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**Questioning empowerment: lessons from
women's groups in India**

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Questioning empowerment: lessons from women's groups in India

...when existing power is unequally distributed the pay-offs from coercion and deception of the powerless by the powerful may be high and the likelihood of political change small (Raiser 1997:52)

Abstract

This paper focuses on the experiences of empowerment of poor and marginalized women in India. By examining the various theories empowerment, it develops an approach to measuring empowerment based on women's own self perception of change in agency. Case studies of self-help groups working with NGOs were used, and the research findings point to empowerment being about changes in poor women's access and influence in a range of social and political domains as being the key changes rather than economic performance per se.

Introduction

The language of empowerment is increasingly being used across the social sciences. It can be found in the literature on management, sociology, health services, politics, as well as international development (Page and Czuba, 1999). In the field of international development, most of the key actors, including government, non-government, and multilateral organizations, have adopted the language of empowerment in their policy and practice (ADB, 2001a; ADB, 2001b; AusAID, 2001; DfID, 2000; World Bank, 2002; World Bank Institute, 2001). This paper examines the various theories empowerment, and how they may provide a basis for developing valid measures of empowerment in the context of contemporary development practice. I will use the findings from case studies of self-help groups that have been sponsored by NGOs in India to develop a framework that is based self-perceptions of changes in agency of poor women as a measure of empowerment, and conclude by drawing out some implications for development practice.

An emerging problem with attempting to measure empowerment is that the popularity of the term has led to the emergence of definitions of empowerment that are all encompassing but tend to eschew notions of the exercise power and power relations within groups and communities and is just another buzzword in development practice used merely to obtain funding (Cheater, 1999; James, 1999; Moore, 2001; Page and Czuba, 1999). Empowerment as a term is used to:

screen off power relations from the public discourse and obscure hegemonic relations... This conception of power as post-modern warm fuzzy expansible, not only conceals its hard edge; this cloak of opacity also discourages nasty questions of who benefits and how, and runs the danger of collapsing objectives, processes and outcomes alike into undifferentiated rhetorical empowerment (Cheater: 7).

In order to move away from a generalized usage of the term empowerment this paper seeks to return to the idea of power relations and related theories. In this context a useful approach is to relate empowerment directly to 'agency' — the expansion of individuals' choices and actions as they relate to others (Kabeer, 1999).

What is Empowerment?

While there may be some debate about what empowerment is, or rather if certain changes in an individual or a group are adequate proxies for empowerment, Mosedale (2005) identifies four generally agreed dimensions:

- i. there is a precondition of disempowerment;
- ii. empowerment cannot be bestowed; at best an external agent can facilitate processes for it to happen.
- iii. it is about capacity to make decisions and carry them out; and
- iv. it is a process rather than a product.

Beyond these four agreed dimensions there are two broad and to some extent competing views on empowerment. First, empowerment is about the individual and their personal cognition and awareness — from which other changes follow (Korten, 1981; Schneider, 1999; Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988). It tends to eschew classical notions of power being related to notions of domination, consent, and resistance. Critics of this view such as Riger (1993: 281) argue that views of empowerment that ignore notions of control in favour of non-adversarial and relatively benign changes focused on the individual merely promote a ‘*sense* of empowerment’ [emphasis added], that is cognitively-based. It does not reflect an increase in actual power but rather they argue that it is a ‘false consciousness’.

The second view is that empowerment is more about changes in social relations and the role of the individual in these social relations: it is inextricably linked to political issues and rights, whether they are in the realm of patriarchy and the family, or community power structures (Crawley, 1998; Kabeer, 1999; Kumari, 1999; Riger, 1993; Sen, 1997). These writers argue that, by definition, empowerment entails a process of change for the powerless or disempowered, whereby these disempowering institutional structures are challenged — i.e. empowerment is not a passive process.

While these two views of empowerment can be seen as being at different ends of a spectrum, they may not be mutually exclusive. Goetz, (2001: 35) speaks of empowerment having both a ‘performative aspect and a substantive aspect of *voice*’ [original emphasis] — i.e. it has both cognitive *and* political components. It is not only a sense of having expanded choice that is important but also of being able to act on those choices and influence to others:

[Empowerment is] ... a process whose outcomes would lead to renegotiations of gender relations, enhance women’s access and control over human, material, financial and intellectual resources, legitimize women’s entry into non-traditional spaces, creates new spaces, and support systems to sustain the process of empowerment (Jandhyala 1998: 205).

In this context empowerment has both individual and collective dimensions.

Empowerment as a personal experience — the individual dimension:

The community psychology literature views empowerment in part as the building of self-knowledge and self-esteem of the individual to reduce ‘feelings of alienation and enhance feelings of solidarity and legitimacy’ (Asthana, 1996). Individual empowerment therefore is ‘... the reciprocal influences and confluence of macro and micro level forces that impact the emotional cognitive and behavioural aspects of individuals’ (Speer 2000), and entails changes in:

- meaning which revolves around beliefs, values and behaviours;

- competence or self-efficacy, that is the belief of being able to carry out particular tasks or roles;
- self-determination or the choices individuals have in initiating or regulating their actions;
- impact or the degree to which one influences the outcomes of others. and
- how people understand and relate to their social environment and the role of collectives in community life (Speer, 2000; Spreitzer, de Janasz *et al.*, 1999).

As touched on above the examining of the processes of disempowerment is important if we are to understand empowerment: disempowerment has been variously described as a ‘... lack of control over destiny’ (Campbell and Jovchelovitch, 2000: 261); ‘polluting’ events which are ‘not fair’ and an ‘affront to dignity’ (Kane and Montgomery, 1998: 266), and ‘isolation in decision-making’ (Puroshothaman, 1998: 50); and a ‘deep-seated constraint on the ability to choose’ (Kabeer, 1999: 438). Disempowerment therefore has a strong individual dimension, but these disempowering factors have also have a social dimension in that they affect group dynamics, and can lead to ‘collective disempowerment’ (Kane and Montgomery 1998: 268), which in turn further impacts on the individual.

These views of disempowerment have resonance those theories of power that focus on the constraints to decision-making — the ‘mobilization of bias’ (Bachrach and Barantz, 1970: 18); and ‘influencing, shaping, and even determining the wants of another’ (Lukes, 1974: 17). In other words people’s lack of control over their destiny or inability to choose can be explained in part by the constraints on their decision-making space: it is the overcoming of these constraints that is empowering. That is it is the cognitive change that occurs within the individual that leads to further action in their relationships with others.

Riger (1993) argues that this individual approach to empowerment understates the political dimension of power and the power relationships that exist in human relations — the notion of domination, and that an individual approach to empowerment is therefore reductionist focusing too much on the *sense* of empowerment rather than on what she calls *actual* empowerment (p. 281). An examination of how an individual feels, can disconnect human behaviour from the larger socio-political context, and therefore serve to maintain the *status quo* rather than lead to substantial change — i.e. this focus on the individual fails to take into account the larger systemic issues that create powerlessness and negative life outcomes for individuals.

Riger goes on to argue that empowerment approaches that focus on the individual are more concerned with control than co-operation. On the other hand a community approach to empowerment is about subverting the notion of individual control to achieve a community good (Riger, 1993). Therefore, there can be an empowering collectivity that disempowers individuals and *vice versa* (Kane and Montgomery, 1998; Leach, Means *et al.*, 1997). Empowerment, however, should not be about simple trade-offs between the individual and the group, but rather how the group can reinforce individual agency and vice versa (Speer, 2000): individual empowerment can only occur in a social context and so must involve co-operation.

Power therefore is about a capacity to act and influencing others, and is about an ‘agent’s capabilities to reaching outcomes’ (Giddens 1979). In other words, while power is usually directed at others, that is not the primary reason for the exercise of power — power is exercised to give a particular benefit to those who exercise it in the context of it being dynamic, multi-directional, and having collective aspects. It is very hard for a person to act unilaterally — they require a collectivity of support and an

institutional framework. Power thus is a structural resource of a community that involves reproducing relations of both autonomy and dependency in social interactions (Giddens, 1979).

All of this discussion, however, presupposes the notion of power with a ‘face’, that it is personal and entails individuals’ engagement with one another. It can be argued that a personalized view of power is limited as it downplay the ‘... the network of social boundaries that delimit the field of what is possible’ (Hayward 1998: 1). These social boundaries are both necessary for promoting social goods on the one hand, but also establish significant differences in social enablement and constraints on the other. Power is now put it into a much wider context to explain behaviours that are more difficult to locate in the personal. This point will be returned to in the discussion of disempowerment and the role of intermediaries in empowerment.

Agency and Empowerment

Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity ... it can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. It can be exercised by individuals as well as by collectives (Kabeer, 1999: 438).

According to Giddens agency is both a ‘continuous flow of conduct’ and so by its nature, is an intervention (1979: 55), and a ‘continuous process by which action transforms both structures and individuals’ (1984: 14). It has a feedback loop such that the more one exercises choice the greater the expansion of opportunities. This in turn is related to the arenas in which agency is exercised: that is the access to, and the mobilization of resources within ‘domains of power’ (Vijayalakshmi, 2001: 4). These domains may include *inter alia*: the household, the local institutional structures, the political community, the broader economy, and civil society. Jandhyala posits a similar notion when she refers to power as being related to access to ‘new spaces’ (1998:205) — i.e. power both defines and confines people’s decision-making spaces (Bachrach and Barantz, 1970; Lukes. 1974).

This discussion identifies a number of elements that are important for both defining empowerment, and developing valid indicators for measuring it. First, power is more about the capability and means to achieve certain outcomes that transform both individuals and structures; second there is a strong personal or self-awareness component; and finally, it is about access or exclusion from certain social domains. There are also tensions in that empowerment is seen as both a social and an individual process, and so trade-offs must be made between the individual and collective dimensions.

Collective Dimensions of Empowerment:

This section will focus in more detail on the collective processes in what has become known as collective empowerment (Pilsuk, McAllister, *et al.* 1996) — the summation of individual empowerment which leads to the self-efficacy of a group. This is the underlying framework that drives much of the development work aimed at empowerment. There is a collective strength derived from the ‘web of continuing relationship ... [and] mutual support’ (p. 17), which results in enhanced access by individuals to resources in the arenas of economic, political, and social decision-making. The group gives voice, value, and support to the individual, and a sense of power develops in the course of collective action (Drury and Reicher, 1999; Goetz, 2001; Kroeker, 1996; Murthy, 2001; Purosothaman 1998). There is a virtuous circle of: personal power producing a collective sense of legitimacy, and an awareness of a collective sense of rights (leading to collective action); which in turn leads to enhanced personal power (Drury and Reicher, 1999). The outcomes of community

empowerment are a raised level of psychological empowerment, political action, and a redistribution of resources and/or decision-making (Rissel, 1994; Calman, 1992).

This idealized world view of empowerment can be easily challenged so that the virtuous circle becomes a vicious circle by which individual or psychological empowerment undermines or weakens community empowerment as people begin to act more autonomously:

The image of the empowered person ... reflects the belief in separation, individuation, and individual mastery ... [contrasts] with an alternate vision that emphasizes relatedness and interdependence as central values of human experience (Riger, 1993: 285).

Those situations which foster communal or collective values are opposite to those that foster agency or control — ‘control rather than communion’ (Riger 1993:285). This is because an individuals’ understanding of power, and social change at a group level, differs from their own sense of control and efficacy — there is a tension between how individuals deal with personal dimensions of empowerment, and how they see communal notions of empowerment (Speer, 2000). There are instrumental values that control in tension with expressive values, which are about interpersonal relationships. ‘Finding one’s voice, controlling one’s resources, becoming empowered may reduce the interdependence that produces a strong sense of community’ (Riger, 1993: 289).

For the powerless, those not in a position to exercise autonomy and choice, ‘... [they] must focus on connection and communal goals to survive’ (p. 288), and so the tension between individual and collective empowerment may be of less importance for empowerment of very poor and marginalized groups. The question, however, still remains:

Does empowerment of disenfranchised people and groups simultaneously bring about a greater sense of community and strengthen the ties that hold our society together, or does it promote certain individuals or groups at the expense of others, increasing competitiveness and lack of cohesion? (1993:291).

Much development literature argues that with poorer communities the dilemma outlined above of whether to focus on the individual does not present the level of danger to collective processes that Riger points to, but rather that collective and individual empowerment are mutually reinforcing (Goetz, 2001; Kroeker, 1996; Murthy, 2001; Purosothaman, 1998).

Development Practice and Empowerment

The above discussion on the nature of empowerment has provided a framework to examine the rationale of empowerment in development practice. The starting point for most development interventions is that empowerment is about both groups and individuals: it is ‘... group processes that lead to change in the lives of individuals’ (Sen, 1997: 4).

In order to be truly empowered, poor people must be able to go beyond their consciousness of themselves as eternal victims, to transcend their self-perception towards greater control over their lives and environment. This internal change in awareness, while catalyzed by group processes, is profoundly and intensely personal and individual (p. 5).

Gita Sen then goes on to argue that not only do group or collective processes provide a support or catalytic role for individual empowerment, these processes also provide a context through which individuals can become aware of the local realities. This awareness occurs through the social cohesion the group brings and the local networks to which the group exposes its members (Campbell and Jovchelovitch, 2000) and from which they can gain control over resources from which can emerge a capacity for self-expression, and ‘inner transformation of one’s consciousness’, which in turn can overcome barriers to accessing resources (Sen, 1997: 2). Empowerment occurs in the

balance between individuals accessing resources, and their inner transformation — the ‘virtuous circle’ outlined above (Drury and Reicher, 1999; Kroeker, 1996; Puroshothaman, 1998). Sen (1997) argues that it is a poor understanding of this complex process that results in problems with empowerment programs — government programs falter because they focus on the control over external resources, while NGO programs falter because they focus predominantly on inner transformations.

For empowerment to result in both personal transformation and access to resources it must involve changes in power relations — it is a zero-sum game, with those in power relinquishing some in order for others to gain power: it is political (Kroeker, 1996; Rappaport, 1987; Sen, 1997). While changes in power relations between societal actors may not always be a consequence of ‘empowerment’, a central tenet of empowerment is the potential and opportunity for these changes to occur.

Empowerment therefore goes beyond the individual and the group into the realm of political change and social justice: it is more than merely choices but a ‘... sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights’ (Rappaport, 1987: 121).

Mayoux (1999) identified three paradigms that broadly describe the rationale of those development interventions aimed at the empowerment of women.

- i. *An economic* paradigm that promotes development interventions to improve women’s capacity for increasing their income either through employment or micro-enterprises. This paradigm assumes ‘reinforcing spirals’ which occur as a result of increased income and economic independence, which in turn lead to social and political change and greater personal empowerment;
- ii. *A poverty alleviation* paradigm which focuses on decreased vulnerability and looks at ‘mutually synergistic interests’ at the household level. It takes the view that addressing practical needs, such as health or education, is the best way of addressing gender inequality and as a consequence women are empowered; and
- iii. *A feminist* paradigm, which sees empowerment as an ‘end’. It addresses gender subordination at the individual, organizational, and macro levels. Economic programs are seen only as an entry point for wider social, political and legal empowerment.

These three paradigms co-exist to varying extents in most development programs, and women’s empowerment as an assumed outcome in all three. However, the economic and poverty alleviation paradigms for empowerment can be challenged as they rest on two contested assumptions: first, that there is an overarching economic priority in people’s lives; and second, that economic and physical well-being lead to socio-political benefits from increased choices that these benefits bring (Schneider 1999).

The feminist critique of these paradigms centres on the argument that empowerment is more than people gaining the ability to undertake activities to overcome disadvantage. Evidence from micro-finance studies, found that access to micro-finance did not expand women’s choices but in fact increased women’s burdens (Goetz and Gupta, 1996; Mayoux, 1995; Mayoux, 2001; Rahman, 1999). First, women often did not control the loans they were given in their name but were held responsible for them; leading to a paradoxical effect of reducing their choices by adding to their burdens, and creating dependency relationships with micro-finance providers (Weissberg, 2000). Second, microfinance programs do not necessarily accord directly with women’s immediate priorities: for example, when women were asked to rank their own indicators of empowerment according to their

importance in their lives, economic change was rated lower than say education and children (Markham and Bonjean, 1995).

The weakness of the economic and poverty paradigms is that they rest on general assumptions about the most appropriate path to empowerment, assuming that physical or economic resource constraints are the reason for disempowerment. These paradigms also fail to recognize that power relations have to change in order to bring about changes in economic relations; but rather seem to depend on a rather narrow social construct that sees women as being economic beings, rather than social and political beings (Wright, 1994). That is, to be empowered people must be able to go a step further and set their own agendas and change events. Empowerment involves people in an active role, not only in decision-making, but also an understanding of the factors that shape a situation, and the nature of oppression itself (Crawley, 1998; Goetz, 2001; Gujit and Shah, 1998; Murthy 2001). Empowerment, therefore, should entail a transformation of social relations, particularly gender relations, to 'legitimize women's entry into non-traditional spaces and creating new spaces' (Jandhyala, 1998:205), by acting on the 'systemic forces' which marginalize women in communities within a given context (Kumari, 1999:100).

Measuring Empowerment

Measuring empowerment requires making judgements about what are appropriate indicators for measuring changes in people's capacity for choice or action in their lives and so is difficult. If we use indicators that look at how people may or may not exercise choices in terms of action, the question then arises — is this because of a lack of power, or are there other factors that influence choice? (Kabeer, 1999). Some measures of empowerment look at access to services or entitlements (Hishigsuren, 2000), participation in development projects (Manikutty, 1998), or income levels (Basu and Basu, 2001; Hashemi, Schuler, *et al.* 1996). Others take a stronger sociological approach and look at access to local political processes (Fernandez, 2001), social interactions and relationships (Berg, Bredenbeck *et al.*, 1998; Davies, 2000), and personal self-esteem and self-worth (AIMS n.d; Itzhaky and York, 2000; Speer, 2000). The problem is that indicators based on access to services or universally valued entitlements such as shelter, nutrition etc. tend to apply only in situations of scarcity and not everyday living (Kabeer, 1999).

Other measures that relate to tangible outcomes such as income levels, access to education and the like, have problems of causality and time lags (Sen, 1997). Access to these services may be readily available across a community yet individual members of a community may still be disempowered in the level of choice and decision-making they have in their lives. A person's access to services does not necessarily provide evidence of differences in a capacity for choice or action for a particular individual or group in society (Kabeer, 1999). In brief these measures that indicate quantitative proxies for a qualitative process should be treated with some caution due to problems with identifying causal relationships, and time lags between the process of empowerment and the observed tangible results (Sen, 1997). A strong argument can be made that qualitative measures must be used, as what is being measured is qualitative by its very nature (Sen, 1997), and quantitative proxies usually tell us little about the qualitative processes involved.

Qualitative measures such as socially-based functionings, like political representation or social interactions, however have their own sets of problems such as reflecting the values of the people doing the measuring rather than real changes in the lives of those being measured (Kabeer 1999). For example, the nature or structure of political representation is a normative measure and may relate to

values that are external to the particular community (Booth and Richard 1998); or the measures may be culturally determined, and understood and practiced quite differently in different cultural settings (Speer 2000). A focus on outcomes may give a false indication of the changes in choices that have occurred, and the empowering processes they may not lead to the outcomes expected; and what is relevant in one community may not be relevant in another (Hashemi, *et al.* 1996).

Agency in Empowerment

A defining aspect of empowerment is ‘agency’, that is the role the individual plays in decision-making (leading to expanded choice and action) both in their personal life and broader social interactions. In terms of attempting to measure these processes Zimmerman and Zahniser (1991) have developed the notion of an individual’s ‘sociopolitical control’ as a framework for looking at agency. In this framework five components are examined: policy control (a sense of competence at influencing policy decisions); leadership in a group and other domains; a sense of community belonging; a sense of well-being and; participation and decision-making. Naved (1994) who looked at self-defined indicators of agency in her Bangladesh study came up with findings which generally fitted Zimmerman and Zahniser’s framework of socio-political control. Her study focused on the changes that had occurred to women in their lives, which were then used as indicators of expanded choice and action. These indicators were broadly: increased mobility, the use of resources, and participation in public life. She found that women reported choice of being able come out of the house and have some control over resources as being very important to them; as well as being more valued in their families and men care for them more; and some change in decision-making and intra family relationships. Finally, there is also increased: participation in elections; in access to public space; a greater sense of solidarity with others; and positive perceptions of self.

This approach to measuring empowerment in terms of ‘agency’ or policy control is important as these types of change can lead directly to tangible outcomes such as reduced mortality, fertility and gender equality (Murthi, Guio *et al.*, 1996). That is, the greater control people have over broader social ‘policy’ then this is reflected positively in outcomes such as life expectancy, and mortality rates. The specific indicators, broadly outlined above, however vary considerably from culture to culture and while respondents may give similar or different answers, there is little basis on which to make comparisons across cultures (Kabeer, 1999). For example, Naved’s (1994) finding from her Bangladesh study that the capacity of women to freely come out of the house was probably an appropriate indicator in that context. This same indicator however may not be useful in another context (say where *purdah* is practised), or on the other hand it may be an everyday necessity such as in an urban context.

Some of these changes are subtle and can occur in the informal rather than the formal domain and empirical studies can fail to capture this subtlety in which women are:

...opting for private forms of empowerment, which retain intact the public image, and honour, of the traditional decision-maker but which nevertheless increase women’s ‘backstage influence’ in decision-making processes (Kabeer 1999:448).

Nevertheless, even taking into account these caveats, it is the use of self-identified indicators that look at changes over time, similar to Naved’s (1994) approach in Bangladesh that provides a valid basis for measuring empowerment — i.e. the starting point for any measure of empowerment should be defined by those ostensibly being empowered.

Findings from selected Indian Case Studies

The field work for this study adopted the approach of using self defined indicators of empowerment. The research involved surveying seventy seven self help groups that were associated with fifteen small to medium sized Indian NGOs in four districts in two states in Southern and Western India - Maharashtra and Karnataka. These States were chosen as they had few institutional constraints to empowerment-based work: they were liberal democratic states, within a federal structure; had a commitment to decentralization/devolution of local level decision-making to local government structures; and generally supported NGO 'empowerment' work. In this sense they represented an 'ideal' institutional environment for promoting empowerment. The districts chosen for the study had a relatively high density of NGOs working with poor and marginalized communities. The NGOs used in the case studies were chosen randomly on the basis of their stated commitment to empowerment as a means to addressing community issues around poverty and marginalization. Indian NGOs generally have adopted the self-help group (SHG) model for their work (Fernandez, 2001). These groups each comprise of around twenty people – usually women; and they meet regularly for both the purpose of undertaking savings and credit programs, and often training and other social mobilization.

Data was collected through focus group discussions using a stratified random sample of the self-help groups the participating NGOs were working. In addition data was collected from interviews with participating NGOs on their various accountability relationships, and institutional structures and priorities. Typically, Indian NGOs engage in empowerment work through facilitating and working with self-help groups, each comprising around twenty people – usually women. These groups meet regularly for both the purpose of savings and credit programs and also training and other social mobilization. Following are brief qualitative descriptions of three of the NGOs that were found to be successful in achieving empowerment, by way of illustration.

India Development Service

IDS was started by non-resident Indians in 1974, in Chicago, USA with an aim of fundraising among mainly non-resident Indians for development work in India. In 1977 two members of IDS visited India with the aim of making the program operational, settled in Dharwad in Karnataka in 1979, and registered IDS in India in the same year with a commitment to the economic and social development of India 'development of people'. IDS works in drought prone areas of Dharwad District in 100 villages and 20 hamlets with around 500 self-help groups the majority of which are women's groups. The groups are usually created by forming village development societies, which are federated at the sub district level. At the time of the study IDS had around 50 staff in the field. The Board of Directors takes a direct interest in beneficiary welfare, with Board members regularly meeting the groups, and thus providing a direct accountability mechanism 'down' to the communities.

SNDT Rag-pickers Program

The rag-pickers program had its genesis in the late 1980s, when the Department of Adult and Continuing Education of SNDT Women's University Pune Campus started a program in the urban slums of Pune working with waste-pickers who were the poorest and most marginalized in the community. The approach was to advocate for waste-picking to be recognized by local government as a legitimate occupation. From this the idea of a trade union emerged and in 1993 the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat, the association of waste-pickers, was formally registered. At the time of the study it had a membership of 5,000 women from 122 slums in and around Pune City. SNDT provides support to the association through mobilization and training programs with waste-pickers. The staff of SNDT are effectively seconded to the various bodies of the association such as the

co-operative. The waste picker program adopts a different model than most other NGO programs, with the emphasis more sharply focussed not only of the rights of the constituency but on the waste-pickers' role in the process. The waste-pickers are actively involved in identifying program priorities, identification, and design, in a formal process. This occurs through monthly meetings that involve a high level of direct staff accountability to the waste-picking women.

Grama Vikas

Grama Vikas is a medium sized NGO based in Kolar district Karnataka that focuses particularly on scheduled caste women and children. It started in 1980 with an initial emphasis on child development. This was expanded into a women's empowerment program relatively early on in the organizational life, based on the belief that child development is only possible when women have an active role in development activities. The strategy of Grama Vikas is to start with child development through the establishment of pre-schools, and after some village acceptance is reached, to develop self-help groups with the most marginalized in the community. Grama Vikas indicated that it will only expand its programs at the rate of the capacity of the groups to self-manage, with Grama Vikas staff moving out of direct group management as soon as possible. Similarly, in the overall management of the program, there are two separate community organizations that are taking over the responsibility for the management of the technical programs. These two bodies are responsible for the day-to-day running of the programs while Grama Vikas is involved in higher-level advocacy and broader strategic work. This structure provides a high degree of direct accountability of the management of the program to the constituency.

The Womens' Responses

The data that was collected on empowerment was the reported changes that women have experienced and how this translated into 'agency' – the increased choices and opportunities to act on those choices. This approach enabled the women to identify the indicators of change themselves. A range of open-ended questions were used which related to what the women have learned, how their lives have changed, and what material assets they have obtained since joining the groups. The answers were categorized into broad groups of changes which the women themselves see as being important, and were ranked and scored using a framework of empowerment centring on changes to their agency – i.e. their role and influence, or power, in the different domains in the community in which they live.

The majority of responses from the women's self-help groups emphasized a few key indicators of the changes in the lives of their members, which provided an insight into what was empowering. These indicators related primarily to improvements in the 'agency' of the women. The responses describing the changes can be broadly categorized as: autonomy of action; changes in family decision-making; participation in community decision-making; and, advocacy on broader social issues. An interesting finding is that in answer to the open-ended question on change, there was little mention of gaining assets or increased incomes as such, however a number of respondents did refer to the reduced cost of credit.

The changes identified were not only related to how women 'felt', but also they indicated how these changes are having a tangible effect on their standard of living. Table 1 summarizes the number of responses to the identified key changes: note the answers were all to an unprompted open-ended question about changes in their lives, with the categories being delineated later.

Table 1 Summary of Empowerment Responses

Key Change	Go Out of House	Gain Family Respect	See SHG as Important	Attend Village Meetings	Deal with Officials	Social Advocacy	Some Role in Family Decision-making	Engage in Business	Strong Influence in Community
No. Responses (n=77)	37	21	31	21	28	17	36	15	13

Autonomy of Action

The capacity for the women to go out of their homes independent of other family members was a clear statement of change from respondents, in terms of autonomy of action. This outcome was regarded as important by around half of the groups surveyed. The capacity for increased mobility gave women, and the self-help groups, legitimacy in the eyes of other family members, particularly the husbands who ‘allowed’ the women to attend the meetings.

For example one woman in response to the question on change referred to the fact that she could ‘now go to Delhi’ (from Southern India) to emphasize the degree of change in her mobility. The implications of being able to go out of the house meant that they could now interact with others such as peers in the group, people in the village, market, etc., whereas earlier their personal interaction was largely confined to the family. This change has led to an increase in their personal self-esteem and seems to support the theories related to psychological empowerment discussed earlier. For example, in the waste-picker community of Pune, the women responded that as a result of the changes the NGO program had brought to their lives they could now wash twice a day and change their clothes after work, ‘and then they looked like everybody else’. As a consequence they were treated the same as others in the community. The increase in self-esteem had practical implications as the expansion of choices meant that the women could interact more on a wide range of issues with the broader community.

Dealing Directly with Officials

The second area of autonomy of action the respondents identified was an increased interaction with local officials. The key officials that they dealt with initially, were bank managers, as the self-help groups generally held bank accounts for their savings, and the banking role was usually rotated among the group members. It is interesting to note that in those cases where the banking role was not rotated among the group, the members tended to report little change in their lives.

Generally the range of officials the women dealt with broadened over time, from bank staff to being able to approach local government officials about benefits that may be due to them; as well as village wide issues that directly affected them such as water supply. Over time these interactions expanded to include authority figures such as the police, who were usually feared.

Changes in Family Decision-making

The increased capacity for independent action in many cases led to an increased level of respect from the family, and some change in the respondent's power and authority within the household. For example one respondent referred to having being 'introverted' from harassment, but as a result of the self-help group program had become 'bold' and gained 'voice'; others used phrases such as 'I gain more respect in the family'; and 'I am no longer treated like an idiot'.

There were also changes in terms of decision-making within the household. Around half of the respondents indicated that before they became involved in the group the man of the household would unilaterally take major decisions in the household. At the time of the interviews they saw decision-making as either being joint, or that they were consulted to a greater extent on decisions, and as consequence they felt they had some role in decision-making. One respondent indicated that she now treated her daughter-in-law with more respect, indicating a clearer understanding of power relations within families and how damaging these power relations can be to the individual.

The discussion of changes in family decision-making was more limited than the discussion of other aspects of the women's lives, mainly because of the personal nature of the discussion. A number of women however did highlight some changes in family decision-making. The first, was the increased capacity to deal directly with various domestic problems that emerge, for example, small disputes, problems with children, and their education. Others indicated that they could now deal better with household problems that are more serious, and are common within the community. One of these problems is alcoholism and associated domestic violence by the men-folk.

Participation in Village Political Life

In a majority of cases the women perceived themselves as now having *some* influence in village political life, and in a smaller number of cases the women nominated their participation and influence in village political life as an important change. However, in general the capacity of the women to participate in village life was limited, with most village processes still being male-dominated and patriarchal. One factor influencing the involvement of women in village life is introduction of *gram sabhas* (village meetings) as a consultative forum for the *gram panchayat* (village council). In those districts where the village meetings were being regularly held there was greater participation of women who were self-help group members.

Advocacy on Social Issues

A smaller but significant number of respondents reported that they were able to advocate on local social issues as an important change that they had experienced. While it was mainly at the local village council level, it included sensitive issues such as child labour and family violence as well as water supply, access to education, road maintenance, the provision of wash stands, and the like. In some cases it also involved state government level advocacy mainly on the issue of alcohol licensing and regulation. This finding is important as being engaged in advocacy moves beyond participation in village life to a more activist stance by the women group members. The advocacy campaigns on access issues were often articulated by the women in terms of perceived injustice on either or both a gender and a caste basis.

Stability of Income

As discussed above, one of the outcomes of the expanded choices and capacity for action the women identified is some improvement in their standard of living. While only a minority of respondents nominated economic benefits in answer to open-ended questions - generally favouring responses that

were articulated in terms of agency - they did recognize the economic benefits that accrued from the intervention in follow up discussion in particular around the question of assets. For example, respondents (while not usually nominated initially) indicated that the savings programs sponsored by the NGO, and managed by the self-help group, was important. These programs provided ready cash, reduced the cost of credit, and led to some level of economic stability in the household. This enhanced economic outcome in turn enabled the women to invest in children's education, some income generation, or simply household items that they saw as providing a better standard of living (household appliances, clothes, weddings etc.). The greater disposable income that reduced cost of credit and ready savings provided, resulted in opportunities for the women to exercise the change in agency they felt. Part of this change in agency was also due to the degree of control the women had over the savings and credit programs.

Some examples of the economic improvement was the upgrading of pottery wheels by people of the potter caste, and the personal purchase of gold to enable women to secure an independent source of credit for themselves through the commercial banks' pawn-broking services. Other groups reported an increased capacity for covering education expenses, the purchase of clothes, and the accumulation of assets such as cattle or goats by many households. For the waste-pickers of Pune, in an urban setting, the chief resource gained was easier and greater access to household waste, their source of livelihood. The economic benefits in both urban and rural areas gave the women a much stronger sense of security not only in economic terms but also in social terms. In the urban areas of Pune, for example, the related social improvement was that the *dalit* waste-pickers suffered less discrimination because they could afford better housing and clothing, and 'so looked like everybody else'.

Group Processes.

The advantages brought by co-operation and the norms of reciprocity that working together as a self-help group brings was identified by groups as an important resource by nearly one half of the responding groups. Examples of responses include the ability to sit together to discuss issues, joint problem solving, interactions within the groups, and 'listening to each other more', and mutual support for women who are in domestic disputes or are being harassed by the police. The solidarity within the groups was also seen as a source of status. In one case the women was described their lives as being drab and they were 'treated like idiots' but now they had 'status' were getting information outside the household and the group. They specifically identified the group as being the source of this change in status.

Conclusion

The changes the women talked about that were empowering, are substantial and were seen to have made a real difference to their lives that went well beyond economic benefits. From the survey data it is possible to map a progression in empowerment indicators over time and the life of a group. In the initial stages of a group's life the women reported access to very basic resources such as the habit of savings and then access to cheaper credit. The next step involves going out of the house and then participating in basic decisions such as food purchasing, and gaining access to paid work outside the house.

As confidence and self-awareness grew the group members would be involved in group management, taking on social issues in the village etc., and finally taking a greater control in household decision-making; and if a personal interest was there, being involved in local-level political processes. Of course whether a person seeks to become a politician is a matter of personal choice

rather than an indicator of empowerment, but it can be argued that across a district or a number of communities, a high level of women from marginalized groups being represented in politics, may give some indication of broader empowerment processes at play. The theoretical basis of empowerment that these findings reflect is Giddens' (1979) view of power as a continuum of choice and action, to achieving personal outcomes, and the inclusion in, and access to, various domains of life previously denied. Importantly, these findings point to a collective dimension of power, and that it is arguably a community resource which can be called upon, by individuals and groups within a community.

In short empowerment is a collective process that primarily focuses on the individual. It involves expanding a person's capacity for making choices and acting on them, which in turn can lead to higher self-esteem and self efficacy, and from that greater participation in community action — i.e. it has both a collective and a political dimension, as well as the personal dimension. In this sense empowerment is as much about achieving change at a community or collective level as it does at a personal level.

This complex structure of empowerment having both individual and collective dimensions leads to a natural tension between empowerment as being about personal autonomy and achievements, and the communal goals of solidarity and mutual support, which to some extent involve self-sacrifice. The debate then is not an either/or one, but rather about how this tension is managed — individual empowerment on the one hand can be a threat to community processes, but on the other it is also a resource of the community that can be tapped for community processes. The challenge for development practitioners then is how this tension is managed, and how programs are designed to ensure that the space is given for both the individual and collective dimensions of empowerment to be expressed.

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