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**“Conceptualising Empowerment as a Transformative Strategy for Poverty Eradication
and the Implications for Measuring Progress.”**

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Overall Aim

Through this paper I wish to contribute to the discussion on empowerment definitions by elaborating on the concept of empowerment as used and conceptualised in the activities of my organisation, Kvinnoforum¹, and by trying to conceptualise it as a transformative process. Kvinnoforum's conceptualisation of empowerment has been based on the organisation's own work and the work of different researchers, and is as such put forward as one of many ways of understanding empowerment. I will also elaborate on the implications for how to measure empowerment processes and for empowerment strategies. The paper is based on Kvinnoforum's 13 years of experience and especially on the experiences of a project on methods for measuring women's empowerment carried out by Kvinnoforum in co-operation with four southern African NGOs.²

Introduction

As stated in the Aide Mémoire for this Expert Group Meeting, numerous international conferences and UN documents³ have stressed the link between poverty and women's disempowerment, that is, the gendered experiences of human poverty as defined in the 1997 Human Development Report. The link may be direct as in the case when the exclusion of women from decision-making structures result in women's needs being ignored or resources being unequally distributed. Or how the oppression and low status of women living in patriarchal societies prevent women from enjoying human development when defined as “a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity self-respect and the respect of others.”⁴ But there are also indirect links between women's disempowerment and poverty. Consider for example how norms for women to bear many children render childless women abandoned by their husbands and outcast of the community, with few possibilities of supporting themselves. Or how women's dependency on their husbands and feelings of low self esteem limit women's possibility of negotiating safe sex, making them vulnerable to SDIs which may in the short run make them unable to work, at risk of being abandoned by their husbands and/or families, and in the long run, kill them.

¹ Kvinnoforum, the Foundation of Women's Forum is a Swedish NGO working since 1988 with strategies and methods for empowering women and girls in private life, working life and society in general with special focus on multi-marginalised women and girls. Projects are carried out in Sweden and internationally in co-operation with governments, NGOs, development agencies, companies and research institutions.

² These were Organisation for Rural Associations for Progress, ORAP in Zimbabwe, Women's NGO Coalition in Botswana, Namibia National Association of Women in Business and the Community Development Foundation in Mozambique. The project was carried out during 2000-2001.

³ Such as the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995, CEDAW, Commission of the Status of Women resolution 40/9, UN General Assembly resolution 52/193 and outcome document of the "Women 2000" session etc.

⁴ UNDP, Human Development Report 1997, p 15.

Poverty reduction initiatives that address basic needs and issues of infrastructure may facilitate women's empowerment – providing safe water close to the home reduces the time required to carry out household chores which are often the tasks of women, and liberates time for women to participate in income-generating activities and girls to go to school. However, these initiatives will have no impact if they are not coupled with addressing the value systems that forbid women to take part in activities outside the home or girls to go to school. In those cases, the liberated time will quickly be filled by new domestic tasks.

While the link between women's empowerment and human development is clear, the relationship is not altogether casual and subordination of women does not arise out of poverty per se. Baden et al has pointed out that “[c]ollapsing gender concerns into a poverty agenda narrows the scope for a gender analysis which can fully address how and why gender inequalities are reproduced, not just among the ‘poor’, but in society as a whole”. Women's empowerment is a goal in itself and broader than human development in the same way as human development is broader than empowerment. However, there is considerable overlap between the concepts and the one can be used instrumentally to contribute to the forwarding of the other. In the following I will briefly try to tease out some of the differences and similarities between the concepts and point to the advantages of an empowerment approach by conceptualising empowerment as a transformative process, that is, a process of changing the underlying power relations that render women disempowered.

The exercise of conceptualising or defining empowerment is crucial for purposes of monitoring and evaluation when empowerment of women is used as a means to contribute towards poverty eradication. If, to quote the aide mémoire, “the success of anti-poverty policies and programmes depend on the extent to which these policies and programmes empower people living in poverty in general and women in particular”, then empowerment itself must also be measured. Unless empowerment levels are measured it will impossible to say anything about the correlation between women's empowerment and poverty reduction or to determine if the methods employed actually succeed in empowering women.

Defining Women's Empowerment

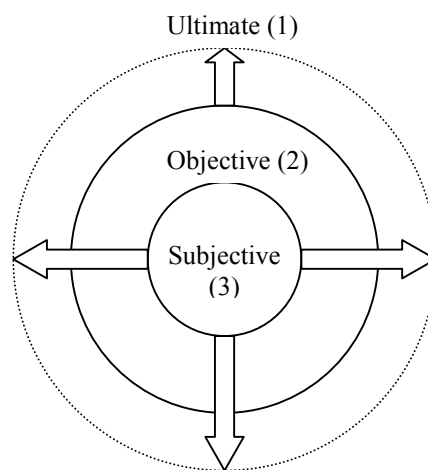
It has been said that “empowerment is like obscenity, you don't know how to define it but you know it when you see it”. The quote captures the fact that most people have an intuitive understanding what empowerment means. It is also often associated with something positive, which may perhaps explain the popularity of the concept in current development discourse. Although the concept of empowerment has been used since the 1960s and despite its current popularity, there is no international consensus on how to define it. The different definitions of empowerment range between defining it as a largely *individual* process of taking control of and responsibility for one's life and situation, and defining it as a *political* process of granting human rights and social justice to disadvantaged groups of people. But very often empowerment is left undefined altogether. Rather than taking lack of consensus as a reason for abandoning the concept, it could be argued that one of the values of the concept lies precisely in its vagueness. Without a universal definition, NGOs and other actors are free to attribute the concept with a meaning that is useful for their work.

However, a lack of definition becomes problematic when empowerment is used instrumentally in poverty eradication initiatives. Unless there is some level of agreement on the meaning of empowerment it will be difficult to strategize around empowerment methods. Measuring progress in terms of empowerment requires a definition and in order to arrive at

results that are comparable between regions or countries, the definition should include general aspects that are relevant in any context. Kvinnoforum has attempted to contribute to this process by conceptualising empowerment as a transformative process:

Empowerment as a transformative process

Empowerment can overall be defined *as all those processes where women take control and ownership of their lives*. Control and ownership requires an array of opportunities to choose among and this understanding of empowerment overlaps with the concept of human development when defined as “a process of enlarging people’s choices”⁵. Both concepts describe processes, but where human development entails *enlarging* choices, empowerment is the *process of acquiring* the ability to choose among these enlarged choices.⁶ The difference can be visualised by a model⁷ of the subjective and objective activity space i.e. the space available for taking ownership of ones life:



The space for women’s activity and agency is limited by a number of factors; women’s own ideas of what is possible for them to do, laws regulating what is legal or illegal for women to do and societal norms for what women should and should not do. The inner circle (3) delimits women’s activity by their own ideas of what is possible for them to do, the internalised views of what I as a woman am able/unable to do and is determined by societal norms, attitudes, past experiences etc. The objective limits (2) to women’s activity are the laws and norms regulating what is legal and possible/acceptable for women to do and not to do e.g. ownership laws, inheritance laws, political rights, access to the labour market etc. The outer circle (1) constitutes the "ultimate" limit to women’s activity space – it is outlined as semitransparent as the limits of women’s activity space in an ideal situation are unknown. Where human development will enlarge the objective limits for women’s activity, empowerment processes leads to the expansion of both subjective and objective activity space as women act to change the laws and norms.

While *human development* does not determine any particular agent of change, it lies at the heart of the concept of *empowerment* that it cannot be given to someone by somebody else. Empowerment processes can be facilitated by outsiders but must be driven by women

⁵ UNDP, 1997, p 15.

⁶ For a discussion on empowerment as the ability to choose, see Kabeer 2000.

⁷ The model is developed by Kvinnoforum. See further Kvinnoforum 2001, p 25.

themselves. As such, it is also an approach to societal change that treats women as agents of change and constitutes a bottom-up perspective where women themselves identify the problem to be solved, how to solve it and act accordingly. If poverty reduction initiatives are to have a transformative impact in the long run, they must enable women to take ownership of the process itself. A development initiative can provide resources such as land or micro credits to women in a community, but unless women are empowered the gendered power relations at individual, household and community level may restrain women's abilities to maximise their use of the outcomes of the initiative. E.g. an increase in women's personal assets through a micro credit scheme may result in the partner/husband feeling challenged in his role as provider for the family and attempt to control these resources.

This does not mean that women solely are responsible for their empowerment and that governments can abdicate from responsibility, which has sometimes been the case in conservative rhetoric on empowerment. Nor does it mean that women can do it on their own. Responsibility is shared but as outsiders, development agencies, governments and NGOs can only facilitate processes of empowerment. E.g. human rights can be given to women but unless they are empowered, women will not be able to utilise these rights. In line with Jo Rowlands and based on the organisations own practice, Kvinnoforum has found it useful to distinguish between the process of empowerment itself and the factors that either encourage or inhibit these processes.⁸ Empowerment in itself is by Kvinnoforum seen as consisting of three core elements existing on individual and group level and to some extent also on societal level; *agency and sense of agency, awareness of gendered power structures, and self esteem and self confidence.*

Core Elements of Empowerment

Agency and sense of agency

Kvinnoforum has found Naila Kabeer's definition of agency as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them", useful.⁹ The sense of agency is the internal aspect of feeling capable of acting upon ones goals and as such constitutes the potential for action or the phase immediately prior to action. Agency can be exercised by both individuals and groups or collectives. On the societal level the sense of agency is relevant in that the public discourse and national laws can acknowledge that women are agents and as such able to e.g. participate in decision making, determine their own needs etc.

Awareness of gendered power structures – gender awareness

In order to be able to act on ones goals, one must be aware of the forces and structures working to one's disadvantage e.g. value systems, norms, legal frameworks, discriminatory practices. The process of women gaining awareness of these power structures and the consequent wish to change them is often referred to as conscientisation or awareness raising. Although women are subordinated in a number of different power structures based on e.g. class, geographical location, ethnicity etc, often simultaneously, all of these are gendered and unless there is awareness of these structures women will not be able to change them and hence not obtain control of their lives. The awareness is hence conceptually coupled with a

⁸ Rowlands 1997.

⁹ Kabeer 2000, p 4.

wish to change these circumstances and ultimately, empowerment processes should lead to protest against all structures that subordinate them. While gender awareness is essentially an individual element of empowerment it also exists on group and societal level. It can for example be seen in how groups of women motivate their actions and how they analyse their situation. E.g. “we come together *as women* because we want to stop violence against women” or “we demand safety on public transport because we have equal right to freedom of movement” etc. Gender awareness on the societal level is expressed through the extent to which public discourse uses gender as an analytical category and acknowledges that there are structures in society working to women’s disadvantage.

This element – awareness of gendered power structures - is what differentiates women’s empowerment from empowerment of other disadvantaged groups, apart from the difference in who is the target group. Unless this aspect is taken into account the underlying power structures of women’s disempowerment will not be addressed. Women may still be empowered to some extent e.g. gaining more self esteem, increased participation in decision making structures but if women are to be able to realise their full potential they must be freed from e.g. societal norms restricting their activity space, subservient role in the family, lack of political rights, limiting gender roles etc. It may therefore be fruitful to distinguish between gendered empowerment of women and women’s empowerment.

Self esteem and self confidence

Living in societies where women are subordinated and subject to different kinds of oppression often leads to a naturalisation of the prevailing power relations to the extent that the powerless see their own powerlessness as natural or justified. This is sometime referred to as self-oppression or internalised oppression in feminist theory and ridding oneself of internalised oppression is by many theorists seen as basic to empowerment. Unless women feel that they are valuable and worthy of a better life, they will not be able to formulate goals for a better life, let alone act to change their situation. Self esteem and self-confidence is easily understandable on the individual level. It can be illustrated on the group level as confidence in the group’s right to exist and in the sense of belonging – gaining strength from shared experiences and a common will to change.

For empowerment to be transformative it must be seen as a process existing on all levels - individual, group and societal. Unless the gendered power structures that subordinate women on the societal level are addressed, individual women cannot take full control over their lives. And unless a group of women feel worthy of safety and able to act together, a law prohibiting violence against women will have little effect on women’s ability to change their situation. The different levels are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, e.g. when empowerment on individual level occurs, this will have effect on the group and societal level. While a new law that grants equal inheritance rights is the result of the empowerment of the women who brought about the law and not women in general, it encourages the empowerment of the latter (if they are aware of the law).

Gender equality is hence both an outcome of the empowerment of the women who brought about the changes, and an encouraging factor for women’s empowerment on the individual level. But where gender equality describes a state, empowerment describes a process. Equally, *human development* when defined as the process of enlarging peoples choices, can also be seen as a set of encouraging factors. However, human development also

contains aspects of self-respect and “ the ability to mix with others without being ashamed to appear in public”¹⁰ and are as such elements of empowerment itself.

What is to be Measured¹¹

When aiming to measure whether empowerment has taken place in a particular context one may approach empowerment as a holistic process of gaining control over ones life or by approaching it as a set of elements e.g. agency, self esteem etc that can be measured individually. Approaching empowerment as a holistic process involves looking at women’s control or influence over different aspects of their lives. When approaching empowerment as a set of elements, some of the elements can be measurable directly, such as self esteem or gender awareness, while elements such as agency need to be translated into indicators in order to be measurable. Ultimately, both types of approaches are needed in order to get an accurate picture of empowerment processes.

As empowerment processes are driven by women themselves and different women have different needs and goals depending on their location in structures of class, ethnicity, gender etc and on personal preferences, the content of empowerment will necessarily differ between women and groups of women. Indicators of empowerment are therefore highly context specific e.g. while an indicator of agency for a woman in an abusive relationship may be to leave the relationship, the indicator of agency for a poverty stricken woman without access to the communal land may be to act to get access to this land. In order to get an accurate picture of empowerment processes in a particular community, indicators need to be developed within the context and in co-operation with the women themselves. Qualitative methods can be used to develop indicators which can thereafter be measured quantitatively for aggregate level monitoring.

The following are examples of context specific indicators of the different elements of empowerment on individual, group and societal level as developed in Kvinnoforum’s project on measuring empowerment. They are taken from the case studies of an empowerment project for women entrepreneurs in Namibia, a rural development project for women in Zimbabwe, and a political empowerment programme for women politicians in Botswana.

¹⁰ UNDP, 1997, p 15.

¹¹ As this discussion largely rises out of the above mentioned project aimed at developing methods for measuring empowerment on individual and project level, the focus is on these levels rather than on macro level indicators.

Element of empowerment	Examples of indicators on different levels
Gender awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual – the extent to which women agree or disagree to statements like "has the fact that you are a woman affected your possibilities of succeeding in your own business" and "Are the preconditions of male and female entrepreneurs different?" (Namibia) - Group – the creation of a Women's Manifesto that outlines the concerns and demands of women in Botswana. Women politicians came together across party lines and created the manifesto. (Botswana) - Society – Increasing levels of public awareness of the role of women in politics according to interviews. (Botswana). Another indicator may be the extent to which recently passed laws make reference to gender or to women's subordinate position in society as problematic.
Self Esteem/ Self confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual – one of the women interviewed sat on a chair in the presence of her parents-in-law instead of sitting on the floor which is what is culturally prescribed for women in the presence of her parents-in-law (Zimbabwe) - Group – the extent to which the women in the group believe in their ability as a group to achieve their goals.
Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual – making purchases with or without the support of the partner (Zimbabwe) - Group – starting up of different income generating projects to improve the financial situation of the group, e.g. renovating an old chieftainship compound and opening it as a tourist attraction (Zimbabwe) - Society – Increased number of women in decision-making structures on national level (Botswana).

However, in order to be able to monitor progress on regional level and to be able to compare countries with each other, predefined or general indicators are needed for empowerment on individual, group and societal level. Examples of general indicators can be related to the awareness of gendered power structures in society, participation in formal or informal decision making structures, collective action, ability to negotiate safe sex etc.

Because empowerment is a process, the indicators of empowerment will change over time as the individual or group proceeds in their empowerment processes. At an initial stage only the fact that women come together in meetings may be an indicator of empowerment, later it may be the group activities they undertake and still later the extent to which the group acts to change power structures in the community. This is particularly relevant for indicators of "gender awareness" - while awareness of gendered power structures may come at an early stage of empowerment processes, actions explicitly challenging these structures may come only at a very late stage, partly due to the risk of severe repression.

Strategies and Recommendations for Women's Empowerment

The prospects for poverty reduction through women's empowerment are naturally hampered by the inequalities in the world economic order and the recommendations put forward here on the basis of the above discussion should be viewed as complimentary to those addressing this order. The recommendations are preceded by a discussion on strategies.

Working with an empowerment approach to gendered poverty reduction would mean that women play a central role in defining what needs to be done and how it should be done, they need to participate in the carrying out of the work and be among the beneficiaries. It also means looking at other aspects of women's lives than strictly economic or welfare aspects and try to set a holistic empowerment process in motion. Defining empowerment as a process that must be driven by the women means that development agencies and development workers can only facilitate women's empowerment by trying to provide encouraging factors or take away inhibiting factors. It is very difficult, even impossible, to know à priori what stops women in a particular context from realising their full potential (violence, ill-health, restriction of movement) and by assisting the women in analysing their situation it is possible to identify the inhibiting factors, perhaps in unexpected areas. Examples of encouraging factors may be; create spaces and opportunities to meet, initiate discussions on women's human rights, encourage sharing of experiences, exposure to new kinds of activities so that women can realise their different capabilities, general support etc. Examples of inhibiting factors may be; violence, women's low status, no access to decision making structures, lack of resources, lack of skills etc. Initiatives must make sure to contribute to the abolishment of these inhibiting factors through pressure, discussions, negotiations etc.

Recommendations:

- *Policies aiming to reduce poverty through women's empowerment should acknowledge that empowerment entails a bottom-up approach of ensuring women's ownership of the initiatives. It entails not only involving women at all stages of a poverty reduction initiatives but making women central to this process. Policies should further acknowledge that governments, development agencies and civil society must facilitate women's empowerment through providing encouraging factors and addressing the inhibiting factors on individual, group/community and societal level.*
- *Women's empowerment should not be limited to a means in poverty reduction initiatives but also be stated as a goal in itself. While it may be useful to avoid attempts to arrive at an international consensus on a definition of empowerment, all initiatives on poverty reduction through women's empowerment should define what is meant by empowerment in the particular context.*
- *UN agencies should strengthen efforts to develop instruments for measuring non-economic human development and women's empowerment on national and community level.*
- *Governments, development agencies and civil society should strengthen efforts of developing indicators of women's empowerment on individual, group and societal level. General indicators are needed as well as context specific and issue specific indicators e.g. indicators related to political empowerment, empowerment of girl children etc.*
- *Poverty reduction initiatives should intensify the dialogue and co-operation between governments, development agencies and civil society on issues of measuring and evaluation.*

In order to ensure that empowerment processes are not limited to the individual levels it is fruitful to couple the empowerment approach with a gender mainstreaming approach. That is, when designing a poverty reduction initiative to start with an analysis of the gendered power structures and relations in the particular community. A gender perspective must be mainstreamed throughout all stages of development process i.e. the consequences for women and girls and for men and boys respectively must be analysed at all stages.

It is imperative that the gender analysis does not halt with making sure that the outcomes and benefits of an initiative are evenly distributed among men and women. If a long-term transformation is aimed for, then underlying power relations determining the unequal distribution of benefits must be challenged. If the analysis does not facilitate a challenging of power relations, then gender analysis becomes a descriptive tool void of transformative power. Empowerment as a concept, makes sure that the transformative aspects are kept on the agenda and herein, arguably, lies one of its foremost advantages.

Recommendations:

- *Poverty reduction policies should make explicit reference to the need for coupling the empowerment approach with gender mainstreaming of initiatives. That is, to analyse the consequences for women and men, girls and boys of all aspects of initiatives.*

Working towards women's empowerment as a strategy for poverty reduction does not imply that women solely need to be the target groups of initiatives. Quite to the contrary, the entire community needs to be involved in order to efficiently work towards women's empowerment. Initiatives must contribute towards the transformation of attitudes, of rigid divisions of labour, of institutionalised power structures that subordinate women. In Kvinnoforum's work it has sometimes been a necessity to work with men's groups parallel to those of women as the men would not otherwise have let their wives/partners participate in the project activities for women. Given the potential for repression such as violence, restriction of movement, social exclusion etc from those in power in the community or the household (and sometimes also the women), initiatives aiming to transform power relations in the long run can seldom be explicit about this in its *initial* stages. Instead of insisting that women have a right to participate in local decision-making structures, it may be fruitful to stress the benefits for the community of putting all efforts together and letting women participate. However, this strategy is only useful in the initial stages and may be counter productive in the long term. It is advisable that poverty reduction initiatives draw on the long time experiences of women's NGOs on how to fruitfully get communities sympathetic to a change of power relations.

Recommendations:

- *Implementation of poverty reduction initiatives through women's empowerment should take the risk of repression into account and therefore address the norms and attitudes against women's empowerment and human development. Initiatives for women's empowerment should also make sure to provide the necessary protection from repression such as violence e.g. by involving men, older women and other key actors in the community.*
- *Poverty reduction initiatives should intensify the dialogue and co-operation between governments, development agencies and civil society on concrete and successful methods for changing attitudes and norms and for facilitating empowerment of women.*
- *Governments and development agencies should strengthen the initiatives for women's empowerment of civil society in general and of women's NGOs in particular and facilitate the sharing of successful methods between NGOs and other actors.*
- *Implementation of poverty reduction initiatives should also make sure not to add on to the often very large work load of women and thereby putting obstacles in the way of their empowerment*

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