority.

In terms of the critical moments framework outlined earlier, we find that women were central in the conceptualization of the programme but in terms that stressed their instrumentality (responsible mothers) and victimhood (most marginal of the marginal). However, the SHG model with its stress on promoting women's capacity to save and manage their own financial affairs combined with participatory forms of training appeared to have achieved cognitive and behavioural changes that went beyond livelihood issues. Despite the lack of a formal monitoring system, the flat structure of the organization enabled lessons from the field to be communicated across the organization. This explains why questions about the limits of a livelihood focus were already being raised before the external evaluation helped to crystallize their limits.

PRADAN is currently engaged in a strategic review of its strategies, to adapt these to the new challenges and opportunities. Steps have been taken to integrate gender analysis into its staff training programme. It has also embarked on a radical new approach to its SHG programme, with a view to transforming groups into a force for transformative change within the community.

**CONCLUSION**
This paper has sought to incorporate a concern about women's empowerment into the management of information and ideas across the planning cycle. The theory of change that underpins this approach stresses the importance of the human element in how an intervention unfolds—from conceptualiza-

tion to final outcomes. The ideas, information, vision and commitment of the different actors that conceptualize, design, implement, evaluate and learn from different stages of an intervention will make an enormous difference to what the intervention is able to achieve.

In terms of the critical moments framework used to organize the analysis of development interventions, it is clear that the ideal approach will be to ensure that concerns with gender equality are present in each of these moments and that it is important to get it sufficiently right at the conceptualization stage, to ensure that there is follow-through at other stages. Whereas gender equality concerns can be introduced belatedly, the costs of getting it wrong are harder to rectify later in the life of a project.

At the same time, the unpredictability of social reality means that integrating these concerns early in the life of an intervention

does not fully determine its outcomes. How an intervention is designed and implemented will also matter. Whereas PRADAN did not incorporate a concern with women's empowerment into its early vision of social change, its emphasis on promoting women's self reliance and the participatory nature of the training it provides its members did contribute to these outcomes.

*Note: This is a modified version of an original paper by Naila Kabeer (2010) titled 'Women's Empowerment, Development Interventions and the Management of Information Flows'. The paper was originally written to identify the gender concerns in two of the projects being supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation: (1) the MFP project being co-ordinated by UNDP and the Mali government since the 1990s, and (2) Pradan's interventions through SHGs.*