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Topic 2: Empowerment of women as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication

***“Poverty, Empowerment and Gendered life cycles:
Latin American perspectives”***

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Introduction

It is becoming increasingly clear that the models of poverty that have dominated our thinking and action over many years are far too static and unidimensional. This meeting, called to discuss women's empowerment, poverty and gender inequality, and paths towards solutions in a dynamic framework focused on life-cycles, is welcome and far overdue. This is not to say that we are close to producing the changes needed in research paradigms and alternatives for action by governments and other actors concerned with world development. But asking the right questions and putting a sufficient number of concepts on the table are positive steps.

This paper will examine some of the evidence from Latin America that helps to throw light on the relationships among women's empowerment, life cycle processes, and poverty eradication. I begin with a brief discussion of what seem to be the more relevant constructions of "power" and "empowerment" for our present purposes. Thereafter, I will focus on three main questions. The first concerns the particularities of gendered life cycles in the Latin American region as they intersect with cycles of poverty and as each interacts with forms and processes of "empowerment". The second raises issues of intergenerational transfers and the sustainability of change. The third concerns the dynamic nature of gender systems, both in their material and symbolic dimensions. A final section of the paper consists of extrapolations and some recommendations that emerge from the discussion.

1. Power: to have and not to have

The meanings of "power" and "empowerment" are hotly debated, both within and outside of women's studies and feminist theory (Wartenberg 1992; Dirks et al. 1994). Conceptualizations of power distribute themselves along a continuum from "power over" (the capacity to coerce, to dominate, to impose one's will, to get one's way with others) to "power to" (to act, to decide, to create, to transform, to nurture others). A second axis has to do with the concentration or diffuseness of power; its "containability" or capacity to spread inadvertently over social space. In the first case, power is a capability possessed and exercised by an individual actor vis-à-vis others, manifesting itself in relatively discreet actions of domination and oppression. In the second case, it is a diffuse element that permeates social relations and institutions and, under specified conditions, comes to be "embodied" in actors, actions, signs, words and symbols.

To one degree or another, all of these possible senses and definitions of power are relevant in discussions of poverty and gender. Male violence against women—for example, a husband's beating his wife or daughter for taking a job he does not approve of—falls at the domination/discreet action pole. Gender schema (Valian 1999), that cause women to be perceived as weak and indecisive despite the similarity of their actions to those of male peers, lie near the diffuse and permeating pole. Here, it is difficult to say where the source of power lies and who or what is responsible for its effects on women, curtailing their agency, self-assurance and objective possibilities.

Anthropology, the discipline I know best, has produced two particularly promising lines of inquiry into gender and power.

a. *Symbolic versus “real” power*

It is perplexingly common, in human societies, that women possess and use power of various types, yet they are constructed, symbolically or ideologically, as subordinate to and less powerful than men. They may even be viewed as unreliable users of power: bad managers, abusive, defenders of the particularistic interests of their families rather than the general interest of the republic. This strain is prominent in Western political thought, as Carole Pateman (1989) has so ably demonstrated. Although her study relies on a crude methodology, as the author herself has recognized, Sanday (1981) gathers a wide range of cross-cultural evidence that shows the frequency with which women wield power in domestic, economic, and even behind-the-scenes political realms, yet men are construed as being those in control. Women’s power cannot be recognized; it is therefore in some sense “illegitimate”; and, in consequence, it may be disputed and reversible.

It is interesting to note that the early literature on poverty in Latin America that inaugurated the dynamic, multidimensional view predominant today, seemed to reveal a situation of female power hidden beneath a camouflage of male dominance. This is the literature on “survival strategies” (Lomnitz 1975; Raczynski and Serrano 1985; Anderson 1991). It emerged from second-wave feminism, the experience of women’s NGOs in poor urban neighborhoods, and the focus this brought to bear on women’s “agency” (not the term that was used at the time). Women were found to be making decisions over their own lives and immediate families, as they accessed resources, played their social networks, and pursued goals that entailed a progressive empowerment of some sort.

The point is that, even in professional research circles, the “powerful” analyses of poverty produced by women from the standpoint of poor women were not “empowered” officially, such that they were incorporated into the mainstream of research and policymaking. Even now, Latin American poverty analysis is dominated by debates about poverty lines, indicators and maps continuously refined to the point where villages, neighborhoods and housing blocks can be labeled as poor. Lines of social, economic, and political exclusion are imagined to be rigid and permanent rather than fluid and contested. Actors and agency are largely absent.

b. *Accruals of power over the life cycle as a “spontaneous” process*

A broad and well-established anthropological literature documents a general trend toward women’s increasing status as they age, passing from a status of “unmarried girl” to “young wife” to “woman with growing children” to “woman with adult children”, “grandmother”, and “head of household” (Brown 1982). This can be verified in many Latin American societies. In Peru, this life-cycle effect gives older women heightened authority, increased access to resources, greater decision-making power, increased personal mobility and a reduced workload. The unfolding of the process depends in part on personal qualities of the women themselves, on their capacity to claim the rewards of maturing and aging, and on the circumstances of the social network they have built up over the years. Cross-culturally, older women, well advanced in personal and household life-cycles, reap the

rewards of their high investments in “social assets”. This literature directs our attention to the world of social relationships and social exchanges as being an important arena in which to examine the nexus between poverty (or its absence), life cycle, and women’s empowerment.

2. Gendered life cycles, poverty cycles, and dynamic distributions of power

Our mandate here is to link power to the concept and to the lived reality of poverty. We must locate “empowerment” within a framework of development and of expanding economic opportunities. This privileges definitions of power that bring to the fore the capacity to act, resolve problems, create and transform. Moving out of poverty involves better management of a wide range of resources in new (and old; e.g. family) groups and combinations. Becoming empowered implies gaining control over the factors that influence livelihood strategies and thus reducing vulnerability.

A thought experiment:

One way of entering into the complex issues we have before us is through a thought experiment. What might be some of the components of “power to” that are relevant to avoiding or overcoming poverty, from the perspective of the individual woman actor?

- Smoothing out shocks and crises
- Managing relations in groups whose cooperation is necessary for successful livelihood strategies
- Developing one’s own capabilities and functionings as these are relevant to livelihood success
- Raising one’s bargaining capacity (including self-esteem and self-confidence); obtaining better terms of trade
- Heightening the degree of control over “fields” of actors and events (information, prediction, technology, control of resources in demand by others)
- Eliminating violence and coercion from exchange relationships
- Facilitating transfer of knowledge and skills to children, associates, and assistants and to expand the scope, effectiveness, and productivity of one’s livelihood activities

What might be relevant dimensions of power and empowerment, from a societal perspective? What would be an empowering environment for women?

- Institutions and rule regimes shaped to serve and encourage women’s livelihood activities
- Broad dissemination of information, knowledge and understanding of the circumstances of one’s life and the real-world social and economic forces that constrain and enable one’s activities
- Public goods that facilitate livelihood activities and personal development of women (as well as men)

A case study (Andean Latin America):

How do these imagined factors map onto real life, at least in one setting? Looking in detail at the social context, including family and kinship organization, custom and norms, we can flesh out a picture of opportunities and limitations on women's "power to" in the case of Andean Latin America (rural villages and towns, migrants to poor neighborhoods on the urban periphery).

- Women are increasingly active economic agents as they become older and can delegate the heavy responsibilities of baby tending. The traditional Andean pattern involves long reproductive periods (often beginning before 20 and ending past 40 years of age) with 3 or 4 years' spacing between children. Thus older siblings and cousins eventually become available to care for younger children. Women do not expect, nor do others expect, that they will stop working entirely at any period: they simply adjust their work involvement upward or downward according to family circumstances and the availability of assistants.
- Poor women (and men) display flexible sequences for crossing hurdles and making various transitions as they move through the life cycle (Anderson et al. 2001). The major transitions are completing formal education, initiating worklife, a period of exploration and wandering, marriage, child-bearing, retirement. Adult women, for example, despite their heavy loads as working wives and mothers, may continue actively to seek information and skills through participation in development projects, night school, organizations, and community leadership roles. By superimposing what would be for middle-class women two or three successive life stages (education/marriage/child-bearing), some manage to cancel out their initial disadvantages in terms of formal and non-formal education.
- The strength and "comprensión (mutual understanding)" of the conjugal pair is an important ingredient for avoiding poverty and for recovering rapidly from economic shocks. Marriage partnerships should function as "yuntas (oxen yoked to the plow)", and there is abundant folklore about the connection between economic prosperity and peaceful, positive conjugal relations. One factor is the obligation of spouses to help maintain the viability of each other's livelihood strategy. A wife might lend her husband fresh working capital after a robbery, for example; a husband might work several nights after hours to help his dressmaker wife fill a rush order.
- Men's portfolio of assets is greater than women's, and some categories of assets may be extremely difficult for women to obtain in their own right: for example, formal credit; titles to property; social security rights. Single mothers, widows and never-married women risk poverty because of lack of access to male portfolios. Other categories of women, as they move through the life-cycle, fortify and diversify their relationships to male relatives, in-laws, employers, employees, and patrons. These become particularly important in their livelihood strategies.

- Building and maintaining a far-flung social network is an important social insurance mechanism for individuals and households, and it is explicitly recognized as such by the poor. Where women are restricted in their movements and cannot get their husbands' "permission" to participate in local organizations, they lose opportunities for "bridging ties" (as used in the "social capital" literature) to wealthy and well-placed potential helpers, and they have less access to circuits of information. Such restrictions are relaxed or disappear in the case of older married women who have proved their trustworthiness (from a jealous husband's point of view). These women become increasingly involved with local organizations and projects, and they effectively cultivate ties to outsiders.
- Growing children are important contributors to the household economy, both in the form of labor and earnings. Mothers tend to have greater power of decision over their children's labor than fathers (teen-aged sons, however, operate increasingly as autonomous economic agents).
- A household's avoidance of poverty—even a one-person household—normally depends on the fortunes and behavior of more than one individual. Women position themselves, more or less consciously and strategically, in a complicated, ever-changing *gestalt* of exchange relationships based on a variety of principles (profit, reciprocity, moral obligation, charity). Their exchange partners include "contractors" (employers, clients, suppliers), collaborators (family members contributing volunteer or low-cost labor, employees) and participants in the intra-household distribution of resources. What is notable about these relationships is their "informality" (the absence of legal bases for enforcing contracts) and their personal nature (the scarcity of associations and institutions).
- In under-serviced poor communities where the demands of housework are extremely high, adult women seek to surround themselves with substitutes and helpers, usually other women and usually loyal kin. The effect is to create female domestic alliances such as Gilmore (1990) describes in rural Spain. The loss of power experienced by men is sufficient to drive them out of the family's social life and out of the circle of economic cooperation; it may even drive them away from the household to take up a relationship with a more compliant, probably younger woman free of daughters, sisters, mother and other female domestic coalition members.

Conclusion: Economic decisions are embedded in a complex social environment that can potentially be made much more favorable for women seeking to emerge from poverty and for increasing women's empowerment and control. There are serious risks, however, in partial actions that upset a delicate balance and that may leave women more vulnerable than before.

3. Intergenerational transfers and the risks of being young

Women's empowerment through the life cycle alludes to relations between the generations as well as relations between the genders. One would hope that the battle for empowerment need not be fought again in every generation. This would require that some of older women's power and empowerment be transferable to younger women. The younger women recipients might be their daughters and other direct heirs, co-workers and associates, or women that hold them as models and reference points.

In mestizo Latin America, both men and women inherit property and social position from their parents. In traditional Andean villages, young women as well as young men receive animals, land and assistance with a dwelling. By staying close to relatives, they can count on a degree of protection in case of abuse or need. Daughters that do not marry can become independent household heads and members of the community assembly. Young married women, however, come under the authority of their husbands, mothers-in-law and other members of the husband's family. The moment of formation of a new household and the early years of child-bearing are probably the lowest point for women's empowerment in the entire life cycle.

In urban poverty settings, some of the vulnerabilities of young women's position in rural towns and villages are reinforced and some new restrictions are added on their autonomy and access to resources. They are far more exposed to becoming single mothers, cut off from the support of the fathers of their children. It is too easy for men simply to drift away in the anonymity of the city, amidst discrepancies about moral norms and how they should be enforced. In addition, urban poverty, with its logic of scarce resources of all types, often reshapes the relationship between mothers and their adolescent and young adult daughters, accentuating the daughters' subordination and limiting their autonomy. Daughters may be asked or even coerced into keeping house and caring for their father, siblings, and grandparents while mothers expand their businesses and increase their role in community and religious organizations. Daughters lose out on educational opportunities such as technical training or even college; they risk missing opportunities for work; they forego a wide range of nonformal learning experiences that young men have access to; and they are cut short in their own personal growth and, quite likely, growth in self-esteem and confidence. Under such circumstances, the empowerment of older women rests on fragile and ambiguous bases.

Under both rural and urban conditions, the transition period that the young wife and mother undergoes is a critical juncture in the life-cycle. It entails many risks for young women that are not taken into account in educational, labor and social policies. Young men easily avoid payment of child support if a young marriage partnership should fail. Young wives have little backup if they try to nip in the bud a pattern of domestic violence. Shown scant respect in the public services they use on behalf of their growing families (school, health post), young women are viewed socially as being of little weight or importance. Maternal mortality in Peru is particularly associated with this transition period in the life-cycle. Young women die from attempted abortions of out-of-marriage pregnancies, and, in obstetrical emergencies, young wives may be denied access to family resources controlled

by their fathers-in-law. From their point of view, a young wife, especially if she has no other children, can easily be replaced.

Conclusion: The period in women's life cycle that spans adolescence and young wife- and mother- hood is particularly critical from a perspective of empowerment and merits special attention in policymaking.

4. Visualizing complex, dynamic gender systems

Gender systems are complex sociocultural institutions that are under permanent dispute and are consequently undergoing continuous change. In this they are no different from any other human institution. Also like other institutions, they have both material and symbolic dimensions; in fact, these tend to be densely interwoven and almost impossible to separate, analytically or in lived experience.

Most discussions of women's empowerment—like most discussions of gender and development—focus attention on the material dimensions of gender roles and relations. This can lead to serious errors. Power is embedded (“situated” – Wartenberg 1992) in social fields and structures whose many symbolic layers must be accounted for. The representations women and men make of domains of action, sociopolitical structures, relationships and actors must be considered.

Gender systems are systems of classification. They create mental maps that assist actors in orienting their attitudes and action, and they create “schema”: sets of expectations about alters and one's self. Many gender categories combine gender identities with life-cycle chronology in ways that are highly charged with meaning and shot through with stereotypes: teen-age girl (dangerous, rebellious, may go astray, easily fooled and victimized), young mother (inexperienced, “tied down” and domesticated), mature man (experienced, powerful, predatory). Such labels are variously ascribed, self-assigned, accepted, contested, rejected, and modified as part of the daily politics of gender.

The tension between “real” and symbolic worlds is palpable in some of the more perplexing phenomena associated with women's life cycles. Older women may make decisions, accumulate wealth, enjoy autonomy and mobility unimaginable for younger women. At the same time, the symbolization of post-menopausal women may have some very negative contents (domineering; threatening witch; worthless, having outlived their reproductive function).

The well-established principle is worth recalling here: day-to-day gender relations tend to be more egalitarian than are gender relations projected onto symbolic realms (Moore 1988). The first has to do with interdependencies, transactions and the exchange of practical services. The other associates gendered “essences” and actors with symbolic abstractions such as beauty, moral purity, worth and godliness.

It would be wrong to think that poor women (and men) have no time for symbolism: we are all part of culture. A sense of decency, self-respect and self-worth are baseline conditions for empowerment for extremely poor people, perhaps even more than for the non-poor,

who have their wealth to excuse their failings. Where women's power is camouflaged and cannot be legitimately "seen", it is different from *and less than* men's power.

The "power to name" and "power to imagine" are also important here. Who has the power to convince others of the rightness or inevitability of what she has imagined and of the world she has named and structured? Who defines the scale of values for a society? Young (1990) creates a list of "five face of oppression" that includes "cultural imperialism" (being persuaded to believe that someone else's lifestyle and values are superior to one's own). She recalls W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness" to describe the predicament of oppressed groups under these conditions (Young, 1990:60):

Double consciousness arises when the oppressed subject refuses to coincide with these devalued, objectified, stereotyped visions of herself or himself. While the subject desires recognition as human, capable of activity, full of hope and possibility, she receives from the dominant culture only the judgment that she is different, marked, or inferior.

Conclusion: "Real" power and "symbolic" power are intimately interrelated. Our present research base is not geared to testing hypotheses relating devaluation and symbolic oppression directly to poverty, such as would be needed to guide priorities for action.

5. Empowerment strategies

In the normal course of events, in most societies, empowerment will take place—at least in certain domains of women's lives—over the life cycle. How can this be made a more risk-proof, generalized, steady and accumulative process under the rapidly changing conditions of modernization and globalization? How can it be made more relevant to poverty issues and women's material conditions of life?

Empowerment strategies must tread very carefully around poor women's existing exchange relationships and social networks. Losing alternatives, reducing the range and variety of exchange partners—even where some are less than equitable and trustworthy—would not seem to contribute to empowerment or to more successful livelihood strategies. A better tack would involve making the terms of exchange more equitable, improving women's bargaining position, and ensuring women's continuing access to specific resources that only certain actors (often men) command.

We want women to have the power to put a stop to male violence and to be able to insist on fair terms of exchange in their relations with men, with institutions, and with other women. At issue, though, is how to avoid undercutting other actors with whom poor women are embedded in relationships that are vital to their present well-being and future opportunities to escape from poverty. In this context, I have argued that the relations, exchanges, and trade-offs between older and younger women are a particularly thorny problem.

An arena that offers opportunities for new initiatives is that of women's informal associations and—where they exist—organizations. March and Taqqu (1986) offer an inventory and an important analysis of the varieties of spontaneous women's associations

in traditional cultures and developing nations. These include burial societies, rotating savings societies, dancing groups, “societies of lamentation” of a wide variety, religious groups, organizations to sponsor festivals, sports associations, and many others that reflect women’s own response to their needs for company, advice, support, aesthetic expression, play and mutual benefit, within the framework of the specific values and conditions of their local and national societies. March and Taqqu rightfully caution us against interventions that distort the ends of many associations, overwhelming and eventually strangling them, through ill-guided attempts to utilize them in development projects (converting a burial society, for example, into a health promoters’ group). As part of a strategy of empowerment, however, the risks are lower since almost all such informal associations coalesce around a common theme of gender solidarity.

Women’s informal associations—which may look like simple friendships or kin groups to outsiders—tend to be overlooked by planners because of their lack of formality and their apparent instability. To outsiders, they come and go. To poor women themselves, they may be one of the firmest and most consistent points of support available to them. In many cases, they seem to operate simultaneously on material and symbolic planes, facilitating women’s access to resources while reinforcing their sense of personhood and rights. At the least, they hold lessons about the kinds of more formal organizations (more recognizable and treatable by planners) that could be built with a view to the dual objectives of poverty reduction and empowerment.

Conclusion: Empowerment strategies should focus on “adding on” new formats for relationships and new organizational bases for women’s action, enhancing the range of potential associates and gradually broadening women’s opportunities to engage with non-customary interlocutors of more formal and institutionalized varieties.

6. Recommendations

1. Give careful attention the situation of young women: adolescents, young married and unmarried women, their needs, education, status, sexual and reproductive rights and health. Focus social programs and “social marketing” campaigns on promoting fair partnerships at the outset of married life, fair rules of procedure in young families, access to support services, stopping violence and abuse before it starts.
2. Take measures to endow women with prestige, visibility and recognition, especially through reforms in the institutions they are likely to use (social services, labor exchanges, community organizations, judicial system), such that they increase their decision-making power and broaden their roles in setting policy.
3. Adapt institutions to poor and marginalized women’s styles of participation, deliberation, decision and vigilance in ways that will make the women look and feel competent and empowered.

4. Explore the potential of women's informal associations, enhancing their capacity to strengthen women's subjective sense of empowerment and the objective access they have to a diversity of resources. Take lessons from such associations about possible new formats for organizing women around livelihood issues in culturally appropriate ways controlled by ("owned") and understandable to the women themselves.
5. Support women's livelihood strategies in all their variety, with special attention to policies tending towards dignifying, renaming, and resignifying activities and occupations, especially those associated with caring work.
6. Promote images of decisive, competent, responsible young women and reinforce images of older women that have those associations.

Be sensitive to men's needs and demands such that the empowerment of women does not produce backlash, male flight, loss of self-respect, or sense of irrelevance to women's and family well-being.

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