

## Pathways of women's empowerment

- [Pathways of Women's Empowerment, 2007 - 2010](#)

About the author

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“Empowerment” has come to be regarded by many mainstream development agencies as a destination that can be reached through the development equivalent of a motorway: fast-track programmes which can be rolled out over any terrain. A new kind of feelgood talk about women is gaining ground: one that puts women at the forefront of achieving peace, prosperity and democracy. Empower women, the story goes, and they will become the motor of development. Development’s emphasis on women’s empowerment has been welcomed by some as a return from the fog of “gender equality” and the blind alley of “gender mainstreaming” to a sharper, clearer concern about the injustice, discrimination and lack of opportunities that women the world over experience. But the straight talk about power that was once part of feminist discourses of empowerment has given way as development agencies have taken up the term. Today’s softer, more conciliatory, calls for women’s empowerment have none of the rough edges of older demands for justice and equality. The answer to women’s persistent disadvantage, we learn from the proponents of the new empowerment narrative, is to enable them to gain “power”, exercise “agency” and make “choices”. There’s a familiar-sounding ring to this narrative; it seems to resonate with the kinds of things feminists have been talking about for decades. But what exactly does all this mean? Talk of “empowering women” turns “power” into a transferable commodity rather than a structural relation. “Agency” becomes self-assertion - taking control of one’s own life, making one’s own decisions - through self-actualisation. Making “choices” says less about the capacity to determine the parameters of the possible than the possibility of selecting the options that development intervention makes available.

### **The image and the real**

Taking a closer look, what appears at first sight to hold some semblance of responsiveness to feminist demands reveals itself as a simulacrum.

“Empowerment-lite” looks like the real thing. It sounds like the real thing - borrowing words from the feminist lexicon, although often in combinations that deprive them of their bite. And it seems to be doing just what feminists have been doing and demanding for decades: from organising women into groups to providing training, resources and rules that get more women into work and into politics. But is it really doing anything to address the underlying structural inequalities and pervasive discrimination that roused feminists into action in the first place?

Much depends on how the term “empowerment” is interpreted. In some parts of the world, “empowerment” has come to be synonymous with projects that give women [small loans](#) and enlist them in small-scale business activities such as producing handicrafts for sale. Claims to be “empowering women” through engaging them in the market conflate power with money, and

imbue the acquisition of money with almost magical powers - as if once women had their own money, they could wave a wand and wish away overnight the social norms, institutions and relationships that are part of their lives. Empowerment-lite promises this, and more: a chain of causalities culminating in development's holy grail, poverty reduction.

In the midst of all this, women's own strategies to [negotiate the constraints](#) of their everyday lives are rendered virtually invisible: poor women are, almost by definition, lacking in power and in need of development's interventions. These interventions may not only bypass the sources of women's power, they may also undermine it. Women may make safer borrowers, but whether small loans enhance their "agency" and "choices" depends as much on what comes along with the package. And the ambivalent effects of training courses that seek to "empower" women came home to me when a colleague returned from evaluating one of these courses and reported the following exchange. She'd asked women what difference being on the course had made to their lives. "Now I know how to say to my husband 'I would be happy if I could go to market tomorrow'," said one woman. "What did you do before?" asked the evaluator. "I just used to tell him I was going", she replied.

OpenDemocracy teamed up with Pathways of Women's empowerment to produce [a blog](#) which will run on the last week of every month to address gender issues in their diversity. You can also listen to our first Pathways [podcast](#).

It's high time to ask whether and how development's adoption of the term "empowerment" has offered women anything that they can use to empower themselves. What might we learn by reversing the gaze and refocusing attention on women's own experiences, and on what they've learnt from their own travels along diverse pathways of empowerment?

Feminists have long argued that empowerment is not something that can be done to or for women. The feminist slogan "the personal is the political" roots the process of empowerment in an expansion of women's consciousness.

Feminists have long recognised that it is when women recognise their 'power within' and act together with other women to exercise 'power with', that they gain 'power to' act as agents. Feminist experience has shown that this is a process that may take a diversity of pathways, but for which there are rarely the kind of short-cuts envisaged by the proponents of empowerment-lite.

### **A journey without maps**

This calls for seeing empowerment less as a destination than, as [Naila Kabeer](#) puts it, a "journey without maps". Each "journey without maps" is also one of discovery, one on which horizons shift as the terrain changes. To understand how women experience empowerment calls for cutting away the tangle of assumptions and stereotypes that have filled the field of [gender and development](#). Tracing these journeys, as they take place in different contexts at different times, can help to provide new insights into what it takes to bring about the kind of change that can advance social and gender justice. Starting from women's lived experience brings into critical scrutiny the taken-for-granted chain of causalities proposed by advocates of empowerment-lite. And it helps to bring power back into the frame.

Economic empowerment policies, for example, may bet on women pouring their resources into their households, expanding their roles as mothers and wives to meet needs that are outsourced to them and their “communities”. But much depends on how they choose to spend such newly-acquired economic power, and whether, where and how entry into the market offers women sufficient resources to begin to challenge and transform the persistent institutionalised inequalities that shore up the established gender order. To work for women’s empowerment, the empowering effects of work need to be better understood - and better contextualised, given the enormous differences between the countries that are the targets for development’s one-size-fits-all interventions.

**W**e will explore ideas, projects and initiatives from around the world - Brazil to Egypt, Sierra Leone to Bangladesh - which aim to understand what enables women to empower themselves and sustain changes in gendered power relations

The vision for women’s political participation in empowerment-lite is entirely consistent with its counterpart, democracy-lite. What is on offer are templates and tools for institutional design that do little to redress the power issues that lie at the very heart of the matter - such as in the cultures and conduct of politics itself. Opening up the debate on women’s political [participation](#) means asking new questions about what is needed to democratise democracy. And it calls for us to begin this process of questioning whether demanding greater representation of women within flawed and dysfunctional political orders is what will do the trick.

As [Ana Alice Costa](#) from the Pathways team in Brazil points out, making political institutions more responsive and accountable is about more than getting more women into politics. That is simply a first step to address a basic inequity. What’s needed is a better understanding of what works to amplify the influence of advocates for justice and equality within the political arena. What can be learnt from the innovative “feminist schools” run in Brazil for female elected officials and grassroots leaders - how do their graduates go on to change the conduct of politics? What can the experiences of global feminist advocates teach us about how to build coalitions for change? And where there have been policy successes - such as the [family courts](#) in Egypt, domestic-violence law in Ghana and other examples that will form the subject of articles on this site in months to come - what does it take to make democracy work for greater justice and equality for all?

Talk about putting more women into work and getting more women into politics has become relatively uncontroversial, at least in the domain of secular development policy. But when it comes to sexualities, there is no such ready consensus. There are those for whom sexuality is a private matter, those for whom the only sexuality issues that matter are sexually transmitted infections and sexual violation, and those who advocate women’s empowerment at the same time as denying women the rights to exercise choices over their own sexual and reproductive lives. How difficult it remains to articulate a perspective on gender and sexuality that refuses to treat all women as victims, to be protected from male predation. What does it take to shift understandings of female sexuality in ways that recognise - and indeed [celebrate](#) - the positive and the pleasurable?

These are questions that lack any simple or singular answers. But they’re questions that badly need to be asked. With funding from the British government’s Department for International

Development ([DfID](#)), researchers in a diversity of places - from Afghanistan to Brazil, global policy institutions to rural Sierra Leone - are opening up long-held assumptions about women, power and social change to critical scrutiny. What we are exploring is an entirely different approach: one that is framed by lived experience rather than stereotypes, one that can countenance contradictions and celebrate plural visions and versions of empowerment that fit with the contexts in which they are voiced, and one that can reframe empowerment in ways that restore its power as a concept to serve the struggle for a more just and equal world.

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