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Women, Gender, and Development

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Empowerment Discourse and Neoliberal Development: A Literature Review

I. Introduction

Development organizations and scholars almost-gratuitous use the language of “women’s empowerment” devoid of a clear meaning has earned the term “empowerment” buzzword-status amongst the development community (Rowlands 1998). Given its widespread use, a look into why actors within the development context use the term so often and what they mean when they do may help to explain and inform an array of development policies and practices. Scholars connect empowerment to development policy and demonstrate how the term’s mainstreaming eroded its radical potential. Empowerment as currently used subverts effective resistance to neoliberal and gender-based exploitation; its replacement or reclaiming will be essential to deconstructing these exploitative structures.

After surveying different critiques of empowerment, a brief history of the term’s meaning will demonstrate its modern definitional ambiguity and clarify how current uses of empowerment entrench inequality. A review of attempts to measure empowerment and their drawbacks will help make these criticisms of the term more concrete. Looking forward, an examination of calls for replacing empowerment or redefining it will elucidate different paths for resolving the problems raised by critiques of empowerment.

These critiques are diverse in methodology yet similar in their central claim, that empowerment discourse obscures systems of power. Kalpana Wilson looks at the evolution of development discourse surrounding the ‘Third World woman’ in relation to recent development advertisement campaigns to demonstrate how modern empowerment discourse obscures power relations and neoliberal exploitation (Wilson 2011). Andrea Cornwall and Althea-Maria Rivas also critique empowerment discourse’s ignorance of power relations, and argue that the human rights framework concepts of accountability, inclusion, and non-discrimination could serve as an alternative, Arendtian interest discourse helping to

Srinivasan 2

build coalitions against power structures (Cornwall and Rivas 2015). Haleh Afshar uses the difficulty of defining empowerment to explicate its broader power in shaping (or revealing) the political agenda which underlies development policies (Afshar 1998). Jo Rowlands proposes a new definition of empowerment as process and uses the Honduran women’s education program (PAEM) as a case study to draw out the elements required for empowerment (Rowlands 1998). In terms of measuring empowerment, Hanmer and Klugman attempt to do a cross-country empirical assessment of general associations between factors like education or income and empowerment as defined by a myriad of proxies in the Demographic and Health Survey (Hanmer and Klugman 2016). On the other hand, Dawson critiques different methods attempting to quantify and measure empowerment and lays forth the difficulties faced by organizations including Oxfam and Novib in their efforts to measure the empowerment effects of their development projects (Dawson 1998). In understanding these critiques, the options for different paths forward in place of current development discourse become clear and what’s left is an academic debate surrounding what terminology should be used in the future.

II. Linguistic Ambiguity

Mainstreaming of empowerment resulted in the term’s linguistic ambiguity, a feature that allowed empowerment to be redefined in service of neoliberal development. Empowerment within development discourse dates back to the 1970s and has roots in a variety of regions from Brazil and India to the US and the UK; originally a radical approach, empowerment focused on “transforming power relations in favour of women’s rights, social justice and the transformation of economic, social and political structures” (Cornwall and Rivas 2015, 404). By the 1990s, empowerment had entered mainstream development discourse devoid of its original meaning; actors with divergent interests and ideologies — from Western politicians to the World Bank to feminists — all claimed to be proponents of empowerment (Rowlands 1998). Projects that claimed to empower often focused on economic and political factors and viewed empowerment in terms of the rising Western capitalist values of individualism and consumerism

Srinivasan 3

(Rowlands 1998). In the 21st century, empowerment has realigned with the Women in Development (WID) movement’s call for inclusion of women in the economy, seeing women’s economic gains as “enough to overcome all other barriers to equality” (Cornwall and Rivas 2015, 406). In this way, modern empowerment is consistent with and often legitimates neoliberal development projects like microfinance in service of economic growth (Cornwall and Rivas 2015).

At its core, the transition in the meaning of empowerment shifted from improving a collective situation by changing power relations and gender hierarchies to improving an individual situation by changing people’s immediate circumstances. The main scholarly grievance with empowerment discourse then is that it obscures the central role of power relations and power structures in creating inequality and subordination (Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Rowlands 1998; Wilson 2011; Afshar 1998).

As a result, empowerment discourse ignores challenges to power relations and instead justifies and legitimates policies and practices centered on individualism and neoliberalism. Wilson looks to modern portrayals of women in the development context as empowered; she situates them as a response to Chandra Mohanty’s critique of racist depictions of ‘Third World’ women as always oppressed and subjugated. Wilson’s study of three advertisement campaigns explicates the way in which empowerment is tied to tropes of ‘Third World’ women as hyper industrious, inherently more responsible with finances, and grateful of their own exploitation. The common purpose between these tropes is to redefine empowerment as a vision of women fulfilling their maximum productive capacities to strengthen the national economy (Wilson 2011). Furthermore, since empowerment is viewed as individual—as something that can be bestowed—development agencies are justified in pursuing “quick fix solutions” instead of long-term projects of investment in communities (Cornwall and Rivas 2015, 407).

III. Replace or Redefine?

Srinivasan 4

Given the conceptual drawbacks of current empowerment discourse, two clear paths forward are presented: replace empowerment with alternative language that challenges power structures or redefine empowerment to return to its original focus on power relations.

Cornwall and Rivas lay out the case for using the alternative human rights framework of accountability, inclusion, and non-discrimination in lieu of empowerment. This language already holds weight within development discourse and is at the center of powerful international documents including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Accountability is praised for its universal nature and for placing the onus of action on the powerful. Inclusion demands mutual respect and would allow for women to hold positions of power within important institutions. Non-discrimination uses rights language to characterize injustice as a product of structures of power. This human rights framework would help focus development on power and power relations, resolving the core flaw with current empowerment discourse (Cornwall and Rivas 2015).

Alternatively, Rowlands’ approach reconceptualizes empowerment as a bottom-up *process* of enabling women to define and confront their practical and strategic needs. Practical needs refer to pragmatic immediate necessities, while strategic needs refer to confrontation of power inequities. Rowlands’ analysis begins by looking at the core of the term empowerment: power. A multiplicity of definitions of power are needed. While most understand power as “power over,” where one group holds power—both overt and covert—over another, Rowlands argues that “power to,” “power with,” and “power from within” are also essential to understanding power. “Power to” refers to the generative or productive power to produce new possibilities without new domination; “power with” refers to the power only achievable through a group; and “power from within” refers to the components of self-respect and accepting others as equals, both of which are necessary to enable individuals to face overwhelming opposition. To include all these different forms of power, one must conceptualize empowerment as a *process* of helping create the constitutive elements of each form of power. After examining how groups from PAEM, the Honduran women’s education program, empowered and disempowered women and

Srinivasan 5

groups of women in different contexts, Rowlands draws out the constitutive elements of three useful categories of empowerment: personal, collective, and within close relationships. Given these elements and original *process*-based definition of empowerment, Rowlands reconceptualization refocuses development on changing power relations (Rowlands 1998).

One crucial commonality between these approaches is that neither sees empowerment or its replacement as something that can be *bestowed* upon women, a problem central to Cornwall and Rivas’ analysis of development organizations’ advertisement campaigns (Cornwall and Rivas 2015). Accountability, inclusion and non-discrimination along with empowerment-as-a-process all reject the idea that small grants of Western donors’ money or short-term development projects can truly produce meaningful lasting change, as the focus of these discursive tools has shifted to structural, long-term changes in power relations.

There are drawbacks to either linguistic approach creating the need for further debate. Redefining empowerment as a process may be conceptually preferable to Cornwall and Rivas’ alternatives, as the human rights framework fails to capture more abstract forms of power including “power to,” “power with,” and “power form within.” At the same time, since Rowlands’ process-based definition of empowerment is more abstract, its practical utility is called into question because of the challenges associated with measurement.

IV. Measuring Empowerment

Central to the usefulness of a development goal like empowerment is the ability to measure progress in achieving that goal. Given the challenges in finding a stable, all-encompassing definition of empowerment (Afshar 1998), attempts to measure empowerment are inherently difficult (Dawson 1998). Proxies for empowerment are rarely comprehensive and even Dawson’s recommended method of measuring empowerment effects of development projects, the Gender Analysis Matrix—which “crosses the variables of women, men, household, and community with labour, time, resources and culture”—still

Srinivasan 6

lacks precision (Dawson 1998, 198). The culture element remains ambiguous, and the matrix does not differentiate between strategic and practical needs (Dawson 1998). Furthermore, critics of empowerment discourse delineate between “enabling factors” like “legal changes, education policy or microfinance initiatives favouring women[, which] can be measured,” and empowerment which is seen as a process (Cornwall and Rivas 2015).

Despite these criticisms, attempts to measure development projects’ empowerment effects are still worthwhile. Research efforts can demonstrate the progress resulting from past and current development initiatives and help maintain support for current and future policies and programs (Dawson 1998). Hanmer and Klugman’s study of Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data including fifty-eight countries, whose population contains nearly 80 percent of women in the developing world, represents a recent and path-breaking empirical study (Hanmer and Klugman 2016). Different questions within the DHS were used as proxies for elements of empowerment; for example, whether women could refuse sex, ask their partner to use a condom, or were married as an adult were all proxies for sexual health and reproductive rights. Hanmer and Klugman forefront limitations to the dataset and empirical investigation, as DHS was lacking in data on jobs and information about assets, did not contain proxies for political voice and collective agency, lacked information on men and girls as DHS only surveys women ages 15-49, and could not demonstrate causal effects (Hanmer and Klugman 2016). Given these limitations, DHS still enabled cross country comparisons that bring out broader trends in development policy. The results of their investigation showed consistent strong positive association between finishing secondary education and empowerment; furthermore, higher income and economic growth, although to a lesser extent than education, were also positively associated with empowerment (Hanmer and Klugman 2016).

Critiques of broader efforts to measure empowerment no doubt still apply to Hanmer and Klugman, as they readily admit that DHS proxies for empowerment are in no way comprehensive. Yet Hanmer and Klugman provide intriguing insight into certain contradictions within the field of criticisms of empowerment and neoliberal globalization. While most critical empowerment scholars in this field are

Srinivasan 7

critics of neoliberal development and projects focused on economic growth, Hanmer and Klugman’s study suggests growth can result in what appears to be material empowerment; even if gender subordination remains, it seems as though development aimed at secondary education and growth may constrain or limit the extent of the disparity in power relations. Measuring empowerment will not always provide a clean, clear, or comprehensive understanding of women’s situations in relation to development, but it can give some insight into the contradictions and areas deserving of greater scholarly attention within the field.

V. Conclusion

While there is great depth to the field of empowerment criticisms in relation to neoliberal development, many areas for further exploration remain. In addition to continued attempts at improving measurement of empowerment through new datasets and new proxies for empowerment, academics and practitioners must further develop debates about which path to take. A form of scholarly consensus has emerged amongst the sect of academia focused on empowerment discourse within development; scholars seem to agree empowerment has for too long served as a buzzword whose ambiguous meaning legitimated neoliberal development projects. Should practitioners and academics call for a human rights framework instead, or redefine empowerment as a process, or look to some third way? Deep debates about this question are essential.

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