

**A Review of the Concepts of Empowerment
and Women's Empowerment Projects in
South Asia**

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エンパワーメント概念と南アジアにおける女性のための エンパワーメント・プロジェクト再考

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ジェンダーの視点を中心に据えたGADアプローチが開発に取り入れられた80年代半ば以降、その核心となる‘エンパワーメント’といった概念に対する認識は広まりをみせた。しかしその概念は依然として多義的に、曖昧に使われ続けており、それらが実践に移されると概念のさらなる単純化が志向されている。その傾向は、現在主流化しつつあるマイクロファイナンスに伴いさらに加速しているといえる。したがってこの論文では、はじめにエンパワーメントをめぐる概念を概説し、バトリワラ（1994）による南アジアにおけるエンパワーメント・プロジェクトの分類を基に、南アジア、特にインドにおける外部主導型のエンパワーメント・プロジェクトを概観する。それにより、理論と実践の相関関係とその乖離について考察することを主たる目的とする。

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Introduction

This paper will examine the popularised and yet abstract concepts of empowerment of women in development discourse. Based on the literature reviews, attempts will be made to examine some empowerment projects based on Srilatha Batliwala's (1994) classification in the context of South Asia, especially India, and examine the correlations between theory and practice.¹

1. Conceptualising Empowerment

Caroline Moser (1993:1) argues that the goal of gender planning is to emancipate women from their subordination and to achieve 'equality', 'equity' and 'empowerment'. The Platform for Action, adopted by the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, also identifies women's empowerment as a necessary requirement for the achievement of equality, development and peace (United Nations, 1995). Development agencies express a deep concern for the necessity for empowerment, especially of 'low-income' and 'disadvantaged' women. The concept of empowerment has been applied in development circles since the mid-1980s following the emergence of the concept of gender and Gender and Development (GAD), which was popularised through the efforts made mainly by Southern feminists such as the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN). Thus empowerment can also be called a 'Southern women's approach to development' (Mosse, 1993:161), though its origins can also be traced back to several disciplines. The GAD approach is now widely acknowledged by development circles with the recognition that the previous Women-in-Development (WID) approach was out of touch as it failed to address power relations with regard to 'efficiency' and 'equity' and hence aimed merely at 'integrating' women into the existing structure.² Thereafter, with the recognition of unequal power relations, the concept of 'gender' entered development discourse and the effort to 'empower' women is emphasised as a prime objective for development. Nonetheless, its definition still remains contentious due to the existence of different stresses placed upon it in the various interpretations of those who perceive and use this term. Thus the notion of empowerment is emphasised by development circles and yet its proponents tend to remain ambiguous about its definition and strategies in practice.

In addressing the concept of empowerment, it is necessary to review the concept of power. The conventional analysis of power can be seen, for instance, in Steven Lukes (1974); he examines one and two-dimensional views on power theorised by Robert Dahl (1957) and Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1970) and criticises the way in which power is conceptualised predominantly as overt and actual behaviour notably in decision-making. Based on the critique of this, he further develops the three-dimensional view of power that can occur without actual and observable conflict

(Lukes, 1974:24). That is, it is something more of 'a *latent conflict*', which lies in 'a contradiction between the interests of those exercising power and the *real interests* of those they exclude' (Lukes, 1974:24-25); that is, there is no apparent conflict, because A can shape B's desire or A's preference is in B's interest, as B does not recognise why it is so. This concept of power as latent may originate in Antonio Gramsci's (1971) conceptualisation of power and his development of the concept of 'hegemony'. He does not theorise power solely as a class relation and domination by coercion, as opposed to what classical Marxists conceptualise as the capitalist class and the state as the main source of dominative and coercive power. Rather, he distinguishes between coercive power and hegemony when discussing ideological control over the masses. That is, he conceptualises that power is a 'relation' between classes and other social forces and hegemony is formed by creating and in fact perpetuating political and ideological control over the masses. Such ideological persuasion, including 'folklore' that is characterised as 'popular religion and ... in the entire systems of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting' (Gramsci, 1971:323), permeates civil society and people consent to it as 'common sense' (Boggs, 1976:39). This notion of power also echoes Paulo Freire (1972); for him, those who are 'powerless' may have feelings of compulsion but 'internalise' or accept a prescription of the role of 'oppressed' due to their 'fear of freedom' (Freire, 1972:23). Thus the emphasis is placed on 'conscientization' that is the process of learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions to take action against such oppressive elements of reality (Freire, 1972:15).

This covert but controlling model of power can also be seen in feminist thinking. Here power relations may be seen as differentiated, especially between men and women, and it is argued that power is exercised over women 'unintentionally' (Elshtain, 1979:246). That is, women internalise their distress and/or take it for granted as a natural part of female life, or they may not even be conscious of being 'oppressed', while men consciously and unconsciously exercise power. Batliwala (1994:130) identifies this as 'patriarchal ideology' which is one of the main sources of power that exists on a psychological level, and which legitimises male domination and women's submission. Thus she uses the term 'empowerment' in a way which challenges and changes such ideologies and the associated values and attitudes that women have internalised. However, feminists' views on power are more complex for they suggest that power does not exist only between men and women hierarchically but is more intricately intertwined with other variables such as class, ethnicity, caste and other differences. In this, empowerment aims at modifying all kinds of existing asymmetrical relations (Sen and Grown, 1988:19; Batliwala, 1994:135).

The notion of power under the GAD approach is therefore seen as 'generative', 'productive' and 'relational' rather than negative 'power over' views imposed in a top-down manner (Rowlands, 1997:14). Under the GAD framework, generative power or

empowerment is often described as taking the form of 'power to', 'power from within' and 'power with' (e.g. Williams et al., 1995; Rowlands, 1997; Townsend et al., 1999). For instance, in *The Oxfam Gender Training Manual*, Williams et al. (1995:233) argue that 'power to' manifests as 'creative' and 'enabling' power that is the essence of the individual aspect of empowerment. The concept of 'power to' may also be traced in Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen's (1989:12) concept of 'capability'; they argue that human capabilities include not only the personal ability to gain income and to integrate their ability to avoid human deprivation, such as early mortality and undernourishment, but also to go beyond this to achieve a better 'human life' being able to have freedom and make choices. Moreover, 'power from within' is described as involving psychological change;

'the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each of us and makes us truly human. Its basis is self-acceptance and self-respect which extend, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others as equals.' (Williams et al., 1995:233)

Under this, it can be argued that 'gaining control over one's own life' and 'the ability to do things' also manifest power generated 'from within' (Rowlands, 1997). The individual level of empowerment is also emphasised by Batliwala; it is first to 'recognize the ideology that legitimizes male domination and ... understand how it perpetuates their oppression' and then to leads towards a 'reversal of the values and attitudes, indeed the entire worldview, that most women have internalized' (Batliwala, 1994:131). From this, personal empowerment can be summarised as involving a process of generating changes in the psychological sense which builds increased self-esteem and confidence, and is a process through which women are expected to develop new skills and abilities; the concept of self-empowerment under the GAD approach thus equates with 'power to' and 'power from within' to a great extent.

The debates on empowerment of the underprivileged, however, also place emphasis on collective empowerment as inequality and injustice also exist on structural levels (Sen and Grown, 1988; Batliwala, 1994; Rowlands, 1997). Batliwala (1994:134) argues that the fundamental goals of the empowerment of women are to transform the existing multiple forms of power relationships and oppressions through women's 'new understanding of power'. In sum, these are,

'to challenge patriarchal ideology...; to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality (the family, caste, class, religion, educational processes and institutions, the media, health practices and systems, laws and civil codes, political processes, development models, and government institutions); and to enable poor women to gain access to, and control of, both material and informational resources.' (Batliwala, 1994:130)

The transformation of society and bringing about structural change that helps to achieve 'equality' with generative power can be argued to be the ultimate goal for Southern feminists. The feminist perspective on empowerment also indicates that it is a 'political process' involving women gaining and developing a political will and that it promotes wider alliances with other women's organisations in order to accelerate the transformation through political mobilisation (Sen and Grown, 1988:89). These notions of empowerment as 'politics' reflect the feminist slogan, 'the personal as political', which emphasises the inclusion of women's experiences of power in their everyday situations as their politics and then connects them to the wider issues which surround them. This obviously extends the meaning of often male-defined 'politics' and power that tend to be seen only in the public arena.

Moreover, Liz Stanley (1993:14) states that feminism is not simply a way of seeing (as a 'perspective') and knowing (as an 'epistemology') but also includes an ontology or a way of being in the world. With this specific consciousness, she further elaborates 'feminist praxis' as an interconnectedness of acquiring knowledge 'for' changing the world, unifying both theory and research, and then having methodological and epistemological concerns (ibid:15). Her emphasis may illuminate Gramsci's (1971) 'philosophy of praxis' in showing self and structural transformation to be an integral part of liberation through the unity of theory and practice. 'Philosophy' in Gramsci's sense indicates alternative ways of conceptualising the world among the masses, which will then become a political instrument used in mass struggles and action as political consciousness develops (Gramsci, 1971:332-4). Similarly, Freire (1972:28) argues that education combines both 'reflection' and 'action', which becomes a basis for the transformation of the status quo. That is, this conscious process of critical knowledge gained through 'reflection' of their situations and stimulated understanding and 'actions' interrelated with and guided by critical theory, or the synthesis of theory and practice through conscientisation, is what Freire (1972) calls 'education' or revolutionary 'praxis'. Thus it can be argued that their analysis of power and empowerment may manifest the marginalised people's reflection and action, or their processes of dialectically synthesising their theory with practice, which can then be a basis for collective empowerment, though they do not actually use the term empowerment themselves.

In pursuit of the empowerment of women, women's groups are therefore emphasised by Southern feminists to be essential in inducing both personal and collective action (Young, 1995; Batliwala, 1994; Sen and Grown, 1988). The concept of 'power with' under the GAD approach thus indicates power that is generated collectively, as a process of uniting women to gain greater collective power by which to initiate changes collectively.

'Collectively, people feel empowered through being organised and united by a

common purpose or common understanding. Power-with involves a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together.' (Williams et al., 1995:233)

Gita Sen and Caren Grown (1988) claim that women's organisational forms are a core element in achieving a long-term strategy for women's empowerment, both at the individual and collective levels. Women's groups are particularly emphasised when the existing traditional organisations do not represent men and women equally or do not specifically reflect or address women's felt needs. In some cultures, women's participation in any form of organisation is overtly or covertly discouraged and in such cases, separate groups representing only women may be more effective in articulating women's issues, interests and priorities. Bina Agarwal (1997:56) argues that women's groups and their coalitions can prove to be important determinants of a women's fallback position and bargaining power in the household, the community, the market and the state. Advocating radical changes may also provoke resistance from those who benefit from the existing gender systems and in this case, a group of women, rather than individuals, is more adequate to advance the process of change in the face of resistance. Thus, their shared views are that women can gain and sustain their power better in a group than remaining as individual voices, which will then be a driving force for breaking down exploitable 'traditional' forms of alliances among them (Kabeer, 1985:209). Furthermore, Veronica Schild (1997:127) argues that women's groups are spaces in which women are able to gain political learning locally, question their subordination and then contest power relations. This process can then be claimed to lead to wider transformation of social and political relationships and these groups are their fundamental means of achieving these long-term objectives. In this respect, grassroots group formation is crucial in developing outwards for further networking of women, 'homogeneous' as well as 'heterogeneous', and towards the establishment of, say, global sisterhood.

Compared to the enriched theoretical debates on empowerment and roles of women's groups that are influenced by Southern feminists and their insights, debates on power and empowerment among development circles are more specific and parochial, and feminist insights are narrowly translated and implemented in practice. This will therefore be further elaborated upon in the following section, by introducing Batliwala's (1994) typology of empowerment projects in South Asia.

2. Approaches for Women's Empowerment in Practice

There are a number of projects for women in South Asia in general and in India in particular; most of the Ministries and Departments have implemented more than 200 schemes and programmes in total especially for women in India (BRIDGE/IDS,

1995:48). The national commitment for 'developing' women can also be seen in the outlay of projects for women that went up to Rs2,000 crores⁴ in the Eighth Five-Year Plan (1992-1997), which is 500 times that of the First Five-Year Plan (1951-1956) (Indian Embassy, 2000). Such figures will further increase if one takes the performances of NGOs into account.⁵ Here, based on Batliwala's (1994) classification of empowerment approaches for women in South Asia, attempts will be made to examine how each approach recognises the concept of empowerment and translates it into projects and to what extent these projects are facilitating the empowerment of women in practice.

(1) The Integrated Development Programme Approach

Batliwala (1994) presents three main empowerment approaches for women in South Asia; these are the 'integrated development programme', the 'consciousness-raising and organizing' and the 'economic development' approaches. The integrated development programme approach recognises women's poverty and their more limited access to well-being and survival resources as the main causes of women's disempowerment (Batliwala, 1994:135). This basically equates with the concept of 'social development' that is designed to promote well-being along with economic development in addressing a wide range of issues such as poverty, inadequate social services and educational needs (e.g. Midgley, 1995:25). In line with this, the Human Development Report (UNDP, 1990 onwards) reflects the fact that human beings are both the means and the end of production, and so access to and improvement in material prosperity and well-being will contribute to 'human development'. Under this, the 'expansion of choices for women and an increase in women's ability to exercise choice' is considered as a basis of empowerment (UNDP, 1995 cited in Mehra, 1997:138).

Despite these facts, however, it is argued that two aspects, increased women's 'ability' and 'choice', may not always correspond. Rekha Mehra (1997:139), for instance, argues that the expansion of women's choices is more difficult than the expansion of capabilities. Naila Kabeer (1999:441) also lays stress on the ability to make choices, but as she observes, some of the choices that women make do not always liberate them. Indeed, as Patricia Jeffery and Roger Jeffery (1994) also claim, the dominant assumption that female education will reduce child mortality and fertility does not equate with the notion of women's 'autonomy'. That is, educated women may also not have any part in the decision on their marriage or the selection of their spouse, let alone be able to demand control of their household finances (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1994:161). It can be therefore stated that increased access to facilities which promote well-being and income may also not automatically expand women's choices and opportunities. Access to resources is an essential prerequisite for empowerment, as Batliwala (1994) and others recognise, and yet both 'access' and 'control' of

material and informational resources may be needed for the achievement of women's empowerment. However, the 'controlling' aspect is often missing in programmes that interpret women's needs as a priori such as 'education', 'health', 'income' and 'jobs'. Such a tendency can also be seen in national programmes such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) implemented since 1975 and the National Programme of Adult Education (NPAE) introduced in 1986 in India; both of which aim for women's (and child) development through a package of services but the mobilisation of women is not always envisaged and instead, more emphasis tends to be placed on quantitative achievement (e.g. Athreya and Chunkath, 1996:85). Moreover, although the formation of women's grassroots groups is encouraged, these are in many cases perceived as a tool for 'implementing' programmes in the most 'efficient' and 'cost effective' way. Whilst these programmes may reach a large number of women, this may not automatically increase women's control and bargaining power if transformative aspects are not particularly envisioned and integrated into programmes.

(2) The Consciousness-Raising and Organizing Approach

The consciousness-raising and organizing approach identifies women's 'powerlessness' due to 'the ideology and practice of patriarchy and socioeconomic inequality in *all* the systems and structures of society' (Batliwala, 1994:135). This 'holistic' approach, often based on 'conscientization' (Freire, 1972) arising from grassroots group formation, has been used notably in adult literacy programmes. It is believed that by working in a group, it is easier to touch upon more sensitive issues that address all the inequalities confronting the marginalised people.

Here, the role of external agents is the key to leading the 'powerless' towards liberation. Gramsci and Freire similarly conceptualise such external agents in their own terms, i.e. Freire (1972) claims that 'critical educators' and Gramsci (1971) argues that the 'organic intellectuals' are the keys to raising the critical consciousness of the masses. They equally believe that this process does not occur automatically towards social change due to the intricate ideological and cultural control mechanisms. Thus in this model, external agents help the subordinated to gain power. Freire (1972) and other pedagogical educators emphasise the role of external agents as critical educators in the matter of the 'consciousness-raising' of the masses to gain self-esteem and worth and to learn to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and then to be free from the state of 'powerlessness'. In this process, critical educators are those who are from the same background and work as facilitators and not as preachers to tell people what they are supposed to do. Gramsci (1971) also argues that organic intellectuals who constitute a fundamental core of the masses and also belong to the working class, and even come from the same community, are necessary in the attempt to mediate between the elite and the non-elite to alter mass-consciousness and hence

guide them in creating ideal socialism.

Nevertheless, this approach cannot also be free from critiques, as a consciousness-raising process may entail contradictory relations between the 'experts' guiding the 'powerless poor' on the path towards 'empowerment'. In practice, it is argued that change agents cannot easily perform their role of catalyst but remain as 'instructors' by imposing particular institutional visions on them rather than letting them have their own ideas of liberation (Blackburn, 2000:11). This also represents a potential pitfall and is considered to be essentialist in seeking to find one 'goal' and 'solution' which is often delineated by change agents. This is apparent when development projects are planned and implemented in a top-down manner. Freire's political notion of conscientization may not always be translated exactly in the way that Freire outlined but may be disguised and even misused. The top-down empowerment thus includes contradictory aspects of empowerment, that is, unwillingness to decentralise power to the 'powerless' and the empowerment programmes tend to be implemented in mere lip service to various external pressures.

Consciousness-raising through groups is often integrated into the programmes of the NGOs more than in those of government, often along with group savings and joint income-generating activities at the grassroots levels in South Asia (Streefland, 1996:305) and this was also observed to be the case in India. Nevertheless, this approach is becoming less popular in the face of recent proliferation and adoption of 'microfinance' as a dominant way in which women are believed to be empowered, which has made more NGOs change to integrating or even shifting its emphasis from their original consciousness-raising strategies. This shift may primarily be due to the fact that, while the consciousness-raising strategy places emphasis on social justice and provides intellectual resources such as 'knowledge' and 'ideas', it does not necessarily provide the material resources to meet their immediate needs (Batliwala, 1994:135). For Batliwala (1994:130), empowerment must include both 'access' and 'control' of both material and informational resources as crucial elements of empowerment. Resources (i.e. financial, epistemological and technical) are also emphasised by Sen and Grown (1988:89) as one of the prerequisites for the empowerment of the 'poor' women. This clearly contrasts with what Freire (1972) sees as problem-posing 'education' that will raise critical discovery among them, as opposed to the banking type of education, which does not include 'financial aspects' as the prerequisite for building up the empowerment of the poor. Thus this may direct more development planners and practitioners to accept poverty-focused approaches for the empowerment of poverty-stricken women rather than insisting on carrying out lengthy projects that aim at transformative aspects.

(3) The Economic Development Approach

In the context of South Asia, especially India, the economic development

approach, often viewed as an extension of the anti-poverty approach, is more popular than other approaches for the 'development' of women. This approach addresses women's economic vulnerability as a prime problem and objectifies it for intervention (Batliwala, 1994:135). It can be seen, for instance, in the UNDP's (1995:4) estimate that 'of 1.3 billion people in poverty, 70 per cent are women'. The anti-poverty approach for women since the 1970s identifies women's poverty and vulnerability due to the lack of access to private ownership of land and capital and the existing sexual discrimination in the labour market, and hence the solution is seen in an increase in 'employment' and 'income-generating options' (Moser, 1993:68). In India, the implementation of poverty alleviation programmes has a long history; the conventional poverty debates have been predominately explained as an economic reason as poverty continues to be determined mainly by income and expenditure on food and other basic requirements, which successfully submerge 'subjective' poverty experiences and the heterogeneity of the poor in the policy framework. The Government of India first recognised 'female' poverty in the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980-1985) and thereafter, the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), undertaken as a sub-scheme of the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), has been implemented under the Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment as a poverty alleviation programme for women since 1982. It is stated that the programme directly aims to improve the living conditions and status of women, both economic and social, and thereby to help children by providing income generating skills and activities for rural women who are below the poverty line (GOI, 1997:95). Here, recognising women's productive role and integrating them in the mainstream economy are prime objectives (*Gramin Vikas News Letter*, 1998). Furthermore, a programme called the *Rashtriya Mahi Kosh* (National Credit Fund for Women) has started to provide loans to needy 'poor' women who work in the informal sector since 1992. In parallel to this, women's economic programmes aiming for their economic empowerment have been implemented on a state level, i.e. the Tamilnadu Corporation for Development of Women Ltd. (DeW) has been carrying out the IFAD assisted Tamil Nadu Women's Development Project (TNWDP) since 1989-90 with an emphasis on microfinance⁶.

Microfinance has gained importance dramatically in Asia and elsewhere as a 'necessary' method for economic enhancement to serve poor women's immediate needs. 'Poor' women's access to small loans is believed to relieve economic pressure and provide possibilities for initiating income-generating activities. In this scheme, 'poor' women who did not have access to formal loans are also recognised as 'bankable' and 'creditworthy' based on their high repayment rates compared to men (Hulme and Mosely, 1996:125; DeW, 2000). Its popularity is obviously followed by the Grameen Bank's success in Bangladesh and thereafter development institutions and Southern governments have rapidly adopted its practice as a means of relieving

poverty and achieving the empowerment of women. Behind this scenario, however, there is the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) designed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank; in India, macro-economic policy changes since 1991, as a result of accepting the SAPs, have resulted in high inflation, increased unemployment and taxation paralleled with reductions in social sector expenditures and absence of adequate safety nets (Upadhyay, 2000). As a consequence, to help the acutely impoverished socio-economic lives of the poor, an 'alternative' model based on grassroots initiatives was needed to supplement top-down macroeconomic failures. 'Organising the poor women' thus tends to be undertaken out of necessity in the face of economic crisis, particularly among poor households (Fernando, 1997:157-8). In this context, self-help groups have been created in the community in order to relieve income poverty and ensure their 'survival' (Schild, 1997:130), which do not always include feminists' 'transformative' visions of empowerment and group formation.

Thus despite the expected outcome, however, it presents mixed results. For instance, it is stated that women's access to loans has not instantly resulted in women's 'autonomy' (Goetz and Gupta cited in Hulme and Mosely, 1996). It is also documented that the loans that women obtain may also not be controlled by them (*ibid.*) or may be controlled only by already 'empowered' women (Rajasekhar and Kabeer in UNRISD, 1999:53). However, Jude Fernando (1997:163) argues in a study in Bangladesh that in any case the loans that a woman obtains are not used solely for herself due to imbedded gender relations within the households. David Hulme and Paul Mosley (1996:132) also argue that microfinance tends to target the poor 'above the core poor' and does not always reach and meet the needs of the poorest. Mixed results are reported in a number of micro-level studies which show that it is necessary to pay careful attention to the extent to which opportunities of employment and income impact on the alleviation of women's poverty and unequal power relations. Fernando (1997:175-6) also argues that microfinance programmes may induce women's participation but do not induce the power to change women's marginalisation and oppressive structures. Fernando points out evidence that the studied NGOs rarely challenged the interests of local religious leaders and elites. Instead, it is often assumed that aspects of change such as in social norms and the predominant perceptions of women's value and contribution would emerge as a 'by-product' of the effective delivery of economic programmes. Yet such assumptions do not reflect the fact that women members actually face increasing pressure to maintain institutional relations to ensure regular repayment of loans and the survival of their families (Fernando, 1997:176). This sort of negative function also needs to be recognised as the actual impact of a project on women.

There are, however, some programmes that are held up as relatively successful examples for empowering women in India; those are the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) based in Ahmedabad since 1972, and the Working Women's

Forum (WWF) based in Chennai since 1978. Both of them emerged out of grassroots initiatives which are often declared to have contributed to serving mainly urban poor women's interests by providing them with loans, in addition to successfully making the work of marginalised women in the informal sector more visible and positive through their being organised on the basis of their mutual needs (WWF, 1992; Rose, 1992). Besides these successful bottom-up and group-based examples, the government-led, top-down empowerment programmes for women tend to place more emphasis on economic aspects of poverty as the main cause of women's vulnerability and powerlessness. Hence the fact that poverty is a gendered experience is not adequately addressed and power relations that make women subordinate are rarely explored; as pointed out, a problem of 'synergism' continues to exist in development thinking, that is, gender equity will be achieved by alleviating poverty (Jackson, 1998:43), though the solutions for these may not always be the same. This can also be seen in statements that tend to simply assume that poverty alleviation in an economic sense will improve women's living conditions and status, as indicated earlier (e.g. GOI, 1997). As Batliwala (1994:135) also recognises, empowerment strategies need to intervene in both women's 'condition' and 'position' in a way that modifies these two aspects and brings about some positive changes. Nevertheless, paradoxically in a place especially where the issues of poverty and hunger are prioritised, gender issues are easily treated as a 'luxury' or a 'Western' concept and given the least priority. Providing jobs and income alone do not allow people to explore the correlations between female poverty and the power relationship, but may in fact produce and reproduce the age-old social institutions and value systems which maintain the disadvantages of women's lives by involving them in development projects.

3. Beyond the Impediments

The examination of the three major approaches to empowerment in South Asia based on Batliwala's typology shows different ways in which disempowerment of women is identified and how prescriptions for solutions turn into a project. However, by examining these approaches closely, it can be argued that feminists' notions of power and empowerment are much toned down and narrowly translated in practice. That is, despite the political connotations of empowerment, as Batliwala (1994:137) acknowledges, many programmes tend to avoid overtly political activities in challenging the dominant ideology or power structures, due probably to the limited existence of democratic space in Asia. Freire's political notion of conscientisation inspired by Gramsci (1971) may therefore not always be construed and practised in the way they propose but tend to be disguised and even misused by so-called top-down empowerment.

This argument may also link with the issues of inherent essentialism in

development discourse; development agencies tend to treat women in the 'Third World' as a unitary category (i.e. women in the South are 'powerless' and 'ignorant') (Mohanty, 1991:56) having a singular experience (i.e. 'economic poverty' and 'need for money'), and hence they prescribe giving loans automatically as their solution. Empowerment in this sense is often used as a synonym for 'participation' in a narrow sense such as the mere inclusion of women in development or 'listening to the poor women' in a way to make the project apparently more 'participatory' and 'gender-aware'. The concept of empowerment is thus treated as being at the opposite end of the spectrum to top-down approaches, often based on the management or co-management of resources and services with local people. While it is believed that this shift in development thinking aims to increase 'efficiency, equity, empowerment and cost effectiveness' (Narayan, 1995:5), it is also apparent that with the specific focus on 'economic' enhancement, the formation of women's groups cannot automatically be guaranteed to be a means to an end in themselves. That is, empowerment in this sense is often equated with 'self-reliance' through creating income 'for' women, and the development agencies fail to perceive diversity, activism and potential of women at the grassroots levels due to what Serge Latouche (1996:253) calls 'abusive reductionism'.

This is contradictory in many cases as many projects are not committed to decentralising power to the 'powerless'. Thus instead of 'intrinsic' arguments for feminist goals and 'praxis' aiming at reflection and action (Freire, 1972: Stanley, 1993), more 'instrumentalist' ones are applied and the methods to achieve empowerment are therefore narrowly focused. The rhetoric of empowerment can also be seen in the low budget allocation aiming at transformation (Moser, 1993), while microfinance is rapidly accepted and proliferated as a 'quick' method of empowering women in the South. The increasing adoption of microfinance by the government and as a consequence their appointing of local NGOs as implementing agencies may be due primarily to the latter's lack of resources and this sort of linkage further increases financial dependency on the government and the international donor agencies. This inevitably maintains and in fact deepens unequal and hierarchal relationships between the Northern donors and Southern 'implementing' agencies such as the NGOs, rather than promoting 'real' partnership between them, due primarily to the influx of aid and resources from the former to the latter. These undertakings are also not free from the current effects of globalisation that tend to deepen the existing gaps between the North and South and exacerbate the existing social divisions within the South as well. Under this structure, it is obvious that project planning and implementation tend to be modified in a way that is based on donors' preference and priority rather than local subjective ideas, and the latter's institutional 'autonomy' and 'flexibility' in identifying local issues and strategies are ironically reduced (Mawdsley et al., 2002). In being responsible for creating and deepening dependant relations, women's and feminist

NGOs are no exception. The fact that feminists are often appointed as 'gender experts' by governments in facilitating 'gender-sensitive' project planning and implementation often results in undermining their critical capacity for advocating and lobbying against the state as a result of co-option or 'NGOization' of movements (Alvarez, 1999:183; Lang, 2000:301); a minute and latent control is thus certain to be involved in shaping the relationship in this manner rather than creating a democratic partnership between them.

Batliwala (1994:130) also stresses the need for a shift in the scope of the analysis of empowerment and groups by examining a 'process' and the 'result' of that process rather than treating empowerment as a priori or as moving towards predetermined goals as the province of outside agents. However, this trend runs parallel to the need to increase pressure to 'measure' the outcomes of empowerment by the donor agencies rather than assessing actual processes (Kabeer in UNRISD, 1999:12). The measurement is necessary to see certain outcomes of the process of empowerment, i.e. access to resources and growth of self-esteem and dignity in order to achieve 'control' of resources and increased 'decision-making' in many aspects of life in the qualitative sense. Yet, these aspects are extremely difficult to measure and cannot be measured instantly by seeing a set of criteria. Thus despite the increasing emphasis on evaluating changes in their livelihoods in a qualitative manner (e.g. Wieringa, 1994:843), actual evaluation tends to be more 'quantitative' for the evaluation of qualitative changes (Kothari, 2000:5). This was also observed in the evaluation of women's empowerment which focused on quantitative aspects of changes such as 'how many grassroots groups were formulated' and 'how much they saved'. This obscures the question as to whether empowerment projects had actually led to 'a redistribution of power and wealth' (Wieringa, 1994:842-3); project planning and evaluation with women involved is thus indispensable as a crucial way of overcoming these dilemmas, especially in facilitating the success of empowering processes through intervention.

Conclusion

By analysing the concepts of empowerment and empowerment projects in South Asia, it can be argued that considerable gaps between theory and practice still co-exist. This indicates that development circles still require continuous examination of the way power and empowerment are conceptualised and translated into development projects rather than prescribing a mere blueprint for change. In this, perspectives of those who actually take part in a development project need to be integrated in the development planning and implementation. Moreover, development planners and practitioners need to change their perceptions of 'poor' women if projects are fundamentally aiming for bottom-up development. The integration of transformative

ideas into development planning and implementation will also need to be taken more seriously into project designs. Various conceptual and methodological issues involved therefore still need to be tackled seriously in order to facilitate such empowerment processes to happen. Without such efforts, empowerment projects especially under the operation of globalisation may continue to remain as mere lip service and may risk becoming seen as 'manipulation' in the name of 'emancipation' (Long and Villareal, 1994:51) or a bureaucratic tool to be used for the sustaining of ideological control by outside professionals.

Notes

- 1 Some ideas in this paper were first appeared in a thesis entitled 'The Role of *Sangams* in the Lives of Tamil Women' (2002).
- 2 Despite the conceptual differences between the two, however, it is also acknowledged that the classifications of WID and GAD are not always clear-cut in practice due to the different emphases and interpretations placed on the notions of women's development and gender.
- 3 I thank Dr. Ledwith for useful insights in using the concepts of Gramsci.
- 4 A 'crore' is equal to 10 million of whatever is being measured.
- 5 According to Emma Mawdsley et al. (2002:65), the foreign funds allocated to Indian NGOs, as many as 15,000 organizations, totalled US \$459 million.
- 6 The programme changed its name to *Mahalir Thittam* when the assistance from the IFAD was completed in December, 1998. The share of the state budget for it is Rs12 crores out of a total budget of Rs94.71 crores for women's development; the vast majority is for women's welfare especially marriage assistance (Rs70 crores) in 1999-2000 (GOT, 1999).

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