FEMINISMS, EMPOWERMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

EDITED BY ANDREA CORNWALL AND JENNY EDWARDS

CHANGING WOMEN'S LIVES

书馆

Feminisms, Empowerment and Development

Changing Women's Lives

edited by
Andrea Cornwall and Jenny Edwards

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To Andrea's mum, Ilse Cornwall-Ross,
and to the memory of Jenny's mum,
Shirley Skepper

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About the Editors

Andrea Cornwall is the director of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment programme and professor of anthropology and development in the School of Global Studies at the University of Sussex. She has written widely on gender issues in development, sexuality and development and participatory governance. Her publications include *Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure* (co-edited with Susie Jolly and Kate Hawkins, 2013), *Men and Development: Politicizing Masculinities* (co-edited with Jerker Edström and Alan Greig, 2011) and *The Politics of Rights: Dilemmas for Feminist Praxis* (co-edited with Maxine Molyneux, 2009).

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Preface

Andrea Cornwall

Feminisms, Empowerment and Development brings together a constellation of studies from an international research and communications initiative, Pathways of Women's Empowerment (www.pathways-of-empowerment.org). Pathways began in 2006, with support from the UK government's Department of International Development and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the bold assertion that international development agencies were pouring resources into constructing motorways – one-size-fits-all programmes and interventions – that may lead to nowhere in terms of actually addressing the structural gender inequalities that are such a powerful source of disempowerment.

We set out to explore how women in different contexts, cultures and circumstances experience power, empowerment and change in their lives. Our focus was not only on the policies and programmes, feminist movements and organizations that explicitly sought to bring about changes in women's lives. We were interested in discovering what we called 'hidden pathways', the otherwise invisible routes that women travel on journeys of empowerment, as we sought to get to grips in a more holistic way with what makes positive change happen in women's lives. These were to include a focus beyond the conventional emphases in work on women's empowerment – enabling more women to gain an independent income, getting more women into politics, securing women's sexual and reproductive rights

– on other dimensions of women's lives that are a source of empowering pleasure and leisure.

A network of regional hubs in Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia and West Africa – with partners across the regions – and a hub that took as its focus 'Aidland' and global development policy, Pathways drew together researchers from more than a dozen countries. Cross-hub thematic groups on work, voice and sexuality worked on collaborative research projects, conferences and workshops. This gave rise to a series of volumes in the Feminisms and Development series, as well as special issues of journals, monographs and other edited collections, working papers, documentaries, digital stories, photographic competitions and exhibitions, short stories, and performative events. An interactive learning platform repurposed our work for use by secondary school teachers and trainers (http://learning-platform.pathwaysofempowerment.org/), and in an online forum, Contestations, we sought to engage activists and practitioners in debating contentious issues in gender and development. Over the eight years since Pathways came into being, the network has expanded to embrace other researchers and activists working on women's rights and empowerment, and to explore new avenues for engagement.

This book marks an important point in our journey. It brings together a diversity of contributions from across the Pathways network, reflecting some of the regional and thematic diversity of our work. Together, these studies offer a perspective on empowerment that complicates the conventional narrative, and that takes us off the motorways of current gender and development policy to the roads less travelled that take us further into the everyday realities of women's lives. The contributions enrich our understandings of the dynamics of power, empowerment and change, and serve as a vital reminder that empowerment is not a destination, nor something that can be 'delivered', but a journey that is neither linear nor predictable in terms of its outcomes. We came to understand, with these studies, that pathways of positive change do not only involve extending the

boundaries of what we are able to do – physically, economically or politically. Empowerment also involves shifts in the way in which we perceive the world and our place within it. Pathways of empowerment, then, can be as much about routes that ignite our indignation and invite new ways of imagining what might be and expanding our horizons of possibility – about shifts in consciousness that make other kinds of changes possible. These are journeys that can be taken alone, but that may become more possible, and more productive, when taken in company.

Some of the most powerful stories of empowerment that we came across in our work involved shifts of consciousness and forms of collective action that came about as part of women's rights activism, facilitated and supported by women's movements and organizations. These are pathways that have been travelled by hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of women around the world. And yet the international development enterprise has been profoundly neglectful of the role that women's movements, small and large, have in making change happen to bring about greater gender justice and equality. It's time for that to change, and it is our hope that this book, and our work in the Pathways network, can make a small contribution to making more visible the vital role of women's rights in the struggle for a fairer and more equitable world.

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INTRODUCTION
Negotiating Empowerment

Andrea Cornwall and Jenny Edwards

From its origins as a feminist strategy for social transformation, women's empowerment has come to be championed by corporate CEOs, international NGOs, powerful Western governments and the financial institutions they preside over – and, or so it would seem, the entire global development apparatus. 'Gender equality is smart economics', the phrase coined by brilliant marketeers at the World Bank to promote investment in women and girls, has become a meme whose traces can be found in a thousand echoes across the landscape of corporate and international development institutions. Extravagant promises are made talking up the 'value-added' of such investments: 'stopping poverty before it starts' by investing in adolescent girls; 'lifting' economies; stemming the effects of the financial crisis; driving economic growth. This embrace of women's empowerment centres on women's entrepreneurship but also accommodates a focus on women's leadership, and extols women's contributions to a host of other development goods.

Bringing together a diversity of studies from a variety of locations, this book offers insights from empirical research that complicate the picture painted in these narratives of women's empowerment. It weaves together fine-grained ethnographic studies of processes, perceptions and institutions with macro-level analyses of shifts in law and policy, ranging across sites as diverse as family courts in Cairo, the meeting rooms of international

development agencies in London and New York, and slum dwellings in which Bangladeshi women watch television. Together, contributors ask questions about how positive change in women's lives is brought about and experienced. Drawing on rich empirical and conceptual work produced over a period of five years by an international network of researchers – the Pathways of Women's Empowerment research programme (Pathways) – this book seeks to restore to discussions of women's empowerment a consideration of the complexities of change and the lived realities of women's lives in diverse contexts.

Understanding change in women's lives

A key question for Pathways was: what makes change happen for the better in women's lives? Our interest went beyond planned intervention to broader and more diffuse social, cultural and economic changes that wrought effects in the lives of women in all their diversity. Part of our work was oriented at mapping the effects of interventions that have a deliberate focus on women's empowerment, such as laws, policies and programmes aimed specifically at women. As a corollary, we also sought to explore the role of relationships in facilitating women's access to legal, social, economic or political institutions. Shaped by and shaping our recognition of the relational nature of empowerment, much of this work focused on women's organizations and on front-line workers, activists and bureaucrats in government and the aid apparatus involved in mediating women's empowerment. A third dimension of our work explored what we called 'hidden pathways' – unusual, unexpected and commonly unseen pathways that we sought to find and make visible. Many of these hidden pathways took us into terrains that are under-explored in development: television, popular music, faith and religious practice, everyday domesticity, pleasure in leisure and in sexual relationships. They provided us with diversions that were rich in insight, adding more significantly than we anticipated at the outset to our understanding of processes of and preconditions for empowerment.

This book takes shape from these different approaches to understanding processes of change. In this introduction, we explore the backdrop to today's enthusiasm for women's empowerment via a consideration of foundational feminist writing and a brief account of contemporary development policy. We go on to address a number of salient themes emerging from reflection on the disjunctures that come into view, weaving into this discussion elements from the chapters in this book that highlight important dimensions of empowerment in practice. A central thread that runs through this diversity of experiences and examples is the relational understanding of empowerment that Pathways came to recognize as critical to making sense of what was needed to bring about change – whether through direct efforts to produce particular kinds of change or more diffuse shifts in mindset, confidence and consciousness that underpin broader societal change. What emerges are powerful tales of the dedication and ingenuity of those who persist against all odds, the tactics that are resorted to in fields of power in which there may be little overt room for manoeuvre, the rallying points, the alliances, the compromises and the disappointments. In doing so, we seek to restore some of the complex richness of women's experience to discussions of women's empowerment.

Tracks and traces: women's empowerment in development

The concept of empowerment has a long history in social change work, in fields such as popular education, community psychology and community organizing. Feminist consciousness raising and collective action informed early applications of the concept to international development in the 1970s. Women's empowerment came to be articulated in the 1980s and 1990s as a radical approach that was concerned with transforming power relations in favour of women's rights and greater equality between women and men (Batliwala 1993, 2007; Kabeer 1994, 1999). As Bisnath and Elson observe,

> it was explicitly used to frame and facilitate the struggle for social justice and women's equality through a transformation of economic, social and political structures at national and international levels. (1999: 1)

In the writings of the 1980s and early 1990s, empowerment was cast as an unfolding process, a journey that women could take alone or together that would lead to changes in consciousness and collective power. Common to many of these writings was an insistence that empowerment was not something that could be bestowed by others, but was about recognizing inequalities in power, asserting the right to have rights, and acting individually and in concert to press for and bring about structural change in favour of greater equality (Batliwala 1993; Kabeer 1994, 1999; Rowlands 1997; Sen 1997).

As early as 1994, Srilatha Batliwala expressed concern about the growing popularity of the term, which had virtually replaced, she argued, terms such as welfare and community participation. Warning that empowerment was in danger of losing its transformative edge, she called for a more precise understanding of both power and empowerment. Defining power 'as control over material assets, intellectual resources, and ideology' (1994: 129), Batliwala defined empowerment as 'the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power' (1994: 130). Challenging a tendency in the discourses of the day (Moore 2001) to limit the concept to purely local, 'grassroots' participation, Batliwala pressed for the potential of what she called an 'empowerment spiral' to mobilize larger-scale transformative political action.

Out of this earlier feminist engagement with international development, then, a narrative of empowerment emerges that is bound up with both collective action ('power with') and the development of 'power within' and 'power to' at the level of consciousness. These two facets of empowerment – consciousness and collective action – are represented in writings from this period as deeply mutually imbricated. Gita Sen draws on Srilatha Batliwala to argue:

> Empowerment is, first and foremost, about power; changing power relations in favour of those who previously exercised little power over their own lives. Batliwala (1993) defines power as having two central aspects – control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, financial, and the self), and control over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). If power means control, then empowerment therefore is the process of gaining control. (1997: 2)

What feminist work from this period emphasizes – a point that tends to be lost in today's policy narratives of women's empowerment – is that there is a complex reciprocal relationship between women's 'self-understanding' (Kabeer 1994) and 'capacity for self-expression' (Sen 1997) and their access to and control over material resources. That is to say, providing women with loans, business opportunities and means to generate income may in and of itself bring about some changes in their lives, including enabling them to better manage their poverty. But to see really *substantial* changes, the kind that can transform the root causes of that poverty and begin to address the deep structural basis of gender inequality, conditions need to be fostered for shifts in consciousness so that women begin to understand their situations and come together to act to bring about change that can benefit not only them, but also other women. As Hania Sholkamy (2010: 257) puts it:

> Alleviating poverty and enabling women to make some income can better lives, but the enabling environment that confirms the right to work, to property, to safety, to voice, to sexuality and to freedom is not created by sewing machines or micro-credit alone.

What lies at the heart of these differences and disjunctures is how power is conceived. The individualist perspective of contemporary neo-liberal empowerment policies, dubbed 'liberal empowerment' by Cecilia Sardenberg (2009) following Ann Ferguson (2004), sees power as an asset: something that can be acquired, bestowed and wielded. Feminist conceptions of power and empowerment are altogether more nuanced. Naila Kabeer, for example, wants us to see power as 'more fluid, more

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