Chapter I - Conceptualizing Empowerment: An Overview of Key Theoretical Perspectives and Ideas

The term 'empowerment' is one of the most loosely-used terms in development discourse, meaning different things to a variety of development actors - governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international aid agencies. It is therefore important to understand the term more precisely, in order to achieve clarity about its conceptual premises and its strategic implications, especially for women. This is all the more important because throughout the developing world and even in many so-called developed regions, large-scale programs have been launched with the explicit objective of 'empowering' women, and several older women's development projects now call themselves ‘women's empowerment’ programs. Increasingly, funding of work on women's issues is linked to whether development organizations adopt empowerment as a stated goal, even when there is high lack of clarity in terms of what this implies for methodology and field strategies (Batliwala, 1995).

One of the problems with a concept like “Empowerment” in the development discourse is that there is no coherent body of literature that lends itself directly amenable to understanding the term in great depth. Consequently, one has had to ‘read around’ and review different streams of literature in order to arrive at a coherent understanding of the term and its implications for women. Review of literature on this exercise has included key theoretical debates and writings on the history of gender policy and planning for development, on community participation and development, writings on power and empowerment, radical political philosophy, adult literacy, social work, grass-roots people’s movements, especially women’s movements in the Third World and in India and finally an examination of the links between concepts like civil society, social capital and questions of citizenship rights to the idea of empowerment. In addition, key documents related to major international meetings and conferences in the past decade dealing with the theme of women’s empowerment have also been reviewed. Given the scope of this research, the attempt in this section is to map out important elements of
what constitutes women’s empowerment by drawing upon writings from various fields and in the process setting out a clear conceptual framework of the term itself.

In the past two decades, the development context in India and predominantly rural development has been characterized by a proliferation of professional development organizations (mostly NGOs) involved in a range of cross sectoral projects and programmes. This period is also marked by heavy external inducements from aid agencies, which are routed largely through both government and Non governmental organisations (hence forth NGOs) for various development activities. As against this reality, development projects are expected to perform the “cutting edge” function (Shetty, 1991). The power of the project approach is so overwhelming that attempts at suggesting alternatives such as “process based” or “learning and innovation based” approaches (Korten, 1980) “anti-projects” and “para-projects” (Uphoff, 1980) have either been rejected by mainstream development thinkers and practitioners or incorporated merely as footnotes in project planning manuals. Given the overwhelming legitimacy that the project approach has gained, this research focuses on understanding women’s empowerment within the framework of projects and programmes designed and implemented with the specific objective of empowering women, especially in the context of the Southern State of Andhra Pradesh.

1. Empowerment in the context of Gender and Development Programmes: A Review of Gender Policy and Planning Approaches

Throughout the third world, particularly during the decade’s 1970s-1990s, there has been a proliferation of policies, programmes and projects designed to incorporate women’s needs and requirements in the process of development. The emergence of the “Empowerment Approach “ needs to be seen against the background of gender policy and planning approaches in order to fully understand its conceptual underpinnings and its practice in the development context.
While the important role women played in Third World development processes is now widely recognized, the emergence of women as a constituency in development and their changing significance within policy declarations and institutional structures of major development agencies owes much to the pressures created by various social movements, especially the upsurge of women’s movements during the above period. Research and writing on women also provided useful insights into the status of women in various parts of the world. Changes within the United Nations, a major player in this field, also provide an illustrative example of the new consciousness about women. The publication of Esther Boserup’s book “Women’s Role in Economic Development” (Boserup, 1970) marked the beginning of what is considered a watershed in thinking about women in development. The declaration of UN Decade for Women (1976-85) played a crucial role in highlighting the important, but often previously invisible role of women in the economic and social development of their countries and communities, and the plight of women in low-income households in Third World economies. Boserup’s study was the first to demonstrate systematically at the global level the sexual division of labor in agrarian economics.

1.1 Women in Development or WID as an approach was used by development agencies in the United States like USAID to bring Boserup’s evidence before American policy makers. American liberal feminists also used the term WID to indicate a set of concerns (including legal and administrative changes) to integrate women into economic systems. In countries as diverse as Japan, Zimbabwe and Belize, Ministries of Women’s Affairs and WID units were set up adopting this approach (Gordon, 1984). While the WID approach ensured the institutionalization of the recognition that women’s experience of development and societal change differed from that of men, the approach was grounded in modernization theory. Modernization, industrialization and growth were uncritically accepted as the basis for development. The WID approach also focused only on the productive aspect of women’s work, ignoring the reproductive side of their lives. Further the approach accepted societal structures and did not question the nature or sources of women’s subordination. The WID approach, with its underlying rationale that women are an “untapped resource” who can provide an economic contribution to development
gained ground and has had an important influence in popularizing income-generating projects for women in several countries (Moser, 1989)

1.2 Women and Development or WAD approach emerged in the second half of the 1970’s, influenced by neo-Marxist ideas. It grew out of the concern with the limitations of modernization theory and the WID assumption that women were inadvertently left out of development processes. Drawing its theoretical base from the dependency theory, WAD advocates argued that women always have been part of development processes, but have experienced it differently from men. They further emphasized that the WID notion of linking women to development is inextricably linked to the maintenance of the economic dependency of the Third World, to the industrialized countries. WAD advocates held that women’s contribution in their societies and their labor both within and outside the household is central to the maintenance of those societies. While the WAD approach offered a more critical view of women’s position than WID, it assumed implicitly that women’s position would improve if international structures become more equitable. By focusing more on the productive dimension of women’s work and women’s condition within international class inequalities, the WAD approach did not offer insights on the influence of the ideology of patriarchy.

1.3 Gender and Development or GAD emerged in the 1980s as an alternative to WID, with its roots in socialist feminism. This approach sought to bridge the gap of modernization theorists by linking the relations of production to the relations of reproduction, by taking a more holistic view of women’s lives. This approach also highlighted the limitations of addressing women in isolation in term of their sex, i.e. their biological differences from men rather than in terms of the social relationship between men and women in which women were systematically subordinated. The GAD approach looked at the totality of social organization, economic and political life in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding. It sought to focus on the social construction of gender inequalities between men and women and the assignment of roles, responsibilities and expectations based on these unequal differences. By focusing on women’s contribution both within and outside the household, including non-commodity
production, the GAD approach sought to break and reject the public/private dichotomy legitimized by patriarchy and often used as a mechanism for devaluing women’s work. GAD also recognized women as critical agents of change while stressing the need for women to organize themselves for a more effective political voice. While the GAD approach went further than WID and WAD in questioning the underlying assumptions of various structures of patriarchy, the integration of this approach into ongoing development strategies was not easily possible since it demanded a commitment to structural changes and shifts in power imbalances at various levels that posed serious challenges to institutionalized male practices in various development agencies. Consequently, in a number of countries, development policy and planning tended to largely embrace the WID approach (Rathgeber, 1988)

In practice, gender policies adhering to some of the above theoretical positions tend to fall broadly into three kinds – Gender Neutral policies, Gender Specific Policies or Gender Transformative Policies (Kabeer and Subramaniam, 1996). Gender-neutral policies may have a good understanding of the gender division of resources and responsibilities but focus only on meeting the policy objectives effectively. They therefore tend to leave the existing division of resources and responsibilities in tact and concentrate on targeting the appropriate actors to realize pre-determined goals. Gender specific policies are those that target and benefit a specific gender to achieve certain policy goals or meeting gender specific needs accurately without touching the division of resources or responsibilities either. Gender transformative policies recognize the existence of gender specific needs and constraints and seek to transform existing gender relations in a more egalitarian direction.

1.4 An Overview of Gender Planning Frameworks and Methodologies

The development and proliferation of several of the above theoretical frameworks did not necessarily ensure the incorporation of gender into development policy and planning in any easy manner. Each of these frameworks with their merits and limitations had their uses in diverse and complex contexts, governed largely by the ideological orientation of
the users and more importantly the extent of male resistance from predominantly male
dominated development institutions. At another level, while the primary concern of much
feminist writing has been to highlight the complexities of gender divisions in specific
socio-economic contexts, the actual translation of these complexities and insights into
methodological tools and appropriate gender aware planning frameworks has been a
major challenge. For those involved in planning practice, it has proven remarkably
difficult to “graft” gender onto development plans and programmes. Notwithstanding the
fact that Gender planning framework has a long way to go before being recognized in its
own right as a distinct planning approach, attempts have been made to use insights
provided by each of the above theoretical frameworks into methodological tools for use
by planners (Masefield, 1994)

1.5 The Harvard Framework or the Gender Roles Framework is a popular, liberal
feminist approach based on the sex role theory, developed at the Harvard Institute of
International development in collaboration with the WID office of USAID. The
framework aims to provide an economic logic for allocation of resources to women based
on women’s contribution to production. Equity and economic efficiency thus go hand in
hand. The framework has four interrelated components: In asking who does what? The
Activity Profile as a tool facilitates data generation on various activities performed by
men and women in any context. While this framework sees women as a homogenous
category, it is useful to adapt the tool more meaningfully by adding other parameters such
as caste, class, age, time allocation for various activities and activity locus etc. The
Access and Control Profile –Resources and Benefits helps to list out and identify
resources used for carrying out various activities and analyzing who has access and
control over their use. The Influencing factors component helps to chart out the factors,
which affect the gender differentiation identified in the profiles. Project Cycle Analysis is
the final component that helps in examining a project proposal or intervention in the light
of gender disaggregated data and social change (Overholt, Anderson et al 1985, Murthy,
1993, Kabeer and Subramanian 1996)
Caroline Moser developed what is known as the Moser framework (Moser, 1989) in an attempt to introduce an empowerment agenda into mainstream planning. The framework rests on the concepts of The Triple Roles of Women, Practical and Strategic Gender Interests and Policy Approaches to low-income Third World women and gender planning. This framework seeks to set up gender planning as an approach in its own right and sees emancipation of women from structures of subordination as its goal aimed at equality, equity and empowerment. Triple Role is a tool that helps to identify and map the gender division of labor. Women in most societies undertake productive, reproductive and community managing activities. While productive work is the production of goods and services for consumption and sale, reproductive work involves care and maintenance of the household and its members. While community work is the collective organizing for management, provision and maintenance of community resources such as water, health care and education, mostly undertaken by women and largely voluntary and freeing nature, community politics is the organizing at the formal political level, mostly undertaken by men involving considerable power, status and money.

Based on Molyneux’s (1985) conceptualization of women’s interests and needs, Moser makes a further distinction between “women’s practical gender needs” and “strategic gender needs” for purposes of planning. Practical gender needs are identified as a response to immediately perceived necessity in a specific context like water, shelter, health care, food and work. While all members of a community may share these needs, they are more likely to be identified or expressed by women, who take on the chief burden of providing these needs on a daily basis. Strategic gender needs are identified as those if addressed will transform relations of subordination between men and women (Moser, 1989). Varying across contexts, these may include issues of legal rights, domestic violence, land rights for women, equal wages and women’s control over their bodies (Kannabiran, 1998).

Despite the proliferation of various policies and programmes designed to assist low-income women, there have been no systematic categorization or identification of the extent to which various interventions have responded to the gender needs of women. The
diversity of interventions since the 1950s were formulated, not in isolation but in response to changes at the macro-level economic policy approaches to Third World development. Thus the shift in policy approaches towards women are categorized by Buvinic (1983) as “welfare” largely involving relief and aid programmes aimed at vulnerable groups like women seen as dependent on men and passive recipients of largesse, “equity” oriented approaches aimed at redistribution of resources and equality for women through legislation and State intervention – the original WID approach was in fact the equity approach, and the “anti-poverty” approach that focused on poverty as a problem of development rather than on inequality, with therefore emphasis shifting here to reducing income inequalities.

Moser (1989) added two further classifications to the above categorization of approaches - “efficiency” and “empowerment” approach. While the shift from equity to anti-poverty has been well documented, the identification of WID as efficiency has passed almost unnoticed, even while it continues to be the predominant approach for those working within a WID framework. In the efficiency approach, the emphasis shifts away from women towards development on the assumption that increased development participation for Third World women is automatically linked to increased equity. Amongst several writers who pointed this out, Maguire (1984) has argued that the shift from equity to efficiency reflects a specific economic recognition of the fact that 50% of the human resources available for development were being wasted or underutilized. A position that led a spectrum of powerful development organizations like the USAID, the World Bank and the Organization for Economic cooperation (OECD) to propose that an increase in women’s economic participation in development links efficiency and equity together. “The experiences of the past ten years tell us that the key issue underlying the women in development concept is ultimately an economic one” (USAID, 1982). “Substantial gains will only be achieved with the contribution of both sexes, for women play a vital role in contributing to the development of their countries. If women do not share fully in the development process, the broad objectives of development will not be attained” (OECD, 1983). The efficiency approach also coincided importantly with the marked deterioration in the World economy, occurring from the mid-1970s, especially in
countries like Latin America and Africa, enabling multi-lateral aid agencies like the World Bank and IMF to initiate structural adjustment policies for achieving economic stabilization. Women in these contexts were therefore seen as equally capable and more reliable than in repaying building loans as workers and showing far more commitment to maintenance of services as community managers (Fernando, 1987; Nimpuno-Parente, 1987). These examples illustrate the fact that the efficiency approach largely meets only the practical gender needs of women, even while relying negatively on the elasticity of women’s labor and time which go unpaid and fails to meet their strategic gender needs.

1.6 Emergence of the Empowerment Approach

The empowerment approach as an identified policy approach developed out of dissatisfaction with the original WID as equity, because of its perceived cooption into the anti-poverty and efficiency approaches. The empowerment approach however differs from the equity approach both in terms of its origins, its understanding of structures of women’s oppression and the strategies that it proposed to change the position of Third World women. The origins of this approach drew more from a number of emergent feminist movements for women’s equal rights and grassroots organizational experiences in several Third World countries, especially Asia, than from the research and writings of western feminists. Research and writings by several women writers (Mazumdar, 1979; Jayawardena, 1986) demonstrate the independent history of Third World feminism as an important force for change, with women’s participation in large numbers in nationalist struggles for freedom, working class struggles, peasant rebellions and the formation of several autonomous women’s groups and organizations who pushed for change in favor of women. While acknowledging inequality between men and women, the empowerment approach went further in highlighting the multiple forms of oppression experienced by women owing to their multiple caste, class, race, colonial histories and positions and suggesting the use of multiple strategies in challenging these structures of oppression. This approach also questioned the fundamental assumption around the relationship between power and development underlying previous approaches and emphasized more in terms of the capacity of women to increase their own self-reliance and internal
strength. Women’s ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material resources was seen as critical for determining their right to make choices in life and influence the direction of change. The empowerment approach also questioned the underlying assumptions in the equity approach that development necessarily helps all and secondly that women want to be integrated into the mainstream of development that is essentially Western-designed, in which they have no choice in defining their priorities (Moser 1989).

The Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), a loose formation of individual women and women’s groups set up prior to the 1985 World Conference of Women in Nairobi, made one of the most succinct articulations of the empowerment approach. DAWN’s purpose was not only to analyze the conditions of women but to also formulate a vision of an alternative equal society where women’s basic needs are recognized as basic rights. Using time as a parameter for change, the approach distinguishes between short-term and long-term strategies to break structures of oppression with national liberation from colonial and neocolonial domination, shifts from export-led strategies in agriculture to greater control over the activities of multinationals being fundamental prerequisites for the process of attaining equality between genders, classes and nations in the long run. Changes in the law, civil codes, systems of property rights, labor codes, control over women’s bodies and changes in the social and legal institutions that were essentially patriarchal were sought as part of addressing strategic gender needs of women. It was in suggesting the means to achieve the above needs that the empowerment approach went beyond the previous approaches. Recognizing the limitations of top-down government legislation in potentially addressing the above needs, the approach suggested building solidarity and joint action as well as political mobilization, consciousness raising, popular education as important points of leverage at various levels as to address structures of power (DAWN, 1985). While recognizing the importance of different form of organizations, advocates of this approach sought to transform the more traditional organizations to move towards a greater awareness of feminist issues. The empowerment approach also sought to address strategic gender needs indirectly through practical gender needs, thereby avoiding the more
confrontationist position taken up by the equity approach advocates. In the Indian context, the experiences of groups such as Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW) working in Bombay and the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in Ahmedabad demonstrate the above strategy. “Empowering through self-reliance and organization” has been a slow global process, the period especially after the women’s decade inspired by this approach, saw the emergence of diverse women’s groups, organizations, movements, networks and alliances covering a range of issues from peace and disarmament to specific national and local issues. Even while having different organizational arrangements, a lot of these groups shared a commitment to empower women through rejection of rigid hierarchical structures in favor of more open democratic spaces.

Because of the potentially challenging nature of the empowerment approach, it remained largely unsupported both by national governments and bilateral aid agencies for a long time. This meant that most of the groups and organizations advocating this approach were not funded or under funded and relied largely on the use of voluntary and unpaid women’s time and depended for financial support from a few international non-governmental agencies who were prepared to support this approach. Evidence suggests that considerable support came from the governments of countries like Netherlands, Canada, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. The Netherlands perhaps went the furthest in critiquing the WID approach in favor of what it termed an “autonomy” approach (Boesveld et al., 1986)

1.7 Women’s Empowerment Framework

To translate some of the ideas proposed in the empowerment approach into practice, the women’s Empowerment framework also known as the Longwe framework was developed as a planning tool by Sara Hlubekile Longwe. This framework introduces five different levels of equality as criteria to assess the degree of women’s empowerment in social and economic arenas like control, participation, conscientisation, access and welfare. The framework also helps to identify whether the project design ignores or
recognizes women’s issues through criteria such as the negative level where there is no mention of women’s issues, the neutral level where the project design recognizes women’s issues but says that women are not worse off than before and the positive level where the project is concerned with improving the position of women relative to men. Longwe makes a distinction between women’s issues, which are concerned with levels of equality and women’s concerns that are concerned with their traditional and subordinate sex stereotypes.

1.8 Social Relations Framework

The Social Relations Framework (SRF) evolved through interaction between Southern academics and practitioners and Naila Kabeer at the Institute of Development Studies, IDS, Sussex. The first key element of this framework is recognizing the extent to which development has increased human well being in terms of survival, security, autonomy and human dignity. Production again is not confined to market production but to all those tasks in reproducing human labor and livelihoods. The second is the recognition of unequal social relations, which in turn determine unequal access and relation to resources, claims and responsibilities. The term Social relations is used to describe the different structural relationships that intersect to ascribe positions to individuals in the structure and hierarchy of society. Gender relation is one such relation. Social relations are also seen as resources that groups and individuals have. Poor women often rely on networks of family and friends to manage their workload. This calls for development to look at ways of supporting these relationships to build on solidarity, autonomy and reciprocity rather than reducing them. This framework identifies institutions such as the State, Market, Community and the Family/kinship as the third key element which frame rules for achieving social and economic goals. Gender inequalities are reproduced across all these institutional sites with their specific ideologies that intermesh in complex ways, mutually impacting and in turn impacting on women’s lives. All the 4 institutions have five distinct, but interrelated dimensions of social relationships such as rules, resources, people, activities and power. Categorizing policies as gender blind and gender aware depending on their biases towards women is the fourth element in this framework with
the fifth and last being to analyse the causes and effects of key problems while planning in the form of immediate, intermediate and long term levels.

Each of the different policy approaches and planning frameworks described above represented a response to a distinct set of imperatives. It would therefore be misleading to regard them in a chronological sense or as mutually exclusive. In several development agencies and institutions, old approaches persisted even as new ones were attempted. Evidence again suggest though that the welfare and efficiency approaches, even while being opposing approaches, were and continue to be dominant, with others being largely transitional and the empowerment approach yet to be taken seriously by development agencies (Kabeer, 1994). Even while providing rich insights on the complexities of gender inequalities in different contexts, wide-scale confusion still persists regarding the definition and use of these policy approaches, with many institutions of different kinds either unclear about their approach or collapsing different approaches. With welfare and efficiency approaches still being dominant and endorsed by most agencies, there are several challenges in shifting policy towards equity and empowerment approaches. While attempts have been made to translate these insights into practice or planning through practical tools and frameworks, the extent to which they have been actually put to use and the degree to which they have been effective remain inadequately documented.

2. Community Participation and Empowerment: Some Issues

In the context of development projects, a discussion on the concept of “empowerment” must be placed within the larger debate on “Community Participation”, a term again used most commonly by development practitioners and planners. Empowerment over time has come to share much in common with participation in a manner where a lot of ideas, values and meanings that govern participation appear to permeate and govern the former.

The first systematic elaboration of the idea of people’s participation in the development process seems to have appeared in a modern variant of liberal democracy (Midgley et al, 1986). In the post-independence era (1950-65), especially in the context of developing
countries, a lot of these basic ideas were transferred largely in the form of initiation of cooperatives and Community Development and Animation Rurale movements (Gow and VanSant, 1983). The need for the periphery and its populace to have a voice in their own development was strongly affirmed by the emergence of “Dependency” theorists as a forceful indictment of the “modernization” paradigm and its obvious failure to tackle the problems of mass poverty in underdeveloped countries. During the mid-1970s, popular participation acquired a sharp focus in the form of community participation within development projects, based on a realization that the macro impacts of development are rooted in micro efforts at the grassroots. International organizations, both within and outside the UN orbit were quick to endorse this thinking. The World Employment Conference held by the ILO in 1976, the launch of the “Participatory Organisations of the Rural Poor”, programme in 1977, WHO’s “Alma-Ata” declaration in 1978, FAO’s World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD) in 1979 followed by the “People’s Participation Programme” are some significant landmarks which unequivocally supported the need to incorporate community participation in development projects (Oakley and Marsden, 1984).

The new stress on participation has also been understood in terms of a deeper and more pervasive “paradigmatic shift”, signaling a marked change in pattern of ideas, values, methods and behavior in development thinking and practice. Arguably, “the big shift of the past two decades has been from a professional paradigm centered on things to one centered on people”, (Chambers, 1995). The paradigm of things was dominant in development in the 1950s and 1960s, with emphasis placed on big infrastructure, industrialization and irrigation works, with economists and engineers through their top-down physical and mathematical paradigms determining norms, procedures and styles. Even while economic analysis continues to dominate, the paradigm of people became increasingly influential. This is shown by the burgeoning literature on people and participation (Cernea 1985, 1987; Uphoff 1985, 1988; Chambers 1983, 1989), by the increase in numbers of non-economist social scientists in aid agencies, the development and spread of participatory approaches and methods like PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal). Social anthropologists and non-governmental organizations, in particular
shifted the balance from the things to people thus shifting the rhetoric of development that favored putting people first, and often, putting poor people first of all.

The disillusionment with failures of previously designed top-down plans and programmes sensitized policy makers, administrators, donor agencies and NGOs to the need to understand the local realities for designing development programmes and projects that respond to local needs and requirements of different people. The need for understanding the local realities of communities and enabling the excluded sections of poor, especially women to have a claim and voice in development saw the gradual but nevertheless visible emergence of concepts like participation and empowerment in development literature (Narayanan, 2003). In the Indian context, significantly from the early 1990s, several streams of approaches and methods under the broad rubric of “participatory approaches” was applied to addressing social sector development planning like primary education and health to large-scale development and management of natural resources in the form of participatory irrigation and watershed management, wasteland development, sustainable agriculture, community forestry management, promotion of thrift and credit societies by involving different sections of the local communities in diverse contexts. Both participation and empowerment came to be seen in a means-end framework where enabling people’s participation increasingly came to be seen as a means for their ultimate empowerment from structures of poverty and oppression. In recent years, the twin concepts have been positioned at the center of both radical and mainstream thinking and practice on development.

Despite its universal appeal amongst a wide array of actors who embraced it, what participation meant in practice to different people has been increasingly elastic, particularly since the term has been largely used in a loose manner with the critical co-ordinates of context, time, scale and authorship being largely left out. Participation thus has come to assume a dynamic definition. FAO sees participation as a basic human right, UNICEF sees it as self-reliance and autonomy, Nyerere viewed it as a political process and a learning experience (Cernes ed., 1985; UNESCO, 1986; Oakley et al, 1991). Cohen
and Uphoff (1980) describe participation not as a single phenomenon but as a rubric with the actual tactics and practices varying, depending on a host of factors.

A decade or so after the value of participation was recognized, the “cloud of rhetoric” surrounding it and the “pseudo participation” that is seen in practice (Uphoff, 1985) has invited sharp criticism even from observers who are generally in favor of people-centered participation. In more recent years, this has led to a serious questioning of the interpretation of participation and a realization that the issue merits closer scrutiny. Firstly it was found that Third World governments in particular use the concept of community participation primarily to reduce their own responsibility for promoting development (Oakley et al, 1991). In the case of newly independent developing countries, using community participation as a tool to extend the control of national governments has been described as “manipulative participation” (Midgley et al, 1986). Making political capital is often a hidden agenda behind promoting community participation (Moser, 1983). The tendency to integrate and assimilate the varying interests of diverse groups as well as the dangers of co-opting local leaders through community participation has also been highlighted. This is particularly true in cases where the communities have been assumed to be homogenous entities with the result that traditional elites (normally men) have taken a disproportionate share of the benefits (Bamberger, 1988). Obtaining data, especially technical information, from the local population in order to lower implementation costs has been seen as an unstated objective in promoting participation (Conyers, 1982). Even while lip service is paid to community participation, the conventional “project cycle driven development” takes over in practice. “Delivering aid efficiently is the overriding priority for donor agencies…participation is secondary and often not congruent with the political and organizational imperative of conventionally managed projects” (Finter-Busch and Wicklin, 1987). A critical review of the experiences of over 40 World Bank projects revealed that almost 50% of them were interested in community participation to recover project costs from the community in the form of labor, cash and maintenance, another 38% had participation as the stated objective to enhance project effectiveness in terms of assessing beneficiary need for demand generation and service utilization, around 20% had capacity building objectives
aimed primarily at post-project construction and maintenance purposes. Only three projects (8%) had empowerment as an objective (Paul, 1987). Participation is often used as a “means” to achieve largely “predetermined economic ends” under the guise of “empowering people” has largely come to be seen by critics as participation for modernization and essentially “instrumental” in nature, eventually benefiting donor agencies and implementing external organizations in the process. An important question posed by Henkal and Stirrat in this context is asking “not how much are people empowered but rather for what?” (2001). The instrumental view of participation does not appear to have changed much despite the renewed interest in participation in the context of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) and the increased proliferation and newfound respectability of NGOs in official aid circles (Shetty, 1991).

2.1 Gender and Community Participation: Some Issues

It has also been pointed out that participatory approaches like PRA tools, often promoted as asocial, ahistorical, universal and neutral technology, often fail to take into account both the complexity and tenacity of local power structures in varying contexts. Often already existing inequalities in the form of class, caste, gender discrimination and social exclusion get reinforced and reproduced through development projects carried out with a stated objective and intention of people’s participation in the process. PRA has also had its gender blind spots. In the process of seeking to establish collective consensus on issues, often power stratifications especially in the form of gender are rendered invisible. In most instances, women from marginalized sections, often lacking confidence to speak in public have been left out of PRA exercises that tended to be quite public events. The focus on “public” issues for planning interventions has again meant that the dynamics and conflicts in the “private sphere”, that impinge on women’s lives often tends to be ignored or glossed over. To a large extent, it can be said that planning processes claiming to use participatory processes tend to keep the public-private dichotomy problematized by feminists, intact and unchallenged with far reaching implications for women. For example studies from Nepal show women’s non-participation in irrigation associations since they got water through their male family members who were members (Cleaver,
A study on a participatory model of indigenous irrigation management in Kenya shows how culturally evolved taboos prevent women from taking part in the communal repair of work on the furrow, thus reinforcing their dependency on male members (Adams, 1997). Similarly, more recent studies in India on the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme, modeled on a participatory approach showed marginalization of women and poorer sections who gained little from the programme, which in practice replaced older, informal arrangements for resource sharing with more formalized rules and practices imposed through the local representatives, often from more powerful sections, regulating resource access and use (Martin and Lemon, 2001).

While attempts have been made to innovatively apply PRA tools for a gender analysis and for reflecting diversity and the complexity of varying contexts, these have been few and far between. Often, the power of the tool has been placed over the perspective and thinking of the user leading to an otherwise oversimplification of a complex reality in many instances. The challenge evidently is for designing tools that deal both with the private sphere as well as reflect the diversity of any reality or issue and the power relations embedded within the structures (Mosse and Wellbourn, 1999). While participation appears to have “democratized” the language of development, its “mainstreaming” clearly has imposed a price with far-reaching implications for its transformative potential and claims to empowerment of the poor and women. By drawing from the earlier discussion on the analytical distinction made between women’s practical and strategic gender needs, it is useful to critique the need identification process of planners in asking whose priorities, needs are adopted and consequently whose participation and information is relied upon for planning interventions? To what extent then has the “mainstreaming” of participatory planning approaches resulted in “upstreaming” women’s participation in development processes as active agents?

Like the Women in Development (WID) agenda, participation is founded on the assumption that “those who have been excluded should be brought into the development process. In order to move away from the predominantly instrumental view of participation, participation must be seen as a political process, a “site of conflict”
consisting of diverse interests attempting to both challenge and resist patterns of power and dominance and bringing change. If participation needs to move beyond the façade of good intentions, it is important to distinguish clearly the diversity of form, function and interests so that the dynamics thrown up by this process becomes the focus for struggle and change (White, 1996). It is in the context of the above discussions that one needs to seriously examine the implications of the new found enthusiasm during the 1990’s for embracing the empowerment approach by aid agencies, governments and NGOs, at the international level and especially in the Indian context.

3. Power and Empowerment

The period of the sixties and seventies were marked by protest – in the South against the injustices of the international economic order and in the North against class and race privilege in various arenas. Movements for civil rights and black power combined with Third World liberation struggles served to heighten awareness of continuing forms of neocolonialism across the world. The women’s movement in various forms also emerged out of the questioning mood prevailing during the time and sought to challenge male domination and hierarchy on several fronts. The upsurge of these movements and their demands also compelled a critical reexamination of strategies and measures for assessing growth-oriented models of development. There was a plea for evaluating development policies through the use of political values and parameters such as freedom and equality. The preoccupation with growth was questioned, while the political essence of progress was emphasized (Kothari, 1988; Mohanty, 1989). With the upsurge of women’s movement and other social movements, the pursuit of freedom and justice were redefined and development process was assessed based on such parameters (Omvedt, 1993). The early use of the term empowerment in the sense of power to the marginalized gained legitimacy in this context. An early usage of the term empowerment can also be found in the North American Black radicalism of the 1960s. While the concept is easy to use, it is difficult to define. Because the concept has political, social and psychological components, people in a wide range of disciplines and fields use it. Empowerment is
closely linked to self-esteem and perceived competence that could lead to pro-active behavior and social change (ibid, 1986)

The concept of empowerment has been linked to the rise of populism, calling for return of power to people in the U.S. Some view the growth of new populism as being fostered by empowerment ethos in the form of pro-choice demonstrations. The quest for empowerment is seen to be tied up with the new consumer role in advanced capitalist society where choice is empowering and expansion of educational opportunities has created pressures from below and there is a general cry for devolution of powers to local communities (Riessman, 1986). The community development movement in the UK also echoes elements of similar thinking (Craig et al, 1990). Writing from a radical political philosophy perspective, West (1990) outlines some empowerment principles- groups must maintain constancy in their objectives, generalize the interest of their members, be efficient, develop explicit procedures and engage in networking.

Empowerment is often equated with gaining power and access to resources necessary for a living. Attempts to view empowerment as economic empowerment alone to escape poverty fall largely within the realm of economic objectives promoted by instrumentalist forms of community participation and proponents of the early WID approach. Respecting diversity, local specificity, decentralization of power and promotion of self-reliance are seen as the empowering form of participation suggested by Pearse and Stiefal (1979). Empowerment implies “equitable sharing of power” thereby increasing the political awareness and strength of weaker groups and increasing their influence over the “processes and outcomes of development” (Paul, 1987). Hulme and Turner, using Talcott Parsons’s analysis of “distributive” dimension of power involving a win-lose situation as against the “generative” dimension of power in terms of a positive-sum game situation, suggest that empowerment in practice is a mix of the two dimensions. Empowerment is viewed as “stimulating a process of social change that enables the marginalized groups to exert greater influence in local and national political arenas” (Hulme and Turner, 1990). In what could be termed as an empowerment strategy, Clarke (1991) using the example of grassroots organizations in Bangladesh suggests issues like leadership building, group
organization, alliance building and development of political strategy as key elements of the process. The need for creating conditions where the poor have a real choice in occupation, education, housing, health and social relationships are seen as elements of an empowerment process by Accord, an NGO working with marginalized tribal groups in Southern India (Thekaekara, 1991). The idea of empowerment expresses the interests of the disenfranchised groups of society and represents a confluence of experiences at the grassroots (Shetty, 1991).

The definitions of empowerment used in education, counseling and social work, although developed in industrialized countries, are broadly similar to Freire’s concept of “conscientisation”, which refers to individuals becoming ‘subjects’ in their own lives and developing ‘critical consciousness’ of their circumstances leading to action to change it. This process has been variously called awareness building, adult literacy, consciousness raising, literacy training, non-formal education and had underpinned popular education programmes in many socialist countries in the post liberation phase. Kassam (1989) emphasizes the empowering and liberating potential of literacy from structures of power, giving the poor access to the written knowledge – and knowledge is power. Writers on social group work stress the need for using empowerment in the context of oppression and working to remove inequalities (Ward and Mullender, 1991). In counseling context, McWhirter (1991) defines empowerment as “the process by which those who are powerless a) become aware of power dynamics in their life context and b) develop skills and capacity to gain control over their lives, c) exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others and d) support the empowerment of others in the community “. She makes a useful distinction between “the situation of empowerment” where all the above conditions are met and an “empowering situation” where one or more of the conditions is in place or developed. Mcwhirter stresses that empowerment is not about gaining power to dominate others. In the context of ‘farmer first and last-based’ farmer participatory agricultural research, Thrupp (1987) proposes that legitimizing indigenous knowledge is empowering for resource-poor farmers. The emergence of ‘primary environment care’ (PEC) in the context of rapid growth of environmentalism has led
authors to postulate that empowerment refers to securing access to natural resources and sustainable management of these resources (Borrini ed., 1991).

The concept of women’s empowerment owes a lot to women’s movements aimed at equal rights for women. In one of the few definitions of empowerment which has a specific focus on development (Keller and Mbwewe, 1991) empowerment is seen as “A process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist them in challenging and eliminating their own subordination”. Women’s movements for empowerment ultimately represent a challenge to all patriarchal and hierarchical structures in society. As mentioned in the earlier section here, the contribution of the DAWN group to the discourse on empowerment has been critical. Following the strategy of empowerment through organization, DAWN identifies six prerequisites for empowerment – “resources (finance, knowledge, technology), skills training, and leadership on one side; and democratic process, dialogue, participation in policy and decision-making, and techniques for conflict resolution on the other” (Sen and Grown, 1988).

Srilatha Batliwala, writing on women’s empowerment, especially in the South Asian context emphasizes the need to understand empowerment in terms of its root-concept: power. “The most conspicuous feature of the term empowerment is that it contains within it the word power. Empowerment is therefore concerned with power and particularly with changing the power relations between individuals and groups in society” (Batliwala, 1995). Power can be defined as the degree of control over material, human and intellectual resources exercised by different sections of society. These resources fall into four broad categories: physical resources (like land, water, forests); human resources (people, their bodies, their labour and skills); intellectual resources (knowledge, information, ideas); and financial resources (money, access to money). The control of one or more of these resources becomes a source of individual and social power. Power is also dynamic and relational, rather than absolute. The extent of power of an individual or group is in turn correlated to how many different kinds of resources they can access and
control. This control confers decision-making power, which is exercised in three basic ways: to make decisions, make others implement one's decisions, and finally, influence others' decisions without any direct intervention - which in one sense is the greatest power of all. Decision-making of these kinds is used to increase access to and control over resources. Different degrees of power are sustained and perpetuated through social divisions such as gender, age, caste, class, ethnicity, race, North-South; and through institutions such as the family, religion, education, media, the law, etc. “Women’s empowerment is thus the process, and the outcome of the process, by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources, and challenge the ideology of patriarchy and the gender-based discrimination against women in all the institutions and structures of society” (Batliwala, 1995). Based on a detailed analysis of a number of women’s empowerment programmes in the South Asian context ranging from integrated rural development programmes, awareness building programmes to groups involved in research, support and advocacy, Batliwala notes that in some programmes, especially economic interventions, the terms empowerment and development are used synonymously based on the assumption that power comes automatically through economic strength. Economic interventions in themselves, even while making a limited impact on women’s lives do not create a space for women to look at other aspects of their lives. In terms of strategies then, a combination of economic interventions along with building confidence and self-esteem, information, analytical skills, ability to identify and tap available social, political and economic influence and opportunities is needed for empowering women in a meaningful manner. A distinction between individual and collective empowerment is also made but both are seen as necessary ingredients in the empowerment process.

The need for a more precise understanding of empowerment is again made by writers like Rowlands (1995), who emphasize the need for exploring the meaning of empowerment in the context of its root concept of power. “Different understandings of what constitutes power lead to a variety of interpretations of empowerment, and hence to a range of implications for development policy and practice. Empowerment terminology makes it possible to analyze power, inequality, and oppression; but to be of value in illuminating
development practice, the concept requires precise and deliberate definitions and use” (ibid; 1995)

The multiple and sometimes misleading interpretations of the term empowerment has led some writers to question whether the concept is increasingly being co-opted as a “development buzzword” like “community participation” and the potential implications following from this trend. Despite the loose and often confusing usage of the terms community participation and empowerment, there appear to be some fundamental differences between them. “In essence, while community participation moved the debate away from the modernization-driven economic paradigm to a more socially conscious view of development, empowerment has pushed the debate further into the realm of political economy by highlighting the politics of participation” (Shetty, 1991). This observation also ties in with Moser’s classification of the empowerment approach as departing from previous policy approaches to Third World women’s planning in terms of proposing strategies aimed at building self-reliance of women and as an approach grounded in the vision and needs of poor, marginalized women at the grassroots.

The equation of empowerment with participation in a means-end framework continues to be part of mainstream discourse at various levels. For example, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen (1995) had empowerment as a major objective. The Summit declaration, and the programme of action signed by the heads of different government reads “We affirm that in both economic and social terms, the most productive policies and investments are those which empower people to maximize their capacities, resources and opportunities…. Recognize that empowering people, particularly women, to strengthen their capacities is a main objective of development and its principal resource. Empowerment requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and well-being of our societies” (pages 7 and 23 of the summit declaration). In a critique of this, Mohanty (1995) argues that the definition of empowerment being suggested here assumes that people’s participation and strengthening their capacities can be achieved without addressing the structural constraints that have historically been responsible for
their oppression embedded in economic structures, ideology and political processes. The concept of empowerment only implies formal rather than substantive power and it involves an external upper agency to grant power rather than people below seizing it in the course of struggle. More importantly, the popularization of this concept, if accepted uncritically can have disabling consequences, since it is part of the political philosophy of the new economic globalisation of western capitalism (ibid, 1995).

The concept of empowerment, although much criticised for its loose formulation, has been used to critique WID for the failures of the human capital approach that influenced it to take seriously gender inequalities in household distribution of food or state distribution of education. Analysts using the concept of empowerment were often very close to GAD ideas concerning the definition of gender and the strategies to address inequality, but highlighted analytically and in practice the activism of women and alliances with pro-feminist men. They thus took less account of the structuralism in the GAD framework (which in practice often became a form of WID). Empowerment writers also took issue with the failures of postmodernism to engage directly with issues of material inequalities, rather than just the forms in which these were represented. The concept grew out of feminist movements and a view of the importance of enhancing agency amongst the poorest. However initial attempts to give empowerment conceptual coherence suffered from a number of difficulties. These included how to specify the social context; how to work with changing meanings of empowerment, often linked to agendas very different to those of the women’s movement; how to engage with questions of justice; how to define the nature of agency or relate women’s interests strategically to the agendas of those in power (Yuval Davis, 1994; Rowlands, 1997; Kabeer, 1999; Morley, 1998; Oomen, 2003 Rai, 2001; Brighouse and Unterhalter, 2002).

In an important paper that takes on the issue of a clearer conceptualization, Kabeer discusses how empowerment might be measured. She distinguishes three different dimensions that need to be examined when looking at women’s choices (singly or collectively). Firstly empowerment entails choice with regard to access to resources, secondly it entails agency in decision-making and negotiating power, and thirdly it
comprises achievements of outcomes of value. Kabeer argues that an adequate assessment of empowerment requires triangulation of measurement of all three sources (Kabeer, 1999).

Kabeer’s writing about empowerment draws a little on Sen’s capability approach (Sen, 1999; Fukuda Parr and Kumar, 2003), which is very useful in thinking about how we can evaluate gender equality in several arenas such as education, health etc. Very briefly the capability approach considers the evaluation of needs to be based on an understanding of human capabilities, that is what each individual has reason to value. This contrasts sharply with the human capital approach, which stresses that the evaluation of provision of needs, especially by the State is about some aggregated benefit to society or future society. While human capital theory has little to say about injustices and inequality in the household, the workplace or the state, the capability approach is centrally concerned with these, but centres its critique not on outlining the structures of inequality (as GAD does), but by positing a strategy based on an ethical notion of valuing freedoms. Governments using the capability approach therefore have an obligation to establish and sustain the conditions for each and every individual, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, race or regional location, to achieve valued outcomes. These may entail acquiring a certain level of educational attainment, but they undoubtedly entail ensuring the freedoms that allow valued outcomes to be articulated and achieved. Thus, for example, failing to ensure conditions where sexual violence in and on the way to school, especially for girl children can be identified and eradicated, would be a failure to ensure freedom for valued outcomes. Similarly, failure to ensure opportunities for a particular group to participate in decision-making about valued outcomes would also be a limitation on freedoms or capabilities. Although Sen’s capability approach highlights the importance of diverse social settings where capabilities will be articulated, it emphasises the importance of free forms of discussion and association in articulating capabilities. Sen writes about development as freedom because the freedom to think, talk and act concerning what one values is a meaning of development closer to a concern with human flourishing than narrower notions of a certain level of GDP per capita or a pre-specified level of resource.
However, there are important areas in need of elaboration in the capability approach concerning how the approach articulates with a theory of justice and how some of the indexing problems regarding whether different kinds of capabilities are commensurable can be resolved. It has also been pointed out that in addition the ways that capabilities are understood given the long histories and social structures of inequality in virtually all societies, including complex forms of gender inequality requires much more work at theoretical and empirical levels (Unterhalter, 2003a; Brighouse and Unterhalter, 2002; Unterhalter, 2003b). Lastly the way that the capability approach could be used in processes of institutionalising reform is only beginning to be mapped (Pogge, 2002; Alkire, 2002; Robeyns, 2003). Nonetheless important work and thinking about the capabilities approach in relation to gender equality and education is beginning to be published (Alkire, 2002; Nussbaum, 2000). The extent to which these ideas would be utilised in development assistance planning remains to be seen. The capabilities approach is not without important critics, particularly with regard to its failure to take account of injustices of recognition, not just distribution (Fraser, 1997), its inability to engage with dimensions of group based social mobilisation for democratisation and gender equality (Young, 2000) and its tendency to universalise that may not take sufficient account of particular contexts.

4. Empowerment, Civil Society Building and Social Capital

In the contemporary discourse on development articulated in international agencies, along with the term participation, the term empowerment is often used in close alliance with two other key concepts such as Civil Society building and social capital. It is important to understand the meanings and linkages between the usages of these terms in order to draw out the wider implications for the discourse on empowerment.

The place of civil society in development policy literature is not recent, though it had certainly acquired a new meaning by the late 1990s. While in the pre-1990s context, the idea of civil society was seen as a vehicle of democratic transformation, emphasizing the idea of self-determined citizen seeking efficient and accountable (constitutional) politics,
the post 1990s scenario in many ways de-emphasized the role of State (and also constitutions) and replaced it with ‘civil society’ (Schuurman 2001; Berger and Neuhaus 2000). The use of the term civil society in the post 1990’s period is therefore no longer concerned with making the State accountable to the citizens but instead it is about facilitating the replacement of the existing ‘State-spaces’ by private actors from within (Kakarala; 2004).

The post 1990s developmental policy literature indicates the emergence of two broad approaches to civil society: one represented by the Nordic countries and the Netherlands through documents such as the Human Development Report (HDR) and the other by the World Bank and the Anglo Saxon countries. While the former is characterized by a broad continuity of the spirit and values of the previous decades with an additional emphasis on developing ‘rights based approaches’ to poverty reduction (UNDP 2000; GTZ 1999; SIDA 1999, 2002; HIVOS 1996, 2002), the latter approach is characterized by a new kind of thinking that visualizes civil society building as an integral part of ‘making globalization work for the poor’ (World Bank 2000; DFID 2000). By the later half of the 1990’s however, the demarcation between the two approaches appears to have blurred with the emergence of a somewhat ambivalent convergence in ideas (kakarala, 2004). While a majority of the key institutions engaged in development thinking admit that it is difficult to provide a satisfactory definition for the term civil society, there also appears to be a reluctance to engage with the issue of defining civil society. The result of this has the continuation of commonsensical working definitions of the term which has lead to de-emphasising the theoretical complexities and nuances of the concept with the policy documents arguing largely in favor of a practical approach. For example, the World Bank uses the term civil society to refer to the wide array of non-governmental and not for profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations (World Bank–OED 2003). The term civil society is generally used as if it denotes an undifferentiated social fabric to imply that it means something inherently positive and good. There is hardly any acknowledgement of intercommunity tensions and contestations and thus of the dynamics of power relations.
within civil society (Van Wicklin III 2002). The rhetorical references to civil society in development policy documents tends to paper over the contestations between civil society and other realms such as the State and the market which exist on the ground by often tending to emphasize the cooperative partnership between these realms. This perspective of civil society is also antithetical to the understanding of liberal-democratic political theory or Marxist theory (Cohen and Arato 1992; Kaviraj and Khilnanai 2001). There is hardly any mention of social movements in the World Banks’ description of civil society with the emphasis largely being on cooperative partnerships and in this sense the approach to civil society is depoliticizing i.e, viewing civil society as an instrumental middle without taking into account the dynamics of power politics not only within it but also in relation to the State and the market (Harris 2001).

One of the most projected discoveries of developmental studies in the 1990s was the idea of social capital as an important strategy for building civil society, which became immensely popular amongst policy makers and academics alike. While there have been other attempts to conceptualise social capital such as the works of French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1986) and Coleman (1990), the immense popularity of the term in development discourse is generally attributed to the work of Robert Putnam (1993). Perhaps the work of Putnam acquired celebrity status among the policy think-tanks in development circles, largely because his definition was more amenable to rational choice arguments. He defined social capital as “features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enabled participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives’. The emphasis on tangible networks and actor participation prompted a series of attempts aimed at quantifying social capital (Norris 2002; Uphoff and Wijayratna 2000;) with also some writings questioning its measurability (Serra 2001). Fukuyama highlights that the ‘economic function’ of social capital as (reducing) the transaction costs associated with formal coordination mechanisms like contracts, hierarchies, bureaucratic rules and the like ‘, and ….even in non-hi-tech environments, social capital often leads to greater efficiency than do purely formal co-ordination techniques (Fukuyama 2001). The policy literature of multilateral institutions and their documents present a romantic and often reductionist orientation of social capital in their definitions.
Many of these documents claim an almost unequivocal relationship between building social capital and poverty reduction on the one hand, and democratization on the other. For the World Bank, creating Social Capital is a core strategy for empowering the poor to move out of poverty. Working with and supporting networks of poor people to enhance their potential by linking them to intermediary organizations, broader markets and public institutions etc are seen as important steps in this process of social capital building towards empowering the poor. In an important critique of the concept of Social Capital promoted by World Bank, Harris (2001) attempts to show that the ideas of civil society and social capital are painted as being ‘progressive’ and they are deceptively attractive. These ideas are attractive because they imply active support for the ideas and needs and the aspirations of the common people. ‘Can one possibly be against participation and empowerment?’ he asks. But these ideas are deceptive because they are used to veil the nature and the effects of power. They hold out the prospects of democracy (in civil society) without the inconveniences of contestational politics and the conflicts of ideas and interests that are an essential part of democracy.

The new found enthusiasm for creating social capital as a key strategy for civil society building and empowerment has resulted in a new ‘architecture’ that has evolved in the later part of the 1990s comprising of a number of intricate processes and new institutional formations, the most important being the creation of networks of groups/communities variously referred to as ‘user groups’, ‘stakeholder groups’, communities or community based organizations (CBOs) and ‘beneficiary groups’, such as water user associations, village educations committees, self-help groups largely comprising of women formed around micro-credit activity and autonomous organizations which are generally quasi-governmental (i.e. which have governmental patronage and power but are less constrained by rules and procedures) that stand between the State institutions and the user groups. The Non-Governmmetal organizations (NGOs) form a major part of this architecture with rapidly changing mandates and goals (Kamat, 2002). In terms of processes, both decentralization and participatory development became central to this process. In an insightful analysis on the shifting meanings of these terms against the above background, Kakarala shows that the concepts of decentralization and participation
carry a very different meaning and purpose in current mainstream development theory/policy as compared to their earlier usages, wherein they were associated with catalyzing radical, democratic transformation (Kakarala 2004). Their current usage is rooted in a perspective of the human being as a rational, economic person and this emphasizes the creation of ‘civil society’ that would accommodate individuals as consumers rather than as entitled citizens. The shifting meanings of these terms substantially de-emphasises the ‘citizen-entitlement’ route of empowerment and replaces it with a vision of a ‘new-communitarianism’ (ibid, 2004). The implications of the changing conceptual base of the above terms, as well as the meanings and practices related to the above terms needs to be understood more carefully on ground, in the context of thinking and practices related to women’s empowerment.

6. Towards a Conceptual Framework for understanding Women’s Empowerment

A clear signal that one gets from a review of literature is that no single definition of empowerment can do justice. However, the perspectives that come through from all the above writings provide a basis for building a framework with some key features, based on which thinking and praxis in the form of strategies to empower women can possibly be analysed in various contexts. An attempt is made to articulate these under a set of ten key non-linear, non-hierarchical and mutually reinforcing elements as follows.

i) **Process:** Empowerment is a process and not an end of project product. It needs to be understood as a dynamic and on-going process though the result of the process may also be termed empowerment. But more specifically, the process and outcome of empowerment should address structures of power at different levels and manifest itself as a redistribution of power between individuals, genders, groups, classes, castes, etc.

ii) **Context-specificity:** Empowerment needs to be defined within the local social, cultural, economic, political and historical context within which it is occurring.

iii) **Marginalized Groups:** The empowerment approach is clearly focussed on the marginalized groups such as women, landless poor, socially excluded scheduled castes, minorities etc.
iv) **External Agency/Mediation:** The process of empowerment (in the context of development programmes or projects) could be induced or stimulated by external forces in the form of government agencies or Non-Governmental organisations working with the poor or women to mediate or catalyse the process of empowerment. The external change agencies play a role in the consciousness raising process of the oppressed, and enabling them to question the dominant ideology, which has subjugated them, and assert their decision-making power.

v) **Participatory Approach:** A key feature of an empowerment approach is participation both as a means and an end. Participation as an element here is based on the analysis or recognition of socially constructed differences such as gender, caste, class etc and valuing these in the process of identification of problems and needs during the course of planning development interventions and understanding the impact of interventions. The idea of participation here is used in the sense of women taking decisions about matters of public concern and on issues that impinge on their own lives.

vi) **Collective Process of Change:** The process of empowerment must occur collectively. Various examples repeatedly show that the change in one individual does not necessarily lead to a change for all others in the same situation. But if whole groups of women begin to demand change, there is much more. Clearly, when challenging an entire system or ideology, the power of a group is always greater than the power of an individual. The “collective” as a key element is used in the sense of mobilisation of women into groups and the creation of a separate ‘time and space’ for women to collectively and critically re-examine their lives, develop a new consciousness, and organize and act for change.

vii) **Rights over Resources:** Enabling people to gain control and rights over their key life and livelihood related resources is another critical component of an empowerment approach. This includes tangible/physical resources (like land, water, forests), human resources (social networks, their bodies, their labour and skills) and intangible intellectual resources (especially education including literacy skills, expanding women’s knowledge base, information, capacities, ideas, new skills) to help marginalised people and groups to look at old problems in new ways, analyse their environment and situation, recognise their strengths, and initiate actions which challenge the dominant ideology, transform
institutions and structures, and enable them to gain greater control over resources of various kinds. Empowerment therefore means making informed choices within an expanding framework of information, critical reflection, knowledge and analysis of available options as well as expansion of choices and alternatives valued by different women, based on their subjective locations of caste, class, gender etc.

viii) Practical and Strategic Needs: To borrow Moser classification, the empowerment approach is one that clearly links together both Practical and Strategic Gender Needs of women - that is, addressing women's immediate problems ('condition'), as well as taking the longer route to raising their consciousness about the underlying structural inequalities which have created these problems ('position'). Since empowerment implies redistribution of power at various levels, it is inherently a political process aimed at creating conditions for incremental structural changes from below.

ix) Building Citizenship based Democratic Spaces: Building organizations at the local, regional, national and global levels, through which the poor can become a social, economic, and political force is central to an empowerment approach. This process also includes learning to engage with public institutions and systems (local councils, elected representatives, banks, government departments, etc.) analyzing political structures and systems of governance and how to engage with these and demand rights and democratic accountability. More importantly, this process involves an organized mass movement of the marginalized sections and the development of a political strategy, which challenges and transforms existing power structures and brings long lasting transformative changes social changes. Demanding equitable distribution of resources, values related to social justice and equal rights form an important part of this process.

x) Self Reliance and Sustainability: The continuity of processes even in the absence or withdrawal of external agencies catalyzing the processes up to a certain point is an important element in an empowerment approach. This means the presence of self-reliant grassroots organisations, which collectively continue to work together towards their goals and independently plan and control various processes, plan activities etc. Sustainability also needs to be seen in terms of ideas, decisions and resources managed by organisations of poor women.
It is against the backdrop of various theoretical perspectives and policy approaches to empowerment reviewed here that this research attempts to understand the relationship between thinking and practice around women’s empowerment in the context of Andhra Pradesh in South India and the implication of these for women’s lives.

The central question that this research engages with is “How are ideas and strategies related to women’s empowerment operationalized by various mediating organizations (Government and Non-Governmental) in varying contexts? To what extent are these strategies (empowering) catalyzing democratic spaces and women’s citizenship rights?

In seeking to track the relationship between ways of thinking and doing, this research is aimed at subjecting both the content of these empowerment claims by different actors (Government, NGO’s, CBO’s) and the nature of varying strategies to translate these ideas into practice to critical enquiry. At a related level, this research also attempts to explore the range of implications for development policy and practice arising from different interpretations of women’s empowerment. Given that the mobilization of women in rural areas into village-level Women’s collectives (such as SHGs and other groups etc) features as a significant strategy in almost all government and NGO interventions in Andhra Pradesh, these collectives as “vehicles for women’s empowerment”, form the critical sites for analysis in this research process.