

Can Development Create Empowerment and Women's Liberation?

Ann Ferguson,

University of Massachusetts /Amherst

Empowerment of the oppressed, whether they be peasants, workers, racial minorities or women, has been taken as a goal by social movements since the 1960s.¹ This has been true particularly Western-influenced women's movements and other grassroots movements in countries in Latin America and the South influenced by the theology of liberation, the radical pedagogy of Freire, and/or Marxism and struggles for national liberation. While consciousness-raising practices associated with empowerment as the means to challenge social oppression were initially used in radical ways by these movements, Western women's movements and race/ethnic rights movements often subsequently developed an identity politics that ignored the real conflicts that intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality and nationality caused between members of these movements. This made these movements liable to co-optation or defeat.

In a further blow to radical movements for social justice, empowerment as a goal has been co-opted by the neo-liberal hegemonic development establishment, including the World Bank and various international funding agencies such as USAID. In this talk I shall investigate the way in which the ostensive goal of empowerment has been used as a rationale to advance women's development by these agencies, but in ways that still perpetuate sexist, capitalist and neo-colonial structures of economic, political and social domination. I shall contrast what I take to be co-opted uses of the concept of empowerment with its more radical definition and applications by struggles for national liberation and movements for social justice. What consciousness-raising and collective self-organization practices at the grassroots suggest, I argue, is that radical empowerment is only achieved when it is a part of a participatory democratic culture fostered by a movement for social justice.

Definitions of Empowerment, Power, and Interests

What exactly is understood by "empowerment" as a process and a goal, and how does this concept relate to the concepts of "needs", "interests" and "rights"? The concept of empowerment of an individual or a social group presupposes that a state of social oppression exists which has disempowered those in the group, by denying them opportunities or resources and by subjecting them to an ideology and a set of social practices which has defined them as inferior humans, thus lowering their self-esteem. As a general goal, empowerment has been described as a political and a material process which increases individual and group power, self-reliance and strength. However, there are two different ways in which to define empowerment, and I argue that only the second can escaped manipulation by forms of social domination.

Typical of the first camp of mostly feminist economists and sociologists is Paula England's treatment, which defines empowerment as a process that individuals engage in when they obtain both objective and subjective resources of power which allow them to use power to achieve outcomes in the actor's self-interest (cf. England, 1997). On this definition, it would seem that economic, legal and personal changes would be sufficient for individuals to become empowered, and such a process does not require the political organization of collectives in which such individuals are located.

The second camp, more influenced by empowerment as a goal of radical social movements, emphasizes the increased material and personal power that comes about when groups of people organize themselves to challenge the status quo through some kind of self-organization of the group. Jill Bystydzienski gives a typical definition:

Empowerment is taken to mean a process by which oppressed persons gain some control over their lives by taking part with others in development of activities and structures that allow people increased

involvement in matters which affect them directly. In its course people become enable to govern themselves effectively. This process involves the use of power, but not 'power over' others or power as dominance as is traditionally the case; rather, power is seen as 'power to' or power as competence which is generated and shared by the disenfranchised as they begin to shape the content and structure of their daily existence and so participate in a movement for social change. [Quoted on p. 78 of Yuval Davis]

This political process of empowerment has been conceptualized as a process in which the personal becomes the political. As developed in the women's movements and New Left social movements of the 1960s in the West, it involves what has been called "consciousness-raising", that is, a participatory process of individuals sharing their life experiences with others in a regular group process (Henderson). This in turn aims to create the emotional space for individuals to challenge low self-esteem, fear, misplaced hostility, and other issues dealing with internalized oppression (De Montis). In this process they can voice their own life experiences in a context where they learn to apply analytic tools and concepts to understand themselves as structured by oppressive structures.

What are the philosophical presuppositions of empowerment as a political goal? First, it assumes individuals can develop increased **power with** others as well as individual capacities to do things by a process of consciousness-raising within a group. This implies that individuals share common interests with those others in the group, for example, either to better meet their human needs or to promote the acknowledgement of their human rights as a rationale to change existing social and legal structures. But if the political goal of empowering women assumes women have common interests, do race, ethnic, class, sexual and national differences between women challenge this presupposition, hence vitiating women's empowerment as a general political goal?

In the 1980s in the U.S., the theory that social oppressions are intersectional and not merely additive, hence that feminists cannot detach gender identity from racial and class identity and interests, suggested that we must reject the idea that women have political interests in common as a group (Collins 1990, Harris 1990, Spelman 1988). But this conclusion seemed to leave women's movements without any social base on which to unite across race, class and sexual differences. Gayatri Spivak suggests that we need to assume at least a "strategic essentialism" of women as a social group (Spivak 1990) But can we assume women as a social group have any common interests?

Chandra Mohanty (1997) has argued recently that there is one way in which women can be said to have common interests, but only in the narrow "formal" sense developed by Jonasdottir (1988, 1994), who argues that the concept of "interest" arose historically from the demand for participatory democracy in state and society. Jonasdottir argues that there are two components of this historical conception of "interest": a formal and a content component. For members of a social group to have a common **formal interest** in X² refers to the right of **group autonomy and control over the conditions of choice** of a set of needed or wanted goods connected to X, including the meeting of material needs.³ For a group to share a **content interest** with regard to a particular content, X, implies that all members of the group have common needs and/or desires with respect to X. A group can have a common formal interest in X without a common content interest in X, that is, without having common needs or desires in X.

An example of a formal common interest that women share could be the interest in reproductive rights that are acknowledged and defended by the state in which they live. Claiming that women have a common formal interest in reproductive rights does not imply that they all need or desire to exercise reproductive rights (for example, pro-life women may desire to prohibit the reproductive right to abortion, both for themselves and others). It also does not imply that their social class or racial/ethnic position gives them the same material resources to achieve the goal of reproductive choice (so, the Hyde Amendment creates a material limitation on poor women's access to abortions by denying

funding for them through government welfare and health entitlements). What it does imply, however, is that all women have a minimally common social location as citizens of the nation states of the world, through legal differentiation by gender and other means., such as a structured sexual division of labor. Thus, in spite of racial, ethnic, class, sexual and national differences, it would benefit all women to have access to reproductive choice because of this common social location.⁴

I agree with Jonasdottir that having an interest is not a permanent state but a **historical** one which develops when a group, or an individual situated within a social group, comes to desire and to claim a right to participate in choosing which of its needs or perceived concerns (i.e. wants) it will meet with respect to a particular goal. Further,⁵ individuals and groups only have interests in relation to particular other groups, in this formulation, and conceptions of who constitutes one “peers” (who has equal rights to negotiate) and who are not one’s peers (children, social inferiors, foreigners, animals etc.) will determine whether individuals or groups desire to negotiate with, or to dominate (exercise power over), the other group in question, therefore whether or not their interests are compatible.

Needs vs. Interests

What are the implications of Jonasdottir’s definition of interest with respect to the goals of development? First, let’s look at how Maxine Molyneux uses her approach to make a distinction between practical and strategic gender interests, and then in turn how this distinction is used by Carolyn Moser to apply the concept of empowerment to gender and development discourse.

Molyneux’s line of argument in her very influential 1985 article on the women’s movement in Nicaragua aims to assess the claim of some feminists that the Nicaraguan revolutionary state did not promote “women’s interests” because of the control of the male-dominated Sandinista party, in which the interests of male leaders to preserve their patriarchal privilege was put above that of women’s liberation. Rejecting universal “women’s interests”, she does want to argue that there are relational “gender interests” that women share because of their social positioning in relation to men, for example in the gendered/sexual division of labor. These relational interests are in turn of two sorts: *practical gender interests* and *strategic gender interests*. Practical gender interests are those which are defined by women acting to promote perceived practical needs that they have as a part of their given gender role in the sexual division of labor, while strategic gender interests are derived from a critique of male domination and a vision of an alternative set of gender arrangements that would eliminate it. In Latin America, “feminine” vs. “feminist” women’s movements have been defined by Molyneux’s distinctions: women’s activism which promotes practical gender interests, since it does not challenge status quo gender domination, is feminine not feminist, while movements which explicitly act to promote social change toward a vision of gender equality can be called feminist.

Carolyn Moser, a World Bank development planner, makes a similar distinction to Maxine Molyneux between practical and strategic gender interests (1985), although Moser re-defines both “practical and strategic gender interests” as conscious “practical and strategic gender needs”. Moser explicitly ties both practical and strategic gender needs to subjective claims of women, consciously identified, rather than ones defined outside of the context (cf. Moser: 39). She does this because she wants to distinguish between what she calls “top down” government approaches to development, such as that of welfare states who provide resources to less well off citizens, and “bottom up” approaches which come from constituents organizing in what they perceive to be their interests as the grass-roots level. Moser contrasts what she describes as the bottom-up Empowerment approach to development, as initiated by a group called DAWN at the 1985 Nairobi UN Women’s conference, from other paradigms such as the top-down Welfare and Anti-Poverty approaches, and the Equity and Efficiency approaches, in order to persuade planners to take the Empowerment paradigm more seriously.

While I would agree with Moser that there is a distinction between the Empowerment paradigm and the

other paradigms she sketches, I would argue that those operating from the Empowerment approach need not and should not adopt the subjective definition of needs and interests that Moser defends. Rather, it is only when individuals organized as groups come historically to articulate a demand to choose and define their own interests collectively as a group that the problem of top-down manipulation of individual felt needs and desires can be mitigated and challenged. The existence of DAWN, WAND and other such groups in underdeveloped countries shows that they have formed the conditions necessary for articulating a common formal interest as a collective subject, and are capable of creating the democratic participatory space where consciousness-raising and the articulation of demands against other groups, including the state, will not so easily be manipulated from above.

Since the Empowerment approach is explicitly materialist feminist, it can be helpfully contrasted with the mainstream development Equity approach, which is an explicit liberal feminist approach. Both approaches claim that capitalist development and mainstream development discourse and development projects in the Third World, initially marginalized women. They have done so by ignoring the central nature of women's productive, reproductive and community organizing work to meet human material and nurturance needs, often in the subsistence and informal economies rather than in the capitalist labor market. Thus, women must be given equal opportunity with men, via education, health care and funding, to enter employed work and so develop some economic independence, and hence gain bargaining power with men in all important social sites, including the family/household, civil society and the state.

The Equity approach, although it agrees with the strategic or visionary gender interest goals of the Empowerment approach, tends in practice to assume that top down legislative reforms such as laws against domestic violence or for women's reproductive rights, and social welfare measures, such as family planning clinics and free public education for both boys and girls, will lead to the achievement of these goals. ⁶ By contrast, the Empowerment approach emphasizes the way that a combination of institutional domination relations, including race, class, gender, the effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism, will keep such top down methods from empowering the majority of women. Rather, privileged class and race women's situation may be improved, but the bulk of women will simply be controlled in the interests of dominant groups.

DAWN, a spokes group for the Empowerment approach, is an example of a grassroots group which refuses reformist politics in favor of bottom-up organizing by social movements and coalitions of poor, working class and Third World women of color who come to see their interests as allied. Unlike the Equity approach, they refuse to isolate gender inequality out from other social dominations in women's lives as the key issue to prioritize. They agree on the importance of a bottom-up emphasis on autonomous women's groups to improve women's capabilities of self-reliance, internal strength and self-esteem. As an "integrative feminism" (cf. Angela Miles), it insists that the autonomous women's movement a) be thought of not as just one but as many situated women's movements based on different race, class, sexual and national locations; and b) ally its members to a broader social justice coalition seeking democratic control over crucial material and non-material resources for other dispossessed social subjects, including men.

Empowerment, Discourse and Conflicts of Interests

It is time to turn to the problems posed by Jonasdottir, Molyneux and Moser's interest-based justification of the politics of empowerment, particularly as it applies to development projects. One problem is that using empowerment discourse to apply to a social group, such as women, might be thought to presuppose a homogeneous community of the oppressed, either through an identity politics of gender or race, ethnicity/nationality or a Marxist structural analysis of class exploitation. A politics of empowerment based on the assumption of such homogeneity tends to suppress internal differences between its members in ways that ignores power and inequality relations (cf. Yuval-Davis).

How does a gender interest approach handle the intersectionality question? It can be addressed by pointing out that a person or group A may have some interests in common with another person or group B with regard to X, and another set of interests which are in conflict with respect to another issue Y. So a white and an African-American woman may have a common formal interest in having their reproductive rights protected by a government law, but their content interests may conflict with respect to an Affirmative Action policy for a job for which they are competing which gives preference to the African-American, even when they are similarly qualified for the position. ²

This example shows two problems with Jonasdottir's important intervention concerning the historical nature of the concept of 'interest', which also relates to the concept of empowerment. First, if interests are not static effects of human nature but are goals developed historically, then they are defined by collectivities in struggle with each other as political priorities that connect to social identities. But the feminist empowerment theorists assume that these collectivities themselves are either naturally or structurally given, and downplay the fact that these collectivities are social constructs whose boundaries, structures and norms are the result of constant processes of struggles and negotiations (Yuval-Davis: 80). Consider, for example, the following questions of identity boundaries: whether bisexuals are accepted as members of lesbian and gay communities engaged in identity politics of empowerment; whether male to female transsexuals are accepted as women; whether mixed race individuals whose parents are white and chicano are chicano for the purposes of La Raza politics; and the question, subject to ideological debate, as to whether the "popular classes" can be a unified community which includes native and immigrant workers, workers from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, peasant independent producers, salaried rural workers, market women and those in the informal economy, as well as regular working class members who are employed for wages in factories or maquilas.

The point is that those advocating empowerment for a particular "community's interests" will constantly have to deal with who counts as within the community and who is perceived as a hostile other, as well as differences of power of individuals within the community by gender, religion, sexuality, etc. As Nira Yuval Davis (1997: 80) points out: "The automatic assumption of a progressive connotation of the 'empowerment of the people' assumes a non-problematic transition from individual to collective power, as well as a pre-given, non-problematic definition of the boundaries of 'the people'."

The second problem has to do with conflicts of interests that may not be easily resolved by assuming a process of shared empowerment between homogenous individuals whose differences can be bracketed. So, for example, feminist explanations of the process of political empowerment differentiate between the individual "power to" (capacitation) and the "power with" that a consciousness-raising group generates which increases the energy and capacity for self-organization of the whole group, and the negative "power over" that is typical of oppressive structures of racism, sexism and capitalist class relations. But since groups are not homogeneous and individuals within each group may have power over other individuals based on class, race, national origin, etc., it may often happen that an empowerment process allows some people within the group to take more control over their lives at the expense of negative consequences to others. One case is that of the middle class mom freed by the rise in her self-esteem from a feminist C-R group to seek a professional career, who uses an immigrant domestic servant to allow her this space, while the maid must sacrifice time with her own children (cf. Hochschild).

Empowerment Discourse in Development

Criticisms of a politics of empowerment can be raised from a post-structuralist perspective in the context where the discourse of empowerment is used by mainstream funding agencies to justify organizing and funding groups to advance their development toward the goal of empowerment itself.

For example, many community development projects in the Third World funded by the World Bank and other international donors, such as those promoting nutrition and health, literacy or sanitation, now attempt to enable women not only to acquire certain knowledges but to change their characters in such a way as to be able to continuously exercise power, hence demonstrate “empowerment”, in various venues, e.g. in the political and economic realms and in the family household.

From a Foucauldian analysis (1977, 1980), it can be argued that mainstream development institutions have appropriated the discourse of empowerment, along with self-disciplining practices, to create a new development rationality. No longer is it acceptable to describe the Third World clients/recipients of the training or enabling practices called empowerment practices as ‘illiterate’, ‘disenfranchised’, ‘backward’ or ‘exploited’. Rather they are now to be described as ‘rational economic agents’, ‘global citizens’, potential ‘entrepreneurs’: they inherently think the way that producers and consumers of a globalized capitalist economy should think, but merely need some help honing specific skills to achieve their self-interests (cf. Sato, 2002, ms.). Development education should advance such a mind-set in its clients, as it will encourage them to act as good entrepreneurs, wage earners, and consumers, that is, as proper ‘subjects/objects’ of development.

Foucault’s work on the normalization of various discourses and practices in new institutions claiming a scientific/rational base, such as the mainstream discourse of development, suggests that the new ways of thinking about and knowing such subjects involve power/knowledges. That is, researchers and practitioners teaching or applying these practices are creating what he calls a “productive power” in which they gain power over the objects of research, their subjects, and their discourses about them change the subjects themselves. This happens through a process in which their subjects become “subjectivated”, i.e. internalize these new ways of thinking about themselves, even as they are also increasing their power to engage in various activities (e.g. self-scrutiny, for confessional purposes, or body exercises and comportment for increased military or socialization efficiency, etc.) Typically, however, the positive side of this productive power, e.g. that the subjects are more disciplined, effective, efficient, or successful in certain tasks, is used as a justification of these new knowledges, while the negative side, that subjects are being increasingly exploited, or acclimated to a competitive individualism that may eventually undermine the very group cooperation that led to their empowerment, are ignored—these are, after all, in the vested interests of mainstream development agencies and the corporate capitalist world which funds them through the World Bank, the IMF and colluding wealthy capitalist nations, and not in the interests of the clients/subjects. ⁸

An example of this power/knowledge use of the concept of empowerment in a particular development project is discussed by Chizu Sato in a case study of a USAID funded project, the Women’s Empowerment Program, or WEP, designed to increase Nepalese women’s empowerment by two projects in literacy and microfinance training. One NGO carried out a six month training called “Rights, Responsibilities and Advocacy” which taught participants their legal rights and responsibilities as Nepalese citizens as well as collective advocacy of social change to promote these rights. Another NGO ran a “Women in Business” program that taught women literary skills as well as how to be involved in microfinancing collectives which would operate somewhat like the Grameen bank model.

The WEP project can be analysed as having created a set of group practices and a discourse (set of concepts) which allowed the participants to constitute themselves as subjects in different ways than they had traditionally done. The rule by which to run their microfinancing mandated that women must rely on mutual assurance for repayment of loans to individuals, and to think of this as group “self-help”, even though this rule and concept (what Foucault calls a “technology of self”) came from outside the group. Similarly the citizen and human rights they were taught were designed to create them as liberal pressure groups for government reform (but not revolution). ⁹

The ideology of “self-help” rationalized the lack of any initial seed money by the outside donors for the

micro-finance projects, hence insuring that the poorest of poor women, those who had no initial capital at all, could not participate in the groups. This creating an excluded but invisible Other, just as advanced capitalism does, whose lack of class resources were ignored in the ideology of women's empowerment subjectivated by the group. Furthermore the development rationality of the discourse of women's empowerment as employed in the WEP projects made invisible ways in which male heads of households and other male elites could continue to appropriate the surplus labor of wives, daughters and other relatives involved in these projects by patriarchal practices in which women are expected to distribute their capital to other family members in ways not reciprocated by male members (Sato: 22).

Social Movement Empowerment vs. Power/Knowledge Development Empowerment

The objections that have been raised previously against a politics of empowerment used in various social movement identity politics suggest that empowering some in a social group may also inadvertently disempower individuals within that group or other social groups. Furthermore, the case study from Nepal presented above is an example of how dominant groups may co-opt empowerment discourses and processes by creating a productive power that gives individuals new powers but does so in a context which simply re-organizes domination relations of patriarchy, racism, imperialism and class exploitation.

Nonetheless, movements for social justice require a discourse of liberation from those who have unjust power over them, and the language of empowerment is one that can continue to have a radical interpretation under the right circumstances. How then can we distinguish between the co-optive productive power enabled by mainstream development practice and the liberating sort of productive power found in grassroots women's movements and other left social movements?

There are two conditions for the existence of a liberating empowerment process: first, it must be part of an indigenous social movement. This is not to say that the movement itself may not be influenced in its values, goals and strategies by those outside the area or country in which the movement is located. Rather, the point is that the movement must be connected to a grass-roots constituency that involves some form of participatory democracy which gives it legitimacy to those it claims to speak for. Second, since social movements are never homogeneous, there must be some political way for individuals and groups within the social movement to negotiate conflicts of interest within the movement. Social movements which are mass movements are never simply engaged in identity politics, but are constantly negotiating for coalitions in solidarity with other oppressed groups inside and outside their boundaries. This means that there can be no one core of accepted "experts" whose analysis of the relevant structures of oppression automatically gives them the best insight on the political strategy to change it, in part because that group of experts will have a social position with vested interests that may contribute to a new oppressive power/knowledge.¹⁰ Thus, coming to agreement on what structural changes are necessary for empowerment or liberation cannot be achieved by fiat but must be the product of participatory democracy in coalitions. This does not imply that outsiders may not come to be integral parts of social movements, however: the example of the Zapatistas demonstrates that an outsider, sub-commandante Marcos, can come to act in solidarity with a group in such a way as to become an insider, an "organic intellectual" with leadership powers, in Gramsci's terms. But for an outsider to become an insider, he or she must come to understand the group's world view and values and be able to re-constitute his or her own values or categories of critical analysis into that world view as an expansion or development of it, not as a rejection and imposition. I call this process of social, political and epistemic re-orientation of the outsider, the construction of "bridge identities" (Ferguson 1998).

An affinity group, coalitional approach is particularly necessary in promoting women's empowerment that will be liberatory rather than cooptive. The early middle class-based second wave feminist movement's support groups, for example, gave women a powerful means of challenging subjectivation

into gender subordination, but tended to be too simplistic about class, race, ethnic and national systems of domination that also differently empower women in relation to each other. Without a multi-system analysis of social dominations (Ferguson 1991), women may be empowered as individuals in relation to particular men, but still disempowered in relation to other relevant hegemonic forces, such as racism, capitalism and imperialism.

Conclusion and Summary

In this paper I have argued that there are political disagreements as to the content and political application of the notion of “empowerment” as a goal and strategy for women’s liberation. I have contrasted mainstream development institutions’ co-opted uses of the concept of empowerment with its more radical applications by struggles for national liberation and movements for social justice. As post-structuralist critics have pointed out, identity politics by itself has not been successful in organizing in heterogeneous communities (cf. Butler 1990, 1994; Brown 1988). Rather, individuals and groups divided by gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and nationality can only be empowered by a participatory democratic culture which strives for solidarity in a coalition of oppressed groups, while working out a democratic procedure to negotiate possible conflicts of interests among its members as one of the ends of a developmental process toward social justice.