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The Conditions and Consequences of Choice: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment

Naila Kabeer

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◆ Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

This paper is intended as a critical reflection on some recent attempts to construct indicators of women's empowerment, focusing in particular on the meanings given to these measures and values embedded within them. It starts out by offering a three-dimensional conceptual framework for thinking about women's empowerment: "resources" as part of the preconditions of empowerment; "agency" as an aspect of process; and "achievements" as a measure of outcomes.

It goes on to consider the ways in which these different dimensions have been measured by economists, demographers, sociologists and feminists. On the basis of this discussion a number of key methodological points are made, in particular, the need for triangulation of measures to ensure that indicators mean what they are intended to mean.

The paper then turns to the role of values in the choice and interpretation of indicators, both the values of "insiders"—those whose lives are under scrutiny—and the values of those who are engaged in the measurement exercise. It points to the importance of ensuring that etic judgements are informed by, and sensitive to, emic values if the voice and agency of subordinated groups is not to be suppressed by powerful outsiders who may have only a tenuous grasp on their realities.

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Résumé

Ce document, qui est conçu comme une réflexion critique sur certaines tentatives faites récemment pour élaborer des indicateurs de la participation des femmes, porte en particulier sur les sens donnés à ces indicateurs et sur les valeurs qu'ils véhiculent. L'auteur commence par proposer à la réflexion sur la participation des femmes un cadre conceptuel à trois dimensions : la dimension "ressources", qui fait partie des conditions de la participation, celle de l'"agence", qui est un aspect du processus, et les "réalisations", qui permettent de mesurer les résultats.

L'auteur poursuit en examinant la façon dont économistes, démographes, sociologues et féministes ont mesuré ces différentes dimensions. Cet examen l'amène à faire d'importants constats méthodologiques, à noter en particulier la nécessité d'une triangulation des mesures pour s'assurer que les indicateurs signifient bien ce qu'ils sont censés signifier.

Elle s'intéresse ensuite au rôle que jouent les valeurs dans le choix et l'interprétation des indicateurs, tant les valeurs de celles dont la vie est passée au crible que celles des personnes qui se livrent à l'exercice de mesure. Elle relève combien il est important de veiller à ce que les jugements formés de l'extérieur soient éclairés par les valeurs des groupes examinés et sensibles à ces valeurs si l'on veut éviter que la voix et l'"agence" des groupes subordonnés ne soient étouffées par de puissants outsiders qui risquent de n'avoir qu'une compréhension lointaine de leur situation.

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Resumen

La autora busca representar en este documento una reflexión crítica de algunos intentos de fabricar indicadores relativos a la participación de la mujer en la sociedad, prestando especial atención a los significados que se han adjudicado a las medidas y valores que estos encierran. Comienza ofreciendo una estructura conceptual tridimensional para analizar la potenciación del papel de la mujer: la dimensión "recursos" como parte de las condiciones previas de potenciación; la de "agencia" como un aspecto de proceso; y los "logros" como una medida de los resultados.

Continúa con la consideración de los modos en que estas diversas dimensiones han sido medidas por economistas, demógrafos, sociólogos y feministas. A tenor de esta discusión se formularon un sinnúmero de puntos metodológicos clave, en particular, la necesidad de establecer una triangulación de las medidas para asegurar que los indicadores signifiquen lo que realmente procuran significar.

Luego pasa a plantear el papel que juegan los valores en la opción e interpretación de los indicadores, tanto los valores de aquellas cuyas vidas están bajo escrutinio como los valores de aquellas personas que llevan a cabo el ejercicio de medición. Señala la importancia de asegurar que los juicios que se emiten desde el exterior tomen en cuenta los valores de los grupos examinados y se actúe con sensibilidad ante estos valores, si se quiere evitar que la voz y la agencia de los grupos subordinados se vean sofocadas o reprimidas por poderosos grupos externos cuyas nociones de sus realidades se atienen a no más que un mero bosquejo.

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◆ Abbreviations and Acronyms

BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
GDI	Gender-related Development Index
GEM	Gender Empowerment Measure
GNP	gross national product
HDI	Human Development Index
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

Empowerment is like obscenity, you don't know how to define it but you know it when you see it (Rappaport cited in Shetty, 1991:8).

I like the term empowerment because no one has defined it clearly yet; so it gives us a breathing space to work it out in action terms before we have to pin ourselves down to what it means. I will continue using it until I am sure it does not describe what we are doing (NGO activist cited in Batliwala, 1993:48).

INTRODUCTION

Advocacy on behalf of women that builds on claimed synergies between feminist goals and official development priorities has made greater inroads into the mainstream development agenda than advocacy that argues for these goals on the grounds of their intrinsic value. There is an understandable logic to this. In a situation of limited resources, where policy makers have to adjudicate between competing claims (Razavi, 1997), advocacy for feminist goals in intrinsic terms takes policy makers out of their familiar conceptual territory of welfare, poverty and efficiency into a nebulous zone of power and social injustice. There is also a political logic to it: those who stand to gain most from such advocacy carry very little clout with those who set the agendas in major policy making institutions.

Consequently, when women's empowerment is argued for as an end in itself, it tends to be heard as a "zero-sum" game, with politically weak winners and powerful losers. By contrast, instrumentalist forms of advocacy that combine the argument for gender equality/women's empowerment with the demonstration of a broad set of desirable multiplier effects offer policy makers the possibility of achieving familiar and approved goals, albeit by unfamiliar means. One set of payoffs claimed for women's empowerment relates to its favourable effects for children's health, family welfare, intrahousehold equity and fertility decline. Such arguments have received a powerful impetus from the Cairo Declaration, which links women's reproductive choice with a range of favourable demographic outcomes. The other set of payoffs links women's empowerment to economic growth and is based on evidence testifying to the inefficiency of patriarchal family relations in terms of market distortions, labour supply inflexibilities and perverse allocative behaviour (Collier, 1989; Jones, 1986; Sender and Smith, 1990; Palmer, 1991).

However, the success of instrumentalist advocacy has also had costs. Instrumentalism requires the translation of feminist scholarship into the discourse of policy—and during this process of translation, the terrain of the argument has been shifted and some of the original political edge of feminism lost. This attempt at translation entails efforts to quantify the claims of gender advocacy. Measurement is, of course, a major preoccupation in the policy domain. It reflects a justifiable concern with the empirical verifiability of competing claims for scarce resources in the policy domain. And given that the very idea of women's empowerment epitomizes, for many policy makers, the unwarranted intrusion of metaphysical concepts into the concrete and practical world of development policy, quantifying empowerment seems to put the concept on more solid and objectively verifiable grounds.

Yet, as the two quotes at the start of this paper suggest, not everyone accepts that empowerment can be clearly *defined*, let alone measured. And for many feminists, the value of the concept lies precisely in its "fuzziness". This lack of clarity about the notion of empowerment reflects the fact that its root concept—power—is itself one of the most contested concepts in the social sciences (Rowlands, 1997). It is important, therefore, to clarify at the outset how the concept will be used in this paper, since this will constitute the standpoint from which various measurement attempts will be assessed. This will be attempted in the rest of this section of the paper. Sections II and III will review various attempts to devise indicators of empowerment. Indicators can be seen as highly compressed summaries of information, meanings and values. They combine explicit empirical information with implicit assumptions about the meaning of that information. Furthermore, in selecting some categories of information over others, indicators also embody certain values about the kinds of information that "count" in capturing the phenomenon being measured. Because the nature of power is contested, it should be clear from the outset that attempts to measure empowerment are likely to be more value-laden than other, less controversial concepts in the development literature. These are some of the issues addressed in this paper: the information selected for the construction of various indicators of empowerment; the validity of the indicator as a measure of what it is intended to measure; the values it embodies; and the appropriateness of these values in capturing the idea of women's empowerment.

CONCEPTUALIZING EMPOWERMENT

◆ Conceptualizing Empowerment: Resources, Agency and Achievement

The notion of empowerment has been used in a bewildering variety of ways, from the mundane to the profound, from the particular to the very general. Empowerment is seen to occur at a number of different levels, to cover a range of different dimensions and to materialize through a variety of different processes. However, central to the idea of empowerment is the idea of "power". This is the starting point for clarifying how the notion of empowerment will be used in this paper. One way of thinking about power is in terms of *ability to make choices:* to be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choice. The notion of empowerment is thus inescapably bound up with "disempowerment" and refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability. In other words, empowerment entails a process of change. People who exercise a great deal of choice in their lives may be very *powerful*, but they are not *empowered* in this sense, because they were never disempowered in the first place.

However, to be made relevant to the analysis of power, the notion of choice has to be qualified in a number of ways. First of all, *choice necessarily implies alternatives*, the ability to have chosen otherwise. There is a logical association between poverty and disempowerment because an insufficiency of the material means for meeting one's basic needs may impose painful trade-offs between important dimensions of choice. However, even when survival imperatives no longer dominate choice, there is still the problem that not all choices are equally

relevant to the definition of power. Some choices have greater significance than others in terms of their consequences for people's lives. For instance, the ability to choose to have children and the number of children to have is of greater strategic consequence, and indeed consequentially prior, in a person's life than the ability to choose between apples and pears for lunch.

A distinction can thus be made between first order and second order choices in the analysis of power. First order choices are those strategic life choices—choice of livelihood, where to live, who to marry, whether to marry, whether to have children, how many children to have, who has rights over children, freedom of movement and choice of friends—that are critical for people to live the lives they want. These strategic life choices help to frame other, less consequential choices that may be important for the quality of one's life but do not constitute its defining parameters. The ability to exercise strategic life choices can be thought of in terms of three dimensions or different "moments" in the process of social change:

resources	>	**agency**	>	**achievements**
(pre-conditions)		(process)		(outcomes)

Resources include material resources in the more conventional economic sense, but for the purposes of this paper, have to be defined much more widely to encompass the various human and social resources that enhance the ability to exercise choice. Resources in this broader sense are acquired through a variety of social relationships conducted in the various institutional domains that make up a society, including the domains of family, market, state and community. The resources acquired within these various relationships take the form of not only actual allocations, but also of future claims and expectations, where access to both will reflect the rules and norms by which distribution and exchange occur within different institutional contexts.

These rules and norms give certain institutional actors authority over others in determining the principles of distribution and exchange. The distribution of "allocative resources" thus tends to be embedded within the distribution of what Giddens (1979) refers to as "authoritative resources", or the ability to define priorities and enforce claims. Heads of households, chiefs of tribes, directors of firms, managers of organizations, elites within a community are all endowed with decision-making authority in particular institutional contexts by virtue of their positioning within that context. Rules and norms can thus be seen as intangible "enabling" or "disabling" social resources that are drawn upon in the exercise of power and serve to demarcate the boundaries of choice for different categories of individuals.

The second dimension of power relates to *agency*, the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose that individuals bring to their activity—their *sense* of agency, or what feminists have called "the power within". Agency often tends to be operationalized as "decision making" in the social science literature, but it can take a variety of other forms. It can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. And it can be exercised by an individual as an individual or by individuals organized as formal or informal groups.

Agency has both positive and negative meanings in relation to power.[1] In the positive sense of "power to", it refers to people's capacity to define their own life choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition, dissent and resistance from others. Agency can also be exercised in the more negative sense of "power over", where it implies the capacity of an actor or category of actors to impose their goals on others against their wishes. This, for example, is how agency is often exercised in the context of unequal interpersonal relationships where dominant members use their privileged access to authoritative or allocative resources, or resort to outright coercion, to override dissent or resistance.

However, power can also operate in the absence of any apparent agency. The norms and rules governing social behaviour tend to ensure that certain outcomes are reproduced without any apparent exercise of agency, apart from compliance with the rules. While some of these outcomes are consequentially trivial and hence not relevant to the analysis of power, others relate to the strategic life choices we noted earlier and, to that extent, represent the exercise of power as "non-decision making" (Lukes, 1974). The norms of marriage in South Asia, for instance, invest parents with the authority to choose their children's partners, but are unlikely to be experienced as a form of power—unless such authority is questioned.

Resources and agency together constitute what Sen refers to as capabilities, the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of "being and doing". Sen uses the idea of "functionings" to refer to all the possible ways of being and doing that are valued by people in a given context, and of *"functioning achievements"* to refer to the particular ways of being and doing that are realized by different individuals (Sen, 1985). Clearly, where the failure to achieve valued ways of being and doing can be traced to laziness, incompetence or some other reason particular to an individual, the issue of power is not relevant. It is only when the failure to achieve one's goals reflects some deep-seated constraint on the ability to choose that it can be taken as a manifestation of disempowerment.

◆ Qualifying Choice: Differences and Inequality

A focus on achievements in the measurement of empowerment draws attention to the necessity for some further qualifications to our understanding of choice for the purposes of the analysis in this paper. Concern with achievements in this context does not relate to *differences* in the choices that people make, but to possible *inequalities* in their capacity to make choices. A lack of uniformity in functioning achievements cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence of power inequalities, because it is highly unlikely that all members of a given society will give equal value to different possible ways of being and doing. Consequently, where there is evidence of gender differentials in functioning achievements, achievements that embody meaningful choices must be disentangled from those that do not. However, this is easier said than measured: it is not always possible to

[1] My use of the concepts of positive and negative agency echoes Sen's distinction between positive and negative freedom. Negative freedom corresponds to freedom from the effects of the negative agency of others, or their use of "the power over". Positive freedom, which corresponds closely to the way in which I am defining positive agency, refers to the ability to live as one chooses, to have the effective "power to achieve chosen results" (Sen, 1985:208).

know what people wanted to achieve from information on what they have in fact achieved.

One way of getting around the problem might be to focus on certain universally shared functionings, those that relate to the basic fundamentals of survival and well-being regardless of context. For instance, it is generally agreed that proper nourishment, good health, adequate shelter, reasonable clothing and clean water all constitute primary functionings that are both valued in, and common to, all contexts. If there are systematic gender differences in functioning achievements at this very basic level, it can be taken as evidence of inequalities in the underlying capacity for choice rather than differences in needs, wants or preferences. Focusing on basic needs achievements addresses one aspect of the problem, but it ignores others. In most contexts, inequalities in basic functionings tend to occur in situations of extreme scarcity. Confining the analysis of gender inequality to these achievements alone serves to convey the impression that women's disempowerment is largely a matter of poverty.

This is misleading for two reasons. On the one hand, it misses forms of gender disadvantage that are more likely to characterize better-off sections of society. Prosperity within a society may help to reduce gender inequalities in basic well-being, but intensify other social restrictions on women's ability to make choices (Razavi, 1992). On the other hand, it misses out on those dimensions of gender disadvantage among the very poor that do not take the form of basic functioning failures. For instance, gender differentials in life expectancy and children's nutrition, two widely used indicators of gender discrimination at the level of basic well-being, do not appear to be as widespread in sub-Saharan Africa as they do in South Asia. This tends to be attributed to the greater economic contributions that women are able to make in the former context compared to the latter, and to the cultural practices that have evolved in recognition of these differences. This should not be taken to imply that gender disadvantage does not exist in sub-Saharan Africa, but rather that it may take other forms. Thus, while Shaffer (1998) found little evidence of income or consumption disadvantage between male- and female-headed households in Guinea, both men and women in his study cited women's heavier workloads as well as male domination in private and public decision making as manifestations of gender-specific forms of disadvantage within the community.

A second way out of the problem would be to widen our concern from basic survival-related achievements to other functioning achievements that might be considered to be of social value in most contexts. This is the strategy adopted by the UNDP in its gender-related development index (or GDI, a gender-disaggregated human development index or HDI) and gender empowerment measure (GEM). The HDI combines country-level data on gross national product (GNP), life expectancy and educational attainment into a single index (UNDP, 1995). It is seen to represent the basic foundations from which other valued achievements can be attained: "It is not a measure of well-being. Nor is it a measure of happiness. Instead, it is a measure of empowerment. It indicates that if people have these three choices, they may be able to gain access to other opportunities as well" (p. 12). By extension, the GDI represents an endorsement of the position that empowerment for women in any context requires, as a precondition, if not perfect gender symmetry in these achievements, then certainly a closing of the gender gap in terms of wages earned, education levels attained and

life expectancy. The GEM, which combines national data on gender inequalities in income earned (removing the controls introduced for differences in national income levels in the GDI measure) in professional, managerial and technical occupations and in parliamentary representation, takes us beyond the basic preconditions for choice toward achievements that could be regarded as more politically significant measures of choice.

A number of criticisms may be levelled at these global measures, quite apart from the usual questions of data reliability. One is that the GDI does not separate out gender differentials in functioning achievements that reflect overall income levels from those that reflect equality-related achievements. In particular, gender disparities in life expectancy seem to be more closely related to national income levels than, for instance, disparities in education or in earnings. For example, Bangladesh, with half the per capita GNP of Pakistan, has not performed as well in terms of "normalizing" gender differences in life expectancy, but it has achieved a much greater closing of the gender gap in terms of the other achievements that make up both the GDI and the GEM. Indeed, while Bangladesh is ranked lower than Pakistan in terms of the GDI measure, which includes life expectancy, it is ranked higher in terms of the GEM, which does not.

The other point to make is that while we might agree with the UNDP that gender disparities in earnings, education, occupational status and parliamentary representation tell us something important about gender inequalities in the ability to make choices, it is only at a more disaggregated level of analysis that we can establish precisely what these disparities are telling us. For instance, the much higher representation of women in parliament, and possibly in professional employment, in Bangladesh than in Pakistan reflects the constitutional quota of public sector jobs and parliamentary seats in the former country. While differences in these measures reflect differences in the two countries in the extent to which public policy has been influenced by the politicized use of religion, they do not help us to distinguish between countries where women arrive in parliament as a result of reserved seats, nominated by the party in power, and those who have been voted in by a wider electorate. Yet the former are likely to be less representative of the wider polity, less effective in parliament and consequently less indicative of women's empowerment in the public domain than the latter. The dramatic increase in the percentage of women voting in elections in Bangladesh is probably a more vibrant measure of political achievement in relation to gender than the percentage of women occupying reserved seats in its parliament.

Global measures of this kind are useful for monitoring differences in achievements across nations and across time, and for drawing attention to problematic disparities. However, it is not possible to identify the different processes conflated within these measures and hence to know how to respond to the disparities and shortfalls they record. In addition, while there are sound reasons to move the measurement of achievements beyond very basic functionings, such as life expectancy or even education and income, to more complex achievements, such as reducing gender inequalities in political representation, we have to keep in mind that such measurement can only be achieved at the global level by moving away from the criteria of women's choices, or even the values of the communities in which they live, to a definition of "value" that represents a consensus within the international development community.

◆ Qualifying Choice: "Choosing Not to Choose"

The second problem with the use of both agency and achievements as measures of empowerment stems from the central place given to choice in the definition of power. There is an intuitive plausibility to the equation between power and choice as long as what is chosen appears to contribute to the welfare of those making the choice. Where there is evidence of striking gender inequalities in basic well-being achievements, the equation between choice and power would suggest quite plausibly that such inequalities signal the operation of power—either as an absence of choice on the part of women as the subordinate group, or as active discrimination by men as the dominant group.

However, an equation between power and choice would find it far more difficult to accommodate forms of gender inequality, including inequality at the level of basic well-being, that are found to be the product of choices made by women themselves. This problem plays out in the literature on gender and well-being in the form of behaviour on the part of women that appears to suggest that they have internalized the lesser social value given to them on the grounds of their gender. Such behaviour can have adverse implications for their own well-being and for that of other female members of the family. Women's acceptance of their secondary claims on household resources, their acquiescence to violence at the hands of their husbands and their willingness to bear children to the detriment of their own health and survival in order to satisfy their own or their husband's preference for sons, are examples of behaviour by women that undermine their own well-being. Their adherence to social norms and practices associated with son preference, discrimination against daughters in the allocation of food and basic healthcare that compromises the survival chances of the girl child, promotion of female circumcision, and the oppressive exercise of authority by mothers-in-law over their daughters-in-law (a problem often identified in the South Asian context) are examples of how women's behaviour may undermine the well-being of other female members of their family.

While all these forms of behaviour could be said to reflect "choice", they are also choices that stem from, and serve to reinforce, women's marginalized status. They remind us that power relations are expressed not only through the exercise of agency and choice, but also through the *kinds* of choices made. Power pervades choice through the differentiated values, norms and perceived possibilities that accrue to different social groups by virtue of their positioning within the social hierarchy. This notion of power is a controversial one because it allows for the possibility that power and dominance can operate through consent and complicity as well as through coercion and conflict. Sen makes a similar point: "There is much evidence in history that acute inequalities often survive precisely by making allies out of the deprived. The underdog comes to accept the legitimacy of the unequal order and becomes an implicit accomplice" (1990:126). Sen explains this complicity on the part of subordinate groups as "adapted perceptions", or people learning to make the best of their lot. The possibility of complicity in subordination disrupts the simple equation between power and choice, because such an equation is premised on the implicit assumption that people act in their own interests (even if it is accepted that their interests will include concern for others). It takes us very close to the notion of false consciousness, an idea that evokes deep discomfort among social scientists of varying political persuasions,

posing as it does the idea that the "authenticity" of consciousness can be measured by some objective standard of real interests.

Thus Sen has been attacked, from a cultural relativist standpoint, by Apffel-Marglin and Simon who accuse him of "feminist orientalism": "Cognitive authority, once again, resides with the expert who has access to "objective reality" and not with the women themselves. Thus the expert's voice replaces (and eliminates) the women's voices" (1994:35). However, Apffel-Marglin and Simon, like many who consider "orientalist" any critical standpoint on the question of culture, offer little by way of constructive insights into the issues of injustice that Sen is grappling with. Indeed, it is not clear whether they perceive any injustice at all. In this, as Nussbaum (1995) points out, their analysis shares common ground with the neoclassical practice of taking subjective preferences as the only criteria for making judgements about values and welfare, although they stress "cultural" or group preferences while economists stress individual preferences.

Agarwal agrees with Sen that the absence of protest about gender inequality need not signify the absence of that inequality, but adds that the absence of *overt* protest need not signify *acceptance* of that inequality either—"compliance need not imply complicity" (1977:25). She notes various clandestine ways in which women in the South Asian context seek to secure their own self-interest while appearing to comply with the cultural norms of self-subordination. According to Agarwal, the emphasis should be more on the external constraints to women acting overtly in their self-interest, and less on women's lack of awareness of where their interests lie.

While Agarwal makes a valuable point about the importance of recognizing the frequently "strategic" nature of women's compliance with the norms and practices that deny them choice, the uncomfortable possibility still remains, as Razavi (1992) points out on the basis of her work in rural Iran, that not all women want the option of autonomy. My own exploration of the testimonies given by women in both urban and rural areas of Bangladesh as to how they perceived, and acted on, their access to new economic resources, revealed diversity, rather than uniformity, in how women explained their choices (Kabeer, 1997a and 1998). Some actively and explicitly rejected attempts by patriarchal authority within the family to constrain their behaviour. Others contested *official* interpretations of these constraints, those put forward by dominant sections of the community, and sought to redefine them to accommodate desired forms of agency. However, there were also those who did not merely acquiesce with the lesser value they had been assigned by their community, but believed it to be justified on the grounds of biological difference/inferiority, by divine ordination or more simply, "because that is how it has always been". Similarly, Schaffer found that while both women and men in his Guinea study identified women's heavy workloads as well as male domination as major sources of gender disadvantage, neither considered this to be *unjust* (1998).

Clearly, no research can adequately uncover, or even know whether it has uncovered, what people "truly" believe as opposed to what they say they believe. But we cannot rule out the possibility that "choosing not to choose" may not just be "strategic compliance" on the part of women. The vocabulary of "false consciousness" is not helpful here, implying as it does the need to adjudicate between false and authentic consciousness, between illusion and reality.

Consciousness can never be "false" as such, since how people perceive their needs and interests is shaped by individual histories and everyday realities, by the material and social contexts of their experiences, and by the vantage point for reflexivity this provides. In any situation, some of these needs and interests are self-evident, emerging out of the routine practices of daily life. They reflect practical concerns and are gender differentiated in as much as the responsibilities and routines of daily life are gender differentiated. However, there are other strategic interests that do not have this self-evident nature because they derive from a "deeper" level of reality, one not evident in everyday life because it is inscribed in the taken-for-granted rules, norms and customs within which everyday life is conducted.

One way of conceptualizing this deeper reality is to be found in Bourdieu's idea of "*doxa*", aspects of tradition and culture that are taken for granted to such an extent that they are "naturalized". *Doxa* refers to traditions and beliefs that exist beyond discourse or argumentation, "undiscussed, unnamed, admitted without argument or scrutiny" (Bourdieu, 1977). The idea of *doxa* is particularly helpful in moving us away from the false/authentic dichotomy in understanding consciousness to a focus on the possibility for apprehending differing levels of reality. Bourdieu makes the point that as long as the subjective assessments of social actors are largely congruent with the objectively organized possibilities available to them, the world of *doxa* remains intact, a self-evident "common sense" about the world that is validated in the objective consensus of the way that world is. The passage from *doxa* to discourse, a more critical consciousness, only becomes possible when *competing* ways of being and doing emerge as material and cultural possibilities, so that common sense propositions of culture begin to lose their naturalized character, revealing the underlying arbitrariness of the given social order.

The availability of alternatives at the discursive level, of being able to have chosen differently or at least being able to imagine such a possibility, is thus crucial to the emergence of a critical consciousness, to the process by which people move from a position of unquestioning acceptance of the social order to a critical, and perhaps transformatory, perspective on it. But the process is always uneven in any given context because people come to specific points in their lives through very different histories and hence bring very different material standpoints and discursive potentials to their present situation. How does this relate to the earlier discussion about functioning achievements as an aspect of empowerment? The possibility that power operates not only through constraints on people's ability to make choices, but also through their preferences and values, and hence the choices that they may make, appeared to pose a serious challenge to the basic equation made in this paper between power and choice. However, it is possible to retain the equation by a further qualification of the notion of choice, extending the idea of alternatives discussed earlier—of the material possibility of having chosen differently—to encompass the existence of discursive alternatives. In assessing whether or not an achievement embodies meaningful choice, therefore, we have to ask ourselves whether other choices were materially or ideologically possible.[2]

[2] The relevance of both material as well as discursive alternatives appears in different forms in a number of analyses of power. Lukes (1974) refers to the absence of actual or imagined alternatives as a factor explaining the absence of protest to the injustices of an unequal order. Geuss (1981) suggests that knowledge about social life and the self requires not only freedom from basic want but also the material and cultural possibility of experimentation, of

◆ Dimensions, Levels and Processes of Change

Further elaboration of the main points of the discussion so far may help to clarify the direction of the argument of this paper. The ability to choose has been made central to the concept of power that informs the analysis in this paper, but the notion of choice has been qualified in a number of ways to make it relevant to the analysis of empowerment. One set of qualifications refers to the *conditions of choice* in order to distinguish between choices made from the vantage point of alternatives and those reflecting the absence, or punishingly high cost, of alternatives. Another set of qualifications refers to the *consequences of choice* and sought to distinguish between first-order choices—those critical in allowing women to live the kinds of lives they want—and the other, less strategic choices that follow once these first-order choices have been made. A further qualification relates to *transformatory significance*, distinguishing between choices with the potential for challenging and destabilizing social inequalities and those that essentially express and reproduce these inequalities. Choices that express the fundamental inequalities of a society, infringing the basic rights of others or systematically devaluing the self, are not compatible with the notion of "empowerment" put forward in this paper.

While most of the measures of empowerment found in the literature reviewed for this paper are defined at the level of the individual, the preceding analysis points to the structural roots of individual inequalities of power. The qualifications made to the notion of choice in the present analysis represent an attempt to acknowledge these underlying structures for the exercise of choice, since these structures constitute the conditions under which choices are made as well as their consequential significance. Inequalities in structural conditions determine the distribution of valued resources between different categories of members in any society along gender, class, caste and other lines. They also impose socially differentiated parameters within which different categories of actors are able pursue their interests, promoting the voice and agency of some actors and inhibiting those of others. And finally, they shape individual interests so that how people define their goals and what they value reflect their social positioning as well as their individual histories, tastes and preferences.

This suggests that processes of empowerment entail change at different levels and in different dimensions: change can occur at the level of the individual, in their "inner" sense of self or in their access to material resources; it can occur in relationships within the family and household; or it can reflect alteration in position in the wider hierarchies of the economy and state. The complex of causal factors resulting in the denial of choice to women in terms of these different levels can be conceptualized as follows:

"Deeper" level	Structural relations of class/caste/gender
Intermediate level	Distribution of rules and resources
Immediate level	Individual agency and achievements

trying out alternatives, the freedom to experience and to discuss the results of that experience.

The different measures of empowerment reviewed in this paper are drawn from the development studies literature, particularly from contributions to economics and population studies, as well as by feminist interventions in the field. There are some important differences in how these contributions deal with the idea of empowerment. They differ in the dimensions of empowerment that they choose to focus on. They differ also in whether power is regarded as an attribute of individuals or a property of structures. Finally, they differ in how change, which is of course at the heart of empowerment, is perceived, some opting for a linear cause-effect model, others favouring a more process-based approach.

While many neoclassical economists have moved away from the earlier notion of the household as a unified, welfare-maximizing entity—in order to allow for inequalities in decision-making power within the household—they nevertheless retain a methodological individualism in their approach. Power is introduced into their model of the household through the idea of differences in "bargaining power" among household members, where bargaining power is seen to be a function of their "fall-back" positions or the relative resources they are able to command independently of other household members. Neoclassical economists thus generally subscribe to a resource model of power where the resources in question are largely the conventional economic ones of earnings, assets, credit and access to education.[3] They also subscribe to the linear model of change. The strengthening of women's fall-back position through, for instance, an increase in their earning capacity is seen to translate fairly unproblematically into their greater bargaining power within the household, as demonstrated by the greater weight given to their preferences in decision-making (see Hart, 1995 for an overview of this literature).

Within population studies, there has been a shift from the earlier focus on a "roles and status" framework, derived from the modernization paradigm, to a greater concern with kinship and gender relations, the extent to which reproductive gender interests among family members are convergent or divergent, and the ability of women to pursue reproductive strategies that maximize their own interests (see Kabeer, 1997b for an overview of this literature). While reproductive gender interests vary according to the distribution of costs and benefits of children between different family members, women are seen to have a strong gender-specific stake in lower fertility rates because of the costs that frequent child bearing impose on their health, choices and, often, their lives. However, as long as their ability to act as independent agents is curtailed, their interests are best served by strengthening their familial networks through having a large number of children.

Empowerment is captured in this literature largely through the idea of autonomy, and the aim in much of it has been to explore associations between the "degrees of autonomy" permitted to women in different contexts and a variety of demographic outcomes. While a few studies recognize the possibility of multiple pathways through which changes in autonomy might occur, most tend to work with a fairly straightforward "cause-and-effect" model of change, with changes in structural variables determining changes in individual autonomy. Proxies for women's empowerment in these studies include the conventional "status" variables of women's education and employment, as well as a host of family and kinship

[3] However, some structural variables are beginning to find their way into economic models more recently (see McElroy, 1992).

variables also believed to play a role in defining autonomy: marital practices, such as patterns of post-marital residence and prevalence of polygamy; female mobility in the public domain; the ability to inherit or otherwise acquire, retain and dispose of property; and norms determining the continuity or disruption of relationships between married women and their natal kin. The discipline of population studies thus takes greater account of structures than does economics, and a number of studies discussed in this paper attempt explicitly to disentangle individual and structural dimensions of women's empowerment.

Explicitly feminist concerns with empowerment stem from the recognition that, in all societies, women have been denied choice to a far greater extent than men for any given social group and have consequently had less say in strategic areas of their lives. Feminist scholars have played an important role in pointing to the institutionalized nature of gender inequality within the household, family and community as well as within the apparently gender-neutral domains of markets, the state and civil society. Feminist concerns with empowerment have translated into a variety of practical interventions. Within the official development agencies, interventions have included the adoption of mechanisms and training to ensure the "mainstreaming" of gender issues. Outside the official agencies, feminists have engaged in a variety of organizational strategies to address different manifestations of women's disempowerment: lobbying around women's rights, literacy and health projects; awareness raising and conscientization; campaigns for legal reform; and dealing with violence against women.

While these disparate efforts are characterized by a diversity of theoretical frameworks, political standpoints and methodological approaches, they all stem from a recognition of gender equity as central to the feminist goal of social transformation. Some of the commonalities—and differences—in the understanding of empowerment can be illustrated by considering the following empowerment-related definitions drawn from the feminist literature:

> . . . the analysis of women's subordination and . . . the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements to those which exist . . . such as the abolition of the sexual division of labor, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labor and child care, the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the establishment of political equality, freedom of choice over childbearing and . . . measures against male violence and control over women (Molyneux, 1985:232–233).

> Women's empowerment involves gaining a voice, having mobility and establishing a public presence. Although women can empower themselves by obtaining some form of control over different aspects of their daily lives, empowerment also suggests the need to gain some control over power structures, or to change them (Johnson, 1994:148)

> Our main objective is to reverse these processes by empowering the poorest rural women with the freedom and knowledge with which to determine their own destinies. A 'time and space' is created for them to gather together and engage in a process of collective reflection, analysis, learning, and action, defining their own needs and priorities Mahila Samakhya, 1996).

> . . . the exercise of informed choice within an expanding framework of information, knowledge and analysis . . . a process which must enable

> women to discover new possibilities, new options . . . a growing repertoire of choices . . . to independently struggle for changes in their material conditions of existence, their personal lives and their treatment in the public sphere . . . The process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power . . . (Batliwala, 1993:7 and 1994:130).

What is apparent from these definitions is that feminist discourses of empowerment are constructed around a cluster of recurring concepts: power, capability, rights, interests, choices, control. They place a great deal of emphasis on the significance of intangible "resources"—voice, public presence, internal strength and confidence, collective organization, reflection and analytical skills, information, political participation and knowledge. And they are concerned with change at different levels and in different domains: at the level of individual and of social structures and within the intimate domain of the family, as well as in the public domain.

However, in the very nature of empowerment, understood in these terms, is a certain "fuzziness", with a number of issues remaining unspecified or only sketchily understood. The role of men in the processes of women's empowerment is one. As we will see, women's relationships with men, the need for men to change in the course of women's empowerment, barely figure in mainstream attempts to measure empowerment. It occupies more space in some of the feminist literature, but here too the complexity of the relationship is acknowledged. As Batliwala points out, many feminists recognize that poor men are almost as powerless as poor women in access to material resources in the public domain, but remain privileged within the patriarchal structures of the family: "the family is the last frontier of change in gender relations . . . You know (empowerment) has occurred when it crosses the threshold of the home" (Kannabiran cited in Batliwala, 1994:131). Batliwala concludes that men stand to gain as well as lose from women's empowerment. "Women's empowerment means the loss of the privileged position that patriarchy allotted to men . . . however . . . women's empowerment also liberates and empowers men, both in material and psychological terms . . . they find that they have lost not merely traditional privileges, but also traditional burdens" (1994:131).

The other unresolved question relates to the processes of social change entailed in empowerment. Feminists have stressed changes at the level of individual consciousness and everyday lives, as well as changes in the overarching structures of women's subordination, such as the abolition of gender divisions of labour, the recognition of women's full citizenship, equality in property rights and so on. What remains unresolved is how these different levels of change relate to one another. While structural models embody a vision of a more just society, they spell out "ends" that can only be achieved through the long-term transformation of some of the most stable constructs of women's subordination. Given the resilience of these larger structures, changes at the level of the individual—in consciousness and sense of self, in "voice" within the family, in control over individual resources—may be easier to achieve in the short-term. What remains unresolved, and is perhaps impossible to resolve, is the relationship between individual and structural change. How do changes in the rules of women's representation in parliament, for instance, translate into the greater political agency of women at the grassroots level? Or, alternatively, how does change at the level of individual consciousness transform into a demand for greater political representation? It is

this indeterminacy at the heart of feminist understandings of empowerment that explains why many feminists have opted for a non-linear and "fuzzy" model of social change in their approach, one which avoids prescribing specific outcomes and processes over others and concentrates instead on creating the possibilities that will allow women to exercise greater agency and choice in their lives and, perhaps, shape the direction of future change. Different aspects of women's disempowerment, and hence empowerment, are closely related so that initiatives in relation to one aspect are likely to set off changes in other aspects, although not in easily predictable ways. Changes at the level of resources may translate into changes in the sense of self-worth; a space for critical reflection may be the first step to building greater political participation; a campaign to close the gender gap in education at the state level may affect intrahousehold negotiations on these questions. The indeterminacy of the processes of empowerment, the intangibility of many of the elements central in bringing it about, increasing attention to the resistance and opportunities that men can offer in the project for women's empowerment, and insistence that empowerment must be self-generated rather than "given" are some of the features that distinguish this view of empowerment from those underpinning other attempts to measure empowerment discussed in this paper.

MEASURING EMPOWERMENT: THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

◆ Measuring "Resources"

The "resource" dimension of empowerment would seem to be the most amenable to measurement. However, various efforts to measure resources suggest that the task is by no means simple, even when resources are defined in narrow material terms. The problem of measurement is disguised by a widespread tendency in the empowerment literature to talk about "access to resources" in a generic way, as if evoking a particular resource in relation to women automatically specifies their relationship to the resource in question, and hence to the choices it makes possible. In reality, however, resources are removed from choice; they are a measure of *potential* rather than *actualized* choice. Furthermore, "access" to land, to credit, to waged employment, to education or to social capital embody very different potentials for the actualization of choice: the effects on women's agency of access to land are very different from access to education, the effects of their access to waged employment very different from access to self-employment. To be useful as a measure of empowerment, the "resource" dimension has to be defined in a way that spells out its potential for human agency and valued achievements more clearly than simple "access" indicators generally do. This is not always easy precisely because of the indeterminacy in processes of empowerment discussed earlier.

Let us take the example of women's access to land. At the systemic level, this is often captured by distinguishing between different inheritance principles, on the assumption that women are likely to exercise a greater degree of autonomy in those regions where they enjoy some rights to land (see Dyson and Moore, 1983; Boserup, 1970). Yet studies that use measures of women's access to land as an

indicator of empowerment rarely consider the pathways by which such "access" translates into agency and achievement. It is noteworthy, for instance, that while the northern plains of the Indian sub continent are generally characterized as a region of low female autonomy, customary inheritance rules are by no means uniform within this region. There are important differences between Hindu and Muslim communities within India itself as well as across the sub continent. Among Hindus, joint family property is a central tenet shaping inheritance practices, although there are local variations in how this is interpreted. Such property is generally held in a coparcenary system by men, usually fathers and sons, to the total exclusion of women (Mukhopadhyay, 1998). Among Muslims, on the other hand, women have always enjoyed the right to inherit property and to inherit as individuals. Muslim women and men consequently enjoy individual, absolute but unequal rights to property: men tend to inherit twice the share of women. Hindu law was reformed after Indian independence to give men and women equal rights of inheritance. The reform of personal law in India applies only to the majority Hindu community so that Muslim inheritance principles remain intact.

However, despite these differences in the customary and legal positions of women in the two communities, both Muslim and Hindu women tend to be treated as effectively propertyless in the literature. For Hindu women, older norms and customs remain powerful and Agarwal (1994) provides evidence of the difficulties faced when they seek to assert legal over customary practices around land inheritance. Muslim women, on the other hand, generally prefer, or are encouraged to prefer, to waive their rights to parental property in favour of their brothers with the result that they, too, are treated as effectively propertyless. Thus the critical measure of women's access to land characterizing the literature is *de facto* rather than *de jure* entitlement, and by this measure, there is little difference between the Hindu and Muslim communities.

Yet it is by no means self-evident that *de facto* ownership tells us all we need to know about potentials in terms of choice. It has, for instance, been pointed out that although Muslim women do waive their land rights to their brothers (and may be under considerable pressure to do so), this strengthens a woman's future claim on her brother, should the woman's marriage break down. While brothers have a duty under Islam to look after their sisters, the waiving of land rights by sisters in favour of brothers gives a material basis to a moral entitlement. The necessity for such an exchange may reflect women's subordinate status within the community, but the fact that women's land rights are, in principle, recognized by their community gives them a resource to bargain with in situations where they have few other resources. Moreover, as the situation changes, they may begin to press their claims on this resource. There is evidence of women beginning to claim their inheritance rights in rural Bangladesh, although sometimes this is done under pressure from their husbands (Kabeer, 1994). And Razavi notes evidence in rural Iran of a greater willingness of women to press for their property rights in court, often to compensate for their diminishing employment opportunities (Razavi, 1992). These potentials are not easily available to women in communities where such rights were not recognized by customary law and tradition, even if they have, as in India, subsequently been brought into existence by legislative action. Indeed, Das Gupta (1987:92) has pointed out in the context of her study in the *jat* kinship system in Punjab that there was no question of women owning land: "If she should insist on her right to inherit land equally under the civil law, she would stand a good chance of being murdered".

Studies in West Bengal suggest that there may be differences in women's *sense* of entitlement to land as a result of differences in the cultural construction of their land rights within their communities. For instance, Gupta notes differences in the reactions of Hindu and Muslim women to the campaign by women's organizations in West Bengal to secure women equal rights in the land redistribution programme being undertaken by the state's socialist government. She found that Muslim women were much more likely formulate their demands for equality in terms of *individual* property rights, while Hindu women were more likely to press for *joint* entitlement with their husbands.[4] Other differences are highlighted in Mukhopadhyay's study of legal disputes over property in West Bengal (1998). She reports that Muslim women generally had no trouble establishing their individual rights to property, going to court to contest fraudulent dispossession. For Hindu women, on the other hand, the problem lay in establishing their rightful claim to the property, a problem that reflects the ambiguity of their status within local interpretations of customary Hindu law as well as the way in which this ambiguity has been carried over into the new legislation.

One of the limitations of *de facto* measures of property is that they ignore the diverse processes by which the *de facto* possession or dispossession occurs, and may thus fail to appreciate important differences in women's choices implied by differences in the *de jure* position. However, the power of *customary* constructions of *de jure* rights over recently introduced legal ones raises the question of how changes in deeply entrenched rules, legitimized in this case by custom and religion, translate into changes in individual agency and choice. The recognition by many analysts of the need to go beyond simple "access" indicators in order to grasp how "resources" translate into realized achievements has led to variety of concepts that seek to bridge the gap between formal and effective entitlement to resources. The most common is the widely used distinction between "access" and "control". However, the distinction is not always clear or consistent.

Sathar and Kazi (1997) equate both "access" and "control" with "say in decision making". Measures of "access to household resources" are based on whether women have a say in household expenses, cash to spend on household expenses and freedom to purchase clothes, jewellery and gifts for their relatives, while "control" measures are based on asking who kept household earnings and who had a say in household expenditure. In Jejeebhoy's analysis (1997), concepts of "access", "control" and "decision making" are all used in relation to resources, but again the distinction between the terms is not clear. "Control" appears to refer to ownership of resources in some cases and to decision making in relation to resources in others. Thus, ownership relates to material resources, such as land, vessels and jewellery, as well as to own savings. But material resources are also brought into the analysis through a focus on "decision making" in relation to purchasing power, as well as through "access", where access to household income relates to having a say in how it is spent. In Kishor's (1997) analysis, empowerment is defined in terms of women's "control" over key aspects of their lives—defined in relation to resources (earnings and expenditures), self reliance (can women support themselves without their husband's support), decision making (who has final say in making decisions about a variety of issues), and "choice" (choosing own spouse or being consulted in the choice of marriage partner).

[4] Personal communication, Jayathi Gupta.

The introduction of the notion of "control" into the discussion about resources is an important step in the empowerment literature, reflecting the recognition by many analysts that "access" to resources will only translate into empowerment if women are able to act on these resources in some definitive way. The concept of control is thus an attempt to bring the "passive" formulation of the resource dimension closer to a concern with women's agency. But the meaning of "control" must be clearly and consistently worked out before it can be used as an indicator of empowerment. The main methodological point to draw out of this discussion, therefore, is that a key criterion for assessing the validity of a resource-based measure of women's empowerment *is the validity of its assumptions about the kinds of agency and choices that women are able to exercise as a result of their "access" to the resource in question.*

◆ Measuring "Agency"

A number of different indicators of agency are to be found in the literature, but one that appears most frequently relates to *decision-making agency*. These indicators are usually based on women's responses to questions about their role in specific decisions. Answers may be combined into a single index or presented separately. Some examples of the typical decisions asked about in studies covering Egypt, India, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Nepal, Iran, Pakistan and Bangladesh are given below.

Typical decisions in decision-making indicators

- Egypt: household budget; food cooked; visits; children's education; children's health; use of family planning methods (Kishor, 1997).
- India: purchase of food; purchase of major household goods; purchase of small items of jewellery; course of action if child falls ill; disciplining the child; decisions about children's education and type of school (Jejeebhoy, 1997).
- Nigeria: household purchases; whether wife works; how to spend husband's income; number of children to have; whether to buy and sell land; whether to use family planning; to send children to school/how much education; when sons and when daughters marry; whether to take sick children to doctor; how to rear children (Kritz et al., 1997).
- Zimbabwe: wife working outside; making a major purchase; number of children (Becker, 1997).
- Nepal: what food to buy; decision by women to work outside; major market transactions; number of children to have (Morgan and Niraula, 1995).
- Iran: types and quantities of food; inputs; labour and sale in agricultural production (Razavi, 1992).
- Pakistan: purchase of food; number of children; schooling of children; children's marriage; major household purchases; women's work outside the home; sale and purchase of livestock; household expenses; purchase of clothes; jewellery and gifts for wife's relatives (Sathar and Kazi, 1997).
- Bangladesh: ability to make small consumer purchases: ability to make large consumer purchases; house repair; taking in livestock for raising; leasing in of land; purchase of major asset (Hashemi et al., 1996).
- Bangladesh: children's education; visits to friends and relatives; household purchases; healthcare matters (Cleland et al., 1994).

Even a preliminary reading of these different decisions suggests that they are not all equally persuasive as indicators of women's autonomy, because not all have the same consequential significance for women's lives. Few cultures operate with starkly dichotomized distributions of power, with men making all the decisions and women making none. It is more common to find a hierarchy of decision-making responsibilities recognized by the family and community, where certain areas are reserved for men in their capacity as heads of households and others assigned to women in their capacity as mothers, wives, daughters and so on. Broadly speaking, the evidence from studies in South Asia suggest that, within the family, the purchase of food and other items of household consumption, as well as decisions related to children's health, appear to fall within women's arena of decision making, while decisions related to education and marriage of children, and market transactions in major assets, tend to be more clearly male (Sathar and Kazi, 1997; Cleland et al., 1994; Morgan and Niraula, 1995; Hashemi et al., 1996).

This is clearly illustrated in Sathar and Kazi (1997). They found, on the basis of data from Pakistan, that the only area of decision making in which women reported both participating (71 per cent) as well as playing a major role (51 per cent) was in decisions related to the purchase of food. They participated in, but did not play a major role in deciding, the number of children to have (65 per cent and 16 per cent respectively); the schooling of children (53 per cent and 17 per cent) and the marriage of children (52 per cent and 8 per cent). They had lower levels of participation and even less likelihood of playing a major role in decisions relating to major household purchases (17 per cent and 5 per cent) and livestock transactions (21 per cent and 5 per cent). Thus major economic decisions were largely reserved for men, while women could play a more significant role in minor economic decisions. They participated, but did not have a major role, in decisions relating to numbers of children and their schooling. They had an even less decisive role when it came to children's marriage.

Sathar and Kazi's study serves to highlight the fact that decision-making hierarchies occur not only between different categories of decisions, but between degrees of involvement in the same decision. For example, they found that while 65 per cent of women reported that they had participated in decision making about how many children to have, only 16 per cent of those who did not want any more children were using contraceptives. This signals the importance of distinguishing between "participating in" and "having a major say in" decisions. Still other studies (Beneria and Roldan, 1987) point to various critical "control points" within decision-making processes where such control is defined in terms of the consequential significance of influencing outcomes at these different points. Pahl (1989) distinguishes between the "control" or policy-making function, decisions about resource allocation, and the "management" function, decisions pertaining to implementation. This distinction might explain the finding by the Egyptian Male Survey in 1992 (cited in Ali, 1996) that men were dominant in the decision to adopt contraceptives, the policy decision, but tended to leave the choice of contraception largely to women (although Ali's qualitative study found men's continuing involvement in women's choice of contraceptives as well).

In methodological terms, these distinctions suggest the need for greater care in selecting and quantifying the decisions that are to serve as indicators of empowerment*, with attention given to the consequential significance of areas of decision making or of different stages in the decision-making process.* Evidence

that women played a role in making decisions that were of little consequence—or were assigned to women in any case by virtue of their pre-existing roles and responsibilities—tells us far less about their power to choose than does evidence on decisions relating to their critical life choices or to choices they had been denied in the past. However, "statistical" perspectives on decision making should be remembered for what they are: simple windows on complex realities. They may provide a brief glimpse of processes of decision making, but they tell us very little about the subtle negotiations that go on between women and men in their private lives. Consequently, they may underestimate the informal decision-making agency that women often exercise. This can be illustrated by comparing Silberschimdt's (1992) ethnographic account of formal and informal decision making among the Kisii in Kenya. The formal account of decision making given by women ascribed most of the power to men: The husbands were said to be "heads" of households and their "owners"—as an afterthought the wives might add, "they can buy us just like cattle". At the same time, however, accounts of "actual" decision making gave a very different picture:

> (Women) admitted that men should be consulted on all sorts of issues, and that they were supposed to determine various actions that must be taken. In reality, however, many women took such decisions themselves. Their most common practice was to avoid open confrontation while still getting their own way . . . There is no doubt that many women do often manipulate their menfolk and make decisions independently. For example, since the land belongs to the man, he is expected to decide where the various crops are to be planted. If his wife disagrees, she would seldom say so, but simply plant in what she feels is a better way. If he finds out that she has not followed his instructions, she will apologize but explain that because the seeds did not germinate they had to be replanted in a different manner/spot (p. 248).

Studies measuring women's control over resources tend to focus on who makes decisions about the disposal of those resources. But my own exploration of these questions in relation to women's access to credit, as well as waged employment, in Bangladesh suggest that information on the decision to access these resources in the first place reveals insights into women's agency and priorities in a way that exclusive attention to allocative decision-making does not (Kabeer, 1997a and 1998). Accessing credit or waged employment was important for many women because of the potential such resources opened up for them. Knowledge of this potential was often sufficient to enhance women's voice within the household, since all members knew that women's fall-back position had been strengthened. Struggles over "actual control" tended to occur primarily in conflictual relationships.

A second common measure of women's agency is their *mobility in the public domain,* but it crops up largely in contexts where there is a strong public-private divide along gender lines and women's mobility in the public sphere is subject to various socially defined restrictions. Mobility indicators generally ask whether it is acceptable for women to move around on their own in certain pre-identified locations. Some typical locations used in these studies are summarized below.

Typical locations in mobility indicators

- Egypt: just outside the house; local market; health centre; neighbourhood; homes of friends and family (Kishor, 1997).
- Nepal: local health centre; local market; homes of relatives; fields outside the village; community centre; fair or shrine; next village; cinema (Morgan and Niraula, 1995).
- Pakistan: homes of relatives; fields; market; health centre; neighbouring village (Sathar and Kazi, 1997).
- Bangladesh: market; medical facility; cinema; outside village (Hashemi et al., 1996).
- India: market; health centre; home of friend or relative; fair; next village (Jejeebhoy, 1997).

The findings from these studies suggest that, like decision-making power, space is not a dichotomous variable, divided between public and private, but rather a continuum of locations ranging from acceptable to unacceptable places for unaccompanied women to be. For instance, as suggested by the findings from Morgan and Niraula's study of two villages in Nepal, women had much greater freedom of movement in one of the study villages than the other, but there were certain locations in both villages where women were less likely to appear on their own. These related to certain kinds of public activity (cinema, fairs, shrines and community centres) or were outside the boundaries of their village (fields and neighbouring villages). The local health centre, on other hand, appeared to be the most acceptable public place in both villages for women to visit on their own, perhaps because it was perceived as linked to their familial responsibilities. Jejeebhoy's study of Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh found that visiting the local health centre and the homes of relatives or friends within the village were considered less threatening than local fairs or adjoining villages.

	Village 1 (per cent)	**Village 2** (per cent)
Local health centre	97	78
Relatives' homes	78	61
Local market	96	42
Fields outside village	51	19
Community centre	37	3
Fair/shrine	28	10
Next village	24	10
Cinema	8	3

Source: Based on Morgan and Niraula, 1995:552, Table 2.

In methodological terms, our analysis suggests *the need to distinguish between different locations on the basis of their consequential significance for women's ability to exercise choices versus their transformatory significance in terms of past practice.* A location can have consequential significance without necessarily having a transformatory significance. The reported ability to visit the health centre may have important consequences for women's well-being, but if it is a widely accepted location for women to visit, it has little transformatory significance. On the other hand, women's ability to visit the cinema on their own may have little consequential significance. But in those parts of the world (such as much of the Indian subcontinent) where the cinema is a "male" space where it is unacceptable for women to visit, an important cultural transformation will have occurred in gender relations when this becomes routine. Awareness of such distinctions could

improve both the use of women's mobility as a measure of their empowerment, as well as how the measure is interpreted.

Finally, *male violence* is another agency-related indicator that features frequently in the literature on women's empowerment. It is generally seen as a direct expression of patriarchal power: men's ability to resort to physical force to impose their own goals or to block women's ability to achieve theirs. Although such violence is exercised by individual men against individual women in the context of inter-personal relationships, the structural support for male violence can be seen in the fact that it is often condoned by social or religious norms that give men the authority to "discipline" their wives on various grounds.

There is a clear rationale for seeking to quantify the incidence of domestic violence, if only because, "naming and numbering" is an effective way of demonstrating the existence of a problem to policy makers. However, measurement of domestic violence is a problematic exercise, particularly in cultures and contexts where it is defined as a private matter, a source of shame. For instance, Naripokkho, a feminist organization that recently completed a large-scale quantitative study of domestic violence in urban Bangladesh, observed a clear class difference in women's willingness to talk to strangers about their experience (Naripokkho, 1999)[5]. Women in slum areas, where privacy is a luxury and everyone knows everyone else's business, regard violence as an unexceptional feature of marriage. They displayed far less hesitation in reporting it, although there was a tendency to under-report "acceptable" levels of violence, i.e., beatings which they did not regard as major assaults. By contrast, women from middle-class backgrounds, who live their lives behind closed doors, were far less forthcoming.

Although Naripokkho's research team was trained to ask questions with empathy and respect for those of a different class than themselves, they were well aware that their study was likely to underestimate the incidence of domestic violence, particularly for middle class women. Less confidence can be attached to estimates of domestic violence based on the normal procedures of large-scale quantitative surveys. These require teams of strangers, not necessarily trained in dealing with sensitive issues, to walk into the homes of hundreds—sometimes thousands—of women and pose structured questions about intimate and shameful aspects of their lives. Such large-scale quantitative surveys often include questions such as (i) were women afraid of their husbands; (ii) were they beaten by their husbands; (iii) were they both afraid of *and* beaten by their husbands (Jejeebhoy, 1997).

The methodological problems associated with quantifying a sensitive issue like domestic violence are noted by Schuler et al. (1996) in their investigation of the impact of credit for women in rural Bangladesh. They point out that their overall survey data gave much lower estimates of the incidence of male violence than did estimates from six villages selected for a two-year ethnographic study, during which the research team had built a rapport with the local community. Their findings are unusual in that they bring together quantitative indicators measuring the incidence of violence with ethnographic research into the meaning of violence.

[5] This study is currently being written. Information here comes from personal communication with Safia Azim.

Male violence was found to be widespread in their study villages, as it is in much of Bangladesh—and indeed, much of the world. However, it varied considerably from village to village; and it occurred largely in the context of marriage. Women were beaten on a variety of pretexts: for giving birth to daughters rather than sons; for not performing their household chores to their husbands' satisfaction; for talking back when reprimanded; for urging their husband to seek work or to stop gambling; for pointing to their husbands' failure to fulfil his role as provider; for asking for money for any expense, even medical expenses; and in relation to non-payment of dowry. Both men and women believed that men's right to beat their wives was grounded in religious doctrine, but women were also acutely aware of the price they might have to pay in resisting such violence, given their social and economic dependency on their husbands.

Quantitative data suggested that women who had sons were less likely to be beaten; older women were less likely to be beaten than women in their twenties or younger; women with some education were less likely to be beaten than women with no education (Schuler et al., 1996). These findings are consistent with the lower status of young wives who are relatively new in the husband's home, and with the strong son preference in Bangladesh. They also indicate a greater degree of assertiveness on the part of educated women—or perhaps a greater reluctance to report violence.[6] In terms of economic variables, the authors found that membership of credit programmes that lent to women tended to be associated with a reduced incidence of domestic violence: 9–13 per cent of women who were members of credit organizations reported male violence, compared to 21–27 per cent of women from a comparison group of households where women did not receive loans (Hashemi et al., 1996). In addition, in families where women were making relatively large contributions to the family economy, regardless of whether or not they had access to credit, violence was also found to be lower.

One important reason for this "credit" effect on violence was that women's greater participation in social networks in the public domain (as a result of their membership of credit organizations) increased the possibility that incidents of domestic violence would become public knowledge, thereby bringing shame on the family. Other reasons were revealed in my qualitative study into the impact of loans to women in rural Bangladesh. The women all testified that poverty-related stress was a major source of male violence within the family, given that men carried primary and often sole responsibility for family breadwinning. Violence tended to lessen when women were able to make a significant direct contribution to the family economy or were able to make an indirect contribution by bringing in loans (Kabeer, 1998).

Qualitative research by Schuler et al. revealed a number of examples where male violence appeared to have been exacerbated by women's access to credit. A number of these examples remind us that men do not always take kindly to interventions that destabilize the balance of power within the household and that "empowerment processes may sometimes lead to an initial increase in abuse

[6] There is some indirect support for the former interpretation in the views expressed by a large number of women loanees interviewed in rural Bangladesh. One of their reasons for wanting to educate their daughters was to ensure that they would not be forced to marry abusive men (Kabeer, 1998).

because they challenge the status quo of gender power" (Sen and Batliwala, 1997:21). As Schuler et al. (1998:151) point out:

> There were many cases in the study villages where husbands became increasingly violent as their wives began to earn independent incomes and became more mobile and autonomous. Conflicts often developed over the control of assets and earnings and the women became more inclined to defend themselves against what they saw as unfair domination. . . . In contrast . . . many women who had nothing of their own, were completely dependent on their husbands and were rarely if ever beaten.

What lessons can we draw out for the use of male violence as an indicator in the measurement of women's empowerment? Aside from the issue of empathy in asking questions about private, and often shameful, aspects of people's lives,[7] such studies suggest that *estimates of male violence need to be embedded in an ethnographic understanding of what led to violence if we are to distinguish between cases where such violence was an assertion of male power in the absence of change, and those where it was an attempt to assert male power in response to changes in women's agency.* Condemning violence against women does not rule out the need to understand the meaning of violence; and understanding the meaning of violence helps to take us beyond the automatic equation of male violence and female victimhood to a recognition of the fact that in some situations, male violence may be a response to women's assertion of their rights.

◆ Measuring the "Achievement" Dimension of Empowerment

As with the other dimensions of empowerment, analytical rigour must be exercised in the selection of the achievements to be measured. A number of studies that include measures of the achievement dimension illustrate this. Kishor used Egyptian data to explore the effects of direct, as well as indirect, measures of women's empowerment on two valued functioning achievements: infant survival rates and infant immunization (1997). Her selection of achievement outcomes was directly related to her conceptualization of women's empowerment in terms of control, an essential aspect of which, she suggested, was women's ability to "access information, take decisions, and act in their own interests, or the interests of those who depend on them" (1997:1). Since women bear primary responsibility for children's health, it followed that women's empowerment was likely to be associated with positive achievements in terms of the health and survival of their children.

Her empowerment indicators were constructed by using factor analysis to collapse 30 alternative, but overlapping, measures of empowerment into 10 non-

[7] Carried out badly, surveys investigating violence against women within the home can be experienced as insensitive and intrusive. However, where interviewers have been trained in the skills of asking and listening to women's accounts with sympathy and tact, the opportunity to share the experience can be one of relief for women who have been unable to discuss it with anyone else. The Naripokkho team found that they had seriously underestimated the length of time a feminist survey of domestic violence would take; questions that the pilot had suggested would take a few hours sometimes took a day, because of the need many women felt to talk about something they had hitherto been silent about (Naripokkho, 1998).

overlapping factors. These variables were then classified into three categories: direct evidence of empowerment, sources of empowerment and the setting for empowerment. Direct measures attempted to capture "control" through various indicators of agency and choice. The other two were less direct, "background" variables related to access to resources and marriage practices. In order to provide some insight into the meanings compressed within her composite empowerment indicators, they are summarized below, together with the two constituent variables most closely correlated with each indicator:

Direct evidence of empowerment:

1. devaluation of women: reports of being beaten; dowry paid at marriage;
2. women's emancipation: belief in daughters' education; freedom of movement;
3. reported sharing of roles and decision making: egalitarian gender roles; egalitarian decision making;
4. equality in marriage: fewer grounds reported for justified divorce by husbands; equality of grounds reported for divorce by husband or wife;
5. financial autonomy: currently controls her earnings; her earnings as share household income.

Sources of empowerment:

1. participation in the modern sector: index of assets owned; female education;
2. lifetime exposure to employment: worked before marriage; controlled earnings before marriage.

Setting indicators:

1. family structure amenable to empowerment: does not live and has not previously lived with in-laws;
2. marital advantage: small age difference between spouses; chose spouse;
3. traditional marriage: large educational difference with husband; chose husband.

Kishor used multivariate analysis to estimate the effects of these various measures of women's empowerment on her two achievement variables. The "empowerment" indicators that remained statistically significant after various locational (region and urban residence), socio-economic (household possessions index and sanitation facilities) and demographic (woman's age, number of children, previous birth interval) variables had been controlled for are summarized below.

Statistically significant determinants of achievement variables (signs indicate direction of association)

Determinants of child survival	Determinants of full immunization
Evidence of empowerment: None	*Evidence of empowerment:* Equality in marriage (+)
Sources of empowerment: Lifetime experience of employment (+)	*Sources of empowerment:* Lifetime experience of employment (+) Participation in modern sector (+)
Setting conducive to empowerment: Amenable family structures (+) Traditional marriage (-)	*Setting conducive to empowerment:* Amenable family structures (+) Marital advantage (+)

The results of her multivariate analysis were, first, that both infant survival and infant immunization were significantly affected by women's empowerment but not necessarily by the same indicators, and second, that the source/setting or indirect indicators appeared to be far more influential in determining these outcomes than the direct measures of empowerment. The only direct empowerment indicator with any statistical significance was the "equality in marriage index", an attitudinal variable, which had a positive influence on the likelihood of infant immunization.

Two, not necessarily mutually exclusive, explanations might help make sense of Kishor's findings. The first is that her direct indicators of empowerment did not succeed in capturing empowerment particularly well. This is not implausible. Many of the "direct evidence" indicators touch on attitudes and relationships within marriage and are likely to have elicited highly value-laden responses. For instance, women were asked questions about the grounds on which they believe that a husband is justified in divorcing his wife; if husband and wife are justified in seeking divorce on the same grounds; and whether women should speak up if they disagree with their husbands. However, other, more conventional, factual indicators also proved to be insignificant as determinants of the achievement variables. These include "financial autonomy", which measured women's current contribution to household earnings and the extent to which they controlled their earnings, and "freedom of movement", which measured the public locations that women could visit on their own.

The second possible explanation for the results of the analysis is that the achievements in question did not in fact depend on whether or not women were "empowered", but on other factors better captured by Kishor's "source" and "setting" variables. This explanation suggests that improvements in functioning achievements within women's pre-assigned sphere of jurisdiction may reflect improved efficacy in the performance of their roles without necessarily constituting evidence of empowerment as such. A further deconstruction of the findings of the multivariate analysis reported above supports this second possibility. It suggests that child mortality was higher in households where women were currently, or had previously been, in residence with their parents-in-law, as well as in households where there was a large difference in the age and education levels of husband and wife. However, child mortality rates were considerably improved if the mother had been in employment prior to her marriage. As far as immunization was concerned, children were more likely to have been immunized in households where their mothers had extended experience of employment, where they reported exposure to the media, where they were educated and where they were not under the authority of in-laws as a result of joint residence. In addition, where the age difference between husband and wife was small and where women expressed a belief in equality in marriage, children's survival chances were likely to be better.

A plausible interpretation of these findings is that what mattered for achievements in relation to children's well-being was women's agency as *mothers* rather than as *wives*. This would explain why the direct measures of empowerment, which dealt largely with equality in conjugal relationships, proved largely insignificant in explaining the achievement variables. Instead, variables that captured women's ability to take effective action in relation to the welfare of their children played a far more significant role in the explanation. For instance, women who lived, or had

lived, with their in-laws were more likely to have been subordinate to the authority of a senior female, with less likelihood of exercising effective agency at a time when such agency was critical to decision-making outcomes related to children's health. Women who were considerably less educated than their husbands or much younger were also likely have been less confident, competent or authoritative in taking the necessary actions to ensure their children's health. Female education and employment both had a role in explaining child welfare outcomes, but with slight variations. Lifetime experience of employment by women had a *direct* positive effect on their children's chances of survival, as well as on the likelihood of child immunization. Female education, on the other hand, had a direct effect on the likelihood of child immunization but influenced children's survival chances indirectly through its association with improved standards of household water and sanitation.

It is possible that women's education and employment history, both significant for child well-being, were proxying women's competence in accessing information and resources relevant to their children's achievement and to negotiating with the outside world, in the form of public health providers, for instance. Caldwell has suggested this in relation to women's education (1979) and Jejeebhoy (1995) has summarized studies from contexts as varied as India, Indonesia, Mexico and Sri Lanka to suggest that better-educated women are more likely to know of available services, to use these services appropriately, to show greater self-confidence in dealing with officials and service providers and, equally importantly, to be taken seriously by their families and outsiders in their health-seeking behaviour. However, the findings do differentiate to some extent between the determinants of child immunization and child survival, suggesting differences in the agency underlying these achievements. The two outcomes are clearly interrelated, but the immunization of children does require a more active form of health-seeking behaviour on the part of the carer than the more routine forms of agency through which survival is assured. This may explain why child immunization was more directly associated than child survival with a number of "empowerment"-type indicators, such as women's education and the equality in marriage index.

The case for analytical clarity in the selection of "empowerment-related" measures of achievement can also be illustrated with reference to a study by Becker (1997), which used data from Zimbabwe to explore the implications of women's empowerment on two examples of functioning achievements: use of contraception and their use of prenatal healthcare. Becker used multiple regression analysis to explore the impact of a number of different possible determinants of these achievement outcomes. He then added measures of women's empowerment to his equations, where the measures related to women's role in decision making in three key areas: the purchase of household items, the decision to work outside and the number of children to have. He found that contraceptive use appeared to be positively related to household wealth, as measured by a possessions index, as well as to the number of surviving children, the wife's employment and husband's education. Older women, women who lived in rural areas and women who had polygamous husbands were less likely to use contraception. The likelihood that women received prenatal care was positively related to household possessions; rural residence; women's age, education and employment; and husband's education. Adding his decision-making indicators did little to improve the fit of the equation in relation to contraceptive use, but significantly improved the fit as far as prenatal care was concerned.

Speculating on the meaning of these findings, Becker pointed out that, given the commitment of the Zimbabwean government to family planning, contraceptive services were widely available through community-based distribution systems and contraceptive prevalence was correspondingly high. Over 50 per cent of the women in his sample used it. In a context where contraception was both easily available, and had also become a relatively routine form of behaviour, women's employment status did increase the likelihood of use, but otherwise it did not appear to require any great assertiveness on the part of women to access the necessary services. By contrast, women's use of prenatal care was more closely related to their role in intrahousehold decision making as well as to both their education levels and their employment status, suggesting that it may have required far greater assertiveness on the part of women than contraceptive use. In other words, women who were assertive in other areas of household decision making, who were educated and employed, were also more likely to be assertive when it came to active heath-seeking behaviour on their own behalf.

The general methodological point to draw out of these studies is *the need to distinguish between functioning achievements that testify to women's greater efficacy as agents within prescribed gender roles, and those that are indicative of women as agents of transformation*. In both studies discussed, direct measures of women's agency were far more significant in determining outcomes when women were required to step out of routine forms of behaviour: to get their children immunized, in one case, and prenatal health visits, in the other. However, in addition to achievements requiring women to go against the grain of established daily custom, achievements have to be assessed for their transformatory implications in relation to the gender inequalities frequently embedded in established routines. While both child survival and immunization are highly valued achievements from a variety of perspectives—of policy makers, of the family and, above all, of women themselves—and while both are quite evidently brought about by women's greater and more effective agency, neither achievement by itself necessarily implied an improvement in women's ability to make strategic life choices or a shift in underlying power relations. Women's ability to access prenatal healthcare is more indicative of transformative agency in this sense.

A similar distinction would apply, for instance, to the findings of a study by Dreze and Sen on the determinants of under-five child mortality and gender differentials in child mortality in India (1995). They found that female literacy reduced under-five child mortality, while both female labour force participation and female literacy reduced excess female mortality in the under-five age group. They interpreted these favourable effects on child-related functionings as evidence that women's access to education and employment enhanced their ability to exercise agency. While accepting this interpretation, I would nevertheless argue that the meanings conveyed by the two functioning achievements carry different implications in terms of women's empowerment. The reduction in under-five mortality associated with women's access to education probably does represent more *effective* agency on the part of women but does not, by itself, testify to a *transformatory* agency on their part. On the other hand, the reduction in excess female mortality associated with higher levels of female education and employment does suggest something more than greater efficacy of agency. Given that the reduction in excess female mortality represented an increase in the survival chances of the girl child rather than a decrease in the survival chances of

boys, it suggests that women who have received some education and are economically active are more likely than others to give equal value to sons and daughters and to exercise equal effort on behalf of both.

Razavi's (1992) comparison of two villages in Iran, another part of the world characterized by excess female mortality, also found that in a context of rising prosperity and overall declines in child mortality, women's agency still mattered as far as gender differentials in mortality were concerned. Excess female mortality persisted, despite greater prosperity and declines in overall child mortality, in the area where women had withdrawn from the labour force in deference to *purdah* norms. However, it had disappeared in the region where women had high rates of economic activity and greater public mobility.

Our discussion therefore offers a further criterion for judging when the measurement of functioning achievements can be taken as an indicator of women's empowerment: *in situations of gender discrimination, evidence that the enhancement of women's agency led to a reduction in prevailing gender inequalities in functioning achievements can be taken as evidence of empowerment.* The fact that this may, as in Becker's study, entail agency on their own behalf is not intended to equate empowerment with self-interest. [8] But it is a recognition that, by and large, gender inequalities often take the form of women's well-being being given a secondary place to that of men. In some contexts, this results in extreme and life-threatening forms of gender inequality. In others, it may take less life-threatening forms, such as gender inequality in education. In most contexts, it would be reasonable to assume that improvements in women's well-being are likely to imply improvements in the well-being of other family members, whereas improvements in the well-being of other family members do not necessarily imply improvements in women's well-being.

It is also worth noting the "enabling" effect of *male* education for both indicators of women's well-being in Becker's study. This effect suggests that women's ability to act on their own behalf may be, in certain contexts, significantly associated with the attitudes that men bring to the marriage. Although, there is little recognition of the role that men can play in the processes of women's empowerment in the quantitative literature, there is some scattered evidence to suggest that men's attitudes, as proxied by education, can be conducive to women's well-being and empowerment. Women's labour force participation in Bangladesh, for example, was found to be more closely associated with male education than with their own (Khandker, 1988), while data from Kenya and Ghana suggest that male education was an important factor in lowering male reproductive goals and bringing them in closer to female goals.

The fairly consistent positive relationship between women's economic activity and measures of achievement in the four studies cited in this section is also

[8] I have taken evidence of contraceptive use in Becker's study as a positive functioning achievement. In fact, we would need to take account of the terms on which such contraceptives were offered before taking their use as evidence of empowerment. In one very basic sense, contraception offers women the possibility of "choice" rather than "chance" in the matter of childbearing, and hence holds out the promise of greater control over their own bodies and life chances. On the other hand, however, where powerful external agencies seek to promote population control goals, contraceptives are often provided on terms that violate the principle of reproductive choice.

noteworthy. Female education performed less consistently. In contexts as geographically dispersed as India, Egypt, Iran and Zimbabwe, women's role in household livelihood appeared to have played an important role in ensuring a variety of significant achievements, including the achievement of higher rates of child survival and full immunization, reductions in gender disparities in child mortality and women's use of prenatal services and contraception. As we shall see, this relationship recurs in a variety of other studies as well, drawing attention to the need to take very seriously the significance of women's economic activity in strategies for women's empowerment.

TRIANGULATION AND MEANING: THE INDIVISIBILITY OF RESOURCES, AGENCY AND ACHIEVEMENTS

This review of the "fit" between different dimensions of empowerment and the different indicators used to measure them has essentially considered the "fit" between the meanings attributed to a measure and the meanings empirically revealed by it. The discussion has revealed that it is not possible to establish the meaning of an indicator, whatever dimension of empowerment it is intended to measure, without reference to the other dimensions of empowerment. *In other words, the three dimensions are indivisible in determining the meaning of an indicator and hence its validity as a measure of empowerment.* The point was made above that specifying "access" to a resource tells us about potential rather than actual choice, thus the validity of a "resource" measure as an indicator of empowerment is largely determined by the validity of the assumptions made about the potential agency or entitlement embodied in that resource. It is similarly difficult to judge the validity of an achievement measure unless we have the evidence, or can make a reasonable guess, as to whose agency and what kind of agency was involved. Indicators of achievement must also distinguish between achievements that reinforce prevailing inequalities in resources and agency, and achievements that represent a challenge to them. And evidence on agency on its own tells us very little about the transformatory consequences of its exercise, or the conditions under which it was exercised.

The important methodological point brought out is *the critical need to triangulate or cross-check the evidence provided by an indicator in order to establish that it means what it is believed to mean.* Indicators compress not only a great deal of information into a single statistic, but also assumptions about what this information means. The more evidence there is to support these assumptions, the more faith we are likely to have in the validity of the indicator in question. In order to demonstrate the importance of triangulation for the interpretation of indicators, I want to compare how a number of evaluations of credit programmes for women in rural Bangladesh sought to quantify their empowerment potential, the conclusions they drew on the basis of their analysis and the plausibility of the evidence they provided in support of their interpretations.

The first of these studies typifies the neoclassical approach to analysis of power within the household. One of the characteristics of this approach is that it rarely contains direct information about agency, but rather seeks to infer it from the

relationship between access to resources by individual members and the pattern of decision-making outcomes that results. In their study, Pitt and Khandker (1995) used multiple regression analysis to quantify the relationship between a number of "achievement" outcomes and gender of the loanee; they also included in their sample a control group of eligible households that had not received any loans. There was no direct measure of women's agency in their empirical analysis. Instead, gender roles in decision making were inferred from evidence on whether the achievement outcomes varied by the gender of the loanee. Based on this inferential approach, Pitt and Khandker concluded that targeted credit programmes "empowered" women by leading to higher levels of overall consumption, increased hours in market-related production by women and increased value of assets in women's name in those households where women had received access to loans.

The study's highly sophisticated econometric model allowed the authors to control for the possibility that biases might have been introduced by the selective placement of credit programmes in particular villages or by the self-selecting nature of those who received loans. But the value of Pitt and Khandker's analysis was undermined by the conceptual limitations of the notion of empowerment that they utilized. No clear-cut rationale was offered for the selection of particular achievement outcomes for the study, thus it was not always clear how to interpret its findings. The authors themselves throw no light on one of the findings they report, which appears to go against the grain of conventional wisdom in the population literature: that loans to men are far more likely to lead to a reduction in fertility levels than loans to women. Other findings are given *ad hoc* interpretations, most of which can be challenged by alternative, often contradictory and equally plausible views.

For instance, they interpret their finding that women loanees spent *more* time on market-related work than did women in male loanee households as evidence of women's empowerment. But they explain as an "income effect" the finding that men in households that had received credit spent *less* time on market-related work, and probably more time on leisure, regardless of whether the loanee in question had been a male or a female. However, the increase in women's market-related work as a result of their access to credit can, and indeed has, been given a much more negative interpretation than that offered by others. It has been suggested that increases in women's loan-generated labour may simply add to their increased work burdens, overwork, fatigue and malnutrition (Montgomery et al., 1996; Ackerly, 1995; Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1996). Similarly, men's greater leisure as a result of loans to their household, regardless of who actually received the loan, could plausibly be interpreted as evidence of male privilege and power rather than (or as well as) an "income effect". Finally, the finding that household consumption expenditure was significantly higher when the loan recipient was female may be indicative of an "empowering effect" or it may represent the effect suggested by Montgomery et al. that loans to women were "heavily compromised by the persisting responsibilities of women to cover the consumption needs of the family" (1996:168). In fact, the only finding reported by Pitt and Khandker which had a relatively unambiguous conceptual link with women's empowerment was that women's access to credit appeared to significantly increase their ownership of non-land assets, which could be interpreted as a strengthening of their fall-back position.

A similar absence of information on the agency involved in the achievement of particular decision-making outcomes characterizes one of the earliest studies to explore the impact of Grameen Bank loans to men and women (Rahman, 1986). However, Rahman's selection of "functioning achievements" have at least one advantage over those selected in Pitt and Khandker: they have a plausible bearing on women's empowerment because they focus on gender differentials in basic welfare outcomes in a context characterized by considerable gender discrimination. She found that women who had received loans enjoyed higher levels of welfare (food, clothing and medical expenditure) compared to women in households where men had received loans or in economically equivalent households that had not received any loans at all. This welfare impact persisted regardless of how women used their loans, but was likely to be higher where they had utilized some of the loan themselves, which the majority had done.

On the basis of Rahman's finding, we can say that women's access to credit had the effect of reducing, though not fully eliminating, gender differentials in intrahousehold welfare, and that it had certainly improved their welfare levels compared to women who had not received any loans. However, we do not know whose agency was involved in translating loans into impact, nor what the motivation was. Did increased expenditures on women's well-being represent the more active and direct exercise of purchasing power by women; did it represent their greater role in household decision making around the distribution of household resources; or did it represent the greater weight given by the household head to women's well-being in recognition of women's role in bringing in economic resources? Clearly, each possibility sheds a different light on the issue of power and agency within the household so that while we can arrive at some firm conclusions about women's welfare as a result of their access to credit, a question remains about their empowerment.

If there are problems with inferring agency on the basis of information about achievements, attempts to infer achievement potential on the basis of very narrow interpretations of agency are equally problematic. In her study, Ackerly (1995) uses what she calls "accounting knowledge" as her indicator of women's empowerment, calculating it by adding up whether or not the female loanee knew about the price of inputs into the enterprise funded by her loans; the product yield of the enterprise and its profitability. A woman who was informed on all three counts was counted as empowered. However, while knowledgeability about prices and profits may be indicative of enterprise involvement, it does not, in and of itself, constitute evidence of "empowerment". It would have been more persuasive as an indicator if some attention had been paid to what such knowledge had allowed women to achieve in strategic decisions about their lives—in other words, its consequential significance.

Similar problems of interpretation dog Goetz and Sen Gupta's (1996) evaluation of the impact of credit. Their indicator of empowerment, which also focuses on enterprise involvement, was formulated as an index of "managerial control". At one end of the scale were women classified as having "little or no control" over their loans because they either had no knowledge of how their loans had been utilized or had played no part in the enterprise funded by their loans. At the other end of the scale were women who were described as exercising "full control" over their loans, having participated in all stages of the enterprise, including marketing of their products.

The large numbers of women, particularly married women, found to be exercising "little" or "no" control over their loans according to this criteria led the authors to extremely pessimistic conclusions about the empowerment potential of credit programmes for women. However, if we return to our earlier point about the hierarchy of decisions within decision-making processes, a major problem with the index of "managerial control" developed by Goetz and Sen Gupta (1996) is that it conflates quite distinct moments in the process by which access to loans translates into impact on women's lives. In particular, they conflate "control" and "management", making no distinction between the policy decision as to how loans were to be utilized and repaid, and the management decisions related to how to use the loans. If this distinction is taken into account, then apart from the unknown proportion of the 22 per cent women in their "no control" category who reported that they did not even know how their loans were used, the remaining 78 per cent of women in their sample could, *in principle,* have exercised much greater control over their loans than credited by the authors. What Goetz and Sen Gupta's study highlights is the point made earlier about the confusion surrounding the conceptualization of "control". Indeed, it suggests that attempts to measure "empowerment" by measuring "control" very often merely shift the burden of definition from one elusive concept to another.

Clearly, supportive information on who made decisions about loan use or the motivations involved would have helped to establish what their index of managerial control is actually measuring. Since this information was not sought, the authors have to confine themselves to speculating about possible reasons for loan transfer. However, if Pitt and Khandker (1995) tend to give an upbeat interpretation to most of their findings, Goetz and Sen Gupta draw more gloomy conclusions. The explanations "which suggest themselves" (1996:51) to the authors reinforce the overall pessimism of their analysis, conveying the impression that credit to women is either appropriated directly or indirectly by male family members, or is bargained away by women in return for "peace" within their marriage, the right to get fed and clothed, or to retain their membership of the credit organization in question.

Goetz and Sen Gupta's contribution to our understanding of the transformatory potential of women's access to credit is also limited by the dearth of information on the consequential significance of such access. If "managerial control" in loan-funded activity is seen as the critical "control" point in the process by which access to loans is translated into a range of valued achievements, then certainly an accurate measure of women's decision-making role in such activities can be taken as indicative of their agency and achievements in other aspects of their lives. This appears to be the interpretation favoured by the authors and explains their preoccupation with the *likely* negative consequences of women's loss of managerial control. However, this interpretation is directly contradicted by another evaluation of credit programmes in rural Bangladesh. Hashemi et al. (1996) classified all the women loanees in their sample according to the categories of "managerial control" developed by Goetz and Sen Gupta. While there was considerable variation in their results according to the length of women's membership of the credit organization, as well as by credit organization, they confirm that a large percentage of women in certain villages did "lose control" over their loans according to Goetz and Sen Gupta's criteria. By then going on to examine the relationship between women's access to loans, use of loans and a

range of functioning achievements, Hashemi et al. are essentially asking whether women's access to credit can have any transformatory potential, regardless of who exercised "managerial control".

Their study compares empowerment measures for two broad groups of women: women who had received credit (from either BRAC or the Grameen Bank) and women from economically equivalent households who had not received any credit. Their empowerment indicators vary, with some more clearly indicative of women's agency and some of resources, including intangible resources. However, most of the measures could be argued to constitute valued achievements in themselves. They include magnitude of women's economic contribution to the family; mobility in a number of public locations; ability to make small and larger purchases, including purchases for themselves; involvement in major areas of economic decision making (land-related decisions or purchase of major assets); whether women had suffered appropriation of their money or any other asset; whether women had been prevented from visiting their natal home or from working outside; participation in public protests and campaigns; political and legal awareness; economic security (assets and savings in their own name). Finally, Hashemi et al. construct a "composite" empowerment indicator based on positive scores on more than five of these eight measures.

Using logistical regression analysis, Hashemi et al. found that women's access to credit contributed significantly to the magnitude of the economic contributions reported by women; to the likelihood of an increase in asset holdings in their own names, to an increase in their exercise of purchasing power, in their political and legal awareness as well as in the composite empowerment index. In addition, BRAC loanees tended to report significantly higher levels of mobility and higher levels of political participation, while Grameen members reported high involvement in "major decision making". The study also explores the separate effects on the various empowerment indicators of women's economic contribution to the household budget and their access to credit, and found that while separating out the effects of women's economic contribution reduced the impact of women's access to credit, the independent impact of access to credit on the empowerment indicators remained significant. In other words, access to credit and the size of reported economic contributions were each *sufficient but not necessary* for the achievement of empowerment-related outcomes; together, their effects were mutually reinforcing.

This comparison of different approaches to the quantification of empowerment in the context of the same set of credit programmes is intended to illustrate the need for triangulation of evidence to ensure that indicators mean what they are intended to mean. The absence of such supportive evidence carries the danger that analysts will load meanings onto their indicators that reflect their own disciplinary, methodological or political leanings rather than the realities they are seeking to portray. Triangulation requires that multiple sources of information are brought to bear on the interpretation of an indicator rather than reliance on single source.

For example, study of a rather different credit programme to those covered in the preceding discussion allowed me to draw on women loanees' own evaluations of the difference that credit had made to their lives to gauge the extent to which my findings supported or rejected the hypotheses suggested by some of the preceding evaluations of credit, as well as the more quantitative findings of my study

(Kabeer, 1988).[9] One set of competing hypothesis I was able to explore related to the evaluations of increased hours of market-related work by women as a result of access to credit. No evidence was found supporting the optimistic interpretation (offered by Pitt and Khandker) that such increases were indicative of women's empowerment, nor the alternative interpretation by credit pessimists that it represented increased work burdens, overwork, fatigue and malnutrition for women.

However, Hashemi et al.'s finding that the magnitude of women's economic contributions, itself linked to access to credit, had favourable implications for other aspects of their voice, agency and access to resources supports the more optimistic interpretation. My own qualitative findings confirm this more optimistic interpretation and also point to the need to differentiate the meanings that women invested in different uses of their time. While most women I interviewed reported an increase in the hours of work they did as a result of their access to credit-generated enterprise, they made a very important distinction between paid work, which increased household income, and the more traditional unpaid forms of family labour to which they gave far less value (Kabeer, 1998).

We need to take cognisance, in other words, of the value that women themselves attach to their role as economic actors rather than as unpaid family labour and how this perceived value can spill over into other forms of agency. The problem of intensified workloads, while applicable in many parts of the world, does not apply to the same degree in Bangladesh where poverty is often associated with enforced unemployment, particularly among women (Cain et al., 1979), and where discussions with women at both national and local levels reveal that the need for productive employment is their highest priority (Kabeer, 1998; UNDP, 1996).

A second set of competing hypotheses relates to consequential significance of different stages in the decision-making process by which access to credit was translated into valued achievements. Ackerly (1995), as well as Goetz and Sen Gupta (1996) identify entrepreneurial agency as the key indicator of women's empowerment, and the "marketing" aspect of entrepreneurial involvement as the most significant aspect of such agency. However, the studies by Hashemi et al. (1996) and Rahman (1986) suggest that enhanced agency within loan-funded enterprises was only one route by which women's access to loans translated into valued achievements. My own study (Kabeer, 1998) suggested a number of critical points of decision making, along with managerial control and accounting responsibility, with implications for how women experienced loan impact: the decision to seek out a loan, whose idea it was and who participated in deciding; the decision as to how the loan was to be utilized and managed; decisions relating to the actual management of loan use; and finally, decisions as to how profits yielded by the loan use were to be utilized. Each of these decisions, and how they were negotiated, provided important information on the exercise of agency by women and their potential for achieving valued goals.

[9] Although the programme I studied was different in a number of ways, I suggest that the similarities and differences of my findings with those of the other evaluations I cite allow one to distinguish between findings accruing to credit *per se* and are similar regardless of the organization of credit delivery, and findings reflecting differences in programme design.

The overall point to make on the basis of these findings is that access to credit translates into improvements in valued achievements through a number of routes, not all of them easily measurable. Some of these routes reflect access to a new material resource, while others reflect access to new experiences and social relationships. In addition to the improvements in women's own well-being, achievements included reduction in the incidence of domestic violence, perceived (as well as actual) economic contribution, strengthening of economic security, ability to exercise purchasing power and to invest in their children, and, in some cases, reducing the level of gender discrimination in children's schooling. All of these can, and have, been measured. In addition, I found that women's ability to make an economic contribution and the sense of self-worth and value within their families that it gave them was an intangible, but widely valued "achievement" associated with access to credit in a context where women have customarily been defined as economic dependants. In other words, I would support Sen's claim that what matters for women's ability to bargain for a better deal within their households and families is their *perceived* rather than their *actual* economic contribution. But I would add that women's *own* perceptions of their value within the family were as critical to their sense of empowerment as their perceived value by other family members. It is worth noting that women's sense of their own value was also linked to achievements that they were instrumental in assisting men in their families to make, a point that may be lost if the focus is solely on what women achieved for themselves. Thus one of the valued achievements that women reported as a result of their access to loans was not only their own release from humiliating forms of waged work for others, but also that of husbands and sons.

MEASURING EMPOWERMENT: THE PROBLEM OF VALUES

◆ Status, Autonomy and the Relevance of Context

The discussion so far has focused on the importance of *meaning* in the selection of indicators of empowerment—in other words, the need to be sure that indicators mean what they are believed to mean. It now turns to the question of values and how they complicate attempts to conceptualize and measure women's empowerment. Emic or "insider" values will be considered first, before going on to consider the complicating effects of "outsider" values. Insider values have mainly been captured in studies of women's empowerment through variables measuring some aspect of "context". Such studies tend to be comparative in nature and explore how differences in the context in which choices are made influence individual agency and achievements. The relevance of context for our understanding of empowerment will become clear in the discussion below.

In the study by Dreze and Sen cited earlier (1995), women's literacy and employment status were found to help explain variations in overall child mortality and in excess female mortality among children across India. However, the single most important factor determining whether girl children had the same survival chances as boy children were dummy variables standing for geographical location: gender differentials in survival rates were far smaller in the southern states of India than in the northern states. A study by Agnihotri (1996) refines this division

further, pointing to a triangle of extreme gender discrimination in the north/north western region of India, encompassing parts of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Regional dummy variables in these studies compress information about a whole range of interrelated norms and practices related to marriage, mobility and inheritance that make up gender relations in different parts of India. If we accept that investments in the survival and well-being of a family member tell us something important about the value attached to that member, the analysis by Dreze and Sen tells us that the structural variables making up gender relations in different parts of India are far more important in determining the extent to which the girl child is valued within the family than the individual characteristics of their parents.

Jejeebhoy's (1997) study, which compared Tamil Nadu, one of India's southern states, with Uttar Pradesh, a northern state, offers some more basic insights into this relationship between structure and individual. Her study explored the effects of a range of variables on women's autonomy, some of which reflected factors traditionally associated with female status (such as number of children and, more specifically, number of sons; co-residence with mother-in-law, size of dowry) as well as education and waged employment, variables associated with the modernization paradigm. Measures of women's autonomy included their role in decision making, mobility, incidence of domestic violence, access to economic resources and control over economic resources. Predictably, women in Tamil Nadu fared better on most indicators of autonomy than women in Uttar Pradesh.

However, she also found that what helped to explain women's autonomy varied by region. In general, the traditional factors conferring status on women—the number of sons they bore, the size of their dowry and nuclear family residence—were more closely linked with the female autonomy indicators in the restrictive context of Uttar Pradesh than they were in the more egalitarian context of Tamil Nadu.

In Uttar Pradesh, women who had brought large dowries to their marriages, who lived in nuclear families and who produced sons were far more likely to report a greater role in household decision making, and greater freedom from domestic violence,[10] than were other women. While female employment also had significant and positive implications for most of the autonomy indicators in Uttar Pradesh, education had a far weaker and less significant impact. In Tamil Nadu, however, the effects of these more traditional "status"-related variables were far weaker; and female employment and, even more strongly, female education were both far more consistently related to women's autonomy.

There are a number of points to draw out of Jejeebhoy's study. First of all, it points to women's rationale, in certain contexts, for making choices which are essentially disempowering. The contextual variables in her study, as in Sen and Dreze's, are a shorthand for the deeply entrenched rules, norms and practices that shape social relations in different parts of India and help to influence behaviour, define values and *shape choice*. Since women are likely to gain greater respect within their communities when they conform to its norms, and to be penalized if they do not, their own values and behaviour are likely to reflect those of the wider community and to reproduce its injustices. There is evidence, for instance, that

[10] The link between number of sons borne and lower incidence of violence echoes the findings reported for Bangladesh by Schuler et al. (1996).

women in northern states (such as Uttar Pradesh) are far more likely to express strong son preference than those in southern states such as Tamil Nadu (Dyson and Moore, 1983). The apparently "voluntary" nature of such choices should not detract our attention from their consequences. If empowerment is simply equated with a decision-making role and "control" over household resources, then having sons and bringing in a large dowry would be considered conducive to women's empowerment. Yet dowry simultaneously expresses and reinforces son preference, and transforms daughters into financial liabilities for their parents. Both dowry and son preference are central to the values and practices through which women are socially defined as a subordinate category in a state with some of the starkest indicators of gender discrimination on the Indian subcontinent.

Second, Jejeebhoy's finding that women's waged employment had a more marked effect in Uttar Pradesh than did their education in their role in household decision making and access to intrahousehold resources, but that both were important in Tamil Nadu, takes us back to the importance of knowing what "access" means in relation to different resources and in different contexts. While both education and waged work are considered to promote women's agency in various ways, they are differently acquired and represent different kinds of resources. Women's education is the product of the parental decision to invest in daughters, but their participation in the labour market is a more direct reflection of their own agency.[11] In addition, both forms of access are likely to have very different implications in different contexts.

Where women's public mobility, and hence participation in waged employment, is severely curtailed by social norms, as in the Uttar Pradesh, their presence in the labour market is likely to be a response to poverty but clearly also signals a certain degree of assertiveness on their part. Furthermore, it increases the chances that, having access to an income of their own, they are more likely to exercise some agency in household decision making and to have resources of their own. Education, on the other hand, tends to be a positional or status good, signalling prosperity rather than poverty, and is more likely to characterize women from better-off households. Within the restrictive gender relations of this part of northern India, this is precisely the social strata of households that is likely to be most restrictive in relation to women. In such contexts, education may increase women's effectiveness in the traditional roles assigned to them. But it is unlikely to override, and may indeed reinforce, restrictive interpretations of these roles. Das Gupta (1987), for instance, found that female education in rural Punjab was associated with greater discrimination against daughters and higher sex differentials in children's survival chances. In Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, where social norms are more conducive to women's agency, regardless of class, education is far more likely to enhance women's autonomy as agents.

A study in Tamil Nadu by Dharmalingam and Morgan (1996) sheds further light on the relationship between wider context and individual agency. They focused on two villages in Tamil Nadu, very close to each other and similar in most respects (caste relations, religious mix, ecology and historical backgrounds) but with

[11] Bearing in mind the earlier discussion about the possible connection between women's exercise of agency and male violence, it is interesting to note that waged employment was more likely to be associated with male violence in both contexts, but significantly so in Tamil Nadu.

contrasting female employment opportunities and educational indicators. In one village, a very high percentage of women and girls were involved in paid work, while in the other women were largely involved in housework while girls were at school. They sought to explore the effects of village setting and women's education and employment levels on three measures of women's autonomy: women's reported ability to support themselves and their dependants with husbands' assistance; freedom of movement within and between villages; and "spousal interaction" or communication between spouses on matters to do with family finance and desired family size.

They found that village setting was more clearly and consistently related to measures of autonomy than were the individual characteristics of women. Women in the village with higher labour force participation scored higher for each of the measures, regardless of their labour force participation, education levels and a variety of other household and demographic characteristics. Women's work status and education levels were also associated with the indicators of autonomy, but not consistently: women who worked were more likely to report economic self-reliance, while educated women reported lower levels of mobility. The authors explain these village-level differences in terms of the introduction of *beedi* work in the early 1970s in the village with higher female economic activity. This not only gave women an independent earning opportunity but also required them to increase their mobility outside the home. The main point to draw out of this study, which reinforces the earlier discussion about the influence of context in shaping behaviour, relates to the fact that the changes associated with *beedi* work led to major changes in social parameters for the entire village, not only for those women directly involved in *beedi* work.

> Given the mass scale of *beedi* work all households are affected. Former norms regarding mobility, for instance, cannot be maintained in the face of these new circumstances. Village-level social control rests on notions of what is "natural and proper" for women to do. When the majority change their behaviour, what is natural and proper can be renegotiated within both the household and the community" (Dharmalingam and Morgan, 1996:198).

Two related studies from rural Nepal offer further interesting insights into the question of contextual versus individual variables in shaping women's agency and autonomy (Morgan and Niraula, 1995; Niraula and Morgan, 1996). They examined influence of contextual variables and individual characteristics on a number of measures of women's autonomy as well as the relative significance of context and individual autonomy on certain functioning achievements. "Context" was captured by contrasting two villages in Nepal. One village was located in a *tarai* (plains) setting and shared many of the social characteristics of Hindu culture in northern India, including its rigid caste and gender relationships. The other was located in the hills and was characterized by a less orthodox Hinduism, which incorporated aspects of tribal and Buddhist beliefs and practices and had a more relaxed caste and gender regime. Differences in social practices in the two villages were captured by a number of marriage-related behavioural variables: likelihood of "choice", rather than "arrangement", in women's selection of their marriage partner; ability to leave an unsatisfactory marriage and enter a new one; continued contact with one's natal family after marriage; willingness to let children choose their own spouses. Autonomy was measured by women's role in household decision making and freedom of movement in the public domain. Finally,

functioning achievements were captured by family size preferences, son preference and use of contraception.

Focusing first on individual marital behaviour and attitudes, they found, not unexpectedly, that women who exercised greater choice in their marriage-related behaviour also enjoyed greater freedom of movement and exercised a greater role in household decision making. However, adding the effects of "context", i.e., bringing in a dummy variable to control for village location, led to a marked reduction in the association between these individual aspects of behaviour and the indicators of women's agency. In other words, without the village dummy variable, there was a strong association between women who had exercised choice in relation to their marriage partner and the mobility index, but the association disappeared once context was factored in.

The effect of context in defining the parameters of women's autonomy meant that context also mediated the effects of women's autonomy on a number of functioning achievements. Explored separately, "context" and individual autonomy had the expected effects. Women in the more restrictive village were more likely to express preference for sons, to want larger numbers of children and to have educated children, particularly educated daughters. They were also less likely to use contraception. The relationship between individual autonomy and reproductive choice was also predictable: women with greater freedom of movement were more likely to use contraception when they did not want any more children. When the effects of both individual agency and village setting were explored together, both effects remained significant but in a reduced form. The authors concluded that, while individual agency did increase women's ability to implement reproductive choice, such agency itself was largely shaped by social context rather by the characteristics of the individual.

The discussion about the importance of context in shaping individual behaviour suggests that many dimensions of (dis)empowerment treated as having a relationship of cause and effect in the literature may, in fact, be products of the same underlying social context. As Niraula and Morgan point out, context operates in the lives of individuals as the sum total of institutional arrangements—one cannot pull apart the different elements of the institutional context and measure the separate effect of each: "The context specifies appropriate goals and the means for achieving them. Such a role for context does not deny *individual agency* but stresses how context constrains rationality for all local actors" (1996:46). Consequently, the discussion helps to explain in greater detail why empowerment cannot be conceptualized simply in terms of choice, but must incorporate an assessment of the values embedded in agency and choice—values which reflect the wider context. It points, in other words, to the need make a distinction between "status" and "autonomy" as criteria in evaluating agency and choice from an empowerment perspective.

Status, in the sense used here, has been defined in terms of social standing within a community derived from meeting the expectations set up by a hierarchy outside oneself: status implies hierarchy (see the discussion in Abadian, 1996). Status considerations are relevant to hierarchies of class and caste as well as gender, so that norms defining gender propriety are frequently bound up with the maintenance of hierarchies of caste and class. Autonomy, on the other hand, refers to qualities of self-determination and independence; it refers to the capacity to

define one's own goals and act on them without reference to notions of propriety and social standing. Autonomy is thus rooted in the notion of the individual, while status is derived at a social level.

However, individuals rarely operate as if they do not exist in society. All forms of autonomy are also socially embedded. The value of the idea of "status" is that it draws attention to the influence of "the social" in ascribing greater value to certain kinds of choices over others, and hence gives greater value to those who make these choices. In other words, it reminds us of the interconnectedness of social life in that we care what others think. However, in certain contexts, the nature of prevailing status considerations and cultural values will lead women to choose dependence over autonomy, not only by curtailing their ability to act autonomously, but by bestowing prestige, honour and value to those who conform to these norms. When such contexts set up a trade-off for women between their ability to make independent choices in critical arenas of their lives—such as marriage, reproduction, friendship and so on—and their ability to enjoy status and respect within the family and community, status becomes antithetical to autonomy. As Sen comments in relation to reproductive choice:

> The point is especially apparent in gender hierarchies where, for example, a woman's status may be linked to her fertility. Bearing the approved number of children will grant a woman the rights and privileges accorded to a fertile woman, but do not necessarily give her greater autonomy in decision-making (Sen, 1993:198).

More strongly, in such contexts, status is also likely to be antithetical to empowerment. The need to bear the approved number of children in order to secure social status and family approval takes its toll on women's bodies and on their lives as they bear children beyond their capacity. Furthermore, status considerations in cultures of son-preference require women to give birth to a certain number of sons; to favour their sons over their daughters in ways that reinforce social discrimination against women; and to bring their daughters up to devalue themselves, thereby acting as agents in the transmission of gender discrimination over generations. Status considerations also lead to the more hidden costs of dependency, difficult to measure but testified to eloquently by women all over the world (Kabeer, 1997a; Rowlands, 1997; Villareal, 1990; Silberscmidt, 1992). Finally, in the extreme, status considerations can lead to cultures where female infanticide and foeticide, female circumcision and widow immolation all become "rational" responses to social norms.

◆ Outsider Values and Women's Empowerment: Prescribing Altruism

The discussion in the preceding sections elaborates on the rationale for the highly qualified notion of choice that informs the understanding of empowerment in this paper, pointing to the significance of social context in shaping the values justifying the subordinate status of women and to the internalization of these values by women themselves. However, the qualifications to the notion of choice put forward in the analysis bring in an external normative standpoint, a set of values other than women's own, as the criteria for assessing the meaning of their choices. The problem that this raises is not one of a normative standpoint per se—the whole idea of development is, after all, based on some kind of normative standpoint—but

in determining the extent to which this normative standpoint expresses values that are relevant to the reality it seeks to evaluate. There is always the danger that when we assess "choice" from a standpoint other than that of the person making the choice, we will be led back to ourselves and to our own norms and values.

The tendency to re-present "the self" in representing "the other" has been noted by Mohanty, who describes the way Third World women from a variety of contexts tend to get reduced and universalized, particularly in texts coming out of the field of women and development: "This average Third World woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being Third World (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)" (1991:56). Although this portrayal of the "average" disempowered Third World woman was intended to evoke sympathy and action on their behalf, its reductionism reflected the fact that the social distances of location, class, nationality and language that often separate researcher and "researched" in the social sciences tend to be particularly large in the development field.

The same distances help to explain why attempts to define and measure women's empowerment have given rise to similarly averaging tendencies in the portrayal of the *empowered* woman. I want to point to two distinct examples of these "averaging" tendencies, coming out of quite different forms of scholarship and advocacy, addressing different dimensions of "co-operative conflict" within the household and both containing some elements of truth but large elements of simplification. The first is associated with instrumentalist advocacy of the kind we noted at the start of this paper and tends to favour the "co-operative" dimension, advancing a "virtuous" model of the empowered woman. Ackerly, for instance, makes this point in relation to the model of the empowered woman that implicitly informs many of the credit programmes for women in Bangladesh: "'Empowered', the borrower wisely invests money in a successful enterprise, her husband stops beating her, she sends her children to school, she improves the health and nutrition of her family, and she participates in major family decisions" (Ackerly, 1995:56).

Neoclassical economics also contributed to the construction of the altruistic Third World woman as it shifted from its earlier emphasis on the male household head as "benevolent dictator", who it now transpires spends most of his money on alcohol, other women and other reprehensible "adult goods", to the altruistic mother who spends hers on her children and family (Hart, 1997). The virtuous model of empowerment endows women with a number of different traits that form the basis of advocacy claims on their behalf: altruism, of course, and the dedication to the collective family welfare; thrift and risk-aversion; industriousness in the form of long hours of work and in little need for leisure; a sense of civic responsibility, manifested in willingness to take on unpaid community work; and a natural affinity for collective action to achieve the common good (social forestry programmes, loan repayment, community healthcare, etc.) but an aversion to collective action at the work place to promote class interest.

The instrumentalist model of the empowered Third World woman has given rise to a range of interventions that seek to reap the policy benefits of women's virtues based on the now familiar "win-win" format, which asserts that gender equality/women's empowerment is both an important end in itself and also essential to the achievement of efficiency / fertility decline / environmental

sustainability / family welfare / poverty alleviation / good governance. The fact that these interventions are largely made on instrumentalist grounds does not mean that women do not obtain any benefits from them. Instrumentalism is, after all, a game that two can play, and studies suggest that not only have women benefited from such interventions, which have ensured them access to a range of development benefits that had previously been withheld from them (credit, education, literacy, family planning, new collective relationships and employment), but that they have also drawn on this policy discourse in instrumental ways to promote their own interests (Jackson, 1996; Harrison, 1997; Villareal, 1990).

However, instrumentalist advocacy has also had its costs. At the conceptual level, women's empowerment as a central element of social justice and as a valued goal in itself has had to take second place to the demonstration of its synergy with official development goals. It has been adopted as an issue by scholars, governments and international agencies whose interest in empowering women is limited to whether this will "deliver the goods". Instead of an open-ended process of social transformation, this discourse produces a notion of empowerment as electric shock therapy to be applied at intervals to ensure the right responses: "empowerment appears to be best 'learned' early and needs reinforcement through constant exposure to empowering circumstances" (Kishor, 1997:16). Delivering resources for women's empowerment on instrumentalist grounds may fail to realize their full transformatory potential because empowerment *per se* was never really on the agenda.

Alternatively, it may empower women but fail to realize the presumed policy impact because the "win-win" formula does not apply. Women do not always share the same priorities as policy makers and development agencies and they may define their own empowerment in forms not intended by those designing interventions. As Whitehead (1981), Sen (1990) and others have pointed out, there are sound reasons why women's interests are likely to be better served by investing effort and resources in the collective welfare of the household rather than in their own personal welfare. However, it is important to recognize that such altruism is often a manifestation of their disempowerment, a response to their restricted options rather than a "natural" female attribute. If efforts to channel resources to women succeed in empowering them, they will also succeed in bringing a number of options that had previously been denied to them into the realm of possibility. Not all women will choose options likely to receive the official stamp of approval.

As we saw, in some cases, women's greater "voice" within the household can lead to greater conflict therein, particularly within marriage, as well as to possible intensification of male violence. In other cases, women may choose the "exit" option, and there is evidence from a variety of contexts to suggest that women will choose this option when it becomes possible. In the US context, England and Farkas (1986) suggest that the rising access to employment by women since the 1950s and the rise of single motherhood, as a result of divorce or of births outside marriage, is not coincidental: "the short version of the story is probably that employment gave women the freedom to leave unhappy marriages" (England, 1997). Literature from sub-Saharan Africa points to women setting up on their own once they have independent economic resources (Roberts, 1989). Hoogenboezem found that several of the women who had participated in a legal literacy programme run by the Women's Action Group in Zimbabwe stated that

once they knew about the procedures to be followed, they sued their husbands for divorce (1997:85). Moore cites evidence from Thailand that access to an independent income has given many women the ability to walk out of unsatisfactory marriages (1994). Chant also concluded on the basis of her empirical data from Mexico, the Philippines and Costa Rica that women often opted to set up their own households, despite the moral stigma and poverty frequently associated with this decision, rather than live with unsatisfactory husbands/partners (1997).

My own research in Bangladesh confirms this connection. The emergence of new waged opportunities for women in urban areas has made it possible for many women to leave husbands who had humiliated, beaten or deceived them (Kabeer, 1997a) . In rural areas, where social disapproval makes life very difficult for women on their own, women who wanted to leave their husbands had a number of options if they could not return to the parental home (Kabeer, 1998). Some migrated into the towns, where community pressure was less intense, and took up waged employment. Others used their access to new resources, such as credit, to effect a "divorce within marriage", setting up a parallel economy within the household that allowed them to be economically self-reliant. Finally, the possibility of economic independence has allowed women in a number of different parts of the world to delay or opt against entering marriage: data from Japan, Java and Bangladesh point in this direction (Tsuya, 1997; Wolf, 1992; Amin et al., 1998).

◆ Outsider Models of Women's Empowerment: Prescribing Autonomy

If female virtues of various kinds, and their associated benefits, underpin instrumentalist approaches to women's empowerment within official development agencies, then feminist scholarship and advocacy outside these agencies, and often intended to challenge their assumptions, focuses far more on the conflictual element of gender relations and hence tend toward a prescriptive model of empowerment based on women's autonomy. The danger of prescriptiveness is always implicit in any discussion about women's empowerment, since the very notion of women's empowerment is premised on a model of how gender relations "ought" to be rather than on "how they are". However, the danger is more real in the context of development studies because, as noted earlier, the distances separating the researcher from the "researched" are so often distances of culture. The likelihood of adopting a normative standpoint that is not sufficiently informed about the possibilities and constraints making up women's perceived set of possibilities in different contexts is consequently that much greater.

A great deal of the prescriptiveness evident in these analyses reflects an unacknowledged tension between "separation" and "connectedness" in definitions of autonomy. While instrumentalist notions of empowerment appear to give value to the notion of altruism and "connectedness", some forms of feminist analysis accord greater recognition to individualized forms of empowerment. The origins of this are understandable: it reflects recognition of the widespread tendency of women to subordinate their own needs to those of others within the family (see contributions in Dwyer and Bruce, 1988). Fierlbeck, for instance, argues that women would be much more likely to expand their ability to make choices if they

were to view themselves as individuals rather than members of a social group (1995:29). Jackson, noting the widespread evidence that women subordinate their own interests to those of the family, comments: "It may well be true that women prioritize children's needs, but there is a sense in which one might wish women to be a little less selfless and self-sacrificing" (1996:497).

Studies from some parts of the world suggest that many women seek separate living arrangements, or even set up their own households, when they are economically able to do so. In such contexts it may make sense to ask, as does Lloyd: "If income permits, wouldn't a mother-child unit prefer to form a separate household with its own decision-making autonomy rather than join a more complex household under other (most likely male or older female) authority?" (1995:17). However, in contexts where households are organized along more corporate lines, where a powerful ideology of "togetherness" binds the activities and resources of family together under the control of the male head, such a question would have very little resonance. Even in a situation of rising female employment and wages, women do not *actively* seek the opportunity to set up separate units from men or older females because such autonomous units are neither socially acceptable nor individually desired. Instead, they invest considerable time and effort in maintaining their marriages, in strengthening the "co-operative" dimension of co-operative conflict, seeking separation only in exceptional circumstances and, as Chant (1997) points out, often only when their sons are old enough to step into the role of male provider.

Indicators of women's empowerment, therefore, have to be sensitive to the way context will shape processes of empowerment. Access to new resources may open up new possibilities for women, but they are unlikely to seek to realize these possibilities in uniform ways across contexts or even within the same context. Instead, they will be influenced by the intersection of social relations and individual histories from which they view these new possibilities. Unless indicators are sensitive to these contextual possibilities, they are likely to underestimate the significance of those transformations which *do* occur.

Returning, for instance, to some of the evaluations of credit programmes in Bangladesh, we find that for Goetz and Sen Gupta (1996), empowerment is conceptualized in zero-sum terms: there is no place in their measure for "joint control" over loans, only for "more" or "less" control by women. Similarly, an evaluation by Montgomery et al. (1996) recognizes only evidence of individual decision making by women loanees as indicative of the transformatory potential of women's access to credit, equating "joint decision making" with disguised male dominance. Yet, in situations where women have been marginalized in household decision making, social transformation is less likely to take the form of the emergence of individualized decision making and more likely to take the form of greater equality in decision making. Not surprisingly, evaluations that allow for increases in both "joint" and "individual" forms of decision making by women as evidence of change tend to offer more optimistic assessments of the impact of credit (Rahman, 1986; Hashemi et al., 1996; Kabeer, 1998).

Similarly, the fact that women are able to move more freely in the public domain in those parts of the Indian subcontinent where they are also believed to enjoy greater autonomy does not automatically mean that the ability to move freely in the public domain will carry the same meaning in those regions where norms of

female seclusion apply. As I have pointed out, the public domain does not just carry very different social meanings in different contexts, but different locations in the public domain can carry different meanings in the same context. While enabling women's direct access to the market in situations may indeed be the most effective way to enhance their control over resources, recommendations that women be provided with transportation to take then to the market place and security measures to protect them from physical assault by hostile men (Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1996) miss the point. By and large, the reason that many women in rural Bangladesh do not go to the market place is not because of what men *do* but because of what people *say*. The constraint in question is one of local values rather than brute male force. As long as *purdah* norms remain a powerful social ideal governing women's behaviour in rural Bangladesh, their presence in the public domain, and in particular locations in the public domain, such as the market, is likely to signal poverty and lack of choice rather than empowerment and the exercise of choice.

The "social embeddedness" of choice may explain why a number of studies have found that women's access to resources is far more likely to translate into changes in intrahousehold relations (such as decision making, reduction of male violence, greater equity in welfare distribution) and much slower to translate into public forms of change. In her analysis of women's access to factory employment in Java, Wolf noted that such access had increased women's "room for manoeuvre" within the home, expanding their ability to make critical life choices in relation to timing of marriage, choice of partner and resistance to patriarchal controls within the home. However, it had not empowered them sufficiently to challenge patriarchal controls of the work place, which kept them "relatively acquiescent, poorly paid and vastly unprotected in industrial jobs that are often dangerous" (1992:255). In Morgan and Niraula's 1996 study of rural Nepal, many more women reported "voice" in decision making, the outcome of interpersonal negotiations and individual assertiveness, than freedom of movement in the public domain, an achievement far more subject to the norms and sanctions of the wider community. My own research in Bangladesh supported this interpretation, but with the additional point that women who moved freely in the public domain, particularly the market domain, were not only subject to community censure but were also seen to signal their husband's incapacity to fulfil his role as breadwinner and guardian. Public renegotiations of gender norms are likely to carry higher costs than private ones, not only because they entail taking on the norms of a powerful community—and perhaps losing community support—but also because they may expose family members to public ridicule.

The discussion here is not intended as a return to a cultural relativism, but as an indication of the need for a culturally informed one. The notion of choice that figures in our notion of empowerment asks about whether it would have been possible to choose otherwise, and the consequences of choices, but it does not seek to prescribe choices. Greater sensitivity to the likelihood that empowerment is socially embedded, to the aspects of their culture that women might value and seek to reproduce in processes of change and those they reject or seek to modify, is far more likely to be found in studies reflecting an experiential understanding of local contexts than in the brief encounters that often characterize development studies. A number of more culturally nuanced studies have raised the need to rethink many of the key concepts featuring in the literature on women's empowerment, particularly such notions of "autonomy" and "control". Talking about South Asia,

where gender discrimination takes some of its most extreme forms, Basu (1996) makes the following important point:

> . . . the force of custom and norm cannot be too strongly stressed. The standard defence that much that is unfortunate about women's status reflects a conscious preference by women in this society is, at least superficially, valid. The internalization of norms over generations means that subjective perceptions about inequality and subordination need have no connection with an outsider's views on these matters. And nor is it clear that one view is more real than the other. It is only in certain clearly defined and agreed upon goals such as an equal right to life, for example, that there can be any universal ethic. For the rest, the kind of modernization and westernization which lead to a questioning of existing norms about female subordination and the valuation of autonomy over, say, economic security need not have any kind of universal appeal.

A similar point about the need to recognize the social-embeddedness of change came out of Villarreal's study of a development intervention in western Mexico and led to her and others (Arce et al., 1994) to question Schriver's definition of autonomy as "control over their lives, their bodies and their projects", and also to ask what such a notion of "control" meant in the context of rural Mexico:

> Autonomy can be a misleading concept. Looking at the boundaries they placed on their projects, at the meanings they accorded their beekeeping, agricultural and household activities, and at the kinds of roles they were willing to see themselves playing, we have found the women of Ayuquila renewing their bonds with their menfolk, not breaking them unless it is really necessary, while at the same time working to build up their other networks and creating new ones. This is not without problems, since one can easily see the constraints faced by these women . . . Nevertheless the case illustrates the importance of understanding the efforts of poor, rural women in the creation, appropriation and conservation of space for themselves. . . . It implies power, negotiation and consent (1994:168–169).

For White, the importance of interdependence between family members in rural Bangladesh throws doubt on the notion of "autonomy" as an indicator of degrees of power (1992) and she cites instead the notion of "centrality" put forward by McCarthy (1967), which as a more appropriate concept focuses on relationships rather than prioritizing individualism. My own research suggests that in situations where gender relationships within the family and community are based on relations of *unequal interdependence*, the search for empowerment may take the form of a search for greater *equality* rather than greater *independence*, for the democratization of family relationships rather than their disruption. Chen's work on renegotiations of gender relations in Bangladesh (1983) supports Basu's point that, at least in the South Asian context, women may opt for more indirect forms of empowerment, which retain the public image, and honour, of the traditional decision maker but which nevertheless increase their "backstage" influence in decision-making processes. Such strategies may reflect prudence and caution on the part of women, as Nussbaum (1995) points out, but these are strategic virtues in situations where they have as much to lose from the disruption of social relationships in the processes of empowerment than they have to gain.

CONCLUSION

The concept of empowerment is extremely difficult to measure due to the elusiveness of its meaning and the values which it tends to be loaded with. While the notion of choice has been made central to the understanding of empowerment that informs this paper, it has had to be qualified in a number of ways to allow for these problems of meaning and values. As a result, our concern has been less with the subjective preferences of individuals and more with the conditions and consequences of the choices they make.

The other problem is that empowerment is essentially about *change*. Many of the indicators discussed here provide "snapshot" accounts, often using cross-sectional variations to capture change. There is an implicit assumption underlying many of these measurements that we can somehow predict the processes of change involved in empowerment, whereas human agency is indeterminate and hence unpredictable. Any change in the structure of opportunities and constraints in which individuals make choices can bring into existence a variety of different responses, which can have quite different impacts and meanings in different contexts.

The task of measurement is further complicated when the focus is on intrahousehold relationships. Although the household constitutes an important arena for establishing greater equality between women and men, more than most other arenas, negotiations between women and men are complicated by the entanglements of issues of power, intimacy and identity that make up the essence of co-operative conflict within the family. Attempts at measurement in this arena are most likely to be fraught with problems of misrecognition and misinterpretation.

This suggests that there is no single linear model of change by which a cause can be identified for women's disempowerment and altered to create the desired effect. Giving women access to credit, creating constitutional provision for political participation or equalizing educational opportunities are unlikely to be automatically empowering in themselves, but they create the vantage point of alternatives which allows a more transformatory consciousness to come into play. However, the translation of resources and opportunities into the kinds of functioning achievements that would signal empowerment is likely to be closely influenced by the possibilities for transformation on the ground, and how they are perceived and assessed. To attempt to predict at the outset of an intervention precisely how it will change women's lives, without some knowledge of ways of "being and doing" that are realizable and valued by women in that context, runs into the danger of prescribing a particular process of empowerment and thereby violating its essence, which is to enhance women's capacity for self-determination.

Bearing these various caveats in mind, we can draw out certain policy and methodological implications from the discussion in this paper for the practical project of women's empowerment. Many of the resources, agency and achievements featuring in the empowerment literature are integral to the broader developmental agenda. The arguments for equalizing access to health, education, credit, land, livelihoods and employment opportunities—as well as equality in the wider political domain, which has not been dealt with in this paper—rest solidly

on grounds of gender equity and social justice, regardless of their implications for intrahousehold relationships and female autonomy. In particular, we need to draw attention once again to the consistency with which measures of women's economic activity appear to be related to various measures of their agency and achievements, both on their own behalf and on behalf of their families, in a wide variety of contexts. Indeed, women's economic activity performs far more consistently than education in predicting outcomes that are positive by both welfare and empowerment criteria. We may want a more qualified understanding of economic activity for women to take account of the terms, working conditions and so on, but if we take seriously the findings of the various studies reviewed here, it is clear that some version of economic activity is vital to women's self-esteem and empowerment.

Whatever the specific priorities in different contexts, the paper suggests that both official development agencies and social movements have important contributions to make to the project of women's empowerment, based on their comparative advantages. Creating equality of access to these various valued resources for sections of society who are otherwise excluded from them is clearly a vital and legitimate area for public policy interventions. As we saw, the expenditure of public resources generally generates a demand for objectively verifiable indicators that can help to provide evidence of the cost effectiveness of different policy measures. However, changes in access to valued goods are far simpler to measure, regardless of context, than the subtle and open-ended negotiations that may go on within culturally differentiated families in connection with improvements in access. They are also indicative of changes in the conditions of choice. Greater investments in women's health and well-being in contexts where they previously suffered deprivation, greater access to paid activities in contexts where they were previously denied such opportunities, greater evidence that they participate in the political processes of their communities in situations where they were previously disenfranchised are all critical aspects of the context of choice.

At the same time, creating "access" is not enough. Equity requires that poorer women and other excluded groups are not just able to take advantage of such access, but that they do so on terms that respect and promote their ability to exercise choice. Such achievements are less easy to quantify since they deal more directly with questions of power and negotiation and have to be far more sensitive to local cultural nuances. They have to be monitored through methodologically pluralist approaches combining quantitative and qualitative data, preferably by grassroots-based organizations whose greater embeddedness in local realities enables them to combine "emic understanding with etic analysis" (Harriss, 1996).

Such achievements also require imaginative strategies. I pointed earlier to evidence suggesting that educated women appeared better able, in a number of different contexts, to negotiate with public providers of various social goods to ensure that their needs were addressed. Such evidence suggests an important role for female education in the achievement of welfare and empowerment goals. However, limiting the policy implication of such findings to the improved provision of female education on the grounds that it improves women's access to other valued resources is based on a very narrow reading of these findings. It still places the onus of change largely on women themselves. The mainstream institutions through which goods and services, employment and livelihoods are generated escape policy attention and their norms and practices are left largely

intact. Furthermore, it overlooks the fact that education is often a proxy for social class in the contexts of these studies, so that the greater responsiveness of public officials to educated women is partly a response to their class status.

We can therefore think of a second, and perhaps more challenging, policy implication of these studies, which is the need to shape the distribution of social goods in a way that is responsive to the needs and interests of *all* sections of the population, regardless of gender, class and level of education. Grassroots organizations have a vital role to play in building bottom-up pressures for greater accountability, efficiency and *respect* in public service delivery.[12] However, for such bottom-up pressure to occur, other conditions have to be brought into existence. Certain forms of gender inequality have now been given recognition in the public arena, thanks largely to the collective efforts of these organizations, and attempts are being made to redress these inequalities through more sensitive policy practice. Other forms of inequality, however, remain buried at the level of *doxa* within the communities and groups that practise them, and advocacy to address them has failed to garner active support in the public domain.

Such inequalities cannot be addressed by individuals alone. Although we have cited evidence that individual women can, and do, act against the norm, their impact on the situation of women in general is likely to remain limited and they may have to pay a high price for their autonomy. The project of women's empowerment depends on collective solidarity in the public arena as well as individual assertiveness in the private. Women's organizations and social movements in general have an important role to play in this project. They are able to raise questions about forms of injustice that are taken for granted to such an extent as to appear natural, and to challenge forms of hierarchy that appear to be too deeply-entrenched to destabilize. They are also likely to be much closer to realities on the ground than official agencies of development. They are hence more able to tailor their strategies to local realities, to avoid prescribing specific definitions of "autonomy" over others, and to concentrate instead on creating the possibilities that will allow women "the exercise of informed choice within an expanding framework of information, knowledge and analysis . . . a process which must enable women to discover new possibilities, new options . . . a growing repertoire of choices . . ." (Baltiwala, 1994). They can then leave it to individual women, and men, in the diversity of circumstances in which they live, to work out what forms of social change they wish to see and how they want to make it happen.

[12] See Fraser (1997) for a powerfully argued case for the importance of recognition as well as redistribution in the struggle for social justice.

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