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

***“Empowerment of women in the context of Muslim Societies
as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication in a globalizing world”***

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I. *Introduction:*

One of the most pervasive challenges of development at the turn of the twenty-first Century continues to be Poverty. The eradication of poverty is a priority within the agenda of national governments, donors, multilateral and UN organizations in addition to a host of dynamic actors that have gained responsibility for development, and agency for specific issues within a globalizing world system. It is beyond need to substantiate that women are among the most hard ridden by poverty constituting 70% of the World's poor¹. This qualification transforms women into the main target group for poverty eradication programmes, strategies and projects. While there is a global commitment to poverty eradication, women should constitute a focus group. At the same time the international community should strive to recognize the special needs of women as a focus group, and underline the inhibiting factors that act against granting them freedom from the burden of poverty due to gender inequalities and structural factors. Thus women are subject to a double form of inequality. The first is social inequality resulting from the uneven distribution of resources reflected in poverty. The second level of inequality is resultant from gender inequality. It enforces the effects and dynamics of social inequality, rendering women doubly vulnerable unto poverty than men.

Social values and norms usually set gender roles, within a specific cultural context. Thus gender roles and levels of inequality vary cross-culturally and from one country to the other. Gender inequality hence in developing countries shall not manifest the same structures and causes that permeate its manifestation in industrialized societies. Thus the level of development shapes the level of inequality where it is safe to make the assumption that the lower the level of development the higher the gender inequality. This is basically due to the limitedness of resources, the lower the level of education and awareness, the higher the competition for value services such as health and nutrition etc.. This is reinforced by the main value system controlling individual societies. Whether a society is patriarchal or non-patriarchal, the eminence of religion and deriving values and norms, and the specific predominating model of gender socialization, among other factors. Hence to tackle the question of empowering women as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication can start from a basic strategy of empowerment that is general in nature. But has to contain instrumental tools that shall allow for manipulation of variables targeting empowerment as per *context* where such a goal is to be targeted. The context hereby mentioned represents variables such as social make-up, religious connotations and effects on gender socialization models, norms, values, codes of behavior patterns, cognitive realities just to mention a few. The main focus of this paper shall hence be the 'Empowerment of women in the context of Muslim societies as transformative strategy for poverty eradication in a globalizing World'. Our analysis shall hence contain a level of empowerment of women in general as a transformative strategy, and Muslim women in particular.

¹ Speech by Hillary Clinton at Opening Ceremony of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995.

II. *Human Poverty Shaping Terms of Empowerment:*

Poverty is a multidimensional, non-uniform phenomenon (UNDP, HDR, 1997: p.16). Thus in seeking a comprehensive definition of poverty and the nature and elements of poverty the ‘human poverty’ definition and index have constituted an inclusive (even though not exclusive) framework. In an attempt to seek a holistic definition of poverty that will reflect its multidimensional nature, the human poverty model is based on the ‘deprivational approach’ in contrast to the ‘conglomerate approach’ adopted in human development analyses (Ibid: p. 15).

Measurement of human poverty is carried out through the Human Poverty Index (HPI). HPI seeks to measure “the deprivation in three essential elements of human life – longevity, knowledge and decent standard of living. Where the first relates to factors of survival; the second relates to education and literacy; and the third comprises ‘overall economic provisioning’ reflected in three variables, namely access to health, safe water and malnourishment of children under 5” (Ibid: p. 18). But it is necessary to state that in the present paper the recognition that “human poverty is larger than any particular measure, including HPI. (Where) as a concept human poverty includes many aspects that cannot be measured – or are not being measured. Critical dimensions of human poverty excluded from HPI ..are lack of political freedom, inability to participate in decision-making, lack of personal security, inability to participate in the life of a community and the threats to sustainability and intergenerational equity” (Ibid, p. 17). The HPI however and human poverty as a conceptual framework as defined in the HDR (1997) is not gender or sex desegregated. While it is instrumental in reflecting regional and global human poverty trends; inter and intra-country and sector trends; the ability to use it as a tool for group and regional differentiation should include maneuverability to use it to measure gender differentiation across the poverty line. Thus, the fundamental characteristic of human poverty as generally reflecting “basic deprivations in choices and opportunities” (Ibid, p, 22) shall be taken as given. Where other dynamic variables emanating from this base such as sectoral and gender variance, global inequalities, culturally defined variance that lead to different patterns of deprivation(s), shall constitute our base line when analyzing the shape and nature of women’s empowerment, especially within the transformative framework.

Kabeer bases the manifestation of empowerment on the ability to built capability or windows of opportunity to ‘make choices’. Hence empowerment is choice driven, but has to emanate from a state of disempowerment. Hence according to Kabeer “the understanding of the notion of empowerment is that it is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability. In other words, empowerment entails a process of *change*” (Kabeer, 2001: pp. 18-19, emphasis added). Choices are not however uniform and those carrying the transformative tag are considered much more important and instrumental in the process of change, hence branded the name “strategic life choices” (Ibid: p, 26). In delineating the variance of the quality of choice(s), Kabeer borrows the notion of ‘doxa’ introduced by Bourdieu (1977) which reflects “the aspects of tradition and culture which are so taken-for-granted that they have become naturalized.

Doxa refers to traditions and belief which exist beyond discourse or argumentation..” (Ibid: p, 25). This notion is particularly important in our analysis of women’s empowerment in the context of Muslim societies, where realm of ‘doxa’ is more defined and implicitly disempowering. Thus the vicious circle in which many women in Muslim societies find themselves is intrinsic within their careful “ adherence to social norms and practices ” (Ibid: p, 24). This adherence is reflective of the ‘doxa’ realm that impregnates social and cognitive realities of women in relation to society. Where the subservient status becomes a prize status, and where women actually choose this subservience. Thus they effectuate the choice to become disempowered. I choose to call this ‘*negative empowerment*’.

Thus the most ideal form of ‘choice’ defining a level of empowerment is to be directly linked to its transformative qualities. When defining ‘levels’ of empowerment, I would like to converge with the different theoretical representations that distinguish between the existence of different levels and types of empowerment. Our main assumption is that empowerment takes place at the following levels:

1. *Level of Self*: Or the individual level where the exercise of empowerment emanates from the awareness and understanding of parameters of practice of “ power to ” and “power within”².
2. *Level of group/community/society*: This level shall reflect the ability of the individual within a group e.g. ‘women’ to center activism about a reactionary cause. It involves a level of resistance that has to be reached after awareness. Hence the achievement of the first level is a pre-requisite for the second level. I have also chosen to combine the group level with the societal level, because it is assumed that when this level is reached by a group or a collectivity – it shall be active in practicing ‘power to’ and ‘power with’ to achieve a level of ‘power over’.
3. *Extra-societal/global level*: This level distinguishes the ability to act within the ‘transnational civil society’³ system, where local issues for empowerment become manifest in the global arena, gaining momentum for transformative change and

² **Power over**: a power exercise of a person group over another. This definition is however extended to include power over structures, and the ability to change institutional frameworks and structures that are incapacitating or in contradiction to the interests of the power exerciser. **Power to**: is the ability to exercise power in resistance to power over. That is the ability to react to a power situation where the person exercising power to is usually in resistance. **Power with**: The ability to work in a collective mode to further advocacy or change in favor of interests and potential to exercise power to and power over. **Power within**: is basically the ability to feel empowered at the individual level, where the self is the main power coefficient. (For further discussion please refer to KvF/Undp, 2001: pp. 14-16).

³ A notion introduced by Rudolph and Piscatori (1997) where the development of a transnational society that is characterized by:

- Being external to state systems.
- Invokes resistant and polemical connotations.
- Is a political realm representing and mobilizing opinions and interests.... Where the religious (and different) formations and movements that inhabit the transnational civil society engage in persuasion and collective action of world politics. (R&P, 1997: pp. 10-11) – added bracketed text.

enhancing the level of ‘power over’, but at a global level. An expression of this level is the ability of groups and collectivities e.g. women to bring their interests and demands to international multilateral fora, and global agenda including the developmental agenda. At this level a flow is constantly effective between the local and global, whereby a level of harmonization and consensus is intended and necessary to achieve transformative force (e.g. international conventions, agreements, plans for action etc.).

In seeking a working definition of empowerment that seeks a linkage with the concept of human poverty and its eradication, a simple straightforward definition is sought, where:

The empowerment of women through the life cycle is reflected in their awareness of and ability to make strategic transformative life choices that target change and the elimination of basic deprivations in choices and opportunities. Empowerment in this case is focused on a definitional status of human poverty eradication in its expansive sense, while targeting the empowerment of women at the individual, collective and extra-societal levels.

Awareness as stated above is an important component and prerequisite to the definition of ‘strategic life choices’. Such an awareness is necessary in delineating the difference between empowerment and negative empowerment, a paradox earlier alluded to through the discussion of ‘doxa’ parameters in promulgating a false sense of conscienceness and cognitive reality that enhances social inequality and reinforces gender disparity rather than dismantling it.

III. *A note on Policy and Institutional Ramifications for Women’s Empowerment and Poverty:*

As mentioned earlier women constitute the greater majority of the poor. Hence, “ the lack of income, food, health, care, education, (choices)⁴ and opportunities that characterize poverty affect more women than men, and women’s efforts to overcome poverty are further constrained by discrimination in access to social and economic resources ” (DAC, 1998: p. 25). While the forms and levels of empowerment of women are essential within the framework of a gender equal approach to poverty eradication, aiming at the elimination of gender disparity between women and men living in poverty. It is also necessary to contemplate at this point the essential characteristics of policy and institutional contributions to women’s empowerment within a more holistic approach to poverty from a gender equal perspective. Empowerment hence does not occur in a vacuum, and following a discussion on nature and parameters of empowerment it is only logical to make clear mention of the ‘*enabling environment*’ that is a pre-requisite and medium for the realization of such an objective. This ‘enabling environment’ has two realms. The formal realm represented by policy, structures, and institutional setting and transformation; and the informal realm represented by the empowerment processes taking place within the active flows and dynamics of the three levels of empowerment explicated above, namely, from the individual, to collective, to extra-societal. The first realm reflects a top-down approach to transformative interventions, while the second

⁴ Bracketed text added.

realm represents a bottom-up approach. Hence it is important to concentrate on the two realms when contemplating a holistic approach to the dynamics for targeted change i.e. the empowerment of women as a strategy for poverty eradication. The formal realm and mechanisms of policy, structure and institutional processes enhancing empowerment shall be more explicitly dealt with within the section of the paper dedicated to ‘recommendations’.

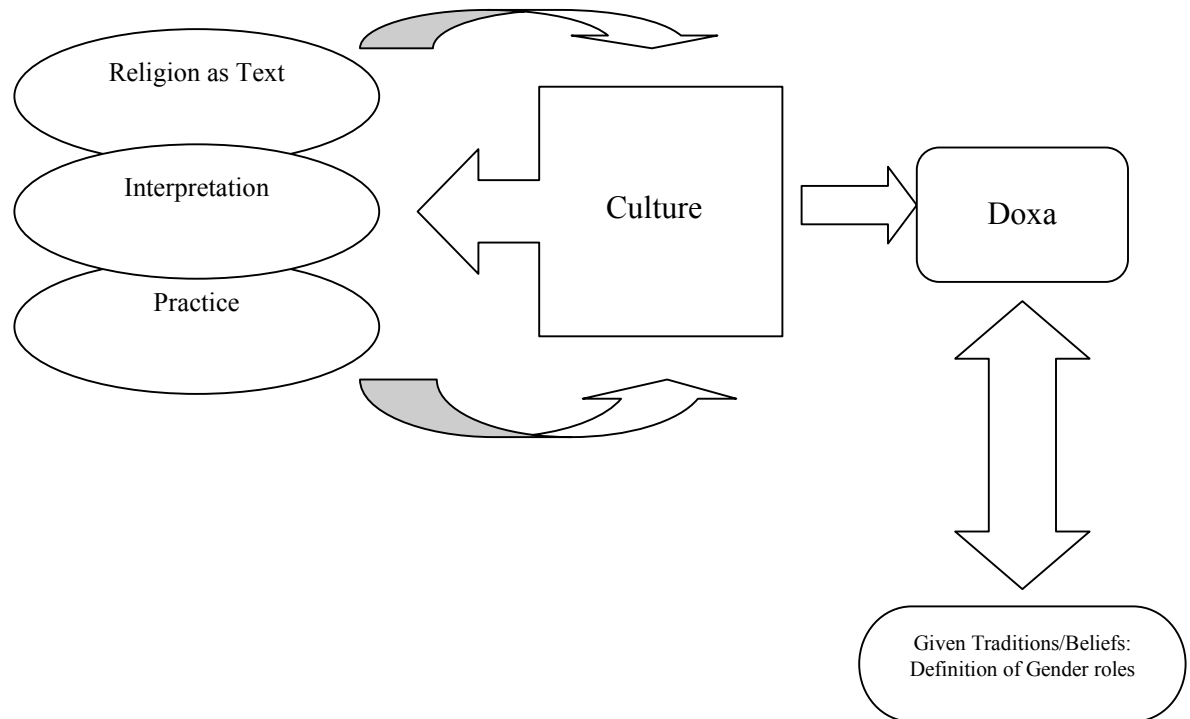
IV. *Empowerment of women as a strategy for Poverty Eradication within Muslim Societies:*

One important factor when examining the explicated context is the role of culture on shaping and delineating paradigms for gender roles within Muslim Societies. One basic question that comes to the fore is whether it is specifically Islam as a religion, or its interaction with existent host culture(s) that renders the dynamics of interpretation, and practice delineating the reasoning behind male-female power dynamics, and space in Muslim societies. Thus in trying to understand the nature of interaction between religion and cultural influx one pays special attention to the role represented by interpretation of original Islamic Text⁵; and practices that have affected such interpretation. In addition to the role of male-interpretation and Islamic historical memory in regulating the cognitive realities of women’s space in contemporary predominantly Muslim societies. Thus the level to which this cultural influx with religious interpretation and practice plays a role is of central concern. In this regard a distinction is made between religion as such (in the realm of Text), its interpretation and level of practice strongly influenced by culture and its historical synthesis. The interaction of the three parameters of Text, interpretation and practice with culture render a specific and particularistic ‘doxa’ that is eminent and particular to Muslim societies.

In this respect Gerami (1996: p. 3) openly states that culturally defined sexual distinctions determine men and women’s political, economic, and spatial positions within social organization. Religious ideologies that solidify these functions also promote gender identities that further reevaluate and redefine previously established sex roles. In referring to the role of religious ideologies and more specifically to fundamentalism (whether in Islam or Christianity) Gerami attributes a subsidiary but effective role to religion in shaping culturally defined gender roles. This assumption however shall be refuted but is used as guidance in formulating our own assumptions about the role of the influx between culture and religion in the identification of gender roles and sexual identities. Hence it is our assumption that the effect of culture on religion and not vice versa is crucial in shaping the paradigm of religious interpretation and practice that enhance certain percepts about gender and gender dynamics within Muslim societies, reinforcing patriarchy.

⁵ The Koran and Sunna (the Hadiths , sayings of the Prophet and his code of behavior).

Figure 4.1: Interaction between religion (at the level of Text, interpretation and Practice) with culture rendering a particularistic ‘Doxa’ acting on the definition and nature of gender roles:



Sharabi (1988) has described the encounter between patriarchy and modernity, in his conceptualization of the development of ‘neopatriarchy’ a theory of distorted change in Arab society. Although Sharabi consciously delimited his theory to the analysis of Arab/Muslim societies, it is my intention here to generalize it to other Muslim societies where patriarchy and the traditions of constricting female space and power is a reality. Thus according to Sharabi “over the last one hundred years the patriarchal structures of (Arab) society, far from being displaced or truly modernized, have only been strengthened and maintained in deformed, ‘modernized’ forms.... Material modernization, the first (surface) manifestation of social change, only served to remodel and reorganize patriarchal structures and relations and to reinforce them by giving them ‘modern’ forms and appearances “(Sharabi, 1988: p. 4). These mechanisms are manifested in most Muslim and predominantly Muslim societies, especially in relation to gender roles and power dynamics between the sexes.

The mechanisms of ‘neopatriarchy’ also led to the development of what I denote as ‘selective modernization’ especially among specific ideological currents as represented by the conservative fundamentalist trends, and the growing Islamization of Muslim societies per se in the latest quarter of the twentieth century. This has led to the existence side by side of modern and traditional cognitive realities in Muslim societies, reflecting alternative, and conflicting paradoxes. Thus by selecting aspects of modernism that do not threaten the integrity of ‘neopatriarchy’. And denouncing other aspects such as the

heightened liberalization of women, and expansion of their power and space in society and polity as threatening forms of Westernism that is destabilizing Islamic authenticity and its *raison d'être*. This selective use of modernity and modernization is a product and tool of 'neopatriarchy'. Where the modern/western analogy is serving to a male dominant model of social order and contract that holds women and gender roles in check and in conformity with a larger framework of religious/cultural influxes. Aspects reinforcing this process are the appearance of certain ideological trends such as Islamic Fundamentalism. And the growing Islamization of Muslim societies at large and their turning to a more conservative worldview (independent of ideological fundamentalism but collateral to it) leading to practice(s) that acts as an inhibiting factor in the empowerment of women.

Thus and according to the above logic religious/cultural influxes have different dimensions; the first is historical and based on the process of building an Islamic cognitive memory. While the second is dialectical based on the interaction and product of three levels of comprehension of what the religion represents. The three explicated levels are those of religion as Text, interpretation and practice. The interaction between these three levels with each other and with culture produces a complex of 'religious acculturation' that defines the parameters of Islam in society and the resultant dynamics of *doxa*. And hence its influence on the enduring structures of neopatriarchy, the constancy of engendered roles, and delimitation of women's space, and power in society.

4.1. Implications for Empowerment of Women in Muslim societies⁶, challenges for Development and transformative action:

Briefly examining new trends in perceiving development at the academic and practical levels, one can trace that the disenchantment with the modernization theory, the depleted influence of the dependency paradigm, and globalization of the political economy has led to renewed foundations for development analysis and implementation (e.g. Hettne, 1991, Mittleman and Pasha, 1997). An example of a variable, not limited to earlier paradigms, is Mittleman and Pasha's (1997) analysis of the elements of *cultural determinism* and *social transformation*. In their critique of the modernization theory and its reliance on the replication of a Western model of development, which is taken as universal (but not necessarily so), the authors resort to delineating the important role of capital accumulation (within a national and global perspective). They underline the importance of new dynamics of interaction based on the materialist paradigm (class actors), but extend such a vision of development to include 'non-class actors' (such as gender activists, environmentalists, religious and ethnic groups) and the role of social transformation (Ibid, ch. 2 and 4). Non-class actors/forces may be further defined as "those groups in society that transcend class lines. Most important among them are religious, ethnic or gender-based groups as well as the single-issue social movements" (Ibid, p.100)

⁶ Section 4.1 is an amended excerpt of the author's publication, Sherin Saadallah. " Gender and Power in Muslim Societies: Issues for Development Practice " in *Discussing Women's Empowerment – Theory and Practice*. Stockholm Sida Studies no.3, March 2001, pp. 124-127.

The importance given to social transformation in the development process, and the role of these non-class actors is pertinent to our analysis. This framework gives prominence to the interactive nature of relations between class and non-class actors, where the latter have come to play an active role in development, and especially so in contexts pertaining to Western-oriented models and methodologies. The assertion that “the ideological orientations of non-class forces help set the parameters of political discourse with real effects on development” (Ibid, p.92) indicates that we – as practitioners and theorists – need to pay close attention to the power of such groups in the development process. And hence in the adaptation and design of development programmes and associated processes such as the empowerment of women as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication. An example of the role and influence of non-class actor is the Islamist instigated judicial debates over the legality of capital interest in Muslim society “leading to the creation of regulatory mechanisms that have rendered an effect on the pace and magnitude of investment, and more indirectly, development” (Ibid, p.92). On equal but opposite terms is the role of NGOs and civil society actors promulgating a message for gender equality, and the empowerment of women within a new framework and social order. The recognition of the role of non-class actors is hence central in our attempt at delineating inhibiting factors, as well as enhancing factors to achieve a specific outcome, which in this case is women’s empowerment.

It is the case however that in Muslim societies different predominant forces including the Islamist trend, have created a maze of societal resistance to the ‘woman question’ and issues of gender equality. This resistance has been the product of various factors, including historical, cultural and societal transformation. To adapt development interventions in general and strategic parameters such as ‘women’s empowerment’ to these realities is a growing necessity, notwithstanding the maintenance of a level of active parameters for change and transformation. Hence, the transformation should not only tackle traditional society and resultant doxa, but also the growing effect of non-class actors, their role and configuration within the paradigm for change as either inhibitors or facilitators.

What is suggested here is a development practice, and interventionist action targeting women’s empowerment, that is sensitive to the contextual reality of third world countries and, particularly in this case, of Muslim societies. The incapacity to achieve an accountable level of success in the practice of gender-targeted development in Muslim societies, and hence women’s empowerment sometimes emanates from a disregard of the important realities that exert a direct effect on outcomes.

Muslim societies present a framework of hierarchical gender role division between the sexes. In addition to this, gender inequalities, and pertinent power interplay between men and women are grounded in important factors that are intrinsic to the religion, Islamic and historical memory, Islamic resurgence, and the Islamization of society. It is a most difficult context for the realization of women’s empowerment, and gender-targeted goals. The most important point of departure is the awareness of the role played by the factors cited above (in addition to their role in enhancing resistance and support through

different non-class actors). Any strategy and policy for change has to be therefore accountable to these factors and forces within a cultural-sensitive approach.

Another vital point of departure is the recognition that - as Oxaal and Baden state “adopting women’s empowerment (or gender equality)⁷ as a policy goal in development organization implies a commitment to encouraging a process of more equitable distribution of power on personal, economic, and political levels” (1997, p.24). Strategies that aim at dismantling some long-standing traditional manifestations in Muslim societies, and the institutional frameworks that reinforce them thus need to be focused on alleviating gender inequality and power imbalances within a holistic, offensive yet accommodative framework that will ensure transformative change. This is intrinsic within our understanding of the nature and pre-requisites for women’s empowerment in Muslim societies, and especially in relation to mechanisms for poverty eradication. The subsequent section shall enumerate a series of recommendations that emanate from the present analytical progression.

V. Recommendations Targeting Empowerment of Women as a transformative strategy for Poverty Eradication in Muslim Societies :

Recommendations hereby presented combine basic general recommendations that may apply to the empowerment of women in general, while some are particularly designed to tackle the specificity of the context represented by Muslim societies. Recommendations comprise and address both the formal and informal realms, and parameters affecting women’s empowerment.

1. Some interesting recommendations for action on the formal level were mentioned within the ‘DAC guidelines for gender equality and women’s empowerment in development cooperation’ (1998: pp. 25-26). They are presented here with due modifications:

- Identifying macroeconomic and microeconomic strategies that tackle causes leading to the gendered incidence of poverty to the detriment and disadvantage of women when compared to men.
- Identifying and strengthening policy, institutional and structural frameworks that allow for equitable access to resources, choices and opportunities between the sexes.
- Enhancing the role of non-class actors in reinforcing the effects of targeted institutional, policy and structural changes that will enhance women’s empowerment, and access to ‘choices’ and ‘opportunities’ that target poverty eradication. This level of action may be denoted as informal but is a required supplement to the formal agenda for action, as a legitimizing, accelerating force.
- Assessing and evaluating the financial performance of different economic models for growth, while attempting to identify those complemented by functional strategies to eradicate poverty that tackle the special status of women along the poverty line.
- Gender desegregated economic and developmental policy assessment and evaluation.

⁷ I choose to add gender equality here, as similarities are implicit and exist between it and women’s empowerment on the level of aggregate effects on social development, and the society as a whole.

- Reviewing and enhancing policy and economic strategies and plans that will allow for the evaluation of women's unpaid work. Finding possible methods for adding monetary value mechanisms to this important variable, within more comprehensive frameworks addressing poverty eradication.
2. The inclusion of a gender component in all poverty eradication policies, ensuring addressing the special needs of women, as the more vulnerable to poverty. This shall entail a level of gender mainstreaming within policy as such, ensuring the tackling of traditional constructs (represented by doxa) and non-class forces reinforcing gender inequality in an original atypical manner.
 3. The empowerment of women through facilitating their equal and equitable access to resources, choice and opportunities. While ensuring a level of institutionalization and policy changes favorable to gender equality in poverty eradication programmes that may cede a trickle down effect at the societal level.
 4. Creating mechanisms for 'women involvement' in policy, strategy, and decision-making processes that affect their life chances, access to choice and opportunities throughout their life cycle. This may be supplemented by converting the concept and ethos of Women and development (WAD) to *women development (WD)* per se, highlighting the necessity to focus on women's empowerment and development in particular - in relation to ceding opportunities for the rational use of resources and value services such as education and health (equally between the sexes) to reach gender equality. Male involvement is a requirement within this process, as promoters of women's development and partakers in attitudinal change that would enhance gender equality in the particular context of Muslim societies.
 5. A deeper involvement of intra state, and transnational civil society in the process and dynamics of women's empowerment. Especially non-class actors acting as enhancers for the 'enabling environment' for women's empowerment such as women NGO groups advocating a *woman friendly change* (this is accentuated due to the existence of several forces in civic society, advocating the unequal treatment of women e.g. Islamist groups acting as non-class actors).
 6. The recognition of the role of non-class forces especially religion, and religion-related constructs cited above within the framework of the development of strategy and policy for poverty eradication in Muslim societies. Agendas for action hence have to be context-specific, and culturally sensitive to ensure a minimum level of success, and viable means for women's empowerment.

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