CHAPTER 10

Taking the power out of empowerment – an experiential account

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This chapter traces the centuries-long evolution of the concept and practice of empowerment, its adoption by radical social movements, especially women's movements from the 1970s onwards, and its conversion, by the late 1990s, into a buzzword. Situating the analysis in the context of women's empowerment interventions in India, the chapter describes the dynamic of the depoliticisation and subversion of a process that challenged the deepest structures of social power. The 'downsizing' and constriction of the concept within state policy, the de-funding of genuine empowerment strategies on the ground, and the substitution of microfinance and political quotas for empowerment are examined and analysed.

Of all the buzzwords that have entered the development lexicon in the past 30 years, *empowerment* is probably the most widely used and abused. Like many other important terms that were coined to represent a clearly *political* concept, it has been 'mainstreamed' in a manner that has virtually robbed it of its original meaning and strategic value. It is one of the best examples of what I have elsewhere described as the

> ...distortion of good ideas and innovative practices as they are lifted out of the political and historical context in which they evolved and rendered into formulas that are 'mainstreamed'. This usually involves divesting the idea of its cultural specificity, its political content, and generalizing it into a series of rituals and steps that simulate its original elements, but lacking the transformative power of the real thing. Thus good ideas – evolved to address specific development challenges – are altered into universally applicable panaceas. Transferring the correct rhetoric – buzzwords and catch phrases emptied of their original meaning – is a vital part of this legerdemain. (Batliwala 2007:89)

A brief history

Both the word itself and the concept of empowerment have a fascinating history.[1] According to some recent research into the term's origins and meanings (Gaventa 2002), it can be traced back as early as the Protestant Reformation in

Europe and it reverberates through the centuries in Europe and North America through Quakerism, Jeffersonian democracy, early capitalism, and the black power movement. The concept of empowerment, although expressed in other linguistic equivalents, was embedded in many other historic struggles for social justice: in my own state of Karnataka in southern India, for instance, the twelfth-and thirteenth-century Veerashaiva movement against caste and gender oppression called for the redistribution of power and access to spiritual knowledge through the destruction of these forms of social stratification. But the term became revitalised and acquired a strongly political meaning in the latter half of the twentieth century, when it was adopted by the liberation theology, popular education, black power, feminist and other movements engaged in struggles for more equitable, participatory, and democratic forms of social change and development.

From these historically, politically, and geographically diverse locations, empowerment was hijacked, in the 1990s, into increasingly bizarre locations, converted from a collective to an individualistic process, and skilfully co-opted by conservative and even reactionary political ideologies in pursuit of their agenda of divesting 'big government' (for which read: the welfare state) of its purported power and control by 'empowering' communities to look after their own affairs. Management gurus discovered 'empowerment' and infused it into the human-resource development and motivational practices of the corporate world, turning it to the service of profit making and competitiveness in the market place. Thus the 1990s witnessed a widespread co-option of the term by corporate management, neo-con political movements, and consumer-rights advocates.

What's in a word?

Should we be troubled by what many may consider the inevitable subversion of an attractive term that can successfully traverse such diverse and even ideologically opposed terrain? I believe we should, because it represents not some innocent linguistic fad but a more serious and subterranean process of challenging and subverting the politics that the term was created to symbolise. This political project is most clearly evident in the domain of women's empowerment, and I shall use the subversion and de-politicisation of the term within this context, particularly in my country – India – to demonstrate why it is a matter of concern.

The concept of women's empowerment emerged from several important critiques and debates generated by the women's movement throughout the world during the 1980s, when feminists, particularly in the Third World, were increasingly discontent with the largely apolitical and economistic 'WID', 'WAD', and 'GAD' models in prevailing development interventions. There was growing interaction between feminism and the concept and practice of popular education, based on the 'conscientisation' approach developed by Paulo Freire in Latin America in the 1970s as part of his 'liberation theology'. The latter, though

representing a powerful new framework that contested the more top–down, paternalistic 'community development' approach that had remained prevalent until then, nevertheless ignored gender and the subordination of women as a critical element of liberation. The re-discovery of Gramsci's 'subalterns' and the hegemonic role of dominant ideologies, and the emergence of social construction theory and post-colonial theory were also important influences on activists and nascent social movements at this time.

The interplay of these powerful new discourses led, by the mid-1980s, to the spread of 'women's empowerment' as a more political and transformatory idea for struggles that challenged not only patriarchy, but also the mediating structures of class, race, ethnicity – and, in India, caste and religion – which determined the nature of women's position and condition in developing societies. By introducing a hitherto absent gender dimension to theories of conscientisation and popular education, by recognising women as part of Gramsci's subaltern classes, feminists incorporated gender subordination and the social construction of gender as a fundamental category of analysis in the practice of social change and development. Feminist movements in the Third World, but particularly in Latin America and South Asia, evolved their own distinctive approach, pushing consciousness-raising into the realm of radical organising and movement building for gender equality. The influence of these discourses had led to the widespread adoption of the empowerment concept in many other development and social-justice arenas, such as education, health care, rural development, and workers' rights. By the beginning of the 1990s, empowerment held pride of place in development jargon. And though it was applied in a broad range of social-change processes, there is little doubt that the term was most widely used with reference to women and gender equality.

It is not surprising, therefore, that 'empowerment' – if not the concepts that informed it – soon became a trendy and widely used buzzword. The sharp political perspective from which it arose became diffused and diluted. Development-assistance agencies (multilateral, bilateral, and private), eternally in search of sexier catchphrases and magic bullets that could somehow fast-track the process of social transformation, took hold of the term and began to use it to replace their earlier terminology of 'people's participation' and 'women's development'. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing played a critical role in introducing the 'e' word to state actors, and governments anxious to demonstrate a progressive approach to gender quickly adopted the catchphrase of women's empowerment. For instance, signatories to the Beijing Declaration stated that they would dedicate themselves to 'enhancing further the advancement and empowerment of women all over the world ...' (United Nations 1995: 7).

The most important point, however, is that all efforts to conceptualise the term more clearly stressed that empowerment was a *socio-political* process, that the critical operating concept within empowerment was *power*, and that empowerment was about shifts in political, social, and economic power between and across *both* individuals *and* social groups.

How power left empowerment: the Indian experience

Let us now use the Indian case to demonstrate how the once powerful idea and practice of women's empowerment degenerated into a set of largely apolitical, technocratic, and narrow interventions that create nothing like the radical transformation envisaged by early women's movement leaders – and how it was brought to serve neo-liberal economic ends.

Borrowing from the usage of the term by feminist popular educators in other parts of the world, 'empowerment' entered the women's movement lexicon in India by the mid-1980s. Almost at the same time, it replaced the earlier terminology of 'women's welfare', 'women's development', and 'women's up-liftment' in use by the government and major donor agencies supporting work with marginalised women. In 1986, for instance, I co-designed a critical new programme template for the Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, entitled 'Education for Women's Equality' in which the *empowerment* approach (roughly similar to feminist popular education methods) was strongly advocated. Thus, empowerment as a term entered the gender-equality arena in India through distinctly different political routes: those of feminists challenging patriarchal gender relations, of progressive government policy, and of aid agencies anxious to do something new. By the beginning of the 1990s, therefore, everybody concerned with women's issues and gender equality – state actors, aid agencies, development professionals, and feminist activists and advocates – was using the term 'empowerment'. But in this latter-day development Babel, there was no clarity about what exactly it meant to its various proponents, since the meanings that they attached to it were seldom articulated in any clear or specific way. It was common, in those days, to find the annual reports of NGOs or donor agencies talking about how their objective was empowerment, but it was impossible to find a comprehensive definition of what it signified to them.

In an attempt to clear the conceptual and strategic cloud, I was invited, in 1992, to undertake an exercise of examining how empowerment was understood and operationalised across South Asia by grassroots women's and development organisations with a stated objective of women's empowerment. Through a process of wide consultation and discussion with more than 25 organisations across South Asia and a number of leading feminist activists, a (then) new conceptual and strategic framework was collectively and painstakingly developed over the course of a year, and presented under the title 'Women's Empowerment in South Asia: Concepts and Practices' (Batliwala 1993). At the time, this document provided one of the first detailed conceptualisations of empowerment, constructed from the perception and practice of those consciously engaged in the empowerment of women and in advancing gender equality. This coincided with Naila Kabeer's own research and her influential book *Reversed Realities*, which reflected and greatly enhanced the framework in the South Asia document (Kabeer 1994).

The South Asia document defined empowerment as a process, and the results of a process, of transforming the relations of power between individuals and social groups. Since feminist activists were among the first to use this word widely, it also had a specific gendered meaning: the transformation of the relations of power between men and women, within and across social categories of various kinds. The document defined empowerment as a process that shifts social power in three critical ways: by challenging the ideologies that justify social inequality (such as gender or caste), by changing prevailing patterns of access to and control over economic, natural, and intellectual resources, and by transforming the institutions and structures that reinforce and sustain existing power structures (such as the family, state, market, education, and media). The document emphasised that transformatory empowerment could *not* be achieved by tackling any one of these elements of social power – even at that early stage, its architects were clear that there was no 'one-shot' magic-bullet route to women's empowerment, such as providing women with access to credit, enhanced incomes, or land titles. The framework stressed that the ideological and institutional change dimensions were critical to sustaining empowerment and real social transformation.

Through the 1980s and early 1990s, initiatives around the subcontinent, and particularly in India, were engaged in a diverse range of experiments that attempted to enact the process of empowerment on the ground with various marginalised communities, but most often focused on poor rural and urban women. These approaches tried to depart from past interventions that treated women either as beneficiaries of services or as producers or workers. Instead they adopted feminist popular-education strategies that created new spaces for women to collectivise around shared experiences of poverty, exclusion, and discrimination, critically analyse the structures and ideologies that sustained and reinforced their oppression, and raise consciousness of their own sense of subordination. These spaces and the activists working within them facilitated women to recognise their own agency and power for change – their power to organise themselves to confront and transform the social and economic arrangements and cultural systems that subjugated them. The main inputs in these processes were new ideas and information, not hand-outs or services; an opportunity for women to locate and articulate the changes that they wanted to make, and evolve strategies to do so. Grassroots women in different corners of the country, in cities, towns, and villages, were mobilised into *sanghs* or *samoohs*[2] through which they developed a political and personal agenda for change, and the collective strength and creative power to move their agendas forward.

These basic strategies found expression in a range of activities across the country. Women's groups and grassroots women's collectives began to address their unequal access to economic and natural resources, to education, health services, to reproductive health and rights, aiming to change the gender division of labour and access to training, technical skills, and employment. Micro-credit programmes successfully shifted productive resources into poor

women's hands and they, in turn, were demonstrating how women's enhanced incomes were applied to raise household nutrition levels and improve the health and education status of their children. There were struggles to make visible and redress the pervasive and diverse forms of violence against women – dowry-related violence and murders, rape, female infanticide and foeticide, domestic violence, caste-based and communal violence that targeted women, and state-sanctioned violence. Major public campaigns were launched for legislative reform and enforcement – for special cells for women in police stations, for greater representation of women in *Panchayat Raj*[3] institutions, for changes in the rape law that would shift the burden of proof from the victim to the perpetrator, for banning or regulating sex-determination and sex-selection technologies, and for more stringent punishment for dowry harassment and domestic violence (see Kumar 1993).

Interestingly, during this entire phase, women's movements saw the state as a critical enabler of the empowerment process, even if their stance was adversarial. In turn, several arms of the Indian state – and especially some committed senior bureaucrats – took the lead in supporting and launching programmes that were built upon a transformative notion of empowerment, providing space for the mobilisation and organisation of some of the country's poorest and most oppressed women to challenge and change their social, political, and economic conditions, even when this meant confronting other sections of the state and its policies and programmes.[4] This support was not entirely altruistic, of course, but often sprang from an astute understanding that these women's empowerment processes might better enable the administration to deliver its schemes and services, outperform other states and provinces in development indicators, and lower the poverty line.

Donor agencies quickly followed suit and abandoned their earlier 'WID', 'WAD', and 'GAD' approaches to adopt the empowerment framework as both an objective and a methodology. While donors did not play a critical role in India in defining or advancing the empowerment approach, they quickly promoted it among their development partners, and many NGOs and women's development organisations were compelled to switch their language, if not their strategies, to fit the new empowerment mantra. This was a huge factor, along with government adoption of the term, in spreading the use of the empowerment terminology and eventually rendering it into a meaningless buzzword.

In retrospect, it is the early successes of the empowerment approach – despite contemporary angst about how difficult it was to measure, or how it took too long to demonstrate impact, and other anxieties – that contributed inadvertently to its subsequent instrumentalisation, and its conversion into not only a buzzword but a magic bullet for poverty alleviation and rapid economic development, rather than a multi-faceted process of social transformation, especially in the arena of gender equality. By the mid-1990s, India had enthusiastically embraced neoliberal economic policies, but it was also an electoral democracy where the poor – particularly the rural poor – were the largest vote

banks, who routinely threw out regimes that failed their interests and needs. Opening up rural markets and raising incomes of the poor was thus critical to political survival. In India's populist politics, empowerment was a natural target for co-option by varying political players, most of whom were anxious to limit its transformatory potential.

Consequently, ruling regimes and political parties of various hues rapidly adopted and simultaneously constricted the concept and practice of women's empowerment into two relatively narrow and politically manageable arenas: (1) the so-called 'self-help' women's groups (SHGs) which were meant to simulate the empowering nature of the *sanghs* and *samoohs* mentioned above, but in reality engage in little else but savings and lending; and (2) reservations for women within local self-government bodies which are deemed to lead to political empowerment. Both of these are described as 'women's empowerment' approaches, although there is little evidence that either result in sustained changes in women's position or condition within their families, communities, or society at large. Indeed, there is a growing body of analysis that argues that the empowering effects of these interventions are complex, and that they can consolidate existing power hierarchies as well as create new problems, including manipulation and co-option by dominant political interests, growing indebtedness, doubling and tripling of women's workloads, and new forms of gendered violence (Cornwall and Goetz 2005: 783-800; Burra et al. 2005; Fernando 2006). On the other hand, policies such as rural development, which have the widest sway, have determined that the goals of poverty alleviation and empowerment will be achieved through self-help groups and *panchayats*.[5]

Although virtually every government policy claims to support women's empowerment, a deeper scrutiny of both policy and implementation strategies (available on the websites of every ministry concerned with poverty eradication, marginalised social groups, women and girls) reveals that the broad-based, multi-faceted, and radical consciousness-raising approaches fostered in programmes like Mahila Samakhya in the 1980s and early 1990s have more or less disappeared. Every department's narrow-bandwidth intervention, in the era of increasing divestment and privatisation, is packaged in the language of empowerment. India's rural development policy describes its objectives as poverty alleviation and empowerment, claiming that these will be achieved through the strategies of self-help groups and strengthening local governments, the twin sites of 'women's empowerment'. The Education Department's Women's Empowerment Project offers an even better example of this 'downsized' empowerment strategy:

> Since the overall empowerment of women is crucially dependent on economic empowerment, ... the main purpose of the Women Empowerment Project (WEP) is to organize women into effective Self Help Groups.[6]

In the larger political arena, there has been an equally disturbing trend whereby the idea of women's empowerment has been distorted and co-opted into the ideological frameworks of the religious fundamentalism that has become deeply entrenched in Indian politics: the status of women in certain minority groups, and their need for 'empowerment' (in its vernacular equivalents), was a key component of the Hindu nationalists' ideological and political project, as was the construction of the Hindu woman as the educated, equal, empowered opposite – despite the fact that they remain deeply hostile to the questioning of the disempowerment and subjugation of millions of women with the spread of particular regional and upper-caste Hindu practices such as dowry or female foeticide through sex-selective abortions (Hassan 1998; and Sarkar 1998).

A requiem

In the new millennium, the once-ubiquitous term 'empowerment' has virtually disappeared from the Indian development discourse, including in the context of gender equality, except in a few niches of government policy.[7] I attribute this to several tendencies that began emerging in the late 1990s: the overwhelming sway of the micro-credit model and SHGs as substitutes for the more comprehensive empowerment processes of early feminist activism; the displacement of empowerment by the emergence of the 'rights-based approach' within critiques and counters to neo-liberal reductionist and instrumentalist strategies for economic development and social justice; and the management-influenced 'results-based' approach that has been adopted by a large number of development-assistance programmes and donors, including those that had remained steadfastly opposed to fast-track strategies.

With donors increasingly abandoning empowerment as a no-longer-fashionable – indeed *practical* – methodology, and enthusiastically championing (with a few exceptions) large-scale micro-finance programmes as the quickest route to women's empowerment (*and* overall economic development!), the old feminist concept and practice of empowerment have been interred without ceremony. Grassroots practitioners and movements find that they can no longer raise funds with the language and strategies of empowerment, or that they must disguise these within *au courant* frameworks or rhetoric (such as rights, micro-finance, transparency, accountability, and so forth). Some donors have moved resources out of broader-based empowerment approaches, because they don't show 'countable' results and/or because empowerment doesn't work fast enough.

Because the process – and its effects and impacts – was so shaped by the interests and contexts of those engaged in it, and hence less predictable in its outcomes, the empowerment approach is not sufficiently 'results-oriented', an important priority in current development funding. In such agencies, the 'rights-based' approach (as though empowerment is about anything but rights!) finds greater favour, because rights-based interventions – greater access to redress, achievements of the Millennium Development Goals, new legislation

– are more readily quantified. But these approaches often shift agency into the hands of professional intermediaries (lawyers, NGO activists, policy specialists) and away from marginalised women and communities. They also focus on formal structures and equality, rather than on the informal institutions and cultural systems that older empowerment processes attempted to transform (though not always successfully).

Meanwhile, in keeping with the insidious dominance of the neo-liberal ideology and its consumerist core, we see the transition of empowerment out of the realm of societal and systemic change and into the individual domain – from a noun signifying shifts in social power to a verb signalling individual power, achievement, status. *'Empower yourself'* screamed a billboard advertisement for jobs in yet another IT company in Bangalore, my home town, last year. Ironically, the permeation of the concept into corporate management practices reflected some of the principles that infused it in the world of social change: reducing hierarchy, decentralisation, greater decision-making power and autonomy for managers on the ground – all essential to efficiency and competitiveness in the era of global corporations (Morris and Willocks 1995; Cook and Macaulay 1996). But this journey out of social struggles and into management practice is deeply disturbing: can the empowerment of the local manager of a multinational corporation achieve the same social good as the struggles of impoverished Dalit women with whom I have worked to claim the right to burn their dead in the upper-caste cremation ground or have their children seated in the classroom with caste-Hindu classmates, or the efforts of indigenous women to regain their traditional rights to forest produce, or the campaigns of pavement dwellers to secure housing in India's burgeoning metros? Would these women equate their experience to that of the manager who is advised to hold an exercise on Friday afternoon, with the advice to 'Present a daft award for the best bit of empowerment, the most empowered person of the day' (Morris and Willcocks 1995:77, quoted in Gaventa 2002)?

Postscript

I called this chapter an experiential account, because I did not want to pretend to be presenting an exhaustive, thoroughly researched analysis of the buzzword 'empowerment' – and also because I was an unapologetic champion of the powerful and transformatory concepts and practices that it represented at the height of feminist grassroots organising in another India. But today, I ask myself a simple question: if this word, and the idea that it represented, has been seized and re-defined by populist politics, fundamentalist and neo-con ideologies, and corporate management, if it has been downsized by microfinance and quota evangelists, and otherwise generally divested of all vestiges of power and politics, is it worth reclaiming? These very processes signal the vagueness and lack of political accuracy that its critics always highlighted. They also warn us that the subversion of powerful political techniques that

organise the marginalised will always first occur through the co-option and distortion of its language.

Clearly, we need to build a new language in which to frame our vision and strategies for social transformation at the local, national, or global level. I for one intend to do so not by re-reading Foucault or Gramsci or other great political philosophers, but by listening to poor women and their movements, listening to their values, principles, articulations, and actions, and by trying to hear how they frame their search for justice. From this, I suspect, will emerge not only a new discourse, but also new concepts and strategies that have not yet entered our political or philosophical imaginations.

Notes

1. I am deeply indebted to John Gaventa (2002) for his masterly overview of the origins, meanings, and usages of empowerment.
2. Several sections of this chapter also borrow heavily from my chapter 'Women's empowerment in 21st century India – changing meanings, contexts and strategies', in Shiva Kumar and Rajani Ved (eds.), *The Wellbeing of India's Population*, forthcoming.
3. *Sanghs* and *Samoohs* are local terms for collectives or informal organisations.
4. The structures of local self-government at the village and provincial level based on a pre-colonial Indian units of local government that existed in some parts of the country.
5. See section on 'Rural Development' in http://india.gov.in/sectors/ruraldev1.php, retrieved 6 February 2006.
6. See http://india.gov.in/outerwin.htm?id=http://education.nic.in/ (retrieved 6 February 2006).
7. The Women's Development Programme in Rajasthan, the Mahila Samakhya Programme in several states of the country, are the earliest examples of this.

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