Chapter 3
Empowerment: Meaning, Approach, and Measurement

[It is interesting to me how people...are so preoccupied in using this word and concept "empowerment"...My fear in using the expression "empowerment" is that some people may think that such a practice simply empowers..., and then everything is finished, over!...I don't believe in self-liberation. Liberation is a social act.]

No, no, no [there is no personal self-empowerment]. Even when individually you feel yourself most free, if this feeling is not a social feeling, if you are not able to use your recent freedom to help others to be free by transforming the totality of society, then you are exercising only an individualist attitude towards empowerment or freedom.

- Paulo Freire

Empowerment is a buzzword of contemporary times. Other than being a very popular term it has also remained a highly contentious one, with “development” and “participation” being probably the only other concepts sharing these dual characteristics. Though a late entrant compared to these other more established concepts, of late, empowerment has gained greater acceptance in many quarters. It fact, it has become increasingly fashionable to normatively privilege empowerment over development and participation as the goal towards which to work. Development and participation are seen as meaningless and incomplete if the people are not empowered. Consequently, the contemporary discourse has sought to diligently ‘reframe’ all development and participatory efforts and place empowerment at the centre of them.

A striking feature of this discourse is the consensus among the opposing ideologies of neo-liberalism and post-Marxism about the efficacy of empowerment as the remedy for a variety of social ills.1 Albeit for critically differing reasons, both these streams have consistently proposed an empowerment agenda. The legitimacy enjoyed by empowerment both in academic circles and in praxis derives from these opposing ideologies. The point to be noted here is that, empowerment does not mean the same thing to everyone. Also of relevance is the fact that empowerment, though accused of being an ‘invention’ to continue oppression by some, is a concept that has evolved over a period of time, however short it may be. The concept does have a pedigree and has metamorphosed into a mantra of states and development

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1 These are not the only positions with respect to the concept of empowerment. There is a feminist stream which differs from these, though it shares many commonalities with the post-Marxists. But these two positions are dealt with here to highlight the contradictions intrinsic in the currently popular usage of the concept of empowerment and to enable us to problematize it. The feminist conception will be taken up in later discussion on the meaning and approaches associated with the concept.
agencies today. Hence, in order to gain a correct perspective on the current enthusiasm for the concept of empowerment, an understanding of the rationale behind it is essential.

The liberals have characteristically opposed any expansion of the state as it is conceived to pose a serious threat to the freedom of individual enterprise – the market being their version of the latter. Increase in state power is seen as anathema to individual freedom and a free market. They prefer market solutions to societal problems instead of state promoted ones, and seek to build a 'strong wall' between the 'private' and the 'public'. The sectoral view of society, with a limited conception of the state, is at the core of their project. When it came to development or poverty, theirs is a 'trickle down' solution, whereby the wealth accumulating at the top would, with the efficient functioning of the market would percolate down to the masses due to overall progress. Hence, the solution to human inequality does not lie in state 'enthusiasm', but in the market and its principles. This idea informs the essence of all modernization projects emanating from the west and the international institutions based there.

In the 1980s it was widely recognized that all was not well with the world economy. The oil crisis resulting in an unstable international economy and the widespread recession in the west along with the depressing spread of poverty in the third world unsettled the pragmatic prognosis of the liberal agenda demanding urgent solutions. In general, the international economy did not witness the promised growth. Under the leadership of Reagan and Thatcher the response unfolded in two significant policy measures. First, the social welfarism in the west and post-colonial state-led development in the third world were seen as central to the problems with perpetuating inefficiency and stifling the uninhibited growth of the free market. Second, it was argued that this necessitated a “roll back of the state”, reduction in social welfare expenditure and promotion of alternative solutions based on the free market, NGOs and community-based self-help. As a result, structural adjustment

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2 The term “third world” is employed here only to differentiate the developing countries from the developed ones and not pejoratively. It is useful as it helps us to capture the alignments in world politics before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the relatively negligible influence the liberal ideology had in the “Soviet bloc”. Again, in the context of the above statement it does not deny that the economic problems in the latter.

programmes were proposed by the international financial institutions, like the IMF and World Bank, as a remedy that would lead to greater economic growth.

During the same period, the neo-liberal opinion on the state-market relations also underwent a significant shift. The emphasis was now not so much on the rhetoric of an 'aggressor state', rather the effort was to 'tame' the possibly adverse effects of the Hobbesian "leviathan" by prescribing a division of labour between the state and the market. In this reformulation these two spheres are not seen as opposing entities; instead, the partnership between them is emphasized for greater efficiency and solution to all social problems including poverty. Herein, the state is envisaged to play a more regulatory role, prescribing the 'rules of the game' and leaving the actual play to the market forces, NGOs and the local communities. As Stokke and Mohan suggest "(t)his means that the state should be restructured to become an efficient and capable ensemble of institutions that can enable market-led economic development and society-led social development". Following this a 'new model' for healthy 'social development' has been advocated with two central traits – less power to the state, and more power to the community. Empowerment of the local communities in association with community participation and encouraging self-help among them along with a more active role for the NGOs in the process is envisioned and forms part of policies and programmes.

This neo-liberal agenda of 'social development' and empowerment is comprised of three important elements. First, there is an emphasis on reduced social expenditure burden on the state through cost-sharing and cost-reduction and improving the efficiency factor of projects and programmes. The stress is on shifting the social expenditure of the state to the communities, by encouraging them to "make increased contributions through voluntary effort and/or self-help/voluntary unpaid labour". Second, projects and programmes are to be made more sustainable by emphasizing greater inputs from the community in the form of time and money through community self-help and cutting out the subsidies involved. An increased self-help component and reliance on local knowledge is expected to generate more interest within the community as the primary stakeholders and contribute towards greater efficiency and continuity. Participation of the target communities is seen as essential for efficient

4 The result is the now familiar "Independent Regulatory Authorities" in the institutional landscape of several countries including India.
6 Mayo and Craig, "Community Participation and Empowerment", pp.4-5.
programme design and implementation.⁷ Through this the communities are expected to seek local solutions for local problems. They are to be assisted with delivery of micro-finance to overcome their primary disability viz., lack of adequate resources and enable them in these efforts. On the institutional side, the NGOs are expected to play the role of mobilizing the masses towards this goal through group formation and local institution building, and thereby help people to solve their problems with their own efforts. Alongside this emphasis on community participation is the growing influence of an individualist conception of empowerment. In this conception the individual is considered the unit of empowerment. This gets operationalized through an accent on the entrepreneurial skills of the individuals and an increase in the availability of credit to them in the form of regular flow of micro-finance.

Third, this emphasis on the empowerment of local communities is based on a functionalist notion of power, which sees power as “a variable sum”. Importantly, power in this conception is seen to reside in and increase as a whole in the community. As a result power is configured in non-conflictive terms – any increase in the power of the poor local communities will not result in any loss to the powerful and empowerment of the powerless could be “achieved within the existing social order without any significant negative effects upon the power of the powerful. The powerless could be empowered, and they could then share in the fruits of development, alongside those who had already achieved power”.⁸ Associated with this view of power is the tendency to view empowerment as a managerial process, denying its essentially political character.

This idea of neo-liberal ‘social development’ has been embraced by the multilateral and bilateral development agencies. Through several conferences and policy documents they have in turn ‘encouraged’ many states to adopt these as the goals for their policies and programmes. Financial assistance for projects and programmes working to empower the masses have increased manifold and has

⁷ For instance World Bank Report 1994 states that, "Many basic services ... are best managed at the local level – even the village level – with the central agencies providing only technical advice and specialist inputs. The aims should be to empower ordinary people to take charge of their lives, to make communities more responsible for their development, and to make governments listen to their people. Fostering a more pluralistic structure – including nongovernmental organisations ... – is a means to these ends". cited in V. Aithal, "Empowerment and Global Action of Women: Theory and Practice", www.skk.uit.no/WW99/papers/Aithal_Vathsala.pdf.

⁸ Mayo, and Craig, "Community Participation and Empowerment", p.5.
definitely contributed to the current enthusiasm about the concept. NGOs, seen in the neo-liberal agenda as engines of 'social development', have benefited from this enthusiasm in no small measure. Some of these organizations, seemingly at ease with the neo-liberal agenda, perceive themselves as alternatives to the state. As a result, empowerment has become enshrined as an essential part of the dominant agenda and has gained a hegemonic position in the current development parlance.

This neo-liberal proclivity to empower the masses has received endorsement from the post-Marxists, albeit for entirely different and opposing reasons. The latter see empowerment as the collective mobilization of the marginalized against the disempowering activities of the state and market. Within the field of development, this has taken the form of a whole new way of thinking about what development is, and given the name “post-development”. Expressing extreme dissatisfaction with the mainstream top-down development efforts, the post-Marxists argue in favour of an alternative to development and not merely for development alternatives. This takes the form of a total rejection of development, as an instrument of domination circumscribing the creative potential of the masses.

9 Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest is a major international collaborative initiative arising from the 1993 International Conference on Actions to Reduce Global Hunger and was formally constituted in 1995. The 9 founding members are Canada, France, the Netherlands, the United States, the African Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Capital Development Fund and the World Bank later followed by Australia, Finland, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and Inter-American Development Bank. Approximately US $200 million (including existing budget commitments) was pledged to Micro-Finance programmes for the poorest groups in low income countries, particularly women (World Bank, 1996). Actual amounts disbursed by individual CGAP members is however considerably higher.

10 It has to be noted that the term “empowerment” has itself been opposed by many post-Marxists professing “post-/anti-development”. They see it as yet another instance of western ingenuity to reaffirm their domination of the third world. The crux of their contention is that, people have their own form of power and need not empowered by outsiders, who can only impose their domination on them. Hence, when we are referring to the endorsement of empowerment by the post-Marxists, we do not mean they approve of the liberal version of the concept. Instead, what we imply here is the support the former render to “endogenous/autonomous development” where too empowerment of the people as an idea, certainly of a different strain, is at the core. For instance, see M. Rahnema, “Participation” in W. Sachs, The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power, London: Zed, 1992, pp.155-175.

Escobar, one of the chief proponents of this position proposes the formation of “nuclei around which new forms of power and knowledge can converge”. The nuclei comprise of “peasants, urban marginals, deprofessionalized intellectuals” and considerable emphasis is laid on the “nexus with grassroots movements”. This formation has an interest in culture, local knowledge, critique of science, and the promotion of localized, pluralistic grassroots movements. Their common features are that they are “essentially local”, pluralistic, and distrust organized politics and development. The problem with the concept of development, according to Escobar, is that it is extended, based on the model of the industrialized world. He proposes “more endogenous discourses” and identifies three major discourses as nodal points - democratization, difference and anti-development.

This conception of post-development derives from the general ‘turn’ in Marxism away from the notion of class as the central revolutionary category. The alternative post-Marxist position as advanced by Laclau and Mouffe, questions the centrality of class as the locus of political consciousness. The substance of their criticism is that society cannot be so easily or statically explained. Thus, they emphasize the revolutionary potential of the social movements to oppose the dominant class and act as effective political agency. Consequently, social movements of the marginalized come to occupy centrality in their counter-hegemonic discourse and praxis.

The post-Marxist understanding of empowerment is a total rejection of the neo-liberal thinking. Here empowerment is a bottom-up process of social transformation initiated through collective mobilization among the marginalized social groups. Shared experiences of marginalization and collective identity derived from this and the ensuing conscientization are the basis for this mobilization. Unlike the neo-liberal agenda, this collective mobilization of the disempowered is both against the state and the market and there was to be no partnership with these entities as they are seen as the very reason for this state of disempowerment, and any further cooperation with them is viewed to only further this process. Hence, the autonomy of the social movements is greatly emphasized to prevent any cooption. Furthermore, this mobilization is envisioned as opposing the existing power structures that sustain

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the disempowerment of the marginalized. The prime intent of the mobilization is to seek social transformation by altering the disempowering structures. Naturally, power in the post-Marxist discourse is relational, conflictive and a zero-sum proposition, with the powerless gaining more power at the expense and by dislodging the powerful and the structures that support the privileged status of the latter.

What we have at hand are two contradictory ideas on what empowerment is all about and how it ought to be realized. The neo-liberal stress is on community participation and self-help without any emphasis on structural transformation, while the post-Marxists propose an agonistic politics against the (dominant) structures that are envisioned to be the propellers of empowerment in the neo-liberal understanding. Naturally, discordant opinions have been expressed about the concept. Given that these are the two dominant versions of empowerment extant, this results in considerable confusion in understanding what the concept means, how it could be realized in practice, and how to measure the progress we have made in this respect.

Other than the ideological differences that contribute to these conceptual ambiguities, three other related factors further exacerbate the confusion. The concept has been in use in a variety of disciplines like education, public health, social anthropology, social psychology, and community development. With their characteristic disciplinary preoccupation these fields have engineered their own understanding of the concept with varying emphasis. Developments within each of these individual disciplines have influenced other and some commentators have freely borrowed from their peers in other fields to enrich their understanding of the concept. Nonetheless, the concept is still understood with varying emphasis within different disciplinary boundaries and this has contributed to its multiple meanings.

Alongside these theoretical developments is the more complicated arena of practice. Empowerment has been an integral part of the discourse of many feminist and civil rights movements. In addition to this are a large number of grassroots movements in different parts of the world. Activists and scholars engaged with these movements have proposed different themes and processes as characterizing empowerment. This has not only proved the complexities and multiple meanings laced with the concept, but has also in many circumstances thrown up contradictory voices from the ground that have more often than not bordered on traditions, giving rise to questions about their transformative nature.
The recent spurt in the usage of this concept and its sway in the field of development are mainly due to the multilateral and bilateral agencies, which have in the past decade tumbled upon the concept and have identified it as the panacea for many ills afflicting human society. These agencies concentrating on different sectors of human life and with their own pet projects have promoted versions and strategies of empowerment at dissonance with each other. These ideas have been operationalized by many states and NGOs that are funded by them. Nonetheless, states with their own compulsions, with the issues of sovereignty (and law and order being top of the list), have for their part offered a statist version of the concept. Many NGOs aided by the state and functioning as its implementing arms have adopted these versions. Other NGOs with a more radical outlook view empowerment as the only means through which people can realize their aspirations without outside domination. Most of these organizations, placed delicately closer to the people and ground realities, have also continuously reinterpreted the concept and have innovated and adjusted their strategies according to their accumulating experiences, adding to the existing understandings of the concept.

Apart from these relatively ‘external’ factors there is a more important and intrinsic reason for the confusion surrounding the concept. This stems from the power component of the term. The concept of power occupies a central position in empowerment. Power is probably the most contentious term in the social sciences. Its meaning and manifestations in the social world have been the subject of several inquiries, but the outcome is far from settled. Scholars with diverse ideological and theoretical dispensations have offered varying and conflicting interpretations, which remain relevant in different situations. These competing notions of power naturally inform the concept of empowerment, replicating the ‘original’ confusion.

As a result, the concept is shrouded in confusion on important and related aspects about its meaning, approach and measurement. These are issues that can seldom be glossed over as they are based on specific assumptions about the concept and therefore determine what we are going to study. Basic questions concerning the nature and meaning of the concept are the first hurdle any exploration on empowerment encounters. What is its meaning? Is it by nature a top-down enterprise with international agencies and states taking a lead role along with the NGOs to adopt and encourage it as an efficiently designed policy measure, or bottom-up based on collective mobilization and the conscientization of the masses? Can empowerment be a planned enterprise? Is a blueprint for empowerment possible that is applicable
across several countries or at least within a country across several regions? Should it be viewed as a long-term process or a specific one-off outcome related to a project? Is it a state of existence or a process? Is empowerment individual or collective by nature? Is there any relation between empowerment at the personal and social levels, and if so how are they related? Is it an end in itself or a means to realize some other end, i.e., intrinsic or instrumental? How important are the structural conditions as conditioning elements of the efforts at empowerment? What is the role of a change agent like the NGO? Can empowerment be ‘delivered’ to the powerless? Is it a tangible or an intangible process? Is empowerment a potential or something realized? Is it essentially conflictive or cooperative by nature, i.e., a negative zero-sum or a positive plus-sum process? Does empowerment in one aspect naturally lead to empowerment in other aspects of life?

There is also much debate about the right strategy to empower the masses. Several such strategies focused on credit, group formation, institution-building, increased access to basic needs and decision-making, improving the capability set, and conscientization have been adopted for these purposes, both individually and in combination. Which is the best strategy? Is it better to focus on a specific strategy or employ a suitable combination of them? Does credit alone lead to empowerment? How important is consciousness-raising? Is empowerment increased decision making, and if not what are its essential elements? Who should decide about the right strategy? What is the role of different agents involved in the process? Should it be achieved by cooperative means or is it necessarily conflictive? Should one of these approaches be adopted or both of them employed more flexibly as the situation demands? What is the influence of the structural conditions on the strategies to be adopted? How do we know that people are empowered? Can empowerment be measured? What are the suitable indicators to do so? Are these indicators applicable across cultures? Who should decide these indicators?

All these are questions of considerable importance to understand empowerment and the role NGOs can play in empowering poor women. But there are other equally significant and more specific issues that too have remained intriguingly slippery, eluding definite answers and cardinal for our empirical investigation. Quite naturally, the principal question is about the ability of NGOs as organizations of a particular type to empower the poor. Following this there are other concerns about their notions of empowerment, strategies adopted and interaction with the populace. The question of the influences that determine an
organizations approach to empowerment has seldom been explored in the literature, and is one of our chief concerns. In this chapter an attempt is made to theoretically identify the intricacies of the process of empowerment and to suggest how the very nature of the process and the structural conditions in which it unfolds influences the organizational efforts.

Despite this complexity inherent in the concept, it has frequently been employed without properly defining what the usage actually denotes. Of late there have been more courageous efforts to make some sense out of the chaos associated with the concept. The importance of these enterprises is not to be underestimated, since too many notions and instances tend to pass on as empowerment without any serious enquiry. More importantly, there are many hidden assumptions underlying each of these definitions and approaches, which have for long eluded serious scrutiny. The issue is more pressing today because of the amount of funds channelized to empowerment projects and programmes, and the simultaneous entrenchment of particular assumptions as the essentials of empowerment. With considerable normative value attached to the concept, questioning the bandwagon runs the risk of being branded reactionary and anti-people; for as the dominant discourse goes, empowerment is all about the people and them gaining more power -- and why should anyone question it or doubt the efforts.\textsuperscript{15}

The current discourse on the concept has yielded a well-entrenched dichotomy, akin to Foucauldian binaries, propped up in most instances by the extant hegemonic neo-liberalism and the counter-hegemonic post-Marxism. Hence, empowerment is \textit{either} a top-down or a bottom-up process; the change is sought either in transformation of the structure or the agency; the strategy revolves around either credit or conscientization. The debate about institutional focus revolves either around the states or the NGOs; and there is much confusion about concentrating the developmental resources on either men or women. \textit{Empowerment is conceived either as a process or an outcome, which is to be achieved either as an individual or a collective enterprise and either on conflictive or complementary terms. In general, there is a tendency to privilege either economic or political or social or psychological dimensions of empowerment over the other. This parametric dichotomy is setting the}

\textsuperscript{15} A similar trend has been noted with regard to the concept of participation by Oakley. He writes that it is "almost now reactionary seriously to propose a development strategy which is not participatory". P. Oakley, \textit{Projects with People: The Practice of Participation in Rural Development}, Geneva: International Labour Organization, 1991, p.6.
terms of the debate about empowerment, with few exceptions reaching out to the complexity that lies beyond these dichotomic confines. This is not to deny that there is a distinct movement in a particular direction, with the ingredients of the prevalent formula being – more (micro-credit to individual women in savings groups for economic empowerment, and to measure the effect on the basis of the outcomes.

This study counters this dichotomic way of thinking about empowerment in either/or terms and argues for the necessity to reclaim its inherently complex nature. The exclusionist perception that undergirds this is problematic; it not only privileges a particular universalistic solution by excluding the alternatives, but also fails to acknowledge the variations or combinations of these opposed alternatives. Instead, proceeding from the theoretical underpinnings outlined in the earlier chapter to understand NGOs and the process of empowerment as an interaction between structure and agency, this chapter argues that empowerment is essentially a contingent and negotiated process. In other words, empowerment is seen here as a process of interaction between agents within the conditioning structural influences and their ability to negotiate and engineer change. This is contrary to the prevalent tendency to view the structural and agential components of society in isolated or privileged terms and consequently describe empowerment as a change in structure or agency (structural transformations/agental capabilities).

Following this, a distinction is made between the potential and the realized, the former inscribed in the emergent structural conditions of our previous actions and the latter emerging from our ‘empowering’ interaction. As a consequence, negotiation gains prominence over possession of resources or capabilities, and empowerment becomes contingent by nature. It is also important to restate our theoretical point that the outcomes of these interactions are primarily of an unintended nature. This naturally rules out the assumption that a particular strategy will automatically bring about empowerment, and for that matter questions the efficacy of blueprints, planned designs and top-down approaches. Such an understanding also necessarily means that empowerment is a contextual process and the structure, in its broadest sense, conditions the opportunity costs and the ensuing strategies adopted by the agents. By offering this theoretical point, we obviously question the ‘mechanical-universalistic’ understanding of neo-liberal, post-Marxist and (strands of) feminist persuasions and the assumptions about the concept of empowerment that underpin them.
These arguments unfold in four sections. The first section offers an overview of the extant definitions of the concept from various standpoints, and examines the difficulties in them. Following this, it is argued that the concept of power lies at the core of any understanding about empowerment, and therefore the significant trends in the power debate in social sciences are presented for purposes of gaining a more sophisticated understanding of the characteristics of empowerment. The discussion on power naturally leads us to the issue of emancipation, which is of much significance to the issue of empowerment. The second section is concerned with the issue of measuring empowerment, where various indicators proposed by analysts are examined. The final section revisits the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter and operationalizes it in view of the discussion in the preceding sections. This framework allows a role for external change agents like NGOs in the empowerment of poor women and locates empowerment within the interaction of the concerned agents within pre-existing structural constraints.

3.1 Empowerment: Meaning of the Concept
Empowerment is one of those concepts whose origin has gone largely undocumented. It is suggested that the concept was first employed by activists of the Black Panther Movement in the context of the political mobilization of poor blacks in the United States in 1960s. Despite this radical ancestry, the concept of empowerment has emerged out of these precincts and has come to exhibit significant eclectic bearings, enriched over a long period of time with inputs from diverse streams like feminist and civil rights movements, the social action ideology of the 1960s, the self-help perspectives of the 1970s, the Freirian adult education philosophies, and the developments within the field of community psychology in 1980s, not to forget the development discourse in the 1990s. It is quite obvious that its current popularity has much to do with its association with development, or to be more specific community development. A notable feature of the concept’s evolution is its origin in practice rather than in theory, and its close association with the people

or grassroots in all these streams of enquiry. This characteristic has considerably influenced the discourse on the meaning and praxis of the concept.

Much of the empowerment discourse is influenced by the radical philosophy of education proposed by the Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire. Though he does not use the term empowerment, Freire talks about power relations between the oppressor and the oppressed in society. Some of the issues addressed by him remain relevant and more significantly, are the areas of unresolved contention in the current discourse on empowerment. He argues that men, the oppressor and the oppressed, respectively denying and being denied humanity, is in a dehumanized state of existence. Regaining humanity and liberation from this state necessitates critical reflection on objective reality and taking action based on that reflection in order to transform his or her world. This transformation does not mean that the oppressed “become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both”. Therefore, in Freireian terms, empowerment should not lead to the reversal of powerlessness. Two important points that emerge are: first, power has been an important issue right from the radical origins of the concept, and secondly, power in relation to empowerment can exist in diverse forms. This issue gets repeatedly highlighted in the current discourse, largely due to the efforts of feminist writers, who have criticized the narrow interpretation of power as “power over” as distinct from other forms of power like “power to”, “power with” and “power within”. The issue will be taken for a fuller discussion later, for now suffice it to state that power has varying interpretations, feeding into the concept of empowerment.

Freire argues that the consciousness of the oppressed is moulded by and upon the oppressor. Hence, the oppressed tend to ape the “model of humanity” that informs the oppressor and their behaviour is a “prescribed behaviour”. Having denied

17 Ibid. Aithal suggests three other characteristics of the concept. First, its emergence and orientation by the activists in the south; second, its emergence in the context of women’s movement and gradual spread to the general development debate; and finally, feminists from south employing it in feminist debates and redefining feminist discourse largely dominated by “hegemonic feminism of the north”.
18 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, p.21.
the possibility of the oppressors leading the struggle towards humanization, Freire also finds the oppressed to be wanting. According to him, the oppressed suffer from a deeply ingrained "duality":

They (oppressed) discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressors whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided.20

To overcome fear and "internalization", a dialogical method of education based on conscientization or critical consciousness is suggested. This process involves, to start with, the oppressed reflecting upon aspects of their reality, and is followed by an analysis of the root causes of the problems, examination of the implications and consequences of these issues, and finally developing a plan of action to deal with the problems collectively identified.21 This action is to question and alter the structural conditions that sustain the oppression.

There is a significant role for the "educator" (an outsider) in this conscientization process. This education was not to be delivered to the people, but a process which enabled them to become "subjects" superseding their oppressed and dominated state as "objects". Consequently, "(a)uthentic education is not carried on by A for B or by A about B, but rather by A with B, mediated by the world".22 Liberating education is to consist in "acts of cognition" rather than in the mere transfer of information. The educator's function is to facilitate conscientization by posing questions which help the oppressed to see the world not as a static reality, but as a limiting situation which challenges them to transform it. The educator must exhibit leadership abilities in guiding the discussion, asking appropriate questions and facilitating the emergence of a realistic plan of action. Freire favours a dialogical education that necessitates the educator to understand the vocabulary of the people through a process of participant observation. The educators living with the people over an extended period of time, and working with small groups, initially search for "generative themes" – their ideas, values, concepts and hopes – and coin key words that would make these abstract themes more concrete for the oppressed to analyze them and find possible solutions to the problems and generative themes they have identified. Freire clearly defines the role of the educator, which is catalytic in nature.

20 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, pp.24-25.
21 Ibid., pp.60-95.
22 Ibid., p.66.
The main emphasis is on building upon people’s reality and their knowledge, what Freire terms “men-in-a-situation” and critically altering them through dialogue for effective liberation and change. Though the outsider has a prescribed and limited but at the same time effective role, in the Freirian conceptualization of the conscientization process, this role remains contentious and relevant not only in the theoretical disputation between the neo-liberals and post-Marxists, but also in the concern expressed by many analysts informed by practical experiences about the efficacy of empowerment programmes.

Another early conception of the term, albeit a more direct one, comes from the work of Barbara Solomon on the black community in United States. She argues that the problems experienced by this community stemmed from their negative self-valuation. A relation is made between this state of the blacks and the larger society, the latter seen as the cause for these negative valuations and thus the reason for this powerlessness. Writing from the perspective of social work, Solomon proposes “empowerment”, “a process whereby the social worker engages in a set of activities with the client that aims to reduce the powerlessness that has been created by negative valuations based on membership in a stigmatized group”, as the remedy.23 According to her, in practice empowerment implied two aspects – identification of the “power blocks” that contributed to the problem; and, development and implementation of specific strategies to address those problems.

Having made this explicit connection between empowerment and the exercise of power relations, Solomon identifies two ways in which this power operates. It is “direct” when there is a physical attempt by the dominant to prevent the marginalized from a particular action. There is also an “indirect” psychological aspect which has much to do with “negative valuations”, whereby the marginalized sections accept the ideas about themselves generated by the dominant and hence fail to work towards overcoming their powerlessness. Solomon, thus, identifies both the disempowering structures as “power blocks”, and the efforts of the powerful to sustain them and thereby protect their privileged position through a validating discourse. Despite this, empowerment for Solomon is primarily a removal of the negative valuations or what Freire calls “internalized” oppression from the minds of the oppressed. Though we cannot discount the relation between psychological and socio-political empowerment, Solomon’s emphasis is on the former. There is also an

23 B. Salamon, Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities, cited in Rozario, Development and Rural Women in South Asia, p.46.
implicit assumption in her formulation that psychological empowerment will automatically result in socio-political empowerment. Hence, for her markedly distinct from Freire, empowerment is more of an individual psychological process than a collective political one. While Solomon highlights the psychological empowerment of the oppressed, for Freire, psychological empowerment, which he terms as conscientization has to necessarily lead to the transformation of the structural realities that disempower the people.

These two early attempts to conceptualize empowerment, though differing on key aspects, have informed many of the later attempts to define the term. A general feature of more recent attempts is the use of several other concepts like access, autonomy, control, choice, capability, power, etc. to define empowerment resulting in considerable conceptual ambiguity. Analysts and practitioners have responded to this vagueness differently. For some of the practitioners the undefined nature of the term is a positive feature as it offers them a great opportunity to explore the various possibilities in the field along with the people they work with. If empowerment were clearly defined this experimentation would be lost. For instance, an NGO activist cited in Batliwala maintains: “I like the term empowerment because no one has defined it clearly yet; so it gives us a breathing space to work it out in action terms before we have to pin ourselves down to what it means.”

On the contrary, there are other commentators who do not share this enthusiasm for the “fuzziness” of the term. For instance according to Beteille the term “bears the risk of being put to too many uses by too many persons to serve the requirement of systematic social analysis”. The plea here is for a clear definition of the term so that it can be understood and used properly rather than allowing for its misuse. This concern with misuse is not totally unfounded. There have been instances of the term finding itself in ’unusual’ places. Aithal cites two such instances, which shows us how dangerous the “fuzziness” of the term may prove to be. The first instance is the adoption of the “empowerment” of the employees as a stated long-term objective of the company by Bob Haas, ex-Peace-Corps Volunteer and 95 % owner of Levi Strauss.

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24 Rozario observes that in Solomon’s conceptualization there is an implicit assumption that those who are being helped are both ignorant and powerless. Rozario, “Development and Rural Women in South Asia”, p.46.
The second is the founding of the "Empowerment Task Force" in early 90s by the then president of United States George Bush. In this context, Rowlands maintains that the concept of empowerment is anchored in the "dominant culture' of western capitalism". She further observes that the fact that empowerment as a concept has risen alongside the strengthening of focus on individualism, consumerism and personal achievement as cultural and economic goals is significant, and thus the concept is successfully employed for the purpose of construction and validation of changes in the global economic and political system and to legitimize particular policies and practical approaches to development efforts which involve women.27

Other than these instances where the term has moved really far from its radical origins, it has also been employed in instrumental and harmful ways. Akhter brings one such to our attention. She finds that in the UN Population Conference women's empowerment was seen as the means to achieve population control, and those with primary interest in enforcing and marketing reproductive technologies and products actively furthered the cause. Akhter rightly complains about the cooptation of the term as well as feminists, and the actual disempowerment of women, the implicit understanding of "woman" to be empowered as poor, illiterate, and an object of reproduction technologies.28 It has been observed that the term has been transformed into a "subordinate discourse...using its own language and strategies, progressively censoring and muting its radical aspirations".29

Naturally the term has been subject to much criticism and there have been demands for doing away with it altogether. Two streams very vocal against that term are the feminists and the post-developmentalists. The feminist critique is centred on the issue of gender and power relations. Rowlands notes that the use of the term has mostly been focused on economic and political empowerment, dissolving the issue of gender.30 Complaining of cooptation and depoliticization, they object to the inflationary use of the term and the intention to carry out empowerment within existing systems. For the post-developmentalists, the term is merely a "new source of legitimation" for the development projects originating in the west. As Rahnema puts it emphatically: "When A considers it essential for B to be empowered, A assumes not

27 Rowlands, "A Word of the Times, But What Does it Mean?", p.11.
28 F. Akhter, "Health Ignored and Environment Forgotten: Misleading Direction towards Empowerment", cited in Aithal, "Empowerment and Global Action of Women".
30 Rowlands, "A Word of the Times, But What Does it Mean?", p.11.
only that B has no power—or does not have the right kind of power—but also that A has the secret formula of a power to which B has to be initiated”.31 He vehemently denies any possibility of the developmentalist being able to really empower the people. His contention is that people already have the means to empower themselves and do not need any outside interference. Writing from a Marxist perspective, Mohanty criticizes the concept of empowerment linking it with the liberal agenda and for serving the capitalist agenda. According to him, empowerment as employed and practised by the state, development agencies and NGOs only limits the options of the poor to struggle, by streamlining their inherent energy and incorporating them into the mainstream.32 The concept of empowerment implies,

(F)ormal rather than substantive power and it involves an external upper level agency to grant power rather than people below seizing it in the course of struggle. It either disperses power to isolated channels not amounting to overall sharing of power or it symbolically and formally entrusts power to a section without concretizing it in definite spheres. Above all this concept is part of the political philosophy of the new economic globalisation of western capitalism.33

Thus, as Aithal states the concept has changed from being an emancipatory concept with political content to an assimilative one focused on instrumental purposes, “the concept has been ripped of its political content. With inflationary use, it has become a catch-all word, a ‘plastic word’ readily to be used in all contexts and with no content at all”.34 Does this ambiguity and misrepresentation mean that we should abandon the concept? Many, including feminists, have argued against doing so. Instead, it is contended that the right to define the term itself is of significant value to the empowerment of the marginalized.35 Rowlands notes that such an effort has been issuing from the women of the third world, who have sought to redefine empowerment in their terms, through their understandings based on their own realities.36 Strandberg offers a more instrumentalist reasoning; though she argues that the vagueness of the term might be one of its values, the employment of the term in policies poses practical problems in adopting strategies and measuring

33 Ibid., p.1436.
34 Aithal, ”Empowerment and Global Action of Women”.
35 Ibid.
progress.\textsuperscript{37} The call for abandoning the term for its inadequacies, though well intentioned does not reflect the requirements of the time. Today the concept stands squarely at the centre of mainstream efforts at development. As some authors remind us, the battle over the concept cannot be lost so easily. Moreover, it is vital to examine the meaning of the concept and offer alternatives to the problematic usage of the term, as a particular understanding of the term is being propagated relatively unchallenged and is likely to have a telling effect on those who are to be empowered.

We examine some of the definitions in the literature on empowerment to understand what the concept means and the best way to conceptualize it. Empowerment being an issue of much practical significance, several models of achieving this have been proposed. These models are premised on certain assumptions, both explicit and implicit, about the nature of empowerment and how it ought to be achieved. Since our concern in this survey is to find out what constitutes empowerment, these models offer us important insights about the current understanding of the concept, and would naturally form part of the following discussion. The discussion also ventures beyond narrow disciplinary confines to find out what the concept means in these diverse arenas. While doing so it is important to highlight the different contexts in which these definitions are offered. For instance, a definition of women's empowerment will certainly differ in its slant from a more general definition of empowerment, like the psychological variants. Despite this, at the core are certain basic elements of empowerment which will be the focus of our discussion.

3.1.1 Empowerment as a Psychological Construct

Some of the commentators on the concept have stressed the psychological-internal orientation of empowerment. Here the individual is the unit of empowerment, contrary to other conceptualizations that emphasize either the collective aspect or both the individual psychological and collective socio-political dimensions. For instance, Hall views empowerment as individual self-realization and self-assertion.\textsuperscript{38}


We get similar definitions of empowerment from the field of social psychology, focused on the individual and their psychological component. Thus, Rappaport defines empowerment in the following manner,

Empowerment is a sense of control over one's life in personality, cognition, and motivation. It expresses itself at the level of feelings, at the level of ideas about self-worth, at the level of being able to make a difference in the world around us, and even at the level of something more akin to the spiritual. It is a process ability, which we all have but which needs to be released.  

Evident in this definition of the term is the psychological dimension(s) of empowerment, which Rappaport operationalizes as “control” exercised by an individual over one’s life. There is a reference to those facets that should be controlled, and they are explicitly psychological in make-up – personality, cognition and motivation. But significantly, empowerment has a multidimensional character, expressed in various ways as feelings, ideas, interaction with the external world, and also at a “spiritual” level. An implicit relation between the “psychological” and the “socio-political” is made when the former is oriented towards making “a difference in the world around”. There is a similar emphasis on the individual aspect of control in the definition offered by Gruber and Trickett. The individual’s sense of empowerment, a feeling about one’s capability to influence the environment and thereby shape his/her future, is emphasized. They hold that an increase in the range of choices or options available to individuals is important for empowerment.  

It is problematic to limit empowerment to its psychological dimension, since empowerment is essentially a relational concept, and is not a fixed psychological asset an individual possesses. There is a dynamic interaction between individuals, where the psychological strength of an individual necessarily comes into play. In the course of this interaction, the psychology of the individual is either strengthened or dented according to the result of the interaction. Hence, though the psychological core of beliefs about one’s competence and efficacy has been retained in later attempts to define the term psychological empowerment, its scope been expanded not only beyond the individual to include communities and organizations, but there is also an inclination to recognize the embeddedness of the individual and consequently the necessary link between the individual and the socio-political environment. Hence,

in a later definition Rappaport expands the concept to include not only individuals but also organizations and communities, and the process by which they gain mastery over their affairs. Rappaport asserts “Empowerment is not only an individual psychological construct, it is also organizational, political, sociological, economic, and spiritual”. Thus, “empowerment conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights”. A clear reference to the relation between psychological empowerment and social change comes out in the definition offered by Zimmerman and Rappaport:

Empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviours to matters of social policy and social change. It is a process by which individuals gain mastery or control over their own lives and democratic participation in the life of their community. (emphases added)

Thus, with respect to individuals, empowerment performs two functions: it serves as an individual’s determination over one’s own life and is simultaneously a means for their democratic participation in the life of the community through mediating structures. Empowerment can hardly be confined to the psychological dimensions like feelings of self-assurance, self-efficacy, competence, etc., and instead has to enter and operate in the social arena as efforts to influence social policies, participation in community activities with the intention of ushering in social change, and thereby countering the existing situation of powerlessness. Naturally, the ability of the individual to critically analyze the social and political environment and respond appropriately gains predominance. This ability of critical introspection not only of oneself, but also their circumstances, enables people to make choices so that they can effectively engage in conflict and change. Furthermore, a clear differentiation between psychological empowerment, and its manifestations at a broader level, is recognized. Psychological empowerment is considered to be an aspect of the holistic process of empowerment that is effected at the individual level. Zimmerman and Rappaport write:

Psychological empowerment is the expression of this construct at individual level. Its elements are perceived efficacy, self-esteem, a sense of causal importance. Psychological empowerment is the connection between a sense

42 Ibid., p.121.
of personal competence, a desire for, and a willingness to take action in the public domain...

The broader empowerment includes self and political efficacy, perceived competence, locus of control, and desire for control.44

Psychological empowerment is thus the enabling aspect that links an individual and his/her environment, enabling them to actively take part and exercise their influence in the socio-political arena. In other words, the individual experience of empowerment is not merely confined to a feeling of self-assurance, self-efficacy and other associated psychological elements, but is essentially related and combined with the ability of critical appraisal of one’s social and political understanding and the ability to convert mastery over oneself into an effective influence by gaining access to and influence over resources and decisions in one’s community.

Another stream of thinking is that the process is not one-way – the sense of psychological strength leading to overall empowerment; but the reverse is equally possible, with active participation in community life and decision-making resulting in a sense of psychological empowerment. Wallerstein observes that,

Empowerment is a multi-level construct that involves people assuming control and mastery over their lives in the context of their social and political environment; they gain sense of control and purposefulness to exert political power as they participate in the democratic life of their community for social change.45

Wallerstein contends that empowerment should not be viewed as an individual phenomenon detached from the environment, because they are mutually related. This necessitates not only an understanding of the changes in an individual, but also the social setting where these changes unfold and which considerably influences these changes. Following this Wallerstein proposes a broader definition of empowerment as “(a) social-action process that promotes the participation of people, organizations, and communities towards the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life, and social justice”.46 Significant here is Wallerstein’s reference to social justice as a part of the process. This makes it clear that a definition of empowerment cannot be effectively confined to the individual psychological level and has to necessarily include the exercise of this prowess in the social arena. This line of thinking is reaffirmed by

44 Ibid., p.729.
46 Ibid., p.198.
other definitions. We have Torre defining empowerment as “a process through which people become strong enough to participate within, share in the control of and influence events and institutions affecting their lives”.47 Risse! proposes a distinction between psychological and community empowerment, and holds that the latter is inclusive of and built upon the former, while a reference to the former can be made without the latter.

Psychological empowerment can be defined as a feeling of greater control over their own lives which individuals experience following active membership in groups of organizations (through group membership), and may occur without participation in political collective action...

Community empowerment includes a raised level of psychological empowerment among its members, a political action component in which members have actively participated, and the achievement of some redistribution of resources or decision making favourable to the community or group in question (emphasis added).48

Cowger too makes a similar distinction between the terms “personal empowerment” and “social empowerment” to describe the dimensional aspects of empowerment. In this framework, personal empowerment is similar to self-determination, while social empowerment refers to the larger environment and social-justice issues.49 Rissel further attempts to remove any confusion about the various dimensions of empowerment:

The process of psychological empowerment is enhanced by the sense of community, and that psychological empowerment plus collective political or social action plus an actual increase in control over resources (to some degree) constitute community empowerment.50

Rissel’s definition is significant and in an important sense different from the other definitions presented above since it does not conceive of empowerment exclusively in positive terms as individuals gaining more psychological strength and influence in community, but highlights the negative relational dimension, as a redistribution of resources will produce winners and losers. Empowerment is not only positive-sum, but also zero-sum.

50 Ibid., p.42.
These definitions point to the importance of psychological empowerment as an essential base for the holistic empowerment of an individual or community. Psychological empowerment, and even the general empowerment process, is operationalized here as exercise of control. This is an overtly positive and pro-active conceptualization of empowerment, which is premised on the understanding that individuals and communities know their interests, and with an increase of psychological strength will start exercising or at least strive to exercise control. 

Lukes’s three-dimensional operations of power informs us that there are subtle variations of power as non-decisions and no-decisions, the latter meaning that people do not know what their interests are and internalize the discourse of the powerful.\(^{51}\) This operation of power is structured leading to what Bourdieu calls “doxa”, individuals reproducing it in their everyday practices.\(^{52}\) The general inclination in the above definitions is towards the psychological feeling of efficacy, motivation, self-worth, etc., and not on the other important aspect – awareness or conscientization. Even when there is some emphasis on the aspect of cognition, it tends to be again limited to the various facets of the person and does not extend to the context. In essence, empowerment necessitates not only an awareness about ourselves, but also about the socio-political setting in which we live.

Mere psychological strengthening of individuals cannot be assumed to result in their empowerment. This needs greater awareness about the contextual structures that constrain individuals and their concerted action to transform them. For example, it would be very difficult for an individual to break caste restrictions in a village, even if he/she is psychologically empowered, as there are significant risks and opportunity costs involved in doing so. The individual, or for that matter even a collective, might be economically dependent on other caste groups, and would desist from acting against caste norms which would have adverse effects on their livelihood. It also possible that though psychologically strong, the hold of norms and values might be too strong for an individual to detach her/him from them and critically introspect. In this regard, it is essential to differentiate between a feeling of strength and a critical consciousness. This means that mere psychological empowerment is not enough and the socio-political interaction of individuals within a particular context has to be taken into account in any conceptualization of empowerment. In short, there is no automatic fit


between psychological empowerment and social control leading to overall empowerment. It is important for people to realize what actually influences or constrains their lives for them to wield control over themselves and their environment.

In this respect Swift and Levin’s attempt to differentiate between the subjective experience of psychological empowerment, and the objective dimension of modified structural conditions for the purpose of reallocating resources, is useful. A processual relation is established between these two diverse aspects, by identifying three distinct but essential stages for community empowerment, which closely resemble Freire’s conscientization process. The initial stage marks the people attaining some critical consciousness of their powerlessness. This is followed by their critical introspection on the inequality characterizing their existence and social interaction with like-minded persons resulting in a feeling of comradeship. In the final stage the group engages in deliberate action to transform the social conditions that have created and are sustaining their powerlessness. In a similar effort, Breton conceptualizes empowerment both in terms of individual perception of oneself and the understanding of “structural conditions which affect the allocation of power”. According to her, an understanding of these various dimensions of empowerment is important, because the achievement of empowerment as personal competency does not ensure achievement at the larger societal or political level. In an exploratory study, Kieffer offers us important insights about the process of empowerment. The process as a whole is construed to be a movement towards gaining empowering skills and participatory competence, in three intersecting and progressive stages: development of a more positive self-concept, or sense of self-competence; construction of a more critical or analytical understanding of the surrounding social and political environment; and, finally, cultivation of individual and collective resources for social and political action. The substance of these definitional examples is that empowerment is not confined to individual feelings or cognition, and has to necessarily extend towards the socio-political arena of action and interaction.

Two significant aspects critical for our understanding of empowerment emerge from this survey of definitions. First, psychological empowerment is focused on the individual psychological elements such as motivation to control, locus of control, and self-efficacy, but is not confined to it; and instead has to account for the influence of the environment. Second, psychological and community empowerment are mutually related constituents of the holistic empowerment process, each reinforcing the other; and as a corollary, for the empowerment of an individual, mere psychological empowerment will not suffice, and this has to be employed successfully in the social arena in one’s favour.

Empowerment, therefore, is not a psychological state of mind. On the contrary, it is a relational aspect realized in the interaction with other people, all of them possessing differential capabilities. Kabeer reminds us that “empowering women must begin with the individual consciousness – but to bring about social change it must move from changing our personal ways of thinking and doing to changing external relations”.

We have Batliwala, also writing from the perspective of women’s empowerment, arguing that empowerment is not merely psychological, but should necessarily transform into action. She maintains that empowerment “begins not only by recognizing the systemic forces that oppress them (women), but (by acting) to change existing power relationships. Thus empowerment is a process aimed at changing systemic forces which marginalize women in a given context”.

She in fact asserts that recognition and awareness of these forces that perpetuate women’s subordinate position should be followed by a reversal of “values, attitudes, indeed their entire world view”. While psychological empowerment is a necessary condition it is not by itself a sufficient condition for empowerment. Psychological empowerment is the base on which the further process of empowerment should be built. For empowerment to be a meaningful concept, discrete from other distinctly psychological terms like self-esteem and self-efficacy, the embeddedness of the individual or community within a particular socio-political context and the action component of it must be recognized.

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58 Ibid.
3.1.2 Empowerment as an Economic Construct

There are analysts who consider the economic dimension of empowerment to be most fundamental for an all-round empowerment. Many of them write from the perspective of women's empowerment. Women being generally dependent economically on the male members of their family, be it father, husband or son, advancement in the economic field is construed to have spin-off effects and affect this dependent relationship favourably for women. This line of thinking comes forth forcefully in the work of Chen based on her study in Bangladesh. She observes:

We believe that village women's control over and access to material resources is a necessary condition to women's exercise of social power and autonomy. If [women's] productivity can be enhanced or [their] employment expanded, women will automatically exercise greater power and autonomy within their households (emphasis added). 59

Significant is the assertion that an increase in economic assets would "automatically" lead to "greater power and autonomy". Based on this premise several commentators on empowerment have sought to emphasize the economic dimension of the process, or interpret it exclusively in economic terms. Carr et al. is one such effort to document and analyze the impact of economic measures on the empowerment of women. The definition formulated to understand economic empowerment of women is: "Economic change/material gain plus increased bargaining power and/or structural change which enables women to secure economic gains on an on-going and sustained basis".60 For Longwe empowerment is "bringing about equality between women and men in the control of production factors and the control of distribution of the benefits of development".61 A similar emphasis on material resources is discernable in Blumberg as she defines women's empowerment in terms of their control of income.62

Contrary to this material emphasis in the empowerment process, especially concerning women, there are others who offer a broader conceptualization of


empowerment, and specifically warn against limiting the understanding of empowerment to its economic aspects. In her account of the struggles waged by women workers who are employed in the informal sector, Rao cautions against the restriction of the concept to merely an improvement in physical and social conditions, and argues that it has to essentially include equal participation in decision-making processes, control over resources and mechanisms for sustaining these gains. Osirim maintains that it is essential to look beyond mere economic considerations. According to her, women's status in the private sphere of home and family, within their communities, and their perceptions of self are vital considerations of women's empowerment. Hence she offers a broader definition of empowerment, inclusive of the economic component, but not limited to it, which comprises "psychological well-being, self-esteem, self-respect, and autonomy coupled with the striving for achievement of economic independence". Her contention is that woman's sense of identity and self-perception will be important determining factors in whether she considers herself empowered or not. Osirim thus attaches equal importance to both psychological and economic facets of empowerment, with a distinct inclination towards the former as the fundamental aspect.

But the issue left unresolved is how essential or fundamental the economic well-being of women is for the overall process of empowerment. Further, in what sequence should the various dimensions of empowerment unfold, or if there is at all a necessity for conceiving empowerment in terms of a sequence. Friedmann's conceptualization of empowerment as increase in social power is helpful in this regard. He makes an explicit association between disempowerment and empowerment. According to him systematic disempowerment is "a process of virtual exclusion from economic and political power". Hence, his proposal for alternative development involves a process of social and political empowerment.

Friedmann's idea of empowerment derives from his conceptualization of the structure of power in society at large, which he terms as "domains of social practice". He identifies four of these – state power, social power, economic power, and political power. His notion of empowerment is linked to social power and is to operate in "the

64 Osirim, "Making Good on Commitments to Grassroots Women, pp.168-169.
life spaces of civil society" the core of which is the individual household. Friedmann makes a forceful argument in favour of conceptualizing empowerment with the household as the unit of empowerment. He writes,

Each household engages in a daily process of joint decision-making. This jointness may be crystallized into a traditional gender and age division of labour, or it may be more or less open and conflictive. What is important...is that households do collectively produce their own lives and livelihood: they are essentially productive and proactive units.

In his conception, households are the basic units of production and polity, exhibiting market and non-market relations, as well as “the terrain of struggle over the allocation of household resources to particular ends, and over particular rights”. According to Friedmann, the household articulates three types of power: social, political, and psychological. Social power is the access to certain “bases” of household production, such as information, knowledge and skills, participation in social organizations, and financial resources. Political power concerns the access of individual household members to the process by which decisions, particularly those that affect their own future, are made; and includes the power of voice and of collective action. Psychological power is a sense of potency and gets revealed as self-confident behaviour. Social power is the power associated with civil society. It is the principal means available to households in the production of its life and livelihood.

Friedmann contends that contrasting forms of power exercised by the state, economic and political domains limit the social power of the households. Therefore, the long-term objective of empowerment is to “rebalance the structure of power in society by making state action more accountable, strengthening the powers of civil society in the management of its own affairs, and making corporate business more socially responsible”.

Friedmann suggests that each form of power is based on certain resources that can be accessed by a collective actor inhabiting these different “domains of social practice”. The state derives its power from law and legitimate coercion, economic corporations from financial resources, and the political domain represented by political parties, social movements, action groups, etc. from their ability to mobilize and protest. For its part, the power of civil society is based on the

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66 He defines household as “a residential group of persons who live under the same roof and eat out of the same pot”. According to him, each household forms a polity and economy in miniature. “It is the elementary unit of civil society”. Ibid., p.32.
67 Ibid., p.32.
68 Ibid., p.31.
differential access of households to the bases of social power. He identifies eight such distinct yet interdependent bases of social power: defensible life space, surplus time, knowledge and skills, appropriate information, social organization, social networks, instruments of work and livelihood, and financial resources (see figure 3.1). Following this he maintains that poor households lack the social power to improve the condition of their members' lives. Empowerment, thus, is a process of increase in the social power of a household.⁶⁹

**Figure 3.1 Poverty as lack of access to bases of social power**

![Figure 3.1 Poverty as lack of access to bases of social power](image)


Though households can achieve empowerment only by increasing their access to social power, Friedmann recognizes the constraining influence of structures, which tend to severely restrict this possibility. Consequently, he sees the transformation of power relations as essential, the latter being possible only if the social power of the people is transformed into political power enabling them to make claims for legitimate entitlements.⁷⁰ There is a circularity in his conceptualization when he goes on to state that political power is unrealizable because disempowered people lack the requisite social power to meaningfully exercise their political rights.

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⁶⁹ Ibid., pp.66-70.
⁷⁰ Ibid., pp.70-71.
In the final analysis, Freidmann underscores the importance of the economic empowerment of the household. It is his contention that with no excess social power to convert, the political participation of the disempowered, especially the poor, depends on them overcoming their stifling subsistence. Consigned to a subsistence existence, the energy of the poor household is dissipated in its myriad activities to ensure its daily survival effectively excluding the poor from the full exercise of their political rights. Consequently, he argues that empowerment of poor tends to follow a certain sequence, and suggests that political empowerment requires a prior process of social empowerment through which effective participation in politics becomes possible.

Though he conceives women's empowerment also in terms of gains in access to bases of social power, nonetheless he expands its scope to include the other two dimensions of power exercised by a household: political and psychological power, and considers all the three relevant to women's struggles. Therefore, he visualizes them as forming an essentially interconnected triad.

Several issues of import emerge from Friedmann's model of empowerment. There are certain glaring difficulties in this proposition. First, his conception of the household as the basic unit of production and politics is largely skewed towards a cooperative model of the household, and though the conflictive nature gets mentioned the model is essentially based on a cooperative understanding. For, if the conflictive aspect is accommodated on an equal plane, the "jointness" of the household as a unit is questionable. Several studies have highlighted the conflictive nature of the household and its negotiated character. We get a projection of the household as a cooperative unit, largely due to the muted response of women, who are considerably discriminated against and the lack of external exposure because of normative constraints. Behind the façade of joint "productive and proactive" activity, are several issues of discrimination accepted by both men and women and reified in their minds as an impact of norms. Even within these "joint" activities there are contentions and continuous negotiations depending on the strength of the agents involved and the constraints imposed by the structures they inhabit. In emphasizing the household economy, Friedmann shoves aside these significant issues of gender relations. What Friedmann takes as the basic assumption for his model might be a reality in certain circumstances, but certainly not in all of them. Nevertheless, while

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71 Ibid., p.75.
identifying the pitfalls in this conceptualization, it is essential not to slip into the opposite universalistic assumption of a conflictive household. This proposition also suffers from identical problems. A way out is to consider the household or gender relations, as Sen does, in both cooperative and conflictive terms.\footnote{For instance see, A. Sen, "Gender and Cooperative Conflicts", in I. Tinker, ed. \textit{Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development}, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.}

Another issue is the conception of the state and civil society in conflictive terms, as the former is seen to encroach upon the power of the latter. Consequently, the empowerment of the household, as the basic unit of civil society, is posited to be against the state and as a result of participation and negotiation. Such an understanding is fraught with difficulties, as it fails to acknowledge the fact that factors like caste, class, gender bias, race and religion exist within the arena of civil society and are the basic limitations on the disempowered. The state is one of the institutions in the ensemble and not the overriding one in most instances. In fact, on many occasions it is the state which proposes and at times imposes legal restrictions on the discriminatory practices in civil society. For instance, The Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955; The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955; The Minimum Wages Act, 1948, etc. emanated from the state and have resulted in significant social change, if not large-scale empowerment.\footnote{These acts have respectively made it possible for the disadvantaged, namely, dalits, women and labourers, to seek relief in the form of, protection against discriminatory caste practices, divorce from marriage, and demand the minimum wages fixed by the state. The importance of these legal measures needs to be appreciated against the traditional norms that were largely discriminatory. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of most such legal initiatives is conditioned by the social norms and the value attached to them.}

Also problematic is Friedmann's assertion that the state is excluded from social organizations and social networks. This assumption fails to recognize state influence on social institutions, both direct and indirect. A more complex view of state-society relations vis-à-vis the empowerment of the marginalized is required, which perceives the relation not as static and unidirectional, but as dynamic and cross-cutting.

The conception of social power as empowerment also suffers from an inadequate conceptualization of the context of its exercise. Conspicuous in the model is a proactive conception of empowerment, as households strive to increase their bases of social power (naturally the arrows in figure 3.1 point outwards from the household and are unidirectional). Though, as observed by Friedmann, what a household can achieve is a matter of participation and negotiation, that remains a part of the story and fails to account for the influence of the context in the form of
structures, which significantly determine what the household would want to achieve. The point is that the activities of these households are performed within the resources and constraints issuing from these structures.

These problems notwithstanding, Friedmann’s model offers significant insights into the relation between poverty and empowerment. In particular, the eight bases of social power identified by him are of much relevance here. Though his prioritization of the various elements is problematic, the elements per se are pertinent pointers towards the sources of disempowerment of the poor. Based on this, it is possible to appreciate the preoccupation of the poor with and the importance they attach to, acquiring basic needs like food and shelter. This means that empowerment has to be differently conceived with respect to the poor, who lack the basic economic resources to sustain themselves. Naturally economic empowerment might be more fundamental with respect to them, as it can ensure their realization of larger empowerment. For instance, a hand-pump supplying water on a regular basis to poor households might have several empowering consequences: it solves one of problems of their basic sustenance, saves the time spent by women to fetch water, provide safe drinking water and prevent the incidence of many diseases, and on a social plane put an end to the dependence of dalits on higher castes for water. A similar hand-pump in a middle class locality will certainly not have the same importance for empowerment.

Another important issue that emerges from this discussion is the inherent differences in women’s empowerment with respect to the economic dimension. The point is that women belonging to different strata of society experience disempowerment differently. There is a forceful argument from feminists and commentators on gender issues, as to how women as a section suffer from discriminating gender relations. While it is certainly true that women qua women suffer from several difficulties, it is also equally relevant not to regard women as a homogenous group for the purposes of empowerment. The substance of our

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74 Given the situation that due to restrictions of purity and pollution, dalits are not allowed to directly access the water sources and have to fill their vessels through the higher caste women.

75 For a detailed exposition of this aspect see, A. Cornwall, "Gender, Participation and the Politics of Difference", in Gujt and Shah, eds., The Myth of Community, pp.46-55. For another forceful contention against the feminization of poverty, thereby considering all women to be poor see, C. Jackson, "Rescuing Gender from the Poverty Trap", in R. Pearson and C. Jackson, eds., Feminist Visions of Development; "Women and Poverty or Gender and Well-Being?", Journal of International Affairs, vol.52, no.1, Fall 1998, pp.67-81.
contention is that women as a 'category' have to be disaggregated and that poor women experience disempowerment differently from, say, women of middle or affluent sections. While there are many overlapping concerns among them in their capacity as women, they are certainly not identical.

Following this discussion we are now in a better position to comment on the relation between women and economic empowerment or the importance of economic empowerment in general. It is true that economic empowerment can have a remarkable effect in certain circumstances. For instance, if the empowerment is focused on the poor women for whom powerlessness exists primarily in the form of subsistence or below subsistent existence. But, the same fit cannot be expected with all women, especially those who do not experience dearth in terms of basic needs. Moreover, an automatic relation cannot be presumed between the income women earn through micro-enterprise or through access to regular micro-finance and their empowerment.\(^\text{76}\) The process is conditioned by various contextual elements in the form of institutions and other norms. Therefore, economic empowerment is a necessary condition for the experience of empowerment in other aspects, but is not by itself a sufficient condition. The effect of economic empowerment itself is contingent on the context.

### 3.1.3 Empowerment as Control

The socio-political and external orientation of empowerment has gained weight in some of the definitions offered. This dimension is operationalized through several associated concepts, the chief among them being control over diverse aspects of an individual's life. Hence, we have Oakley and Marsden conceiving of empowerment as an individual's control over decisions regarding all aspects of her/his life and livelihood.\(^\text{77}\) According to Feyerabend, "'Empowerment’ refers to a process by which people – as individuals, in groups and in organized communities – exercise an active and direct control over the factors influencing their life and their local

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Similarly, Rood defines empowerment as people taking “control over their own lives”.79 A relation between the ability of women to exercise choice in their lives and the control they have over different aspects of their lives is made by Moser. Empowerment according to her is “giving women the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change through the ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material resources”.80 The mutually reinforcing ability of the material and non-material resources points to the multi-dimensional nature of empowerment.

In contrast to these general references to control over one’s life, Batliwala offers an elaboration of what control means in the context of the empowerment of women. Empowerment is not limited to the control of material resources and includes the ability of women to control the intellectual resources and ideology. Batliwala rightly points out that these dimensions are intermeshed and there is a necessity for concentrating on all these aspects. She defines empowerment as:

(C)ontrol over material assets, intellectual resources, and ideology. The material assets over which control can be exercised may be physical, human, or financial, as land, water, forests, people’s bodies and labor, money, and access to money. Intellectual resources include knowledge, information, and ideas. Control over ideology signifies the ability to generate, propagate, sustain, and institutionalize specific sets of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behavior—virtually determining how people perceive and function within a given socioeconomic and political environment.81

Conceiving empowerment solely in terms of control exercised by individuals or more specifically poor women is problematic. It approaches empowerment only from the point of view of what should be achieved without taking into account the circumstances under which these are achieved, and what it is possible to achieve. This leads to universalistic mechanical solutions without accounting for the “paradigm of possibility”. It fails to recognize that empowerment is essentially a

79 R. A. van ‘t Rood, Empowerment through Basic Education: A Foundation for Development, The Hague: Centre for the Study of Education in Developing Countries, 1997, p.41. Rood derives this understanding of empowerment from Schrijvers, who cites of participants in a seminar of feminist ideology stating that “(t)he power to control their own lives... is essential to ensure a sense of dignity and autonomy for every woman”.
negotiated process. As a negotiated process it unfurls within pre-existing structures, necessitating an account of these structures. Thus, empowerment is not merely *what should* be done, but more significantly *what can* be done and expanding the possibilities of what can be done according to the aspirations of the people concerned, *when* and *how* things should be done and by *whom*. Frequently, control is operationalized as the ability of women to control the various aspects of their lives. Such an argument is premised more on the normative understanding that women should be independent, rather than on the extant interdependent nature of relationships, and constraining structures. Control is a dynamic concept, the meaning of which differs according to the context, as it involves not merely control over objects but an effect of interaction between agents within a structured context.

Thus, to act against norms entails significant opportunity costs, and for people to do so the NGO has to enable them to tackle these by building their capacity e.g. women moving out of marriage. NGOs have to build poor people's capacity and create awareness about other alternatives, which means that both credit and conscientization have an important role to play. Also of importance are the diverse operations of power, subtle and not so subtle, as delineated in Lukes's three-dimensional conceptualization of power. Hence, women in most instances do not perceive or know what their interests are because of the internalization of norms and values generated by the society at large. This entails a more robust conceptualization of structures as the conditioning context of the process. It is in this context that the discursive relationship between the NGOs and poor women assume substantive importance, for empowerment is basically a process of expansion of the possibilities/alternatives for those who lack them constrained by their position in the structure and the ensuing relation with other powerful agents. Articulation of possibilities, enhance the capacity of the marginalized to *imagine* alternatives in relation to the structures and their position therein which they had internalised and reified as unchangeable. In sum, the "realm of possibility" and its expansion are intrinsic to the empowerment process.

### 3.1.4 Empowerment as Transformation

Strandberg offers a definition of women's empowerment that is focused on the transformative aspect. She defines empowerment as "all those processes where
women take control and ownership of their lives". It is her contention that conceptualizing empowerment as a transformative process of changing the underlying power relations that render women disempowered has a number of advantages and offers a more realistic understanding of the complexities involved. A correlation between the process of empowerment and the existence of potential for such a process is established when she emphasizes the necessary presence of an array of opportunities to choose from, for women to exercise control and ownership and hence empower themselves.

Though she identifies the importance of the availability of a range of choices, Strandberg does not equate the availability or enlargement of the choice set per se with empowerment. Instead she makes a clear differentiation between the overlapping concepts of human development defined as "a process of enlarging people’s choices" and empowerment. "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 (emphases added)".

Figure 3.2 Strandberg’s conception of empowerment

Strandberg presents a model of empowerment that has women’s ability to make choice as its central element. Women’s ability to make choices is conceived in

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82 Strandberg, “Conceptualising Empowerment as a Transformative Strategy”.
83 Ibid.
84 This model is developed by Kvinnoforum, an organization Strandberg represents.

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this model as the subjective and objective “activity space” available to them to realize their choices and thereby assume ownership for their lives (see figure 3.2). Women’s space for activity and agency is limited by a number of factors respectively representing their objective and subjective “activity space”. First, an inner circle represented by the subjective limiting space of women’s own internalized ideas of what is possible for them to do. A second circle of objective limits, above the inner circle consists of laws and norms regulating what it is legally and normatively permissible for women to do e.g. ownership laws, inheritance laws, mobility, presence in public places, etc. Very importantly, these objective factors regulate women’s activities and thereby result in women internalizing these ideas.85 Contrary to human development that only enlarges the objective activity space for women’s activity, empowerment processes result in the expansion of both subjective and objective activity space as women act to change the laws and norms. The model significantly locates the complex nature of women’s empowerment by identifying both the subjective and the objective features limiting their choice making ability, and also their mutual influence and relatedness. Accordingly, empowerment is visualized as a process that has to essentially negotiate the subjective elements in order to tackle and negate the objective constraints. There is an obvious stress on the subjective transformation without which, Strandberg argues, any changes in the objective elements will not have the desired effect. The complementarity of subjective and objective change, with the latter anchored in the former, is Strandberg’s proposal for a transformative empowerment process.

3.1.5 Empowerment as Choice

Kabeer offers a definition of empowerment which has the “ability to make choices” as its central feature. This is based on the operationalization of power as choice. According to her, to be disempowered implies to be denied choice, and thus the notion of empowerment 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”.86 In other words, empowerment entails a process of change and empowerment has to be seen in relation to conditions of powerlessness and disempowerment.

85 There is also an outer circle conceived as constituting the “ultimate” limits to women’s activity space in an ideal situation, and are unknown.
She further attempts to qualify the concept of choice for purposes of a more robust understanding of the concept of empowerment that would be much closer to reality. Therefore, she qualifies that "choice necessarily implies the possibility of alternatives, the ability to have chosen otherwise".87 A logical association is found between poverty and disempowerment because an insufficiency of the means for meeting one's basic needs often rules out the ability to exercise meaningful choice. Preoccupation with survival needs might orient the choices to more basic ones concerned with life. Even when the survival imperatives are no longer dominant not all choices are equally relevant to the definition of power. Some choices have greater significance than others in terms of their consequences for people's lives. Consequently, Kabeer makes a distinction between first- and second-order choices. The former are those strategic life choices which are "critical for people to live the lives they want (such as choice of livelihood, whether and who to marry, whether to have children, etc.)". These strategic life choices frame other choices that are of second-order and relatively less consequential. The latter may be important for the quality of one's life but do not constitute its defining parameters. Thus, according to Kabeer the notion of choice has to be qualified not only to incorporate the availability of alternatives, but should also account for the nature of alternatives available. "Inasmuch as our notion of empowerment is about change, it refers to the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them". While this formulation of Kabeer is a very useful one, especially her observation that all choices are not of equal value, there is a limitation in it. It does not attach any importance to the primary choices denied to the poor – to food, to shelter etc. These may be experienced differently by a poor and a rich woman, and frame the priorities of the poor women. The poor live in scarcity and insecurity preventing the exercise of their primary choices. For them even the first-order choices delineated by Kabeer might be of considerably less importance compared to the basic life imperatives about which they are denied any choice.

The choice exhibits itself in three interrelated dimensions according to Kabeer: resources (pre-conditions), agency (process), and achievements (outcomes).88 Resources include not only material resources but also the various human and social resources which serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice. Resources are acquired through a multiplicity of social relationships conducted in the

87 Ibid, p.437.
88 Ibid.
various institutional domains. Resources include both the actual allocations as well as future claims and expectations. Access to such resources is dependent on the rules and norms which govern distribution and exchange in different institutional arenas.

The second aspect, viz., agency, is defined as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them". Kabeer does not confine her understanding of agency to observable actions by individuals. Instead, she conceives it to encompass "the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or 'the power within'". Hence, she offers a broad operationalization of agency that is not confined merely to decision-making. In her understanding agency can assume multiple forms, both tangible and intangible, to include bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. Agency is also not confined to individuals and the agency of collectives is acknowledged. Agency is conceived both in its positive and negative forms in relation to power, as the "power to" and "power over". The former refers to people's capacity to define their own life-choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others, while the latter is the capacity of an actor or category of actors to override the agency of others. Contrary to the other definitions presented in our account, Kabeer recognizes, following Lukes, that power can also operate in the absence of any explicit agency. She maintains that the norms and rules governing social behaviour tend to ensure that certain outcomes are reproduced without any apparent exercise of agency, and in those instances where these outcomes bear on strategic life choices, they testify to the exercise of power as 'non-decision-making'. In this context Mehra too observes the dissonance between an expansion of choices for women and an increase in women's ability to exercise choice. Kabeer emphasizes the necessity for two further qualifications about the consequences of the choice and its transformative character. Hence, choice is more about inequalities rather than differences in the choices women make. The discussion about the importance of choice-making as empowering leads to the issue of the interests of women, because these choices are intricately entwined with their interests.

89 Ibid. p.439.
3.1.6 Women, Interests and Empowerment

The debate about women and the empowering nature of their interests revolves around the distinction between their practical and strategic interests by Molyneux.\(^91\) The difference between women’s strategic and practical interests is based on the specificity of the positioning of women in the society on the basis of gender attributes. According to the distinction made by Molyneux, strategic interests are derived from the “analysis of their subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements than those which exist”. In contrast to this, the practical interests are derived from the concrete conditions of women’s positioning within the gender division of labour. The practical interests are usually a response to their immediate perceived needs. Moreover, they do not generally entail a strategic goal such as women’s emancipation or gender equality.

This heuristic distinction was further employed by others to advance women’s interests in development policies. For instance, Moser has pointed out that Molyneux’s idea of identifying women’s needs as either of strategic or practical interests is a useful framework for planning with a gender perspective.\(^92\) Moser has further argued that the practical interests can be addressed in such a way that they have impact for the strategic interests of women. Kabeer expresses a similar opinion, when she argues that provision of new economic resources, new analytical skills and awareness, and mobilization around self-defined concerns and priorities can address both practical and strategic interests of women.\(^93\)

In contrast to these commentators who found the framework of practical стратегических интересов useful, there are others highly critical of the misconceptions that emerge from this framework. In the context of gender planning in North-East India, Alsop cautions about the dangers involved in outsiders identifying the interests of women.\(^94\) According to her, the complexities of relations and social-economic factors and the limitations of ‘projects’ undertaken by ‘outsiders’ can easily lead to unintended outcomes. Furthermore, she also suggests that satisfying a practical need can positively support a strategic concern and that women have to

identify the needs and issues for themselves. Another such criticism comes from Wieringa, who criticizes the framework as theoretically flawed. She specifies reasons that derive from the distinction between practical and strategic interests as inhibiting any reasonable understanding of women’s empowerment. Wieringa contends that women’s interests change over time and vary depending on who is defining them. Moreover, the distinction between interests lead to a homogenization of “women’s interests” where these are diverse, and also implies a hierarchical relation between the two which lends itself to a top-down approach. She also argues that it is empirically impossible to distinguish between the two types of interests and suggests that “the ‘success’ of certain development efforts may be better ‘measured’ by the way new interests surface or come to be defined along the way, than by the progress made in relation to certain interests which were defined during the planning stage”.  

Three critical issues emerge from the above discussion on women’s interests. First, do women as a ‘category’ have any ‘objective’/‘real’ interests of their own? Second, are these interests universal in scope? Third, who should decide about the priority to be accorded to the various interests of women – women themselves or the ‘outsiders’? There are studies that have forcefully questioned the propensity in certain circles to treat women as a ‘homogenous’ category. Instead, these studies highlight the various contexts women inhabit and the diverse manner in which they perceive their interests, essentially conditioned by their structural contexts. Consequently, any talk of women having ‘objective’ interests is ill-found. Interestingly, Molyneux has distanced herself from any efforts to identify any ‘objective’ interests for women any inclination to privilege the strategic over practical interests. Though there have been substantial reservations against identifying ‘objective’ interests for women, there have been enthusiastic attempts to delineate a set of universal capability set for women. Notable here are the efforts of Sen and Nussbaum. Drawing upon, the capabilities and functionings approach, Nussbaum ranks “some capabilities and functions as more central, more at the core of human life, than others”. Such privileging of certain values over others, however

transformatory they might be bear the danger of imposing the 'outsider's' agenda over the 'insider'. It is important for the achievement of empowerment that women themselves define what their own strategic and practical interests are, given their own particular experiences and understanding of their situation. Therefore, it is critical that the 'outsider' continuously articulates alternative imaginations in discourses, but ensures that the promotion of particular interests is more of a negotiated process rather than a unilateral imposition of values.

3.1.7 Feminist Conceptions of Empowerment

Empowerment as a transformatory idea has received widespread support from the feminists who have opposed the efforts made to 'integrate' women into the mainstream without any alteration in the existing power relations through approaches like Women in Development. They criticized this approach as a means to the further subordination of women. They also opposed the particular view of empowerment advocated by development agencies, where women were sought to be 'brought into development' and become 'empowered' to participate within the economic and political structures of society. This view of empowerment has been criticized as illusory since it focused on delegation of power and always contained the possibility of withdrawal of such delegated powers. Hence, feminists argued in favour of an empowering process that would alter the disadvantageous power relation in which women were embedded in their favour. Accordingly, Jill M. Bystydzienski states that empowerment in contemporary feminist usage implies

A process by which oppressed persons gain some control over their lives by taking part with others in (the) development of activities and structures that allow people increased involvement in matters which affect them directly... (P)ower... is generated and shared by the disenfranchised as they begin to shape the content and structure of their daily existence and to participate in a movement for social change.99

Everingham in her study of the efforts of an NGO to empower and conscientize women, argues that women are agents of change rather than just passive recipients or victims of patriarchal actions. Following Ostergaard, who defines empowerment as "increasing women's control over the choices in their lives",

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Everingham argues for the importance of efforts to meet practical gender needs through a trickle-up approach which are consistent with the long-term strategic interests of women, and consequently seeks to reform the public and private structures of inequality and subordination.

The feminist notions of empowerment see women as acting agents and not as beneficiaries, clients, participants, etc. and they deal with the question of power. Feminists have criticized the inclination to treat power solely in terms of the “power over” dimension, and have offered alternative interpretations of power that takes into account a gender perspective. According to them, the latter aspect revolves not on the “power over” aspect which is conflictive, and instead on the generative aspects of power like “power to”, “power with”, and “power within”. Hence, the following classification of power is identified by the feminists:

- power over: controlling power over some one and something. Response to it can be compliance, resistance or manipulation
- power to: generative or productive power that creates new possibilities and actions without domination
- power with: power generating a feeling that the whole is greater than the sum of individuals and action as a group is more effective
- power from within: a sense that there is strength that is in each and every individual.

Feminists thus contend for a broader understanding of power and propose definite strategies to deal with each version of it (see table 3.1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding of power</th>
<th>Implications in practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power over</td>
<td>Conflict and direct confrontation between powerful and powerless interest groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power to</td>
<td>Capacity-building, supporting individual decision-making, leadership etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power with</td>
<td>Social mobilization, building alliances and coalitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power within</td>
<td>Increasing self esteem, awareness or consciousness- raising, confidence-building</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

This shows the importance the concept of power occupies in the conceptualization of empowerment. Despite this, an understanding of empowerment in terms of power relations leads to certain difficulties. The most important among them being what is

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100 L. Mayoux, "Micro-finance and the empowerment of women: A review of the key issues", www.ilo_data\public\english\employment\finance\download\wp23.wpd; Rowlands, “A Word of the Times, But What Does it Mean?”, pp.13-17.
termed as the "paradox of emancipation". This derives from the conceptualization of power available to us in the social science literature.

According to Lukes, there are three dimensions of power.¹⁰¹ The one-dimensional view defines power as something that is expressed in observable relationships: verbal or physical struggles between antagonists. The two-dimensional view includes the influence of intention in power relationships. This perspective criticizes one-dimensional power theories for overlooking the degree to which power may invisibly impede observable power contests. The three-dimensional view of power suggests that power is even more insidious. Three-dimensional perspectives assert that actors' very own interests are shaped by power structures. Thus, actors are often deceived into doing the bidding of others, even while presuming to serve their own self-interest.

The pluralistic, or one-dimensional view of power maintains that power in a democratic system is distributed among competing groups. This perspective stresses that, although it is unequally distributed, everyone has some access to power. Thus, Dahl assumed that one needed only to observe the democratic representational process in action to witness the exercise of power. Dahl's "intuitive idea of power" can be described as follows: "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do".¹⁰² Power, in this sense, is operationalized as the ability of one actor to affect another, which Dahl and other pluralists believe may best be observed in decision-making situations. Overt conflict is a fundamental component of this operationalization of power. Dahl measured power in terms of an actor's ability to win decisions on key issues, which necessarily implies some disagreement, or in Lukes' words, "actual and observable conflict".¹⁰³

Early critics of Dahl, proponents of what Lukes calls the two-dimensional view of power,¹⁰⁴ argued that pluralist restrictions on the operationalization of power discounted an important facet of power: the mobilization of bias. The mobilization of bias is a "bias in favour of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others".¹⁰⁵ Bachrach and Baratz claim that those who are in power exercise control over organizational agendas by making "nondecisions".

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¹⁰¹ Lukes, *Power*.
¹⁰⁵ Lukes, *Power*, p.16.
"Nondecisions" are conscious choices made by agenda-setters that result in suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision-maker. Issues that conflict with the interests of agenda-setters are therefore easily suppressed simply by failing to allocate time for their consideration.

Lukes suggests that the conflict to which Bachrach and Baratz refer is between the interests of those engaged in nondecision-making and the interests of those they exclude from a hearing within the political system. While, according to Lukes, this is a broader view of interests than that which is subscribed to by many pluralists, it remains a restricted definition. That is, Lukes argues that Bachrach and Baratz’s definition is limited to what may be identified as “subjective interests” or those interests that “are consciously articulated and observable”. But Lukes contends that this still sustains too narrow a view of interests and too great a dependence on observable conflict if one is to effectively define the full scope of power and the range of its invisible effects on observable reality. The trouble with both Bachrach and Baratz and the pluralists is that because power, as they conceptualize it, only shows up in cases of actual conflict, it follows that actual conflict is necessary to power. But this ignores the crucial point that the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place.

Lukes proposes that power relationships may be comprised by latent conflict, or what he describes as “a contradiction between the interests of those exercising power and the real interests of those they exclude”. Real interests are the goals and desires that actors “would want and prefer, were they able to make the choice”. In many cases, Lukes suggests, actors are not able to make the choices they would prefer because their conscious, subjective interests have insidiously been constructed by invisible exercises of power.

The exercise of the third face of power often results in what appears to be consensus, but Lukes argues that such quietude can in fact be evidence of the most coercive face of power. Thus, Lukes suggests that one cannot capably analyze power or observable social reality without taking into account the dimensions of power that

106 Bachrach and Baratz, Power and Poverty, p.44.
107 Lukes, Power, p.20.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid., p.23.
110 Ibid., pp.24-25.
111 Ibid., p.34.
serve to structure events prior to their enactment in empirical reality. Yet, despite the fact that Lukes argues that it is essential to acknowledge the existence and effects of all three dimensions of power, he also maintains that there are inescapable dilemmas that prevent agreement upon the definition of the third face of power.

Lukes states that power is "one of those concepts that is ineradicably value-dependent". This means that every definition of power is based upon value-assumptions and, therefore, any particular definition may only be applied situationally, and never universally. However, Lukes adds that even though every definition of power is limited, some definitions nonetheless "extend further and deeper than others". Lukes argues that the concept of interests is akin to power in that it is also a value-dependent, "irreducibly evaluative notion". Furthermore, he notes that:

(D)ifferent conceptions of what interests are are associated with different moral and political positions. Extremely crudely, one might say that the liberal takes men as they are and applies want-regarding principles to him, relating their interests to what they actually want or prefer, to their policy preferences as manifested by their political participation. The reformist, seeing and deploring that not all men's wants are given equal weight by the political system, also relates their interests to what they want or prefer, but allows that this may be revealed in more indirect and sub-political ways—in the form of deflected, submerged or concealed wants or preferences. The radical, however, maintains that men's wants may themselves be a product of a system which works against their interests, and, in such cases, relates the latter to what they would want and prefer, were they able to make the choice.

While the three-dimensional, or radical, view of power may be a deeper and more thorough-going analysis of power, Lukes admits it is still a value-dependent notion. The value-dependency of the three-dimensional view of power in turn leads to the "paradox of emancipation".

For Lukes to identify an exercise of power, he must be able to address "the double claim that A acts (or fails to act) in a certain way and that B does what he would otherwise not do". To clearly recognize an exercise of power, one must first identify a "relevant counterfactual". A relevant counterfactual is a referent through which one may detect the interruption of an actor's interests by the imposition of another set of interests. For example, supporters of one and two-dimensional views of power argue that observable conflict—actors visibly manipulating the behaviour of

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113 Ibid., p.34.
114 Ibid., p.34.
115 Ibid., p.41.
others—suffices as an unambiguous relevant counterfactual. Thus, according to this definition, power relationships exist only when \( A \) observably gets \( B \) to do something \( B \) would not otherwise do. However, in the case of the three-dimensional view of power identifying a relevant counterfactual becomes more complicated. The definition of the third face of power implies that events in empirical reality, as well as observers’ perceptions, are distorted by social power. Lukes states:

\( (\text{I})n \text{ general, evidence can be adduced (though by nature of the case, such evidence will never be conclusive) which supports the relevant counterfactuals implicit in identifying exercises of power of the three-dimensional type. One can take steps to find out what it is that people would have done otherwise.}^{116} \)

Although Lukes cites several interesting examples, he never explains specifically how to identify a relevant counterfactual for the third face of power. Thus, Lukes takes the discussion of power to a point where he challenges the limitations that have been imposed upon its definition by other theorists. However, Lukes fails to follow through by offering a means with which his conception of power can be employed to produce a more competent evaluation of observable social events.

Lukes does not specify a method for identifying relevant counterfactuals because he claims power is such a value-dependent concept that it is impossible to develop a consistent power-identification process. Thus, he believes that there are ways to identify counterfactuals—and, thereby, exercises of the third face of power—but they depend in each case upon the values of the observer. Another reason that Lukes never specifies a consistent means with which to identify relevant counterfactuals for the third face of power is because he never clearly defines a model of real interests. And Lukes probably never proposed a specific method for identifying real interests because doing so precipitates certain seemingly insoluble problems. Lukes discusses two alternatives implicit in the identification of real interests:

(1) that \( A \) might exercise ‘short-term power’ over \( B \) (with an observable conflict of subjective interests), but that if and when \( B \) recognizes his real interests, the power relationship ends: it is self-annihilating; or (2) that all or most forms of attempted or successful control by \( A \) over \( B \), when \( B \) objects or resists, constitute a violation of \( B \)'s autonomy; that \( B \) has a real interest in his own autonomy; so that such an exercise of power cannot be in \( B \)'s real interests.\(^{117}\)

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\(^{116}\) Ibid., p.50.
\(^{117}\) Ibid., p.33.
Following this, Lukes states that the first alternative is a “licence for tyranny”, while the second alternative “furnishes an anarchist defense against it”. Thus, implied within the very definition of real interests is a power struggle: to define interests for other actors is to impose one's own views about what is “right and wrong” upon the events that one observes, whereas failing to define real interests means that one has chosen not to recognize the occurrence of such subtle exercises of power. Although, strictly speaking, these alternatives may not represent a dichotomy, they do appear to represent the only available options for identifying exercises of the third face of power: to impose one's own value system or to relativistically avoid making any kind of judgment about the invisible effects of power on the course of social events. Recognizing the problematic consequences of both alternatives, Lukes refuses to embrace either one.

Benton labelled the conceptual impasse at which Lukes arrives the “paradox of emancipation”. He writes,

In its simplest form this is the problem of how to reconcile a conception of socialist practice as a form of collective self-emancipation with a critique of the established order which holds that the consciousness of those from whom collective self-emancipation is to be expected is systematically manipulated, distorted and falsified by essential features of that order. If the autonomy of subordinate groups (classes) is to be respected then emancipation is out of the question; whereas if emancipation is to be brought about, it cannot be self-emancipation. I shall refer to this problem as the 'paradox of emancipation'.

Thus, Benton asserts that “emancipation” can neither be engineered in the minds of the subjugated masses, nor implemented through the machinations of tyrants: in both cases, coercive power undermines the goal of autonomy. Hindess has also criticized Lukes for trying to argue for some non-existent real interests. Hindess has forcefully argued that there are no real interests for any group of people and that interests emerge in the course of their interaction. Consequently, empowerment as a process wherein women realize their interests has to be considered as a negotiated and contingent process where strategic and practical interests get articulated variously.

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118 Ibid.  
3.2 Measuring Empowerment

Any transformatory process oriented towards social change needs to be analyzed and measured to understand the nature of the initiative, to decide on future policy commitments, and to take corrective measures that would reorient it in the right direction. We frequently come across several such efforts at measurement of the outcomes of policies and programmes, for instance, school drop-out rates to measure progress in education, infant mortality in child health care, etc. Most of these development efforts lend themselves to easy measurement and social scientists are continuously engaged in developing several tools and indicators for the purposes of measurement. If this is the general trend, how does empowerment fare?

The very nature of empowerment, its multiple dimensions, variability with individuals and regional contexts, and more importantly the power component at its core have deterred moves to develop suitable indicators that would aid in understanding and evaluating the efforts. Nonetheless, there have been several efforts to measure the success of empowerment programmes. These attempts have either concentrated on the process or the outcome of empowerment, and have come out with contradictory results about the same set of programmes. For instance, with the proliferation of micro-credit programmes and advancement of several claims about the appropriateness of credit supply as an effective means of empowering women, studies have investigated more or less the same sets of credit programmes, and interestingly come out with conflicting judgements on the efficacy of increased credit supply as a means of empowerment. In this context, three broad opinions are discernible in the available literature. First, there are studies that offer a positive evaluation of the impact of credit as a strategy for empowerment arguing that microfinance has very beneficial economic and social impacts. Secondly, we have commentators who take the opposite position pointing to the negative impacts that arise from micro-finance schemes. Distinct from these, there are studies that offer


a mixed view about micro-finance. Even as they identify the positive impact such programmes can have, these studies also refer to the downside of micro-finance, for instance, their failure to reach the poorest sections of the society. Kabeer has convincingly argued that this difference in judgement is essentially due to the assumptions and approach that inform these studies, and has mentioned two such distinct trends to understand these programmes in either in terms of process or outcomes.

The basic problem with various efforts at measuring empowerment has been the identification of suitable indicators and variables for this purpose and the specific notions of empowerment they are based upon. These studies try to understand empowerment from the vantage point of certain predetermined indicators and the satisfaction of specific criteria by various attempts at empowerment. The major problem with all these attempts has been the identification of certain indicators which have limited applicability across cultures. They fail to take into account the contextual factors which determine the nature of the process or the outcome. We take up some of the indicators used in studies on empowerment to understand the efficacy of adopting pre-determined indicators to evaluate a dynamic process such as empowerment.

Goetz and Sen Gupta used an index of "managerial control" (see table 3.2) exercised by women on the loans they received as the measure of their empowerment and found that women had "little or no control" over their loans. This led the study to suggest a pessimistic account of the credit-based empowerment initiatives. As Kabeer notes this index conflates the two components of decision-making, namely 'control' and 'management'. Contrary to the conception of Goetz and Sen Gupta, women might make the choice of only influencing the loan utilization and


restitution and leave the implementation function to their spouses due to reasons of social norms or the burdensome nature of the work.

Table 3.2 Goetz and Sen Gupta’s loan control index for empowerment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control Types</th>
<th>Action Leading to Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full control</td>
<td>Over entire productive process including marketing, and significant control over all aspects except of marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial control</td>
<td>Provision of substantial labour inputs but little or no managerial control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very limited control</td>
<td>Minimal input to production process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No involvement</td>
<td>Where there was no labour input or managerial control</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Goetz and Sen Gupta, “Who Takes the Credit?”

Ackerly adopts “knowledge of accounting” women possessed as the indicator of evaluating the empowering potential of credit interventions. Women who were able to report on the input costs for loan-funded ventures, its product yield and its profitability were considered to be empowered (see figure 3.3). This is a very narrow understanding of the empowerment process based solely on accounting knowledge. Such an understanding is flawed on two accounts. First, it is not necessary that women who have accounting knowledge will also ‘control’ the loan-based enterprise. For reasons of social norms and guided by notions of corporate household some women might prefer to ‘delegate’ the actual implementation to their husbands. Moreover, with the markets being heavily male-oriented women’s accounting knowledge need not automatically translate into the ability to exercise full ‘control’ over the loan usage as they find it difficult to participate in market-related activities. Second, as we have noted above women leave the implementation part of the loan utilization to their husbands, and in such circumstances they would naturally have lesser knowledge on accounting. But, this cannot diminish the influence these women exercise in other aspects of loan usage and repayment.

Table 3.3 Ackerly’s “knowledge of accounting” index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Input-cost</td>
<td>The respondent was scored with one if she answered the question properly and with zero if she could not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product yield</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profitability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Oxaal and Baden, "Gender and Empowerment".
Kantor in her study on female home-based garment producers concluded that they tend to control the income flowing from their enterprises supportive of the argument that access to income is empowering. However, she also found that women's control might flow from the low level of their earnings and that when they become more successful, loss of control increases. She measured empowerment outcomes through women's control over their enterprise income and women's participation in household decisions. Control over income was measured through a question asking who made decisions about the use of the income the woman earned (see figure 3.4). Importantly here she accounts for the "jointness" of household decision-making, rather than relying on an individualist understanding that tends to ignore the significance of household context and notions women harbour for their empowerment. In this context, it needs to be pointed that some women tend to voluntarily handover their income to their husbands, and in their cases 'control' over income might not be a useful indicator.

Table 3.4 Women's household economic activity in relation to empowerment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extent of agency involved in the decision to work</td>
<td>Indirect question related to work levels – women were asked what they would do if others in the household earned enough so that they no longer had to work. Choices included continue to work at the same level, expand the enterprise, reduce the hours worked in the same activity, change activities, add another activity or stop working.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference between access to and control over income</td>
<td>Who makes decisions about the use of the income the woman earns. It was coded as one if the woman decides alone or with her spouse and zero if otherwise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household decisions</td>
<td>Buying/selling property, Number of children to have, Male children's education, Female children's education, Marriage decisions, Mobility of females, Deciding use of savings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Kantor, "Women's Empowerment Through Homebased Work".

In their comparative study of the income-generating programmes initiated by NGOs and state, Basu and Basu identify a set of indicators that includes Ackerly's "knowledge of accounting" along with household decision-making and member accountability (see table 3.5). The last mentioned is important in the context of the involvement of 'outsiders' to empower the marginalized. This factor decides the empowering nature of the relationship between the 'outsiders' and the people.
### Table 3.5 Empowerment indicators adopted by Basu and Basu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements of Empowerment</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic</strong></td>
<td>The level of income per month</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Business knowledge:     | - Knowledge of wholesale price of raw materials  
                          - Names and addresses of buyers and markets for selling product  
                          - Information on credit  
                          - Knowledge of exploitation by middleman  
                          Established market links for:  
                          - Collecting raw materials at cheaper rate  
                          - Selling product at good market price. |
| Social                  | Mobility outside the home for:  
                          - Collecting orders  
                          - Collecting raw materials from non-local shops  
                          - Developing market networks  
                          - Attending meetings/workshops  
                          - Depositing money  
                          - Repaying loan  
                          Nature of participation in the intra-family decision-making process:  
                          - 'Main role'  
                          - 'Equal responsibility with the other members’  
                          - 'Only sometimes'  
                          - 'Do not have any say'  
                          Addresses problems, complaints and suggestions:  
                          If the environment helps its members to voice their problems, suggestions and complaints freely  
                          Offers timely support and assistance to its member:  
                          - Initial support with business management and associated skill  
                          - Role of organization in loan sanction and associated formalities  
                          - Post-credit follow up activities  
                          Shares power and financial information with its members:  
                          When members of an organization have power in the decision-making process or play an active role in making policy decisions |

Source: Adapted from Basu and Basu, "Income Generation Program and Empowerment of Women: A case study in India".  
Note: * Members were asked to rank their perception as “good”, “satisfactory” and “not satisfactory”.

Osmani offers a model of empowerment that is based on Sen’s cooperative-conflictive gender relations (see figure 3.6). She rightly highlights the importance of perceived interests and contribution women have in relation to their households. But any equation between landownership and its relationship with the breakdown position of women needs to be treated with caution, for this is essentially mediated by the social norms, which prohibit women from realizing the effects for their ownership in full and in a manner favourable to them. Moreover, Osmani’s adoption of consumption patterns in household as indicators are problematic. Women guided by social norms value their role as food-makers and distributors in the household, and at the same time tend to prioritize others’ consumption needs above their own.
Table 3.6 Osmani’s co-operative conflict model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Measures/Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breakdown position</td>
<td>Value of non-land assets owned by the woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Land owned by her at present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Land received through inheritance or previous marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support of parents/brothers in a crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can support herself fully if left alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived interest</td>
<td>Thinks she works no less hard for the family than husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thinks husband contributes more to the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived contribution</td>
<td>Thinks unequal access to food in the family is fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thinks unequal access to education in the family is fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thinks unequal access to healthcare in the family is fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thinks unequal role in decision making in the family is fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Receives pin money from husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can spend pin money freely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can spend own money freely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife insisted on and adopted family planning measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife could not have baby because of husband’s opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife claims to have gained weight on family planning after joining credit programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>Claims males and females have equal access to food in her family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims males and females have equal access to education in her family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims males and females have equal access to education in her family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims males and females have equal access to decision-making in her family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption</td>
<td>Wife’s meal score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Husband’s meal score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difference between the couple’s meal scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife’s annual consumption of personal effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Husband’s annual consumption of personal effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Household’s annual non-food consumption</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These indicators of empowerment are further corroborated with the effect they have on the autonomy, access and consumption pattern of the women.

A much broader framework to analyze women’s empowerment is offered by Chen, which not only takes into account the material aspects of empowerment, but also the perceptual and relational aspects of it (see figure 3.7). Of significance here is the accounting for basic needs as an indicator of empowerment. In the context of debate on practical and strategic interests of women this framework assumes importance, for along with the basic needs it also accounts for strategic interests like greater participation in public arena. In the context of current enthusiasm for governance, commentators exploring its relevance for gender have argued that women tend to be more thickly located in the lower levels of institutions of governance.\(^{124}\) Hence, any change in this trend with women moving up in the hierarchy needs to be appreciated for its empowering nature.

\(^{124}\) N. G. Jayal, "Locating Gender in the Governance Discourse", in UNDP, Essays on Gender and Governance, New Delhi: UNDP, 2003. Her suggestions that we need to broaden our perspective on gender and governance to include not merely the formal institutions of governance, but also the informal structures of power; and that we need to appreciate the importance of the preponderance of women at lower levels of institutions for its
Table 3.7 Chen’s empowerment framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change Type</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>Income</td>
<td><em>Increased income and income security</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resources</td>
<td><em>Increased access to, control over, and ownership of assets and income</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Basic needs</td>
<td><em>Increased or improved health care, child care, nutrition, education, housing, water supply, sanitation and energy source</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Earning capacity</td>
<td><em>Increased employment opportunities plus ability to take advantage of these opportunities</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptual</td>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td><em>Enhanced perception of own individuality, interest and value</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td><em>Enhanced perception of own ability and capacities</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vision of future</td>
<td><em>Increased ability to think ahead and plan for the future</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visibility and respect</td>
<td><em>Increased recognition and respect for individual’s value and contribution</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Decision-making</td>
<td><em>Increased role in decision-making within the household and community</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bargaining power</td>
<td><em>Increased bargaining power</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participation</td>
<td><em>Increased participation in non-family groups, in local institutions, in local government, in political process</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-reliance</td>
<td><em>Reduced dependence on intermediation by others for access to resources, markets, public institutions plus increased ability and ability to act independently</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational strength</td>
<td><em>Increased strength of local organizations and local leadership</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mayoux, “Poverty Elimination and the Empowerment of Women”.

Hashemi et al explored the possibility for credit having empowering influence on women’s lives. For this purposes they developed indicators that relied on outcomes rather than the process of empowerment (see table 3.8). They found in their study that women’s access to credit resulted in empowerment through asset building, increased purchasing power, political and legal awareness and in the composite empowerment index they adopted. Nonetheless, it needs to be noted that the indicators they have identified are not of universal relevance and might vary considerably even in relation to women in the same locality. For instance, “mobility” as an indicator certainly denotes the freedom and confidence women have to travel and is of considerable consequence for their empowerment, but all women need not relate in the same manner to mobility. Constrained by time and ill health women might prefer to ‘delegate’ their travel related functions to their husbands. Furthermore, mobility can also have a negative relevance for women’s empowerment when it is perceived as a choice, for at times travel related functions might be participatory nature, are significant for the relational dimension of women’s empowerment in Chen’s framework and in general.
imposed on women by their menfolk who are either disinterested or make a choice to spend their time for other purposes. Here women are forced to ‘obey’ their husbands conditioned by patriarchal norms.

Table 3.8 Hashemi, Schuler and Riley’s empowerment index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Associated Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of mobility</td>
<td>Places the respondent had gone (the market, a medical facility, the movies, outside the village) with additional point if she had gone alone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to make small purchases</td>
<td>Progressive points for purchasing small items used daily in food preparation for the family (kerosene oil, cooking oil, spices), small items for self (hair oil, soap, glass bangles), ice cream or sweets for children. Extra points if decisions were normally made without asking husband’s permission, and if the purchases were made at least in part with money earned by the respondent herself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to make larger purchases</td>
<td>One point for purchasing pots and pans, two points for children’s clothing, three points for saris for herself and four for buying the family’s daily food. An additional point for each category if the purchase was made at least in part with money earned by the respondent herself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in major household decisions</td>
<td>One point for making a decision (individually or jointly with the husband) within the past few years about house repair or renovation, one point for a decision to take in a goat to raise for profit, three points for deciding to lease land and four points for deciding to buy land, a boat or a bicycle rickshaw.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative freedom from domination by the family</td>
<td>The respondent was asked if, within the past year someone in the family had taken money from her against her will, taken land, jewellery or livestock from her against her will, prevented her from visiting her natal home or prevented her from working outside the home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political and legal awareness</td>
<td>One point each for knowing the name of a local government official, a Member of Parliament, and the Prime Minister, and one point each for knowing the significance of registering a marriage and knowing the law governing inheritance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in political campaigning and protests</td>
<td>Classified as “empowered” if the respondent had campaigned for a political candidate or had joined with others to protest: a man beating his wife, a man divorcing or abandoning his wife, unfair wages, unfair prices, misappropriation of relief goods, or high-handedness of police or government officials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic security and contribution to family support</td>
<td>A point was assigned if the woman owned her house or homestead land, a point for owning any productive asset, a point for having her own cash savings and an additional point if the savings were ever used for business or money-lending.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Hashemi, Schuler and Riley, “Rural Credit Programs and Women’s Empowerment in Bangladesh”.

The “ability to make purchases” also suffers from similar ‘essentialist’ problems. Women might make the choice of delegating this function to men, and all the purchases they make need not be empowering. For instance, purchasing food provisions is mostly assigned to women according to gender-division of labour and only in particular circumstances of poverty these functions become a matter of choice. In other situations this function is hardly denied to women, and is in fact considered as theirs.
### Table 3.9 CIDA'S empowerment index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Legal**  | - the enforcement of legislation related to the protection of human rights  
- number of cases related to women's rights heard in local courts, and their results  
- number of cases related to the legal rights of divorced and widowed women heard in local courts, and results  
- the effect of the enforcement of legislation in terms of treatment of offenders  
- increase/decrease in violence against women  
- rate at which the number of local justices/prosecutors/lawyers who are women/men is increasing/decreasing  
- rate at which the number of women/men in the local police force, by rank is increasing or decreasing. |
| **Political** | - percentage of seats held by women in local councils/decision-making bodies  
- percentage of women in decision-making positions in local government  
- percentage of women in the local civil service  
- percentage of women/men registered as voters/percentage of eligible women/men who vote  
- percentage of women in senior/junior decision-making positions within unions  
- percentage of union members who are women/men  
- number of women who participate in public progress and political campaigning as compared to the number of men |
| **Economic** | - changes in employment/unemployment rates of women and men  
- changes in time use in selected activities, particularly greater sharing by household members of unpaid housework and child-care  
- salary/wage differentials between women and men  
- changes in percentage of property owned and controlled by women and men (land, houses, livestock), across socio-economic and ethnic groups  
- percentage of available credit, financial and technical support services going to expenditure of female/male households on education/health  
- ability to make small or large purchases independently women/men from government/non-government sources |
| **Social**  | - number of women in local institutions (e.g. women's associations, income generating groups etc.) to project are population, and numbers of women in positions of power in local institutions  
- extent of training or networking among local women, as compared to men; control of women over fertility decisions (e.g. number of children, number of abortions)  
- mobility of women within and outside their residential locality, as compared to men. |

In addition to these quantitative indicators are a series of suggested qualitative indicators comprised of indicator questions to assess empowerment:

- **To what degree are women aware of local politics, and their legal rights? Are women more or less aware than men? Does this differ by socio-economic grouping, age or ethnicity? Is this changing over time?**

- **Do women and men perceive that they are becoming more empowered? Why?**

- **Do women perceive that they now have greater economic autonomy? Why?**

- **Are changes taking place in the way in which decisions are made in the household, and what is the perceived impact of this?**

- **Do women make decisions independently of men in their household? What sort of decisions are made independently?**

Source: Adapted from Oxaal and Baden, "Gender and Empowerment: Definitions, Approaches and Implications for Policy".
Table 3.10 World Bank’s three important forms of gender disparity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Empowerment</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social, economic, and legal rights</td>
<td>Political and legal equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social and economic equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equality in marriage and in divorce proceedings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to productive resources</td>
<td>Education – primary and secondary enrolment rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health – life expectancy at birth, the burden of disease, gender-related violence, HIV/AIDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Productive Assets – land ownership, access to information, technology, and financial resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employment and earnings – labour force participation, occupation representation ratio, and relative earnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice to influence decisions in their communities and at a national level</td>
<td>Participation in politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Representation in elected office</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Two sets of indexes emanating from a broader understanding of the concept of empowerment come from World Bank and CIDA (see figures 3.9 & 3.10). Most of these indicators are pitched at a macro-level, and evaluate the broad thrust and direction of the situation of powerlessness or empowerment. It needs to be pointed out that a mere representation of women in public institutions is not important and the quality of their participation assumes substantive importance here. Hence, though these indicators are outcome oriented, the process here is more important.

The framework offered by Mayoux relies on the various dimensions of power relations implicated in gender relations (see figure 3.11). Here the indicators developed are comprehensive enough since they are based on the various dimensions of power. Though these indicators help us to identify the various possible aspects of women’s empowerment, it would be wrong to expect all these indicators to have equal relevance in across people and regions. The contextual factors and individual idiosyncrasies mean that the relevance of these various indicators is contingent even for a particular individual.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Power Relations</th>
<th>Economic Empowerment</th>
<th>Well-Being Benefits</th>
<th>Cultural/Legal and Political Empowerment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Power Within:</strong></td>
<td>- increased awareness and desire for change for individual woman</td>
<td>- women's positive evaluation of their economic contribution - desire for equal economic opportunities - desire for equal rights to resources in the household and community</td>
<td>- women's confidence and happiness - women's desire for equal well-being - desire to take decisions about self and others - desire to take control of own fertility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Power To:</td>
<td>- access to micro-finance services - access to income - access to productive assets and household property - access to markets - reduction in burden of unpaid domestic work including childcare</td>
<td>- skills including literacy - health and nutrition status - awareness of and access to reproductive health services - availability of public welfare services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- increased individual capacity for change - increased opportunities for access</td>
<td>- control over loans and savings use and income there from - control over income from other household productive activities - control over productive assets and household property - control over household labour allocation - individual action to challenge discrimination in access to resources and markets</td>
<td>- control over parameters of household consumption and other valued areas of household decision-making including fertility decisions - individual action to defend self against violence in the household and community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Power Over:</td>
<td>- acting as role model for other women, particularly in lucrative and non-traditional occupations - provision of wage employment for other women at good wages - joint action to challenge discrimination in women's access to resources (including land rights), markets and gender discrimination in macro-economic context</td>
<td>- individual action to challenge and change cultural perceptions of women's capacities and rights at household and community levels - individual engagement with and taking positions of authority within cultural, legal and political processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- increased solidarity/joint action with other women to challenge underlying resource and power constraints at household, community level and macro-level</td>
<td>- higher valuation of and increased expenditure on girl children and other female family members - joint action for increased public welfare provision for women</td>
<td>- increase in networks for support in times of crisis - joint action to defend other women against abuse in the household and community - participation in movements to challenge cultural, political and legal gender subordination at the community and macro-level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mayoux, "Poverty Elimination and the Empowerment of Women".
In contrast to these indicators those developed by Strandberg and the “Freedom from Hunger” project rely on more qualitative indicators (see figures 3.12 & 3.13 respectively). Notable in these two instances are the evolving nature of indicators reflecting the context under study. Both the studies found it difficult to apply the same set of indicators in different areas. Women interpreted and attached different meanings to the same element. Another significant point to be noted here is the exploration of empowerment at various levels – individual, group and society. This essentially seeks to recognize and establish the relationship between empowerment at these various levels.

Table 3.12 Strandberg’s context-specific indicators at multiple levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements of Empowerment</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Gender awareness        | 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 | 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                  | 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) |

Source: Strandberg, "Conceptualising Empowerment as a Transformative Strategy".
Table 3.13 Empowerment indicators in *Freedom from Hunger* Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empowerment Levels</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women in the last 6 months:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Helped a friend with his/her work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gave advice about health/nutrition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gave advice about business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Were a member of a group or association</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in the last month:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Attended non-kin funerals*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Made cash contributions to non-kin funerals*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Were involved in community political life*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Spoke at the community's General Assembly meeting*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ran for public office or a member of the community's sindicato*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Travelled to La Paz*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Hosted a community festival either by themselves or with family*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married women were asked to identify who made these decisions using the following scale: &quot;only your husband&quot;, &quot;mostly your husband&quot;, &quot;jointly – you and your husband&quot;, &quot;mostly you&quot; and &quot;only you&quot;:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How much to spend on clothing for children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How much to spend on medicine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How much to spend on agricultural inputs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How much to spend on fixing the house</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Whether school-aged children will go to school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Paying primary school fees for children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Paying school expenses – clothes, food, materials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women were asked if:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- In the last 6 months, husband offered help to watch children*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- In the last 6 months, husband offered help with non-farm enterprise*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- They ever discussed method of spacing or preventing pregnancies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- They remembered an occasion when they gave their husbands spending money because their husbands wanted something but lacked the money to buy it*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women were asked to assess their own degree of self-confidence using a specified range of &quot;Very Confident&quot;, &quot;Somewhat Confident&quot; and &quot;Hopeful, but Not Confident&quot; on whether they thought they would be able to:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Feed their children the good foods that they know they need</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Prevent their children from getting diarrhoea and other illnesses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Educate their child to the child's fullest potential</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Earn more money next year than this year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from McKnelly and McCord, "Women's Empowerment", *credit with education, impact review no. 1*, October 2001

Notes: * These indicators were not part of the original survey and were included only in the follow-up survey; * These indicators were derived during the course of research in Ghana and were employed only there; * These indicators were derived during the course of research in Bolivia and were employed only there; * These indicators were employed only in the Ghana survey and not in Bolivia, due to difficulties in eliciting response.

Household decision-making is considered as the single most important feature of gender relations and women's empowerment. In our survey of the indicators developed in various studies we found the list to be differing between countries and even within a single country (see table 3.14). This difference only reflects the contingent nature of the process.
of empowerment, as what is empowering in one context need not be empowering in another, and what is empowering at one point of time need not be empowering at another time. This spatial and temporal dimension ensures the contingent and fluid nature of the process of empowerment. Consequently, what assumes greater relevance is the need to ground the empowerment strategies as reflecting and addressing the features of powerlessness and disempowerment in different contexts and time.

Table 3.14 Decisions as measures of women decision-making indicator

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Decisions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Cleland et al., 1994*</td>
<td>Children’s education, visits to friends and relatives, household purchases, health care matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hashemi et al., 1996</td>
<td>Ability to make small and large consumer purchases, house repair, taking in livestock for raising, leasing in of land, purchase of major assets like land, boat, and rickshaw.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Osmani, 1998</td>
<td>Spend pin money received from husband freely, spend own money freely, having children, adopting family planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Kishor, 1997*</td>
<td>Household budget, food cooked, visits, children’s health, use of family planning methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jejeebhoy, 1997*</td>
<td>Purchase of food, purchase of major household goods, purchase of small items of jewellery, course of action falls ill, disciplining the child, decisions about children’s education and type of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kantor, 2002</td>
<td>Buying/selling property, number of children to have, male children’s education, female children’s education, marriage decisions, mobility of females, use of savings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Razavi, 1992*</td>
<td>Food purchase, inputs, labour and sale in agricultural production and other income-earning activities, sale and purchase of assets, children’s education, seeking health care for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>Morgan and Niraula, 1995*</td>
<td>Food purchase, the decision by women to work outside, major market transactions, the number of children to have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Kritz, Makinwa and Gurak, 1997*</td>
<td>Household purchases, whether wife works, how to spend husband’s income, number of children to have, whether to buy and sell land, whether to use family planning, whether to send children to school, how much education, when sons and when daughters marry, whether to take sick children to doctor and how to rear children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Sathar and Kazi, 1997*</td>
<td>Purchase of food, number of children, schooling of children, children’s marriage, major household purchases, women’s work outside the home, sale and purchase of livestock, household expenses, purchase of clothes, jewellery and gifts for wife’s relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>Becker, 1997*</td>
<td>Wife working outside, making a major purchase, the number of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strandberg, 2001</td>
<td>Individual level – making purchases with or without the support of the partner, group level – starting up of different income generating projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana and Bolivia</td>
<td>McNelly and McCord</td>
<td>How much to spend on clothing for children, on medicine, on agricultural inputs, on fixing the house, school-aged children’s education, paying primary school fees for children, paying school expenses – clothes, food, materials</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: For those postscipted * are adopted from Kabeer, “Resources, Agency, Achievements”.

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Figure 3.3 Re-visit and expansion of Structure-Agency framework

Remote Reality

Weak-Indirect

Strong-Direct

Lived Reality

Opportunity Costs

Strategic Guidance

Reflection

Capacity

Poor Women

Other Agents

NGO

Exit & Voice

Empowerment

Disempowerment