



# Enterprise Impact News

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**Contact:** Sarah Mosedale,  
EDIAIS Project Research Officer,  
Institute for Development Policy and Management (IDPM),  
University of Manchester,  
The Harold Hankins Building,  
Precinct Centre, Oxford Road,  
Manchester M13 9QH  
Tel: 0161 275 7448,  
Fax: 0161 273 8829,  
Email: [info@enterprise-impact.org.uk](mailto:info@enterprise-impact.org.uk)

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# Assessing women's empowerment

Sarah Mosedale, EDIAIS Project Research Officer, [sarah.mosedale@man.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.mosedale@man.ac.uk)

*This article is a summary of a paper presented at the New Directions in Impact Assessment for Development conference and recently added to the Applications Guidance section of the EDIAIS web site.*

**Empowering poor people (especially women) has become the stated goal of many development interventions. Indeed it has become so widespread that the World Bank has identified empowerment as one of an (only) three-pronged strategy for pro-poor development. But what is meant by empowerment? And how do we determine the extent to which it has or has not been achieved?**

### What is power?

Power was first typified as *power over* i.e. A has power over B to the extent that s/he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do. Here power arises from conflicts between people over specific issues. Subsequently a second dimension of power was recognised – the ability to prevent certain people or issues from even getting to the decision-making arena in the first place. This dimension of power is concerned with the rules and methods of legitimising some voices and discrediting others. It was then suggested that the most effective use of power was in preventing such conflicts arising in the first place. From this perspective the powerful may also get their own way by manipulating the consciousnesses of the less powerful so as to make them incapable of seeing that a conflict exists. Often, of course, it is not necessary for powerful individuals to prevent women from doing something they want to do because social norms and customs already achieve this. In all societies people train each other from birth to understand and conform to norms of behaviour considered

appropriate to each sex and in all societies resistance (overt or covert) to particularly restrictive gender norms occurs.

The three dimensions of power above all involve situations in which one person's loss is another person's gain – i.e. they are all zero sum models of power. There are other conceptualisations of power where one person's gain is not necessarily another person's loss. These tend to be known as *power within*, *power to* and *power with*.

*Power within* refers to assets such as self-esteem, self-confidence and a belief that one's actions can have effects. In a sense all power starts from here – such assets are necessary before anything else can be achieved. The internalisation of feelings of worthlessness is a well-recognised feature of women's subordination and therefore many development interventions seek to bring about changes at this level. *Power to* is power which increases the boundaries of what is possible for one person without necessarily limiting somebody else. Learning to read is a good example. ▶



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*Power with* refers to collective action, recognising that more can be achieved by a group acting together than by individuals alone. Many interventions aiming to empower women recognise the importance of creating opportunities for women to spend time with each other reflecting on their situation, recognising the strengths they possess and devising strategies for change.

Power can be both structural and individual. When it is exercised by individuals as they go about their daily lives it fluctuates according to their situation. The classic example is the downtrodden (male) worker who is a tyrant in his home.

### Assessing empowerment

Informed and influenced by feminist development theorists, particularly Naila Kabear, I define women's empowerment as: *the process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to men, from being and doing.*

I suggest that any framework for assessing women's empowerment should include the following components.

#### Analysing constraints to action

Although women are subordinated to men in all societies the way this is achieved varies greatly according to the context. It is therefore essential to begin with a thorough analysis of how women's action is constrained. Since this is necessarily a participative process it contributes towards the women involved developing a shared understanding of how they are discriminated against on the basis of their gender (and a desire for, and belief in, the possibility of, change). Questions relating to open, suppressed or avoided conflict can be asked. For example, in the context of girls' education investigations can ascertain whether girls are prevented from going to school (or even considering it as a possibility) and if so why and by whom. Social norms inhibiting girls' schooling can be identified as can potential allies in achieving change.

This process also identifies a baseline – i.e. it defines the state of gendered power relations before any action is taken. By repeating the process at a later date change can be identified. It can therefore be determined whether power relations have shifted towards becoming more equitable. Of course it cannot be assumed that any such change is a result of any particular intervention – as always this has to be demonstrated.



Angela Martin, Leeds Postcards, 1984

#### Identifying how women's agency has developed

In a sense this is a mirror image to identifying constraints. If constraints to action are loosened then, by definition, possibilities for action (agency) are increased. And, *vice versa*, if possibilities for action are increased then constraints have loosened.

However we are interested not only in possibilities for action but in actual action taken. For example women's rights to land tenure might be made more equal to men's through legislation. This will certainly reduce formal constraints on women's action. But will women take advantage of the new legislation or will social pressures prevent them from doing so? In this case there has been little impact on women's agency or empowerment.

Analysing changes in women's agency will involve considering both the individual and collective level. It will involve seeking answers to question such as:

- How have women's views about gender changed?
- How have their feelings about themselves changed (self-confidence, self-worth, potential etc.)
- What can women do now that they wanted to do but could not do before?
- What new or existing resources (broadly defined) were used to achieve this?
- How have women worked with each other to achieve this?
- In what way did external assistance contribute?
- Do women believe that it will be easier for their daughters to do these things now?

#### Identifying how women's agency changed constraints to action

We have to question whether or not any identified relaxation of constraints has come about as a result of women's actions or for some other reason. If it is because of women's action then it is a straightforward example of empowerment – women have succeeded in expanding the realm of what is possible for them. On the other hand, constraints may have been loosened by some means other than women's action. In this case we cannot talk of empowerment because, as is generally agreed, empowerment cannot be bestowed but must be won.

While any improvement in power relations is welcome and valuable in itself, it is only when this comes about as a result of women's action that empowerment would be the appropriate term to use. Such action may be individual or collective. It may be the result of a single woman's refusal to accept something that until now she has suffered in silence. It may be the result of an action by an international organisation which has been influenced by women's protest, lobbying and advocacy.

Questions we could investigate include:

- What actions did women take, individually or collectively, to challenge constraints to action?
- How did women resist such constraints either overtly or covertly?
- How did women support each other and learn from each other's actions?
- What opposition did women encounter?
- To what extent and how was opposition overcome?
- How secure do women think their newly expanded freedoms of action are?
- What action, if any, do they intend to take to defend their improved position?

The question is sometimes asked: are we interested in empowerment in itself or are we just interested in the good things that empowerment can achieve? If the latter, then empowerment is just one of many routes to a desirable outcome. But surely any commitment to human rights is meaningless if it excludes half the population - support for women's struggles against oppressive gender norms must be an integral part of any attempt to improve the human condition.

*This is work in progress – comments, criticism and contributions very welcome.* ■

# Publications



## Women's empowerment as a variable in international development

Malhotra, A et al *International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) 2002*  
[www.worldbank.org/poverty/empowerment/events/febo3/pdf/malhotra.pdf](http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/empowerment/events/febo3/pdf/malhotra.pdf)

This paper presents a review of current theories and strategies to foster women's empowerment, evaluates research to date, and points to areas for future study. The paper defines empowerment as the ability of people to make strategic choices in areas that affect their lives. Two key factors in the process of empowerment are identified: control over resources (the conditions for empowerment) and agency (the ability to formulate choices). Section one outlines the conceptual framework. Section two discusses how empowerment can be measured in practice, with an overview of various frameworks which cover economic, socio-cultural, familial, legal, political and psychological dimensions. The report argues that measuring empowerment depends on the establishment of universal standards (such as human rights), but at the same time must allow for indicators which are sensitive to context. Section three provides examples of research projects and how they have used these frameworks.



## Gender and citizenship: overview report

Meer, S. with Sever, C. BRIDGE 2004  
[www.ids.ac.uk/bridge/reports\\_gend\\_CEP.html](http://www.ids.ac.uk/bridge/reports_gend_CEP.html)

This report looks at the importance of both citizenship and gender to development theory and practice. It discusses key debates in the literature on gender and citizenship and attempts to illustrate how reframing citizenship from a gender perspective can introduce broader rights and political participation as development goals. It also highlights how understanding the ways in which different groups define and experience citizenship can enable development actors and the citizens they work with to make such rights and participation a reality. In an environment where addressing discrimination and exclusion is being placed more firmly on the agenda alongside economic and technical development, understanding citizenship can help to provide a fuller picture of the basis of such discrimination and exclusion.



## Making rights work for the poor: Nijera Kori and the construction of "collective capabilities" in Bangladesh

Kabeer, N. *IDS Working Paper 200 IDS 2003*  
[www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop/wp/wp200.pdf](http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop/wp/wp200.pdf)

Despite a formal commitment to rights in Bangladesh the reality for its citizens is one of violations as much as of the observance of rights. For the poor, in particular, who rely for their survival on relationships which position them as dependent on more powerful patrons, there is little prospect of demanding justice. The NGO sector in Bangladesh has sought to compensate for various deficits which characterise the lives of poor and marginalized groups. However, few attempt to directly address the "rights deficit". One of the few to do so is Nijera Kori whose strategy is to build the capacity of the poor to mobilise in defence of their rights and in pursuit of justice. Its focus therefore is on collective rather than individual capabilities. The paper concludes by drawing out what Nijera Kori's experience tells us about processes of social change and its challenge to the linear logic that characterises donor agency approaches to accountability.



## Not a minute more: ending violence against women

Jacobs, G. (ed) *UNIFEM 2003*  
[www.unifem.org/index.php?f\\_page\\_pid=207](http://www.unifem.org/index.php?f_page_pid=207)

Violence against women has become as much a pandemic as HIV/AIDS or malaria. But it is still generally downplayed by the public at large and by policymakers who fail to create and fund programmes to eradicate it. Nevertheless the achievements over the last few decades of women and men around the world who have worked to combat violence against women and promote women's empowerment are monumental. In a relatively short time, women and their advocates have transformed the way gender-based violence is understood, and have promoted international documents and treaties that recognize, for the first time, women's right to live free of violence. This report highlights many of the achievements and indicates what must be done to build on them. It provides examples of good practices and also efforts that did not meet the goals set out for them — and explores why not. It looks at the challenges ahead, and asks what the most fruitful next steps might be.



## Men and reproductive health programs: influencing gender norms

White, V. et al *The Synergy Project 2003*  
[www.synergyaids.com/SynergyPublications/Gender\\_Norms.pdf](http://www.synergyaids.com/SynergyPublications/Gender_Norms.pdf)

This review highlights programs (projects) designed to change social norms related to entrenched gender roles. Each project is briefly described in terms of its scope, objectives and implementation. Project objectives include curbing gender-based violence, promoting male responsibility for ensuring consent in sexual relationships, analysing masculinity as a social construction and encouraging introspective critical thinking to prompt changes in social norms. The review explains the methodologies each project employed and presents findings from evaluations conducted to assess their efficacy. Examples are drawn from around the world in order to present a balanced and accurate sense of current efforts to change social norms related to gender. Contacts and sources of further information are provided for each project.



## Overcoming the gender digital divide: understanding ICTs and their potential for the empowerment of women

Huyer, S. and Sikoska, T. *United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) 2003*  
[www.un-instraw.org/docs/gender\\_and\\_ict/Synthesis\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.un-instraw.org/docs/gender_and_ict/Synthesis_Paper.pdf)

The fact that ICTs have so far been predominantly designed and created within male-dominated environments and that ICT policies are usually formulated by male policy-makers has contributed to the gender digital divide. Yet ICTs also hold great potential for women's empowerment on an individual level (better self-esteem, increased confidence and more career opportunities) as well as on a collective level (improving their advocacy, lobbying and networking activities). This paper synthesizes major research findings contained in the five background papers commissioned by INSTRAW. It explores the leading approaches to maximising the potential of ICTs for women's empowerment, examines the social context of technology, and identifies the main structural barriers to women's access and use of ICTs. Strategies are proposed to overcome these barriers and empower women through ICTs. ■

# Web sites

## [www.worldbank.org/poverty/empowerment/events/feb03/index.htm](http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/empowerment/events/feb03/index.htm)

The World Bank Poverty Reduction and Economic Management (PREM) Network's workshop, Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives, brought together development practitioners and academics to focus on conceptual and applied issues of measuring empowerment at the individual, household, community, and national levels as well as the appropriate data, indicators, and methodologies to carry out such research. During the two day event, panel members presented from a range of disciplines, including economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and political science. The web site provides video footage of all presentations and some downloadable papers.

## [www.awid.org/index.html](http://www.awid.org/index.html)

The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) is an international membership organization connecting, informing and mobilizing people and organizations committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights. Resources are collected under: Feminist Organisational Development; Gender Equality and New Technologies; Women's Rights and Economic Change; Young Women and Leadership and the AWID Forum: Reinventing Globalisation. AWID also runs WHRnet which updates readers on women's human rights issues and policy developments globally and provides information and analyses that support advocacy actions.

## [www.mdgender.net/](http://www.mdgender.net/)

This new web site is a collaborative effort of the UN Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, the OECD/DAC Network on Gender Equality, and the Multilateral Development Bank Working Group on Gender. It provides access to resources to promote better understanding of and sharing of tools for addressing gender equality in all of the Millennium Development Goals — from literature on gender equality as it relates to each goal, to tools for advocacy and action. Contributions to the site are encouraged.

## [www.dawn.org.fj](http://www.dawn.org.fj)

Development Alternatives with Women for a New era is a network of women scholars and activists from the economic South who engage in feminist research

and analysis and are committed to working for economic justice, gender justice and democracy. Since 1984 DAWN has influenced global debates on development by offering holistic analyses from a Southern feminist perspective that is both grounded in women's experience and inspired by women's collective strategies and visions. DAWN's global advocacy is based around the research themes of Political Economy of Globalisation, Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights, Political Restructuring and Social Transformation and Sustainable Livelihoods. The site includes details of this work, downloadable papers and DAWN's newsletter.

## [www.wicej.addr.com/](http://www.wicej.addr.com/)

The Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ) represents organisations in all regions of the globe. WICEJ works to link gender with macro-economic policy in international inter-governmental policy-making arenas, from a human-rights perspective. They seek to bring a stronger economic analysis to women's issues and a stronger gender analysis to social and economic issues in the international arena. They seek to bring their local perspectives on gender and economic issues to the international arena, and conversely, to bring their shared analysis from the international arena back to their regions and national communities. The site includes details of WICEJ's activities at international events such as the World Conference against Racism, the 47th UN Commission on the Status of Women and the UN International Conference on Finance for Development.

## [www.eurosur.org/wide/home.htm](http://www.eurosur.org/wide/home.htm)

WIDE Network Women in Development Europe is a European network of gender specialists, women active in NGOs, and human rights activists. WIDE's aims include influencing European and international policies with the objective of empowering women worldwide. They seek to promote better consideration of the situation of women in countries of the South in collaboration with partner organisations there and to lead campaigns and lobbying actions trying to strengthen the position of women in countries of the South. The site includes materials on economic literacy, resources and research for awareness raising, lobbying and advocacy, other publications and resources in Spanish.

## [www.siyanda.org/](http://www.siyanda.org/)

Siyanda aims to be an ever growing resource to support practitioners in implementing gender programmes and in mainstreaming gender equality concerns. It is an on-line database of gender and development materials. A brief abstract is provided for each item in the database. Searching on "empowerment" found 70 items "PRSPs" found 13, "2003" found 87. Basic search help is provided. Siyanda is also an interactive space where gender practitioners can share ideas, experiences and resources through a Discussion Board and a User's Corner. BRIDGE (which hosts and helps build and maintain the site) welcomes submission of materials.

# Conference

## **WIDE Annual Conference 2004**

### **Globalising women's rights: confronting unequal development between the UN rights framework and the WTO trade agreements**

20-22 May 2004

*Bonn, Germany*

WIDE notes a growing lack of coherence between two different global governance and rights regimes which impact on gender justice, women's rights and livelihoods i.e. the human rights framework adopted by the UN and the commercial and corporate rights codified in free trade agreements. Although women's economic, social, and political rights have been spelled out in CEDAW and other UN-documents, they are under attack, and are increasingly difficult to implement in the context of neoliberal globalisation, unequal development between and within countries, and the WTO-regime which expands its mandate. The conference will start with a capacity building day, which provides information and training on topical concepts, political instruments and policy frameworks. More information at

[www.eurosur.org/wide/home.htm](http://www.eurosur.org/wide/home.htm) ■

Enterprise Impact News was edited by Sarah Mosedale, Project Research Officer, as part of the Enterprise Development Impact Assessment Information Service (EDIAIS), which is managed jointly by the Institute for Development Policy and Management at the University of Manchester, and Women in Sustainable Enterprise (WISE) Development Ltd.