



Development  
Progress

Working Paper

06

# Progress on women's empowerment

## From technical fixes to political action

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### Key messages

- Women's empowerment is a process of personal and social change through which they gain power, meaningful choices and control over their lives.
- There are many pathways to women's empowerment but important enabling conditions include women's collective action, constitutional and legal reform, social and economic policy measures, and changes in socio-cultural norms.
- Empowerment is not something that can be done to or for women. Women are the agents of their empowerment.
- To contribute to progress on women's empowerment, the international community must support the political actions of women and their allies to change gender and other power hierarchies.

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### Introduction

Women's empowerment has been a feature of development assistance since the 1990s. Given the continued resistance to 'gender issues' in some parts of the development community, this alone is an achievement. At the same time, feminists worldwide have made a sustained critique of the dominant approach to women's empowerment.

Gender specialists express concern that global support for women's empowerment quickly waned after the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing as new (and old) policy agendas returned to the fore (Eyben, 2008; Molyneux, 2007). There is widespread agreement that gender mainstreaming, the most prominent legacy

Women protesting in Tahrir Square, Egypt.  
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of the Beijing Conference, has become a technocratic exercise that prevents engagement with the issues of power and politics that lie at the heart of women's empowerment (Eyben, 2008; Cornwall, 1997, 2014). In practice, donors have relegated substantive gender issues to their social development sections and paid insufficient attention to the gender dimensions of other areas of development, particularly at the macro level. Some feminists have argued that their co-optation by a neo-liberal agenda has discredited international efforts to empower women (Abdullah and Fofana-Ibrahim, 2010; Miller and Razavi, 1998; Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall and Edwards, 2014).

The international community has, however, shown some renewed interest in women's empowerment and gender issues. The themes of women's participation in conflict and post-conflict settings and violence against women have been the subject of high-level international debate and commitments. These include the recent re-engagement with the 2000 United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and related resolutions on the need to ensure women have a voice and participate in peace and security issues. In 2011, UN Women was created to lead on gender equality and women's empowerment and, with its Executive Director being a UN Under-Secretary-General and with a seat in the resident co-ordinator system at the country level, it has a greater ability to do so (Domingo et al., 2013). For the first time, the World Bank, a litmus test of mainstream development trends, devoted its World Development Report 2012 to gender (World Bank, 2011). Bilateral agencies also appear to be reviving their commitment to supporting gender-related agendas across a range of development issues. The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2015 will also spur reflection and action.

This is therefore an opportune moment for the international development community to reflect critically on its approach to women's empowerment and to ensure that future efforts build on past learning. This paper is a contribution to this endeavour, drawing on a rich heritage of critical reflection on pathways of empowerment for women. Section 1 considers the structural causes of women's oppression and lack of power. Section 2 examines empowerment, and the programme-related implications of its various interpretations. Section 3 provides an overview of the main factors that have enabled women and their allies to challenge unjust power relations. This helps to unpack experiences of women's empowerment that are, in practice, diverse, complex and multidimensional. Section 4 briefly considers how the concept of empowerment can be operationalised and how progress might be identified and measured. Section 5 concludes and reflects on how international actors can most effectively support women's empowerment.

## 1. Structural reasons for women's lack of power

Social structures are the rules and conventions that people make and remake through their everyday interactions. They include formal rules, such as statutory laws, and also unwritten rules and beliefs, such as social conventions and cognitive schemas (Giddens, 2006). Gender hierarchies, and the patriarchal socio-cultural norms that underpin them, are an important structural cause of women's lack of power and meaningful choice. It is therefore impossible to talk about women gaining greater freedom and choice without reference to the structures that mediate both women's access to resources and their control and use of them (Oppenheim Mason, 2005; Malhotra and Schuler, 2005).<sup>1</sup>

Social structures frame people's choices, but they are not fixed: through their collective actions, women and men can alter the structures that lead to women's subordination and exclusion. At the same time, attempts to change gender norms are contested and tend to be protracted, precisely because they are about the distribution of power and resources – changes which create losers as well as winners. In the UK, for example, women's struggle for the right to vote took over 60 years and provoked vigorous, sometimes violent, condemnation. Men resisted women's suffrage because they did not accept women as their equals and did not want to share political power. However, some women also opposed it, publicly or privately, either because they believed their intellect and judgement were inferior to

### Box 1: Development progress, social cohesion and women's empowerment

This study of women's empowerment is part of the Development Progress project, which seeks to identify and explain examples of progress across different dimensions of development. The project draws on the work of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission (Stiglitz et al., 2009), which identified a range of dimensions of wellbeing, including political voice and social cohesion. Our working premise was that women's empowerment advances social cohesion when the (enabled) agency of individuals or groups contributes to redefining power relations in ways that help to reduce structures of inequality and push for more equitable outcomes. Policies that focus on eliminating discrimination and exclusion across a range of spheres (economic, political, socio-cultural) and that focus on different levels (domestic, community/sub-national, national) may therefore enhance the social inclusion of disadvantaged sectors of the population. As the work on women's empowerment demonstrates, such histories of progress are deeply contested and inevitably political.

<sup>1</sup> This is also the reason why gender equality and women's empowerment, while separate, are inextricably linked. Since gender-based discrimination is a structural cause of women's lack of power compared to men's, gender equality is an important objective of women's empowerment insofar as it supports the possibility of women's improved individual and collective agency.

## Box 2: Whose empowerment?

Women's experiences of gendered institutions are extremely varied across the different domains of their lives and in relation to other groups of women and of men. Women may have power and influence in some areas of their lives but lack autonomy in others. For example, a woman might be economically independent but sexually submissive to her husband and/or excluded from politics (Oppenheim Mason, 2005; Malhotra and Schuler, 2005). The empowerment of one group of women may also be at the expense of another. For example, professional women may be released from the bulk of unpaid domestic work, but the household shifts that burden to less advantaged women, particularly when labour laws regarding decent work (pay, benefits, etc.) are not respected (Sieder and Sierra, 2010). Even women within the same household can face different constraints based on their status relative to other family members. For example, in patrilocal communities a mother-in-law has more power in the household than does her daughter-in-law (Bolt and Bird, 2003). Constraints on women's power and choices therefore relate not only to their individual characteristics but also to the contextual factors that mediate these, such as their legal rights, community norms or household structure (Oppenheim Mason, 2005; Petesch et al., 2005).

men's or because they did not want to bear the short-term costs, such as scorn, humiliation or domestic conflict, of challenging the status quo (Phillips, 2003). Addressing the structural and institutional determinants of power make it less likely that processes of empowerment are presented as 'win-win' situations rather than a deeply political process of contestation and resistance.

However, while patriarchy and gendered institutions affect all women, they do not affect all women in the same way since institutions (official or informal), identities and interests other than those relating to gender mediate women's experiences of patriarchy and disempowerment

(Molyneux, 1985; Jackson, 1999; Cornwall and Edwards 2014). Women and also men may face structural discrimination because of their age, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, religion, class or ideological preferences (Lockett, 2008) (see Box 2). This intersection of different forms of discrimination and horizontal inequalities mean that women from marginalised ethnic or religious groups usually have the least power (Shepherd et al., 2014; Stewart, 2002).

Since women as well as men are cultural transmitters of patriarchy and gendered institutions, breaking these down requires changing shared meanings of both femininity and masculinity. This is because patriarchy is often hegemonic and therefore invisible, leading women to internalise and accept their subordinate status to men as the natural order of things – and vice versa. Even when women are exposed to new ideas about how society might be organised differently, they may consider that it is in their interest to participate in reproducing gendered institutions, even when these are harmful to their welfare (see Box 3). This tension between women's short-term and long-term interests is one reason why there is no straightforward link between women's access to new knowledge and information and their taking strategic action.

Finally, gendered power relations and the dynamics of women's empowerment also need to be understood within the broader political economy of a particular context. This is partly because women's lack of power does not arise from gender hierarchies alone, but also because the political settlement – that is, the elite bargain about the rules of political, social and economic exchange that both reflects and frames the balance and distribution of power and resources in any given society<sup>2</sup> – influences women's opportunities to redefine power relations and to advance gender equity (Eyben 2011; Molyneux 2007). For example, strong secular elites may liberalise family law as part of their aim to reduce or eliminate the power of religious elites (Htun and Weldon, 2011).<sup>3</sup> (We return to this issue in section 3.1.)

## Box 3: Practical and strategic gender interests

Maxine Molyneux (1985) differentiated between women's *practical gender interests* – the immediate needs that emerge from women's everyday experiences of gendered institutions, particularly the division of labour and marriage – and their *strategic gender interests*, which stem from an analysis of the causes of women's subordination and a desire to change them. Molyneux argues that a woman may prioritise her practical over her strategic interests, even when this reproduces her vulnerability and exclusion from power. For example, a woman may judge her practical interests to be better met by making claims within an unequal conjugal contract rather than by trying to change it, as when a woman feels unable to leave a violent or abusive relationship with a man because she is dependent on him economically, even when doing so reproduces her economic insecurity in the longer term. Similarly, a woman in a position of political power may decide not to champion gender-based discrimination in law or policy because her material and political security depend on the continuing patronage of her male party leaders.

2 The political settlement arises from contestation and negotiation, and as such may evolve as the balance of power between competing interest groups shifts. Such processes occur with varying levels of conflict or piecemeal reform, and result in varying levels of inclusiveness, including from a gender perspective. See Khan (2010) and Dijohn and Putzel (2009) for further discussion of political settlements.

3 Recent innovative research is delving into the political dynamics of contestation and negotiation of political settlements through the lens of struggles to advance gender equality and women's empowerment (Nazneen and Mahmud, 2012).

#### Box 4: Power and women's empowerment

Power is at the centre of empowerment, both semantically and in practical terms. Yet power is itself a contested concept. Jo Rowlands (1997: 13) described four types of power, each with implications for women's empowerment and their ability to advance personal and structural change.

1. **Power over** – the ability to control others. Changes in the distribution of power (e.g. when women gain power over men) are usually met with resistance and can result in new forms of domination and injustice.
2. **Power to** – the ability to exercise choice and change external conditions. Increasing women's individual capabilities is necessary if they are to contest and change power hierarchies (i.e. alter others' power over them).
3. **Power with** – the power that comes from collective action. Collective action increases women's solidarity and their ability to contest and change power structures.
4. **Power within** – increased critical consciousness and self-respect. A women's awareness of socially constructed identities and hierarchies, and her acceptance of herself and others as equals, are the basis of her desire for personal and structural change.

Source: Adapted from Luttrell and Quiroz (2009) and Rowlands (1997).

## 2. Empowerment, but of whom and for what?

### 2.1 Early thinking on women's empowerment in development

Given the structural causes of lack of power of women and other subordinated groups, the radical origin of empowerment is perhaps not surprising. The idea of empowerment emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s from the field of social work and, in particular, Paolo Freire's advocacy of popular education to enable oppressed groups to develop critical consciousness (Freire, 1968).<sup>4</sup> Empowerment as both a term and a political agenda was rapidly adopted in radical discourse and attached to various emancipatory projects. Feminists in the United States and elsewhere used empowerment to describe women's communal reflection on the nature and causes of their oppression, immortalised in the phrase 'the personal is political', and their collective action to challenge patriarchal structures (Hanisch, 1970; Krollokke and Sorensen, 2006). Proponents of empowerment also included development scholars advocating for endogenous, grassroots approaches to development, a strand of thought reactivated by Friedmann (1992).

Ideas about empowerment remained on the margins of international development until the late 1980s, when Southern feminist movements used it to critique 'women and development' approaches. They argued that rather than the lack of integration of women in development processes, or even women's integration on unequal terms to men, the fundamental and broader issue to be addressed was the subordination and exclusion of women on the basis of sex and other characteristics in society. Further, they contended that structural transformation of unjust power relations would happen only through the formation of women's grassroots organisations and their public education and mobilisation activities.

By the late 1990s, ideas about empowerment had entered mainstream development thinking. The 1995 Platform of Action mainstreamed gender equality and women's empowerment and, in the World Bank's World Development Report 2000/2001 *Attacking Poverty*, empowerment was one of three pillars (with opportunity and security) in tackling poverty (Calvès, 2009).

By then, the main development agencies had policies on gender equality and women's empowerment, often involving commitments to gender mainstreaming. Women's civic and political organisations in particular have been a consistent recipient of donor funding and technical assistance – not least because gender specialists have rightly seen women's organisations as central to women's *collective* agency and ability to contest patriarchy and advance gender equality at community, national and international levels (Molyneux, 2007; Htun and Weldon, 2012, 2013). At the same time, in the social and economic programmes on which most development assistance is focused, such as education, health, social protection and microcredit programmes, empowerment has tended to be interpreted in a more individualistic and instrumental fashion. The emphasis has often been on improving access to assets and opportunities for *individual* women and men to enable them to make informed choices about their own needs and interests and to improve their personal circumstances (Eyben and Napier-Moore, 2009).

### 2.2 Empowerment has intrinsic and instrumental worth

Although there is a consensus that women's empowerment is both an end in itself and a means to other social and economic objectives (Cornwall and Edwards, 2014; Eyben, 2008), there are differences in the relative emphasis placed on the intrinsic or instrumental value of empowerment, and in what it is regarded as instrumental. Feminists stress the intrinsic value of women's empowerment and

<sup>4</sup> Although Freire does not explicitly use the term empowerment in this early work (Rowlands, 1997).

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its fundamental contribution to the collective political struggle for gender equality and other forms of social justice (Cornwall, 2014). But, in the world of development aid, gender advocates have often made a strategic choice to argue for the positive contribution of empowerment to economic growth and poverty reduction, with a view to engaging non-gender specialists who otherwise would pay little attention to addressing gender-based inequalities.

While often recognising the reasons for this approach, feminist commentators have made a robust critique of such efforts to sneak empowerment into mainstream development as a ‘Trojan horse’ garbed in efficiency and growth, claiming that this has stripped it of its political and emancipatory potential (Cornwall and Anyidoho, 2010; Cornwall and Brock, 2005; Batliwala, 2007). They make two main arguments. First, that empowerment has been hijacked by a neo-liberal economic agenda, resulting in a particular form of women’s empowerment that privileges individualism, women’s access to material and financial assets and their participation in the labour market – in ‘women working for development, rather than development working for women’ (Eyben and Napier-Moore, 2009; Chant and Sweetman, 2012). Not only can adverse incorporation into markets constrain women’s power and choices, but also a narrow focus on individualism and economic empowerment can undermine women’s collective empowerment and their ability to reflect critically on the nature of unjust social and economic relations and institutions and act to change them.

Second, and related to this, while donor policies and programmes on empowerment invariably refer to women’s *agency*, either directly or indirectly – using words such as autonomy, choice, control or capacity to act (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005) – critics argue that there has been a neglect in mainstream development of the need to reflect on and address the *structural* causes of women’s lack of power, and that this limits the effectiveness of donor assistance and women’s empowerment (Cornwall and Edwards, 2014).

In fact, these different framings of empowerment – individual agency and changes in personal capabilities and circumstances, on the one hand, and collective empowerment and structural change, on the other – are not contradictory. Both are valid objectives and also necessary for women’s empowerment to take place. For example, women can challenge and reshape discriminatory structures and institutions only through acting together, but in order to participate in collective action they need to have some level of individual choice and power (at the very least to enable them to leave the home and participate in public spaces). The real problem arises when one objective is prioritised to the exclusion of others, or when empowerment is conceptualised as a finite state rather than a continuing process of personal and collective transformation.

### 2.3 Empowerment is a process, not an end-state

As early as 1999, Naila Kabeer conceptualised women’s empowerment as the *process by which women gain the ability to make and enact strategic life choices*, such as choice of spouse or decisions about education and employment. Kabeer argues that women’s ability to choose has three inter-related elements: access to **resources**, their ability to use these to define and act on goals or choices (i.e. **agency**), and the **achievements** that result from these actions. Referencing Amartya Sen, Kabeer argues that resources plus agency can be thought of as women’s capabilities, and achievements as realised capabilities (see also Nussbaum, 1995).

In this view, *women are the agents of their empowerment* and empowerment is about the pathways through which women acquire power and meaningful alternatives (‘the ability to have chosen otherwise’) (Kabeer, 1999; Pathways, 2011).<sup>5</sup> Empowerment is therefore not something that can be done for or to women, or indeed for or to anyone. Empowerment requires changes in power and the power structures and relations that deny women choice in different spheres of their lives (Batliwala, 2008; Petesch et al., 2005; Oppenheim Mason, 2005). Crucially, empowerment also involves women’s *active* involvement and subjective assessment of whether they have more power and choice (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005) (see Figure 1, overleaf).

## 3. Drivers of progress on women’s empowerment

What types of structural, institutional and personal changes are needed to enable women – or more accurately different groups of women – to have access to the necessary resources to take informed choices and action? In other words, what are the drivers of progress on women’s empowerment?

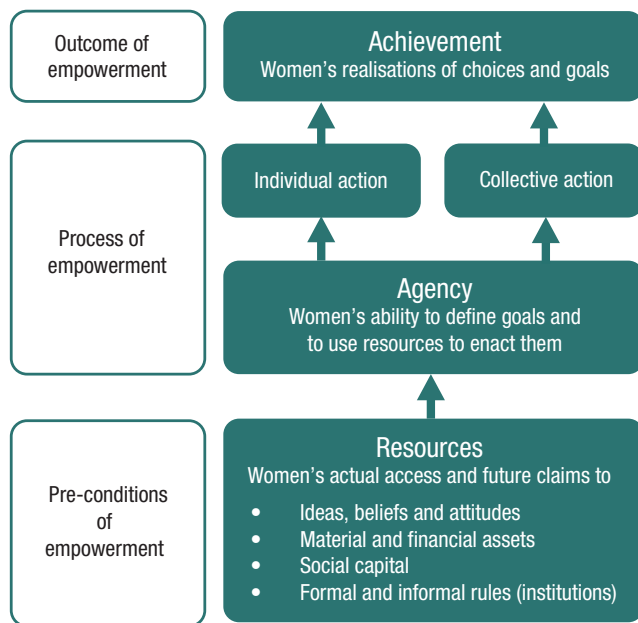
Indian scholar and activist Srilatha Batliwala (2008, citing Batliwala, 1992) identifies three aspects of existing power structures that women and men must challenge and change at the individual, community and systemic levels in order to achieve sustained changes in gender and other power hierarchies. These are:

- **Ideas** – changing the ideologies (beliefs, attitudes and practices) that justify and sustain inequality and uphold social hierarchies.
- **Resources** – changing the way that material, financial, human and intellectual resources are distributed and controlled.

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<sup>5</sup> A core group of IDS-affiliated scholar-practitioners have been pivotal to the conceptual and theoretical development and empirical study of women’s empowerment and development, notably Andrea Cornwall, Ros Eyben and Naila Kabeer. Most recently, IDS has hosted a long-term research programme, Pathways of Women’s Empowerment, which conceptualises empowerment as a journey not a destination (Pathways, 2011). This work in turn builds on that of other feminist activists and scholars working on development issues, including founder members of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), Peggy Antrobus, Devaki Jain and Gita Sen, and others such as Sonia Alvarez, Srilatha Batliwala, Maxine Molyneux, Caroline Moser and Jo Rowlands.

**Figure 1: Women's empowerment as process: a schematic**



Source: adapted from Kabeer (1999) and Batliwala (1992).

- **Institutions and systems** – changing the institutions (family, community, state, market, law, etc.) that reproduce unequal power relations.

Building on Kabeer's and Batliwala's frameworks, we identify five main categories of enabling conditions that the literature suggests have in practice been critical to women gaining more power and choice. Some factors relate to the broader context in which opportunities have arisen for women to gain access to new resources and to use these to challenge gender and other social power relations – such as conflict and regime change, state-building processes, or changes in the international arena (see sub-sections 3.1 and 3.5). Other factors are about women's access to particular types of resources that have been important for women's empowerment, such as legal rights, employment, education or health services (see sub-sections 3.2 and 3.3). Finally, women's organisations have been the central mechanism for processes of women's individual awakening and collective empowerment, enabling them to challenge and change gender hierarchies and, critically, to sustain progress (sub-section 3.4). A cross-cutting theme is how new ideas about gender, associated power relations and women's rights emerge in a society and come to be incorporated into dominant belief and value systems. These factors are not exhaustive but provide a starting point for unpacking and analysing processes of women's empowerment.

### 3.1 Regime change and post-conflict state-building

Social and political history shapes gender and other power relations. Opportunities for empowerment for particular groups therefore need to be reviewed in light of concrete socio-political contexts. Observing how elite bargains evolve and are contested over time provides insights into the interest structures and social norms that shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion and opportunities for political change – more broadly and in relation to relations between women and men. Historically, political organisations and control over and distribution of resources and power have typically been gendered, and specifically biased in men's favour. This discrimination has existed in terms of legal, socio-normative and actual access to power, resources and decision-making roles. The resulting exclusion of women can be relative or absolute, depending on the country, locality and individual characteristics. Therefore, the question is: what changes in socio-political, economic or socio-cultural conditions have enabled women and their allies to persuade or force governing elites to alter the terms of the bargain in ways that are more favourable to women's access to, and influence over, resources (material, political, social) and decision-making?

Institutional reform tends to be gradual (see sub-section 3.2 below on legal reform), although periods of social and political upheaval, such as war, revolution and/or democratic transitions, can also lead to significant redrawing of institutions, particularly formal, and related political settlements. In recent times, these critical junctures, such as post-conflict peace processes and constitutional reform processes, have sometimes been significant opportunities for women's empowerment, acting as a spur to psychological, social and political change (Castillejo, 2011). Causal links are inevitably hard to establish, but some attempts have been made to do so. For instance, a baseline survey by Aili Mari Tripp (2012) found that in post-conflict countries in Africa women have almost doubled their representation in the legislature, in contrast to countries that have not gone through recent conflict.

A number of possible change processes explain why conflict and upheaval might act as a spur to women gaining power in some aspects of their lives. First, women may be exposed to new ideas and social arrangements during war or conflict, which can challenge their own social norms and structures and contribute to a critical awareness of gender hierarchies. This exposure can be direct, as when women take on traditionally male roles to fill the void left by male combatants, or indirect, as when they come into contact with migrants who have customs or experiences that are different to their own (Justino et al., 2012; Wood, 2008).

Second, women's activities during conflict *can* increase their relative bargaining power vis-à-vis men or dominant groups (upper classes, etc.) during peace negotiations and in the post-conflict period. Women's contributions to war or peace efforts, both their productive roles during war (such as that played by European women in both World Wars) and their participation in resistance or peace

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movements (as in countries such as Colombia, El Salvador, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Viet Nam) can lead to change in men's perceptions of women's roles and potential. This should not be exaggerated, however: gender hierarchies are resilient and tend to reassert themselves in post-conflict periods, as was the case in, for instance, France and the United Kingdom after the Second World War, post-war Nicaragua and, more recently, South Sudan.

New (usually male) elites in post-independence or post-authoritarian regimes may also have an interest in demonstrating their democratic credentials by guaranteeing women's rights and, in some cases, authoritarian leaders (such as in some countries in the Middle East region) have used formal progress on women's rights as a way of deflecting international criticism on broader human rights issues. Legal discrimination against women is usually more intractable where religious elites are powerful, either because they reflect the beliefs of the majority and/or because secular governments rely on them to maintain power. Even in these countries, however, international allies can bolster women's bargaining position and advocate (or insist) that women's rights be included in formal peace agreements and new constitutions.

Nevertheless, despite progress, women still have limited access to post-conflict peace or constitutional reform processes and little entry into the closed-door political negotiations that precede peace agreements. This is an area where external actors can make a difference by lobbying to ensure a place for women in peace negotiations – such as happened in Kenya following post-electoral violence in 2007-2008. One study finds, for instance, that there have been more references to women in peace agreements since UNSCR 1325, but that the substantive participation of women in peace processes remains limited (Bell and O'Rourke, 2010; see also UN Women, 2012).

### 3.2 Legal reform and institutional change

Constitutions and laws establish the formal rules of the game about how a society allocates and uses power and resources. They are therefore important determinants of women's access to power and resources. Legal and institutional reform can involve incremental changes to existing laws or, as discussed above, more foundational processes of constitutional reform.

New constitutions that advance civil and political rights, including equality and women's rights, are often the most tangible markers of post-conflict or democratic transitions, whether violent or peaceful. At the same time, the sudden and transformative nature of large-scale legal reform means that dominant social norms and political culture may not match or support new formal entitlements and political rules of the game. As a result, there is *always* a gulf

between women's rights on paper (*de jure*) and in practice (*de facto*) following significant constitutional/legal reform.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the legal and constitutional protection of women's rights remains an important political resource in women's empowerment. The redefinition of the *de jure* terms of the political settlement provides new openings for women and their allies to win incremental gains that can, over time, give substance to formal access to resources and bring about *de facto* changes in power relations over the longer term (UN Women, 2011).

Since the earliest modern feminist movements, legal reform has been a popular, if sometimes contentious, vehicle for women's empowerment. Women still face formal discrimination in many countries, particularly in relation to family and personal status in plural legal systems, where customary and religious law continue to dominate in these areas. But, as a result of incremental legal reform since the 1970s in Europe and North America, and over the past two decades in many countries in the South, there has also been substantial progress in extending the statutory recognition of women's rights (UN Women, 2011). Employment law and women's political rights, including affirmative action to increase the representation of women in public life, are two such areas, but there have also been important gains for women in more socially controversial areas that have been traditionally viewed as private matters, such as family law, land and inheritance rights and violence against women.<sup>7</sup>

As noted by the Pathways of Women's Empowerment research programme (2011), however, laws and policies that affirm women's rights and open potential pathways for women's empowerment are not in themselves sufficient to change women's lives. Real change depends on other social and economic structures, such as access to welfare and other basic services, economic markets, socio-cultural norms and the quality of civic society. Follow-up policies and regulatory reforms help to give substance to legal change and increase women's access to new economic and social rights and resources. Ensuring that women are in practice able to access and use new legal rights also requires longer-term processes of socialisation and transformation of wider social norms. This means that women and their allies need concrete strategies to negotiate and support change in the informal rules of the game that perpetuate gender inequalities, such as constructive engagement with male political or community leaders and heads of household that are potential sources of resistance to changing norms (Sieder and Sierra, 2010).

### 3.3 Social and economic policy and the reallocation of resources

Women's improved access to education, health care and employment or livelihoods are frequently found to facilitate women's empowerment (Pathways, 2011).

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<sup>6</sup> The process of drawing up a constitution, in particular how far it is inclusive and consultative, influences the extent to which different groups identify with it.

<sup>7</sup> For example, 173 countries now provide paid maternity leave, 117 have equal pay laws and 125 have outlawed domestic violence (UN Women, 2011).

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For instance, there is evidence to support the claim that education facilitates changes in cognitive ability and that this, in turn, supports women and girls' critical awareness and their ability to question and reflect on their lives (Kabeer, 2010). Compared with their less educated peers, educated women are likely to participate in a wider range of decision-making processes, at the household level and in the community, and to deal more with the outside world, including engaging with public officials and service providers (Sen, 1999; Schuler et al. 1996).

Access to assets, livelihoods and employment covers a broad range of experiences. Women's capacity to engage in, and benefit from, economic activities can be a spur for change. This can be empowering, for instance, by providing women with resources under their direct control and/or with a legitimate reason to interact with others outside the family. It can also enable women to renegotiate the balance of power within their family (including the conjugal contract) and to change their self-worth and capabilities. Some studies have established a correlation between the long-term reduction in domestic violence and an increase in women's assets (cited in Kabeer, 2010).

Empirical studies also show that microcredit programmes can empower women. Loans appear to have been especially effective when they have helped women to consolidate existing income-generating activities. Moreover, long-term membership of microfinance organisations seems to result in improved access to other resources and greater likelihood of political participation (Schuler et al., 1996; Kabeer, 2010). Evidence also shows that access to the labour market can increase women's capacity to take autonomous decisions in the household, and also to have wider social and political engagement and be involved in collective action. Access to land and property ownership correlates with the capacity for autonomy in decision-making and improved wellbeing (Quisumbing and Maluccio, 2003). In addition, changes in the law and normative frameworks to enable women to inherit assets can be an important means to enhance women's access to property (Cooper and Bird, 2012).

At the same time, other studies suggest that the empowerment potential of livelihood-related programmes is mixed. Some studies of microcredit programmes find that they had no effect on women's bargaining power in the household or on women's health status (Taylor and Perezniato, 2014). Indeed, some have found that they contributed to reaffirming traditional gender roles and gender-based violence (Molyneux, 2007). Similarly, the Pathways (2011) research finds that whether access to education or employment empowers women depends heavily on their interaction with other social and economic conditions and therefore varies across time and place.<sup>8</sup> For example, the empowerment potential of employment is highly contingent on the type of work,

whether it is outside the home, temporary or long-term, and in the public or private sector. Kabeer (2000) found in her research on Bangladeshi textile workers, for instance, that a stable factory job in Bangladesh was far more empowering than domestic piece-rate work in East London. Thus, individual capabilities and experiences, such as in health and education, can improve but do not determine women's opportunities and choices (Kabeer, 1998; Malhotra et al., 2003).

The need for enabling social institutions, norms and relations, as well as formal entitlements and services, reinforces the earlier point that there are limits to women's empowerment without structural changes. Women's collective action at community and national levels is critical to this process of challenging and reshaping gender stereotypes and hierarchies. Given this, it is important to take account of studies that indicate that, while some women may have more choice as a result of education and higher incomes, this *individual* empowerment does not in itself translate into women's *collective empowerment* (Kabeer, 2013; Malhotra and Schuler, 2005). Rather, differences in terms of their class, income level and/or literacy are important, and such heterogeneity can militate against solidarity among women.

### 3.4 Women's organisations and movements

Women's movements and organisations play a critical role in women's collective organisation, reflection and action. The Pathways of Women's Empowerment research programme found that 'organising is a major route to change and a key pathway of empowerment. Women's organisations and movements are vital in building constituencies for gender justice' (Pathways, 2011: 9). There is evidence that women's movements have been the key factor in both driving and ensuring the implementation of women's rights and sustaining changes in gender norms and relations. Organising – whether through community associations or larger movements – contributes to women's empowerment in at least four ways.

First, in all countries, women coming together to share and reflect on their common experiences, which are often practical ones initially, has been pivotal to their development of critical consciousness about unjust social structures and to the redefinition of their identities (Molyneux, 2003). This is critical because the psychological dimension of women's empowerment, the 'power within' (see Box 4 above), is the cornerstone of other dimensions. Women (and other subaltern groups) have usually internalised their subordinate status and face humiliation or abuse when they question it. To challenge oppression, women must be able to imagine alternative social arrangements and value themselves; they can also draw strength from being part of a common cause, which contributes to a sense of self-worth and agency.

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<sup>8</sup> A recent review of evaluations of economic empowerment programmes also found that integrated or mixed interventions were more likely to increase women's empowerment, for example programmes that included life skills and training as well as economic skills and services (Taylor and Perezniato, 2014). Also see Mayoux (2006).





Since the end of the civil war and the election of a female president, many Liberian girls have been encouraged to enrol in school. Photo: © UN/Christopher Herwig

Second, women’s social and political mobilisation has been a key factor in reshaping the terms of public debate on gender relations, achieving progressive legal and policy reform, and in putting pressure on, and working with allies in, government to ensure implementation (Tadros, 2011, 2014; Htun and Weldon, 2013). In rare cases, elite interests drive progressive legal and policy reform. More often, however, male elites use the law to protect their interests and resist changes to patriarchal status quo. Laws and policy that promote women’s interests and potentially challenge gender and other social structures are almost invariably the product of sustained advocacy on the part of gender activists and women’s movements (Htun and Weldon, 2012), and of their policy coalitions with male allies and ‘femocrats’ in government institutions (Nazneen and Mahmud, 2012).

Third, women’s organisations also contribute to the gradual reshaping of community, traditional-indigenous or religious law and other socio-cultural norms that shape women’s everyday experiences, capabilities and choices. For example, research in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Ecuador and Guatemala has found that women’s NGOs and indigenous groups working with traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms to change attitudes and counter power imbalances can improve justice outcomes for women (Golub, 2012; Sieder and Sierra, 2010).

Finally, women’s organisations can provide the space for women to gain leadership skills and act as a stepping-stone for them to take on leadership positions in politics and public life (Cornwall and Goetz, 2005), which they can

use to promote women’s rights. In FRIDE’s research on gender and state-building, women’s participation in civic organisations was found to be an important route into politics, an option not open to them through normal party channels (Castillejo, 2011). Women’s organisations need strong and politically astute leadership for collective action to be effective at the national level. For example, in the case of Morocco, it appears that a politically savvy group of women leaders was able to negotiate complex and shifting dynamics between the King and religious leaders, taking advantages of national and international opportunities as they emerged (Castillejo, 2014). In Liberia, women’s organisations formed during the civil war and peace process provided a platform for women to be selected as party candidates in the transitional parliamentary elections and to enter formal politics (Kellow, 2010).

### 3.5 International politics and new social norms

International factors, including developments in international law and assistance, have also been important contextual and enabling elements for progress on women’s empowerment globally and at the country level. The international human rights framework, beginning with the principles of equality and non-discrimination enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948) and translated into legally binding standards in the 1966 International Bill of Rights (the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), has been key. Women activists were able to use the

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UDHR and the United Nations machinery, in particular the Commission on the Status of Women, as a platform to lobby for and develop international law guaranteeing women's rights, culminating in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979.

State parties to CEDAW (currently 188) have a legal duty to uphold its standards and to report on progress periodically. While enforcement is a perennial problem in international law, CEDAW has legitimised women's struggles for equality and provided focus for both women's mobilisation and efforts to hold states accountable for the protection and promotion of women's rights. Along with the International Bill of Rights, it has also provided a focus for women's advocacy and action around the important United Nations conferences that have taken place since the 1990s, notably the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights (1993) ('women's rights are human rights'), the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) and the Millennium Declaration (2000) and the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 'to promote gender equality and empower women' (MDG3). As noted earlier, these conferences have had an important influence on the direction and content of international development assistance, and have helped to ensure that aid agencies fund gender-related programmes – in particular through support to women's organisations and to the health and education of women and girls.<sup>9</sup>

The international human rights framework has therefore provided a common set of standards and language for international diplomacy in multilateral and bilateral forums on women's and other rights. This includes critical moments, such as following international intervention in wars and other conflicts, when the international community can have significant influence on the nature of formal political settlements, as embodied by transitional constitutions, and guarantees for women's rights within them. UNSCR 1325 and associated resolutions set out a clear framework on this.

The transnational women's movement has been indispensable, both in pushing for changing norms at the international level and in providing technical, financial and moral support to women's struggles at the national and community levels – including to make effective use of emerging international norms. The importance of transnational mobilisation of this kind cannot be overstated (Antrobus, 2013). This includes providing support to national processes of empowerment and South–South exchange; using political leverage at the international level to cajole states into some degree of compliance with their international commitments; and

international lobbying and advocacy to push for legal change at the international and global levels.

At the same time, while international norms are important, women's empowerment, particularly for all women and on a sustained basis, depends on changes in socio-cultural norms and practices within national polities and communities. What is needed to change gender and other hierarchies that deny women power is a change in how men and women behave and, therefore, in how they think. New legal rights for women are important, but only to the degree that implementation becomes a feature of state–society relations and of how social actors interact in the civil and private spheres. Changing beliefs and attitudes about gender roles and relations is therefore vital. This is not only because people (administrators, police officers, lawyers, judges, etc.) implement laws and can block or subvert them, but also because laws require a large degree of self-enforcement and so the majority must accept their legitimacy. This is particularly the case when laws relate to behaviour in the private or domestic sphere (Domingo and O'Neil, 2014). As Batliwala (2014) noted in a recent interview, a new law is one of the easier things to achieve in any struggle for equality – the difficult part is changing how people think and behave. However, it also needs to be recognised that laws, public attitudes and levels of socio-economic development can mask unequal gender relations and the subordination of women. For example, a recent study reported shockingly high levels of violence against women in the European Union,<sup>10</sup> including in high-income countries such as the UK and Sweden (European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014).

While attitudinal shifts are not easy to observe, or to attribute to particular causal factors, important changes in how people perceive women's rights and gender relations have taken place over the past 50 years in many countries worldwide. In the same interview, Batliwala refers to the national outcry about the gang rape and fatal assault of a woman on a bus in Delhi in 2012, and the important shift in attitudes about violence against women in India that this reflects. The Pathways (2011) research found that women's organisations and collective action have played a pivotal role in women's ability to challenge and change their own and others' attitudes. They also discovered that television and other media have played a key role in expanding women's horizons and capabilities, particularly in countries such as Afghanistan and Bangladesh where many women are secluded and are subject to restrictions on their independent movement outside the home. The researchers concluded that cultural change is a critical but understudied aspect of women's empowerment.

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<sup>9</sup> Though this is also to recognise that donor attention and money can distort agendas of feminist activists and depoliticise their struggles. This effect is felt not only by feminist organisations, what Sonia Alvarez called the 'ngo-ization of the feminist movement' (Alvarez, 1998), but also more broadly – for example, see Bano (2012) on how aid flows to NGOs in Pakistan has undermined local capacity for collective action.

<sup>10</sup> A third of the 42,000 women interviewed for the study said they had experienced some form of gender-related physical or sexual violence since the age of 15.

### Box 5: Domains of empowerment

Empowerment is the process by which a person gains the ability to make strategic life choices. It can be individual or collective and can take place in different spheres of life, including:

- **Psychological empowerment** – when women come to believe that they should be able to make or influence decisions that affect them and gain the confidence to act on this.
- **Political empowerment** – when women gain the ability to influence the rules and norms that govern society and decisions about who gets what, when and how. This can be through public or private organisations and concern formal or informal (e.g. socio-cultural) rules/institutions, and at the household, community, sub-national and national levels.
- **Social empowerment** – when women gain the ability to make/influence decisions about their social interactions (e.g. mobility, association with others), reproduction, health and education.
- **Economic empowerment** – when women gain the ability to make/influence and act on decisions about their participation in labour markets, their share of unpaid work and in the allocation and use of their own/their household's assets.

Sources: Kabeer (1999); Luttrell et al. (2009); Eyben (2011).

## 4. Identifying and measuring progress on women's empowerment

The previous section looked at some of the conditions and mechanisms that enable women to gain access to new rights and resources, but how do we know whether women are actually being empowered in practice? How do we identify and assess progress?

That women can have more or less power and choice in different aspects of their life reinforces the fact that empowerment is a composite concept made up of psychological, social, economic and political dimensions (Eyben, 2011). Therefore, in order to observe and measure empowerment, it is first necessary to disaggregate the concept and practice of empowerment into its constituent aspects or spheres (see Box 5). It is also necessary to identify the different levels at which empowerment can take place. This is because different rules about the allocation and distribution of resources and power can operate at different levels of social interaction. Household, community and national (or systemic) levels of society are most often singled out; others might include the sub-national and international levels.<sup>11</sup>

In order to identify and assess progress on women's empowerment, it is important to be clear about what is being measured and what it means. Staying with Kabeer's (1999) conceptual framework, one way to assess women's empowerment is to collect data on women's access to the

different types of resources that are *potential* enablers of increased choice and power (the preconditions of empowerment). A second is to measure the achievements that women are likely to seek and so can signify women's *actual* exercise of meaningful choice (the outcomes of empowerment). A third is to collect data on how women are using different resources and whether these enable them to realise their goals (the process or agency element of empowerment).<sup>12</sup>

### 4.1 Indicators of women's empowerment

Quantitative indicators are most often used to measure women's access to resources and the potential outcomes of women's use of resources. Typical quantitative indicators of women's access to resources are the number of girls and women in education, literacy levels, patterns of property ownership, employment outside the home, restrictions on women's movement, gender-sensitive laws, membership of civic organisations and women's levels of self-confidence. Indicators of the outcomes of women's exercise of agency often include those such as control/influence over household decisions or assets, more equitable division of household tasks, increases in the number of women voting, in public office or in leadership positions, improvements in child or maternal mortality rates, increased use of contraception and lower fertility rates, levels of violence against women, or the number of favourable decisions for women in disputes involving land claims (see Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) for a detailed set of possible indicators).

<sup>11</sup> There are different ways in which the concept of empowerment can be disaggregated and operationalised. For example, Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) divide empowerment into three domains (state, market, society) and eight sub-domains (including justice, politics and service delivery; credit, labour and goods; and family and community), and three levels (local, intermediary and macro). The critical point is to recognise that it is a multi-dimensional concept and that it operates at different levels of social life.

<sup>12</sup> Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) suggest another possible way of operationalising and measuring women's empowerment, providing indicators for agency (resources), opportunity structure (formal and informal institutions) and what they term 'degrees of empowerment', comprising presence, use and effectiveness of choice.

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The particular research question, site and participants should guide the choice of indicators to measure women's empowerment. Appropriate indicators will depend on the domain and level of empowerment being examined. However, as socio-cultural norms are a key determinant of women's access to power, studies must collect data on social attitudes and behaviour at the community and wider social levels, as well as on women's individual characteristics and views, if they are to measure and properly understand women's empowerment (Taylor and Perezniето, 2014). Participatory methods, where those who are being studied are involved in identifying relevant indicators, can help to improve the internal validity of the indicators (ibid.; Strandberg, 2001), but they make comparison more difficult. The most appropriate data-collection methods will also depend on what is being measured, but common methods include using existing data sets (e.g. national household surveys, human development indicators, or the Polity IV dataset of political regime characteristics),<sup>13</sup> surveys, key informant interviews and focus group discussions (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005).

#### 4.2 Mixed methods are needed to assess women's empowerment

Quantitative indicators are useful for collecting data that is easy to communicate and can track changes over time in concrete ways, but the problems associated with using quantitative measures and methods in social research are well documented (e.g. Brady and Collier, 2004). Measures of progress may lend themselves to a variety of meanings and can be divorced from the social and political context, making the usefulness of the resulting data questionable. A high number of women legislators, for instance, will tell us little about the substance of women's political empowerment or access to decision-making roles unless we also know how women candidates are selected, the nature of the party system and the relative political weight of the legislative branch. Moreover, they do not indicate how representative these female legislators are of women in society.

As with other social and political phenomena, qualitative methods are crucial to capture the subjective, relational and process elements of empowerment. Quantitative measures of the women's access to resources and potential outcomes of empowerment can only ever be proxies of women's empowerment (Cornwall and Edwards, 2014). Qualitative data is needed to assess the interaction between women's actions and changes in their environment in different spheres of their lives, to test the robustness of assumptions about how proxy indicators, such as legal rights or increased income or land, relate to women's actual exercise of choice and the outcomes of such choices, and to understand why any changes do (or do not) come about. This includes understanding changes in norms, attitudes and behaviour (Taylor and Perezniето, 2014). Quantitative analysis can show patterns of relationships between different variables, such as women's access to

education, but qualitative research is needed to provide insight into causal mechanisms, such as how a woman's educational level improves the health of her children.

Qualitative data drawn from discussions with women or observing them in their own settings make it possible to say with more confidence whether what is being seen is women exercising their ability to choose and influence life decisions in practice. For example, to examine how women are using loans, such as whether they or male relatives have control over loans, rather than simply assuming that a greater number of women borrowers is an indicator of their empowerment (Goetz and Gupta, 1996). In addition, there needs to be an evident *expansion* in women's ability to make *strategic* life choices. That is, we need to know whether they have gained *more power* and whether this is in important areas of their lives. For example, Kabeer points out that women making decisions in or being able to control a sphere that was already regarded as a female domain is not evidence of empowerment. Malhorta and Schuler (2005) also signal that improvements in gender equality may arise from exogenous factors rather than women's agency.

Rich qualitative studies are therefore needed at all levels but, to date, they have been concentrated at the household or micro level, particularly in relation to health, education or finance (Malhorta and Schuler, 2005). There are few macro- or meso-level studies that trace processes to identify whether and how women have been empowered. This is in part because practical constraints make rich analysis more difficult to do beyond the household, and also because of methodological and theoretical challenges: at sub-national and national levels the relationship between women's decisions and actions is much more likely to be collective, the relationship between these and achievements more complex, and attribution much more difficult. Observing the process of empowerment is further complicated because women's actions and negotiations are often conducted in private, not just within the household but also through informal exchanges and practices in the public sphere. Women's exercise of power can also take many forms, including negotiation, bargaining, persuasion and subversion, and in some contexts may therefore be better thought of as influence over decisions rather than absolute control (Kabeer, 1999, 2001; Malhorta and Schuler, 2005).

### Conclusion: Enabling women's empowerment beyond Beijing+20

Women's empowerment is a multi-dimensional process that involves transforming ideas, norms, relationships and structures of resource and power allocation. In thinking about the pathways to women's empowerment in practice, it is important to avoid unfounded generalisations within or across locations, groups of women or dimensions of empowerment. Processes of empowerment occur in

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<sup>13</sup> However, the lack of relevant data, particularly disaggregated and longitudinal, is a problem (Malhorta and Schuler, 2005).

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concrete political, economic and social settings in which women face violence, domination and the exercise of other forms of discriminatory power (Hossain, 2012; Molyneux, 2007). These structures are subject to change through individual and collective action by women (and men), but gender hierarchies are remarkably resilient, and resistance takes many forms – including inside donor organisations (Eyben, 2011; Moser and Moser, 2005). Progress is never linear, assured or free from setbacks. But progress on women’s empowerment can be, and has been, made in most countries around the world.

While it is the people living in particular communities and societies that drive and sustain changes to patriarchal and other exclusionary social norms, international ideas, assistance and solidarity are an important part of the story of progress on women’s empowerment. In 2015 it will be 20 years since the Beijing Platform for Action, and United Nations conferences and reviews by member states to assess actions and progress towards meeting the goals it set out are already underway. The anniversary is also an opportunity for donors to take stock of their own efforts to support women’s empowerment. In doing so, they can build on lessons learned from gender policy and programming (e.g. Bryon and Örnemark, 2010; Domingo et al., 2013 and 2014; Eyben, 2008; Johnston, 2005; Waterhouse and Neville, 2005). They can also draw on wider discussions about how international actors can best support processes of structural and institutional change in developing countries – including by managing their own internal incentives so as to provide assistance in ways more appropriate to this task (e.g. Booth and Unsworth, 2014; Eyben, 2010; Eyben and Turquet, 2014).

Paramount here is the growing acceptance in development circles that institutional change – formal or informal – is first and foremost political and therefore about interests and power. In a compelling guide for international support for women’s empowerment, Eyben (2011) highlights the critical importance of working with specific political economy conditions of context in order to identify real obstacles and plausible opportunities for supporting locally driven change processes. Drawing on this and other findings from the literature, some key recurrent lessons echo what is increasingly termed ‘politically informed’ ways of working in development discourse (Rocha Menocal, 2014). That is, knowing what to support in order to enhance

the transformative potential of international efforts to contribute to women’s empowerment. The articulation of these efforts in ways that maximise effectiveness and relevance requires a deep understanding of the local political economy and the gendered features of social, political and economic engagement.

Therefore, support needs first and foremost to focus on contributing to locally driven processes. Second, this can involve supporting local capabilities, including women’s organisational and logistical needs, their associative capacity, and their political skills for negotiation and strategic coalition building (individually and collectively). Third, critically, heeding the demands of local women and *not* importing externally driven agendas and priorities will limit the scope for harmful unintended consequences. Fourth, working to maximise opportunities and cross-fertilisation across sectors can result in what Eyben (2011) terms the ‘multiplier empowerment effects’ of different programmes and initiatives. This means investing in understanding how different sectoral programmes (including where gender equality is not the primary objective) can reinforce the potential for women’s empowerment (or, conversely, undermine it).

Much of this is familiar – but we also know that international donors struggle to approach women’s empowerment support strategically (Moser and Moser, 2005). In part this reflects the unresolved tension in international agencies between embracing fully-fledged support to women’s empowerment as an intrinsically important goal – despite international commitments to do so – and the real pressure to make the instrumental case for women’s empowerment. But, in part, it is also the fact that donor organisations lack the organisational capacity, culture, skills, career incentives, accountability mechanisms or commitment to advancing women’s empowerment as a strategic objective *in practice*. Addressing the internal political economy constraints within donor organisations in relation to advancing gender equality, whether through mainstreaming or targeted actions, or a combination of both, remains an incomplete project. But it is a necessary one if aid agencies are to approach women’s empowerment as a political and transformational process rather than an instrumental and technical exercise.

**Women’s empowerment is a multi-dimensional process that involves transforming ideas, norms, relationships and structures of resource and power allocation... Progress is never linear, assured or free from setbacks. But progress on women’s empowerment can be, and has been, made in most countries around the world.**

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#### Acknowledgements

The authors are researchers in the Politics and  
Governance Team at the Overseas Development  
Institute. They would like to thank Kate Bird, Clare  
Castillejo and Rebecca Holmes for their extremely  
useful comments, and Deborah Eade for her  
excellent editing. Any opinions, errors or omissions  
are the authors’ own.