Empowerment and Feminism:
Fostering Progressive Alternatives or Neoliberal Agendas?

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By the end of the 20th century the term "empowerment" had entered the mainstream of international development discourse. Yet, its origins in this arena derive in large part from feminists working in NGOs throughout the global South in the 1970s and 1980s, many of whom were interested in fostering alternative forms of development.[1]

There has been considerable work addressing the mainstreaming of empowerment, with critical commentary on how this has brought significant shifts in its meaning and use. In this paper, we offer an understanding of the transformation in and proliferation of empowerment discourse in the international development arena since the mid-1970s. We explore the contested meanings and uses of the term with a particular focus on understanding the alternative visions of economy at play by contrasting its use by feminist activists to name an alternative development project, with the UN's more liberal embrace and the World Bank's neoliberal agenda.

"Empowerment" is a term that came of age in a period where global/local synergies and tensions became prominent, i.e., the 1970s and 1980s Its embrace reflects a widely shared global recognition of the importance of power, while offering the promise that some forms of power rest upon local (even individual) capacities and processes. Indeed, in some respects, the use of the same word "empowerment" across the political spectrum speaks to a common turn toward local or individual instances of power being understood as crucial elements in the realization of any social project, whether on the Left or on the Right (an interesting contrast to the globalization and transnationalization that also characterized the end of the century). However, the significant differences in what this turn to the local means in different contexts is in part what needs to be interrogated in order to understand the alternative politics and visions of economy at play.

We suggest that, on the Left, those who have embraced the term "empowerment" generally argue that social change must rest on grassroots organizing and participation. This left feminist frame or "chain of equivalence" (to follow Cornwall and Brock 2005, citing Laclau 1996) connects empowerment with justice, redistribution, grassroots power and transformative social change. We contrast this left feminist empowerment approach with the UN's liberal framing– that includes a concern with anti-poverty measures and redistribution, predicated upon development assistance and aid, as well as the promotion of self-determination and self-reliance of member nations – and the World Bank's neoliberal chain of equivalence, that connects empowerment to managing poverty and inequality in a manner that enables an individual to exercise her/his individual capacities for rational decision-making within the context of a free market economy. Thus, each perspective has different visions of economy (and class) at play.

To develop this analysis we begin with a consideration of the feminist empowerment approach to development. We then consider some of the attributes of mainstream empowerment

[1] From its relatively obscure origins in 17th century church and state documents, the term empowerment also began to be used in the United States in the mid-1970s by social workers and community psychologists (especially among feminists working against domestic violence and rape). It also appeared in the public policy arena, first in 1977 with an influential essay by Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus, *To Empower People. From State to Civil Society*, and late in the 1980s by Republicans and the Heritage Foundation, with Jack Kemp eventually establishing an *Economic Empowerment Task Force* in 1990, prior to the Clinton administration's 1993 *Empowerment Zone* legislation.

approaches as exemplified by the United Nations and the World Bank, underscoring the different uses of "power" that are at play. We conclude with a brief consideration of what we think are three key challenges facing a feminist empowerment project today.

I. From the "Grassroots": Empowerment as an Alternative Feminist Approach to Development

The term empowerment emerged on the international development scene in the mid-1980s through the work of one of the first transnational feminist networks, the DAWN project (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), though it appears to have initially circulated amongst feminist activists working in grassroots NGOs in the women's movement in South Asia in the 1970s (Jain 2009, Batliwala 1993 et 1994, Moser 1989, Bhatt 1989, et Sharma 1991-92).[2] Constituted in 1984 in preparation for the UN's 1985 second World Conference on Women, the DAWN network drafted a platform document that provided a critique of neoliberal development programs while putting forth an alternative radical vision of development. DAWN's "manifesto" was widely circulated and discussed, and was subsequently published in 1987 in what became a very well-known book, *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions. Third World Women's Perspectives* (edited by two economists, Gita Sen and Caren Grown).

The book, dedicated to "a process of ongoing empowerment of women" (22), is notable in several respects.

- As a collective project of feminist activists, academics and policymakers from the Global South, it connects the grassroots level work that many of the women were familiar with or engaged in, to a macroeconomic analysis and critique that shows how neoliberal development practices had aggravated women's circumstances throughout the world, resulting in a food crisis in Africa, the Latin American debt crisis, a crisis of poverty in South Asia, and militarism in the Pacific Islands.

- It put forth an alternative radical feminist vision of autonomous and equitable development oriented toward satisfying people's basic needs. As such it criticized the "integrationist" approach of the liberal "Women in Development" (WID) perspective that implicitly assumed that "women's main problem in the Third World is insufficient participation in an otherwise benevolent process of growth and development" (Sen and Grown 1987, 15); and it called for structural and systemic change so that "inequality based on class, gender and race is absent from every country, and from the relationships among countries" (80).

- It argued that only by taking the standpoint of poor Third World women might one come to a proper understanding of development and be able to fashion effective alternatives:

> …The experiences lived by poor women throughout the Third World in their struggles to ensure the basic survival of their families and themselves provide the clearest lens for an understanding of development processes. And it is

[2] Jain's 1980 case study of five community projects in India in which women were active participants uses the term "empowerment" in several instances, and both Gita Sen (email communication, 2009) and Devaki Jain (interview, 2009) claim that the term was used widely among feminists in India in the 1970s.

> *their* aspirations and struggles for a future free of the multiple oppressions of gender, class, race and nation that can form the basis for the new visions and strategies that the world now needs (9-10).

- It posed "empowerment" and the self-organization of women as necessary for realizing such alternative development (82).

Subsequently, DAWN's alternative "empowerment approach" gained substantial recognition in more mainstream development arenas with the 1989 publication of an influential article by Caroline Moser, a social anthropologist, in the highly respected journal, *World Development.* Moser identified the "empowerment approach" as one of five approaches in development policy oriented toward poor Third World women.[3] By the 1990s, one can find references to "empowerment" in literature that spans the globe.[4]

Given the local, grassroots nature of much of those working to "empower women," and the considerable diversity of regions and contexts, there are differences in how women's empowerment is described and undertaken. Yet, generally, feminist empowerment has been viewed as a *process* that involves the self-organization of women in a manner that enables them to mobilize to effect transformative social changes in "structures of subordination." As such feminist empowerment necessitates work at the individual level, as well as at the organizational and social levels. Indeed, it involves an articulation of at least three different dimensions,

(1) encompassing an internal, psychological or subjective level of empowerment, in which a person's "power within" and individual-level "power to" are developed;

(2) an interpersonal, organizational, or collective level whereby a "power with" and a "power over" is cultivated; and, finally,

(3) a political or social level where structural and/or systemic change is made possible via collective action. As Srilatha Batliwala, an Indian social worker and feminist activist, has written:

> radical transformations in society cannot be achieved through the struggles of village or neighbourhood women's collectives…In the final analysis, to transform society, women's empowerment must become a political force, that is, an organized mass movement that challenges and transforms existing power structures. Empowerment should ultimately lead to the

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[3]The four other policy approaches are: the welfare approach, the equity approach, the anti-poverty approach and the efficiency approach. Moser notes that the empowerment approach "is still neither widely recognized as an 'approach,' nor documented as such, though its origins are by no means recent"

[4] From our research, it seems that the "empowerment approach" was most extensively developed and debated within a South Asian context (Batliwala 1993 et 1994, Kabeer 1994, Mazumdar 1989, Muntemba 1985, et Sharma 1991-92). The work of Srilatha Batilwala, an Indian social worker, was particularly influential. In 1993 she prepared a background document on "innovative programmes for women's development, education, [and] empowerment in South Asia" (Batliwala 1993, 2) for a South Asian Workshop on "Education for Women's Empowerment" organized by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization's Freedom From Hunger Campaign-Action for Development. Widely cited, this study became a global touchstone for the feminist empowerment approach, and provided some of the most extensive discussion and characterization of what such an approach entails.

> formation of mass organizations of poor women, at the regional, national and international levels (1994, 134).

II. The 1990s : Empowerment hits the Mainstream

Having emerged within the context of a left feminist project for alternative development, "empowerment" was rapidly diffused within the international development community such that by the mid-1990s it had become a "buzzword" that was, in many respects domesticated or normalized (Rowlands 1998, 11); and, as many have noted, the quasi-obligatory inclusion of "empowerment" in almost all international development programs oriented toward women has, in many respects, robbed the term of its "radical, challenging, and transformatory edge" (Cleaver 1999, 599).

There has been substantial discussion of empowerment's incorporation into mainstream development institutions (Oxaal and Baden 1997, Parpart 2002a, Cornwall and Brock 2005, Sardenberg 2007, Eyben and Napier-Moore 2009) Here we consider some of the key attributes of its use within two important multilateral institutions – the United Nations as compared to the World Bank – so as to offer a sense of both the similarities in the more mainstream/domesticated turn to empowerment and an appreciation of the differences at play *within* "the mainstream." We consider both the discursive and practical levels of empowerment's incorporation in both institutions and, in broad terms, we characterize the UN's turn to empowerment as coming out of a liberal frame, in contrast to a neoliberal frame at the World Bank. Thus, although the UN's embrace of empowerment has contributed to a normalization of the term, we suggest that this liberal normalization differs in significant ways from that of the World Bank's. Further, we would argue that the meaning of "empowerment" within both institutions has been reconstituted and redefined since the mid-1990s.[5]

1995 marks a significant year for the UN's embrace of empowerment, with the Declaration from the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing stating that:

> [w]omen's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace (epigraph 13).[6]

Further, the United Nation Development Program (UNDP), the UN's global development network, adopted empowerment as a development goal which included "a commitment to advocating and promoting the empowerment of women in political and economic decision-making at all levels, from the household to national government and in local, national and international administrative structures" (Oxaal 1997, 8). In 1995 the Human Development Report added empowerment as one of its "human development principles" (along with equity,

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[5]This is illustrated for instance when one looks at the shifting French translations of the term "empowerment" in UN documents. The 1985 Beijing Declaration and Program of Action translates empowerment as " pouvoir d'action," (the power to take action), whereas in the third MDG empowerment is translated as "*l'autonomisation.*"

[6]The Report of the UN's fourth World Conference called its Platform for Action "an agenda for women's empowerment." Several other UN conferences – the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, and the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit on Social Development – also "advocated that women's empowerment is central to development" (Oxaal 1997, 3).

productivity, and sustainability); and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) was established, providing a numerical calculation of "women's capacity to actively participate in economic and political life, and in decision-making."[7] By the year 2000, women's empowerment was so universally recognized as an essential goal of development within the UN system, that it was included as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); a goal with intrinsic and not just instrumental value (as noted by Kabeer 2005).

The World Bank was much slower to take up the use of empowerment.[8] It was only with the publication of *The World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty* that empowerment was recognized as "one of the three pillars of poverty reduction", and a section of the report was dedicated to "empowerment."[9] Yet, even at the World Bank the term became increasingly present, such that by 2005 "empowerment is now found in the documentation of over 1,800 Word Bank-aided projects" ((Alsop and Heinshon 2005, 5).

Thus, as Miller (1998) has shown, WID/gender concerns have been much more effectively institutionalized in the UN/UNDP as compared to the World Bank. For example, after the 1975 Mexico City World Conference on Women, the UN appointed WID advisors and established a relatively extensive WID staff bureaucracy; and "gender mainstreaming" was pursued in UN development projects and programs during its 1985 evaluation after the Nairobi World Conference. This established a considerable institutional presence within the UN related to gender. Indeed, over the years, many liberal feminists have worked assiduously to shape UN policy and programs to incorporate gender concerns and attention to women's empowerment.

At the discursive level, at the UN feminists have been able to argue for the incorporation of empowerment on equity grounds. This framing connects empowerment to a modernist development project in general and, by 1990, to that of human development in particular. As such, "empowerment" within the UN seems located within a "chain of equivalence" (Cornwall and Brock 2005 citing Laclau 1996) that includes a deep and abiding concern with anti-poverty measures and redistribution, predicated upon development assistance and aid, as well as the

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[7]The GEM is based upon four indicators: women's relative share of administrative and managerial positions or professional and technical jobs, women's participation in the active labor force, women's relative share of parliamentary seats, and women's average income as compared to average salaries earned in non-agricultural sectors.

The GEM was introduced at the same time as the Gender-related Development Index (GDI). As Oxaal describes, "the GDI focuses on the expansion of capabilities, [while] the GEM is concerned with the use of those capabilities to take advantage of the opportunities in life" (1997, 20).

[8]The idea of developing a gender equity policy at the World Bank "was first mooted in 1975," but it wasn't until 1994 that the policy paper *Enhancing Women's Participation in Economic Development* was issued (O'Brien et al 2000) and it "hasn't given gender equity concern much of an institutional home." In 1987 it established a Division for Women in Development and set guidelines for assessing women's inclusion in development initiatives (Bergeron 2003, 405). It also increased spending on education and has targeted women as agents of development with micro credit lending. In 2001 the first book-length report on gender equity, *Engendering Development*, was published as part of Wolfenshohn's "Challenge of Inclusion" initiative. Wolfenshon (who took office in June 1995) was "key in shifting the Bank towards an approach that includes a concern with participation, gender, and environment" (O'Brien et al 2000, 27).

[9]However, Professor Ravi Kanbur, the leading architect of the 2000/2001 WDR, resigned when higher Bank authorities insisted on reducing the report's emphasis on empowerment (Braathen 2001, 333). Further, as Parpart notes, while the report "adopts some of the language of empowerment and participation, in its lengthy bibliography there are almost no references to the literature (2002a, 42). She goes on to observe that the World Bank's analysis continues to emphasize economic growth, the role of markets, and the importance of economic incentives. "This is a particular vision in which poverty is understood solely as an individual problem, empowerment necessitates leadership from the top, and poverty alleviation does not require any serious alterations to global capitalism (45).

promotion of self-determination and self-reliance of member nations. At the UNDP, where "human development' has been institutionalized, "empowerment" is also tied to a post-WWII concern with building capacity which, by the 1990s was, in many respects, reconstituted as a "capabilities" approach (coming out of the work of Amartya Sen). Thus, as Giovanni (2008) notes, the UN is based upon a liberal humanitarian ethic oriented toward influencing the policies and practices of member nation states and international and national civil society organizations; and, in many respects, this has provided relatively fertile institutional terrain for feminist influence, especially of a liberal bent.[10]

Some commentators have thus emphasized the enormous gains women have achieved since the first UN Conference on Women in 1975, as evidenced by the expansion of women-oriented NGOs and gender-oriented programs which brought resources channeled towards fostering "women's empowerment" with, in some cases, clear ameliorations in women's material circumstances.[11] It has also brought greater awareness of gender issues, an appreciation of the specificities of women's lives, and an understanding of women as "not only social reproducers" but also as significant economic contributors and political actors (Sato 2004, 6). As Irene Tinker, a political scientist and pioneer in the field of Women in Development notes, "empowerment just happened" (Tinker 2006).

By contrast, at the World Bank, gender and empowerment have had much less of an institutionalized presence. Indeed, the first indication that WID/gender would be taken more seriously was in 1985 when a senior economist from inside the Bank was appointed as a new WID advisor (Miller 1998, 152); and WID/gender concerns have yet to be more fully incorporated into World Bank policy and operational procedures. In contrast to the UN, gender mainstreaming was never attempted. In 1998 a new monitoring system was put in place whereby all projects were subject to review for their WID dimensions. However, the professional staff devoted to this task was too small to effectively carry out such monitoring and there were still no full-time WID posts in the Operations Department.

At the discursive level, the turn to empowerment at the World Bank was accomplished within a neoliberal economic framing; although one that seems to have been undergoing some significant refashioning. For, as many have noted, the World Bank's embrace of empowerment comes out of widespread critiques of and mobilizations against failed structural adjustment policies in the Global South, and in face of the failure of "shock therapy" among many Eastern European nations.[12] This brought a growing recognition of problematic outcomes related to

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[10]One might also compare the UNDP's institutional culture and structure to that of the World Bank, with the UNDP noted for its emphasis on good management practices and coordination and its relatively decentralized structure, such that over eighty-five percent of its staff is based in 132 country offices managed by Resident Representatives (Miller 1998, 147). By contrast, the World Bank is known for emphasis upon economic research and policy, employing primarily academically trained economists. It also has a very centralized structure with only about eighteen percent of its staff in the field.

[11]However, overall women are not necessarily better off. Other observers emphasize the growth in women's work load accompanied by the feminization of poverty, the negative effects on women of structural adjustment programs with extensive cutbacks in a range of public services, the effects of the resurgence of conservative fundamentalist religious movements on women's mobility and access to public arenas, and the insecurity and devastation related to the growth of armed conflict.

[12]Eyben and Napier-Moore (2009) suggest that 'the end of the Cold War" which "led to the return of a parliamentary democracy in many countries and an increased international emphasis on human rights" also contributed to a broad-based appreciation that "people and their participation also mattered" (285-286). Oxaal (1997) argues that the turn to empowerment "coincides with recent questioning of the efficacy of central planning and the role of "the state", and moves by donor governments and multilateral funding agencies to embrace NGOs as partners in development.

unregulated free markets and an understanding that economic growth and poverty "reduction" depend crucially on state capacity or "good governance" and upon "participation," "social networks" and "social capital."[13] Indeed, by the end of the 1990s, for the World Bank, social capital had become "the missing link" in development (World Bank 1997); and in 2002 the World Bank website stated that "social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together." Some have called this a "new institutionalism" at the World Bank (Bergeron 2003), while Braathen (2001) argues that a social-corporatist vision is evident in the World Bank's *The World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty,* and that it differs in significant ways from the prior neoliberal perspective.

Certainly such an appreciation for the crucial institutional conditions upon which effective market functioning rests helps explain the turn to "women's empowerment" among World Bank researchers, policymakers and operations officers. Yet, at the same time, it is clear that feminists have undertaken considerable work to integrate empowerment (and attention to gender more broadly) within a neoliberal economic framework. As Anne Marie Goetz shows in her analysis of the effectiveness of feminist politicking relative to multilateral financial institutions, to be able to talk about women's empowerment in terms that could be understood at the World Bank, one had to "present the business case" or "give the economic rationale for investing in gender" (O'Brien et al 2000, 47-48). This type of neoliberal reasoning is clearly illustrated by a comment by Robert Zoellick, President of the World Bank:

> The empowerment of women is smart economics….despite gains in health and education, progress on women's opportunities is lagging. Women trail men in labor force participation, access to credit, entrepreneurship rates, inheritance and land ownership rights, and income. This is neither fair nor smart economics, and in fact studies show that investments in women yield large social and economic returns (2008).

Thus, at the World Bank, women's empowerment has been cast primarily in terms of harnessing productive resources and providing necessary conditions for economic growth, bringing an emphasis upon economic efficiency (in contrast to that of equity at the UN and upon social transformation, emancipation and/or liberation among feminists in the DAWN tradition). At the discursive level, this produces a neoliberal chain of equivalence that connects empowerment to economic growth, investment, free markets, individuals, opportunity, entrepreneurship and rational choice. At a practical level, efficiency arguments for women's empowerment entail a clear instrumentalization of the term and have proven most effective in generating "human capital" investments in women's health and education (literacy training and the acquisition of marketable skills), micro credit, and small business development while also often imposing short-term, "return on investment" imperatives.[14]

Political and institutional problems have gained prominence on the development agenda with a focus on human rights, good governance, and participation" (3)

[13]Cleaver (1999), Bergeron (2003), and Rankin (2002) note this turn to a "concern with the role of social capital and social inclusion." Cleaver comments that "social institutions" are often posed "as solutions to problems of trust and malfeasance" such that "institutional inclusion has become an integral strand of participatory approaches, a process which is assumed to ensure the more efficient delivery of development" (1999, 600).

[14] The World Bank and USAID began funding micro-lending activities on a small scale in the 1980s and 1990s in rural areas (Fernando 1997). Often these programs were pursued "in the name of democratization and freedom," where "freedom" meant "cultivating the conditions necessary for rational individuals to make free choices in a

One can see the differences at play between the World Bank's turn to empowerment as compared to that of the UN with respect to the types of quantitative measurements that have been deployed respectively by the two institutions. Whereas the UN has established the Gender Empowerment Measure – which we would characterize as an accountability instrument – and the Millennium Development Goals, which Cornwall and Brock identify as providing a "normative framework" (2005),[15] the World Bank has focused on establishing "instruments" of development with its Poverty Reduction Strategy Proposals (PRSPs) and its emphasis upon "outcomes assessments" and "results based management"[16] These latter indicators have often been used in a manner that reinforces the tendency to define empowerment in narrow, individualistic, and static terms – such as women's increased "decision-making power" within the household, their greater involvement in market-oriented activity, their greater mobility, or their capacity to generate more income.[17] Such indicators measure aspects of what some have called "personal empowerment," in contrast to social or political empowerment (Kabeer et. al. 2009). Clearly then, the equation "empowerment = smart economics" marks a significant instrumentalization of the term, in sharp contrast with its origins among feminists in which empowerment is viewed as a process that necessarily connects the growth of individual awareness, self-esteem, and capacity building with collective engagement, mobilization and transformative social action. Indeed, the collective and explicitly political dimensions of empowerment often disappear as empowerment has come to be defined in individualist terms whereby individual agency and the ability to make (rational) choices so as to profit from opportunities to enhance one's material well-being in a competitive market economy are deemed to be the desired outcomes. In this manner, to the extent that women's material lives are ameliorated within neoliberal programs for empowerment, such "progress" is achieved at the price of women's integration into an entrepreneurial, market-based economy. As Jude Fernando has noted, "ironically, the transformation of empowerment into a subordinate discourse occurs by using its own language and strategies, progressively censoring and muting its radical aspirations" (1997, 151).

Thus, in contrast to those who argue that mainstream development institutions have taken the "power" out of "empowerment," we would suggest that there are important and significant forms of power that are envisioned and furthered by mainstream initiatives. Indeed, these approaches appear to be fostering liberal and neoliberal subjectivities, that is, agents that strive to participate in and benefit from free market economies, rather than creating conditions that enable "resistance identities" (Castells 1997). We would schematically characterize both the World Bank's and the UN's interventions as developing an individual's "power to" with an emphasis on individual

capitalist system based on commodities" (Sato 2004, 5). See Chizu Sato's insightful study of the USAID's Women's Empowerment Program in Nepal for a compelling analysis of the neoliberal political and economic dimensions of such a program.

[15]The normative power of the MDGs seems to have been beneficial to furthering women's empowerment by holding UN member states accountable within an international arena, yet also problematic in so far as the "harmonization" of criteria for realizing women's empowerment has taken the emphasis off honoring local and diverse contexts.

[16]Interestingly, the exigencies of donor requirements by multilateral and bilateral aid agencies for "outcomes assessments" have given birth to a considerable amount of work among gender advocates for ways to measure and quantify empowerment achievements. See Kabeer (1999) for an analysis of various measurements of "women's empowerment."

[17] Oxaal (1997) notes that Hashemi et al's research on six villages in Bangladesh with credit programs oriented toward rural women's empowerment all had individual-level indicators of empowerment. Similarly, Ackerley (1996) "suggests using borrowers' knowledge of accounting for loan activity as a measure of empowerment in credit programs" (Oxaal 1997, 22).

choice and decision-making especially in the economic realm (as delimited by a market economy). We suggest, further, that the UN's liberal frame also incorporates a concern with fostering a "power over," in so far as there is a redistributive agenda aimed at rectifying inequities borne of an unequal distribution of resources. UN initiatives remain, however, primarily at the individual level, with an emphasis upon skill building, education, income generation, and political representation and participation (as evidenced by the MDGs).[18]

The incorporation of empowerment within mainstream development discourses is evidence of and has contributed to a broader shift in development policy from the "modernization" of production in the post-war period to a "managerial" modernization at the end of the 20th century aimed at promoting new forms of "governance" that incorporate participation (Boltanski and Chiapelli 1999). In this new managerial development project, individual capacities are to be harnessed in ways that produce forms of self-governance compatible with market-based economic activity (Sato 2004, Cruikshank 1999).

By contrast, the alternative feminist empowerment approach, as exemplified in the work of DAWN and myriad women's organizations, encompasses the multiple dimensions of power – from a power within, to a power to, a power with, and a collective power over. As such it incorporates a transformative social vision (what some have characterized as emancipatory or liberatory [Sardenberg 2007]) and clearly aims to foster radical subjectivities interested in and capable of pursuing some type of transformative agenda. In other words, the feminist empowerment approach to development incorporates a double social dimension in terms of the goals of empowerment and the process of empowerment. With respect to the goals, feminist empowerment is explicitly defined as a transformation in *social conditions*, that is, in the structures, systems, and/or institutionalized forms of subordination and oppression. With respect to the process, to become "empowered" necessarily entails the formation of groups or collectivities that have a "social or collective identity" (Stromquist 2007, 21).

III. Questions and Challenges

However, by insisting on these social aspects of empowerment, feminists have been confronted with several questions and challenges, three of which we address here. The first relates to how "social transformation" is defined. On the one hand, given that women's empowerment is understood as a process of self-determination, many argue that what social transformation means, and how it is to be pursued, must develop out of the process of empowerment itself. As Kabeer notes, Batliwala's study of feminist NGOs in South Asia describes a process that is very "open ended" in which "outcomes are not determined in advance" (2001, 28). Yet, on the other hand, since feminists are expressly interested in fostering social transformation, the empowerment process, as described above, is understood to be oriented inherently toward radical social change, that is, changes in unequal and oppressive social relations. To negotiate this tension, feminists have distinguished interventions that address women's "condition" or "practical gender needs" from those that address women's "position" or

[18]The task force report on the MDG for "achieving gender equality and empowerment women" highlights the importance of equal employment opportunity and formal political participation. Empowerment is by in large defined in individual terms. While the need for agency it recognized, it is only discussed at an individual level (UN Millennium Project 2005).

"strategic gender needs" (Molyneux 1985; Young 1988).[19] Most often the concern is with the transforming gender relations or "patriarchal structures" (Kabeer 2005), although some, notably DAWN, also incorporate a concern with addressing exploitative and oppressive relations of class, race and/or nationality. However, the question always remains open as to what constitutes a "true" transformation in women's social position.[20] While this question or tension is an inherent aspect of a feminist empowerment project (which is a good thing, from our perspective), we would argue that in face of powerful liberal and neoliberal understandings of what constitutes "empowering" economic relations, it is imperative for progressive/left feminists (especially feminist economists!) to not cede the terrain of the economy and to be sure to elaborate a vision and practice of empowerment that encompasses alternative economic projects which enable collective economic subjectivities.

This brings us to a second challenge related to the formation of collective identities and collective forms of power, for, as noted above, from this alternative feminist perspective, not only is effective empowerment *defined* in part by radical social transformation, it can only *be realized* through the formation of groups who engage in collective deliberation and social action. In other words, *the process* of empowerment necessarily involves a collective dimension. One of the key challenges, therefore, is to foster the movement from a capacitating "power within" to a collective "power with" and "power to" (Kabeer 1994). As Stromquist (2007) notes, "resistance to the status quo—which marks the beginning of social transformation – develops on the foundation of a capacity for intersubjectivity, reflection, and creativity" (13). Indeed, feminist empowerment is understood to be a long and difficult process, (Kabeer 1994, Batliwala 1993), since it "necessitates persistent long-term interventions in order to break old patterns of low self-worth and dependence and to foster the construction of new personalities with a realistic understanding of how gender functions in their society and strategies for its modification" (Stromquist 2002, 25). Thus, there's a clear understanding that feminist empowerment necessarily entails the creation of "new subjects and actors" oriented toward critical consciousness and social change ("resistance identities"; Castells 1997, as cited by Stromquist

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[19] Maxine Molyneux (1985), a Pakistani sociologist, was the first to make the distinction between interventions oriented towards addressing "women's practical gender interests" as compared to those that respond to their "strategic gender interests" in her work on women's mobilization in Nicaragua. Later Kate Young, a social anthropologist and WOMANKIND Worldwide's first Executive Director, made the distinction between interventions oriented toward changing women's "condition" and those oriented toward transforming women's "position" (1988).

[20] Also, it is recognized that the process of empowerment often begins with interventions oriented toward women's "condition" or practical gender needs. As Moser (1989) observed: "the very limited success of the equity approach to confront directly the nature of women's subordination through legislative changes has led the *empowerment* approach to avoid direct confrontation and to utilize practical gender needs as the basis on which to build a secure support base, and as a means through which more strategic needs may be reached" (1816). She goes on to note that although "it cannot be assumed that meeting practical gender needs will automatically result in the satisfaction of strategic gender needs, the most effective organizations are often those which started around concrete practical gender needs relating to health, employment and basic service provision, but which have been able to utilize concerns such as these as a means to reach specific strategic gender needs identified by women in particular socio-political contexts" (1816). She argues further that "the strategic gender needs identified in the *empowerment* approach are similar to those of the equity approach." It is in the "means of achieving such needs that the *empowerment* approach differs most fundamentally from previous approaches" (1816). Moser gives examples of practical and strategic gender needs in the areas of employment (1804), housing (1805), and basic services (1806). She concludes by noting that most interventions by governments and international agencies are oriented toward practical needs (1818).

2007, 13), as well as the formation of groups or collectivities that have a “social or collective identity” (Stromquist 2007, 21; Molyneux 1985, Melucci 1989) [21]

In this quest feminists have drawn upon various technologies of intervention such as consciousness-raising, conscientization, and popular education to foster such new subjectivities and, thereby, they have also developed new fields of understanding and new knowledge practices.

> Education here plays a double role: to transmit knowledge about the debilitating and undesirable conditions or issues that have been ignored or that are so deeply rooted in society that they seem immutable, and to teach oppressed people to think in political terms – to become aware that certain demands must be made to those who occupy political positions. Education thus works beyond socialization. (Stromquist 2007, 30-31).[22]

This, however, has raised many interesting and thorny debates within the feminist activist community about whose knowledge and understanding matters. While the feminist empowerment approach clearly argues for the importance of local knowledge from the “grassroots,” unmediated knowledge is not sufficient for enabling empowerment. Indeed, often there is the recognition that “external agents” (Batliwala 1993, 1994) are necessary to facilitate such a transformation in identity and subjectivity, raising a third set of difficult challenges and issues related to the role of professionals, experts and intermediary institutions, such as NGOs and CSOs (Civil Society Organizations), in the empowerment process. [23]

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[21]Stromquist (2007) notes that “observers of social movements emphasize the importance of ‘hidden networks’ (Melucci 1989) or ‘social networks’ (Tarrow 1994) in the process of creating collective identities, in the interpretation of grievances and demands for vindication, and in the evaluation of the possibilities for efficacious collective action.” (16)

[22]Stromquist identifies key elements for such a transformative educational process: awareness of oppression at the personal level, developing resilience, and the ability to face conflict productively (2002, 26-29). She notes that “gender consciousness-raising efforts serve to render the personal public and hence to seek collective responses. Since consciousness-raising promotes a belief in women’s autonomy as subjects, it fosters among participants a sense of their independent worth and needs. It enables women to see themselves as individuals with agency beyond their responsibilities for home and family. More bluntly, such consciousness-raising efforts seek to instill in women an awareness of their role and needs as citizens, not just as mothers or wives “(28).

[23] Maxine Molyneux was one of the first to argue that “independent women’s organizations” are indispensable for feminist action (1985); and, more recently, Nelly Stromquist (2007) argues for the necessity of “intermediate institutions.” These are needed in part due to the specificities of women’s oppression, subordination and/or marginalization and, in part, due to the character of feminists’ vision for radical social change. With respect to women as a marginalized and oppressed social group, intermediary institutions are needed to give women a secure and safe space within which to explore and reflect so as to develop their self-esteem, educate themselves, build a collective “resistance” identity, develop strategies for intervention, and build a collective force capable of mobilization for effective social action. At the same time, intermediary feminist organizations are crucial to afford women the time needed to engage in transformative political work, given the extraordinary demands on women which leave them with little free time to undertake sustained activist work (Stromquist 2007, 23). Stromquist has a clear preference for “women-led NGOs” and she argues that feminist organizations are, in part, important for women given the extraordinary demands on women’s time which leaves them little free time to engage in activist work. “In immediate terms, society needs organizations that can give activist women the full time required for transformative political action” (2007, 23). In her recent work she also argues that intermediary institutions are necessary for a healthy civil society, as citizen participation is needed for stable and democratic societies (2007, 23 and27) [note the clear similarities here with the work of Boyte]

In some respects, the centrality of the concern about the role of intermediaries or external agents (both institutional and individual) arises, in part, out of feminists' understanding of the subjects to which they are addressing themselves; for those who are seen as marginalized and oppressed are also understood as having internalized their oppression or marginalization to some extent, thereby necessitating some level of individual, internal or psychological transformation so as to develop an internal "power within." By contrast, in the post WW II period, many Left progressive movements were built more on working-class identities. While there have been extensive debates about how workers might develop a revolutionary consciousness (e.g., the famous Marxian "subjects in themselves" becoming "subjects for themselves" framing), there has not been the same emphasis on addressing the internal psychological conditions for developing the desire and capacity "to act." We suggest that perhaps this explains why the term "empowerment" was not widely used until the advent of the second wave of feminism in the 1970s.

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