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# Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment

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## ABSTRACT

This paper begins from the understanding that women's empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability. A wide gap separates this processual understanding of empowerment from the more instrumentalist forms of advocacy which have required the measurement and quantification of empowerment. The ability to exercise choice incorporates three inter-related dimensions: resources (defined broadly to include not only access, but also future claims, to both material and human and social resources); agency (including processes of decision making, as well as less measurable manifestations of agency such as negotiation, deception and manipulation); and achievements (well-being outcomes). A number of studies of women's empowerment are analysed to make some important methodological points about the measurement of empowerment. The paper argues that these three dimensions of choice are indivisible in determining the meaning of an indicator and hence its validity as a measure of empowerment. The notion of choice is further qualified by referring to the conditions of choice, its content and consequences. These qualifications represent an attempt to incorporate the structural parameters of individual choice in the analysis of women's empowerment.

## CONCEPTUALIZING EMPOWERMENT

### Introduction

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

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Consequently, as long as women's empowerment was argued for as an end in itself, it tended to be heard as a 'zero-sum' game with politically weak winners and powerful losers. By contrast, instrumentalist forms of advocacy which combine the argument for gender equality/women's empowerment with demonstrations of a broad set of desirable multiplier effects offer policy makers the possibility of achieving familiar and approved goals, albeit by unfamiliar means.

However, the success of instrumentalism has also had costs. It has required the translation of feminist insights into the discourse of policy, a process in which some of the original political edge of feminism has been lost. Quantification is one aspect of this process of translation. Measurement is, of course, a major preoccupation in the policy domain, reflecting a justifiable concern with the cost/benefit calculus of competing claims for scarce resources. And given that the very idea of women's empowerment epitomizes for many policy makers the unwarranted intrusion of metaphysical concepts into the concrete and practical world of development policy, quantifying empowerment appears to put the concept on more solid and objectively verifiable grounds. There has consequently been a proliferation of studies attempting to measure empowerment, some seeking to facilitate comparisons between locations or over time, some to demonstrate the impact of specific interventions on women's empowerment, and others to demonstrate the implications of women's empowerment for desired policy objectives.

However, not everyone accepts that empowerment can be clearly *defined*, let alone *measured*. For many feminists, the value of the concept lies precisely in its 'fuzziness'. As an NGO activist cited in Batliwala (1993: 48) puts it: 'I like the term empowerment because no one has defined it clearly yet; so it gives us a breathing space to work it out in action terms before we have to pin ourselves down to what it means'. A critical analysis of attempts to measure women's empowerment thus provides a useful standpoint from which to assess both the narrower implications of attempting to measure what is not easily measurable as well as the broader implications of replacing intrinsic arguments for feminist goals with instrumentalist ones. However, given the contested nature of the concept, it is important to clarify at the outset how we will be using it in this paper, since it will be from this standpoint that various measurement attempts will be evaluated. This makes up the rest of this section. In subsequent sections, I will be reviewing various measures of women's empowerment, the extent to which they mean what they are intended to mean, the values they embody and the appropriateness of these values in capturing the idea of empowerment.

### **Conceptualizing Empowerment: Resources, Agency and Achievements**

One way of thinking about power is in terms of the *ability to make choices*: to be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choice. My understanding

of the notion of empowerment is that it is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability. In other words, empowerment entails a *process of change*. People who exercise a great deal of choice in their lives may be very *powerful*, but they are not *empowered* in the sense in which I am using the word, because they were never disempowered in the first place.

However, to be made relevant to the analysis of power, the notion of choice has to be qualified in a number of ways. First of all, *choice necessarily implies the possibility of alternatives*, the ability to have chosen otherwise. There is a logical association between poverty and disempowerment because an insufficiency of the means for meeting one's basic needs often rules out the ability to exercise meaningful choice. However, even when survival imperatives are no longer dominant, there is still the problem that not all choices are equally relevant to the definition of power. Some choices have greater significance than others in terms of their consequences for people's lives. We therefore have to make a distinction between first- and second-order choices, where the former are those strategic life choices which are critical for people to live the lives they want (such as choice of livelihood, whether and who to marry, whether to have children, etc.). These strategic life choices help to frame other, second-order, less consequential choices, which may be important for the quality of one's life but do not constitute its defining parameters. Inasmuch as our notion of empowerment is about change, it refers to the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.

The ability to exercise choice can be thought of in terms of three inter-related dimensions:

<b>resources</b>	<b>agency</b>	<b>achievements</b>
(pre-conditions)	(process)	(outcomes)

Resources include not only material resources in the more conventional economic sense, but also the various human and social resources which serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice. Resources in this broader sense of the word are acquired through a multiplicity of social relationships conducted in the various institutional domains which make up a society (such as family, market, community). Such resources may take the form of actual allocations as well as of future claims and expectations. Access to such resources will reflect the rules and norms which govern distribution and exchange in different institutional arenas. These rules and norms give certain actors authority over others in determining the principles of distribution and exchange so that the distribution of 'allocative' resources tends to be embedded within the distribution of 'authoritative resources' (Giddens, 1979) — the ability to define priorities and enforce claims. Heads of households, chiefs of tribes or élites within a community are all endowed

with decision-making authority within particular institutional contexts by virtue of their positioning within those institutions.

The second dimension of power relates to *agency* — the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their *sense* of agency, or 'the power within'. While agency tends to be operationalized as 'decision-making' in the social science literature, it can take a number of other forms. It can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. It can be exercised by individuals as well as by collectivities.

Agency has both positive and negative meanings in relation to power.<sup>1</sup> In the positive sense of the 'power to', it refers to people's capacity to define their own life-choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others. Agency can also be exercised in the more negative sense of 'power over', in other words, the capacity of an actor or category of actors to override the agency of others, for instance, through the use of violence, coercion and threat. However, power can also operate in the absence of any explicit agency. The norms and rules governing social behaviour tend to ensure that certain outcomes are reproduced without any apparent exercise of agency. Where these outcomes bear on the strategic life choices noted earlier, they testify to the exercise of power as 'non-decision-making' (Lukes, 1974). The norms of marriage in South Asia, for instance, invest parents with the authority for choosing their children's partners, but are unlikely to be experienced as a form of power, unless such authority is questioned.

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

### **Qualifying Choice: Difference versus Inequality**

However, a concern with 'achievements' in the measurement of empowerment draws attention to the need for further qualifications to our

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1. My use of the concepts of positive and negative agency echoes the distinction between positive and negative freedom made by Amartya Sen (1985a: 208).

understanding of choice. As far as empowerment is concerned, we are interested in possible *inequalities* in people's capacity to make choices rather than in *differences* in the choices they make. An observed lack of uniformity in functioning achievements cannot be automatically interpreted as evidence of inequality because it is highly unlikely that all members of a given society will give equal value to different possible ways of 'being and doing'. Consequently, where gender differentials in functioning achievements exist, we have to disentangle differentials which reflect differences in preferences from those which embody a denial of choice.

One way of getting around the problem for measurement purposes would be to focus on certain universally-valued functionings, those which relate to the basic fundamentals of survival and well-being, regardless of context. For instance, it is generally agreed that proper nourishment, good health and adequate shelter all constitute primary functionings which tend to be universally valued. If there are systematic gender differences in these very basic functioning achievements, they can be taken as evidence of inequalities in underlying capabilities rather than differences in preferences. This, for instance, is the strategy adopted by Sen (1990). However, focusing on basic needs achievements addresses one aspect of the problem but raises others.

Inequalities in basic functionings generally tend to occur in situations of extreme scarcity. Confining the analysis of gender inequality to these achievements alone serves to convey the impression that women's disempowerment is largely a matter of poverty. This is misleading for two reasons.

On the one hand, it misses forms of gender disadvantage which are more likely to characterize better-off sections of society. Prosperity within a society may help to reduce gender inequalities in basic well-being, but intensify other social restrictions on women's ability to make choices (Razavi, 1992). On the other hand, it misses out on those dimensions of gender disadvantage among the poor which do not take the form of basic functioning failures. For instance, marked gender differentials in life-expectancy and children's nutrition — two widely used indicators of gender discrimination in basic well-being — do not appear to be as widespread in sub-Saharan Africa as they are in South Asia. However, this does not rule out the possibility that gender disadvantage can take other forms in these contexts. Shaffer (1998), for instance, found little evidence of income or consumption disadvantage between male- and female-headed households in Guinea. However, both men and women in his study recognized women's far heavier workloads as well as male domination in private and public decision-making as manifestations of gender inequality within their community.

A second way out of the problem might be to go beyond the concern with basic survival-related achievements to certain other functioning achievements which would be considered to be of value in most contexts. This is the strategy adopted in the UNDP's gender-disaggregated Human Development Index as well as its Gender Empowerment (GEM) index (UNDP, 1995). Such

measures play a useful role in monitoring differences in achievements across regions and over time and in drawing attention to problematic disparities. However, while there are sound reasons for moving the measurement of achievements beyond very basic functionings, such as life-expectancy, to more complex achievements, such as political representation, we have to keep in mind that such measurements, quite apart from their empirical shortcomings, entail the movement away from the criteria of women's choices, or even the values of the communities in which they live, to a definition of 'achievement' which represents the values of those who are doing the measuring. We will return in a later section to the problems that external values can raise in the analysis of women's empowerment.

### **Qualifying Choice: 'Choosing not to Choose'**

The use of achievements to measure empowerment draws attention to a second problem of interpretation deriving from the central place given to choice in our definition of power. There is an intuitive plausibility to the equation between power and choice as long as what is chosen appears to contribute to the welfare of those making the choice. In situations where we find evidence of striking gender inequalities in basic well-being achievements, the equation between choice and power would suggest quite plausibly that such inequalities signal the operation of power: either as an absence of choice on the part of women as the subordinate group or as active discrimination by men as the dominant group. However, the equation between power and choice finds it far more difficult to accommodate forms of gender inequality when these appear to have been chosen by women themselves. This problem plays out in the literature on gender and well-being in the form of behaviour on the part of women which suggests that they have internalized their social status as persons of lesser value. Such behaviour can have adverse implications for their own well-being as well as for the well-being of other female family members. Women's acceptance of their secondary claims on household resources, their acquiescence to violence at the hands of their husbands, their willingness to bear children to the detriment of their own health and survival to satisfy their own or their husband's preference for sons, are all examples of behaviour by women which undermine their own well-being. It is worth noting, for instance, that in Shaffer's (1998) study from West Africa cited earlier, both women and men recognized the existence of gender inequalities in terms of women's heavier workloads and men's dominance in decision-making, but neither considered these inequalities *unjust*. In addition, women's adherence to social norms and practices associated with son preference, discrimination against daughters, the oppressive exercise of authority by mothers-in-law over their daughters-in-law (a problem often identified in the South Asian context), are examples of behaviour in which

women's internalization of their own lesser status in society leads them to discriminate against other females in that society.

While these forms of behaviour could be said to reflect 'choice', they are also choices which stem from, and serve to reinforce, women's subordinate status. They remind us that power relations are expressed not only through the exercise of agency and choice, but also through the *kinds* of choices people make. This notion of power is a controversial one because it allows for the possibility that power and dominance can operate through consent and complicity as well as through coercion and conflict. The vocabulary of 'false consciousness' is not a particularly useful one here, implying as it does the need to distinguish between false and authentic consciousness, between illusion and reality. The consciousness we are talking about is not 'false' as such since how people perceive their needs and interests is shaped by their individual histories and everyday realities, by the material and social contexts of their experiences and by the vantage point for reflexivity which this provides. In any situation, some needs and interests are self-evident, emerging out of the routine practices of daily life and differentiated by gender inasmuch as the responsibilities and routines of daily life are gender-differentiated. However, there are other needs and interests which do not have this self-evident nature because they derive from a 'deeper' level of reality, one which is not evident in daily life because it is inscribed in the taken-for-granted rules, norms and customs within which everyday life is conducted.

One way of conceptualizing this deeper reality is to be found in Bourdieu's (1977) idea of 'doxa' — the aspects of tradition and culture which are so taken-for-granted that they have become naturalized. Doxa refers to traditions and beliefs which exist beyond discourse or argumentation. The idea of doxa is helpful here because it shifts our attention away from the dichotomy between false and authentic consciousness to a concern with differing levels of reality and the practical and strategic interests to which they give rise. Bourdieu suggests that as long as the subjective assessments of social actors are largely congruent with the objectively organized possibilities available to them, the world of doxa remains intact. The passage from 'doxa' to discourse, a more critical consciousness, only becomes possible when *competing* ways of 'being and doing' become available as material and cultural possibilities, so that 'common sense' propositions of culture begin to lose their 'naturalized' character, revealing the underlying arbitrariness of the given social order.

The availability of alternatives at the discursive level, of being able to at least imagine the possibility of having chosen differently, is thus crucial to the emergence of a critical consciousness, the process by which people move from a position of unquestioning acceptance of the social order to a critical perspective on it. This has an obvious bearing on our earlier discussion about functioning achievements as an aspect of empowerment. As was pointed out, the possibility that power operates not only through constraints on people's

ability to make choices, but also through their preferences and values and hence the choices that they may make, appears to pose a serious challenge to the basic equation made in this paper between power and choice. However, it is possible to retain the equation by a further qualification to our notion of 'choice', extending the idea of alternatives to encompass discursive alternatives. In other words, in assessing whether or not an achievement embodies meaningful choice, we have to ask ourselves whether other choices were not only materially possible but whether they were *conceived* to be within the realms of possibility.<sup>2</sup>

### MEASURING EMPOWERMENT: THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

It is not possible to provide an exhaustive survey of various attempts to measure women's empowerment in this paper. I have confined myself to analysing a selected number of studies from the development studies literature in order to make some general methodological points about the measurement of empowerment. As we will see, there are some important differences in how these various studies deal with the idea of empowerment. They differ in the dimensions of empowerment which they choose to focus on, and in whether they treat power as an attribute of individuals or a property of structures. They also differ in how social change is conceptualized. What is understandably missing from the measurement literature are examples of the more processual model of social change subscribed to by many feminists (Batliwala, 1993, 1994). A processual understanding of social change tends to treat it as open-ended. It is premised on the unpredictability of human agency and on the diversity of circumstances under which such agency is exercised. While it may identify certain key elements of structure and agency as having a catalytic potential, it does not attempt to determine in advance how this catalytic effect will play out in practice. Consequently, it is a form of social change that tends to be least amenable to measurement.

#### Measuring 'Resources'

The 'resource' dimension of empowerment would appear at first sight to be the easiest to measure. However, a critical reading of attempts at measurement suggest that the task is less simple than it looks, even when

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



resources are defined in narrow material terms as they generally tend to be. There is a widespread tendency in the empowerment literature to talk about 'access to resources' in a generic way, as if indicating some relationship between women and resources automatically specifies the choices it makes possible. In reality, however, resources are at one remove from choice, a measure of *potential* rather than *actualized* choice. How changes in women's resources will translate into changes in the choices they are able to make will depend, in part, on other aspects of the conditions in which they are making their choices. By way of example, let us take women's 'access' to land.

At the systemic level, this is often captured by distinguishing between different categories of land rights with the assumption that women are likely to exercise a greater degree of autonomy in those regions where they enjoy some rights to land (Boserup, 1970; Dyson and Moore, 1983). Yet studies which use measures of women's access to land as an indicator of empowerment seldom reflect on the pathways by which such 'access' translates into agency and achievement, let alone seeking to understand these pathways empirically. It is noteworthy, for instance, that a causal connection is often made between patrilineal principles of descent and inheritance in the northern plains of the Indian sub-continent (compared to the south) and the low levels of female autonomy there. However, land inheritance rules are by no means uniform within this region. Among Hindus, joint family property is a central tenet shaping inheritance practices with some local variation in how this is interpreted. Joint family property is generally held in a coparcenary system by men, usually fathers and sons, to the total exclusion of women (Mukhopadhyay, 1998). Among Muslims, on the other hand, women have always enjoyed the right to inherit property and to inherit as individuals. Muslim women and men consequently enjoy individual, absolute but unequal rights to property: men tend to inherit twice the share of women. Hindu law has been reformed after Indian independence to give men and women equal rights of inheritance; Muslim inheritance principles have been left untouched.

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

Yet it is by no means evident that *de facto* ownership tells us all we need to know about the potential domain of choice. It has, for instance, been pointed

out that although Muslim women do waive their land rights to their brothers (and may be under considerable pressure to do so), they thereby strengthen their future claim on their brothers, should their marriage break down. While brothers have a duty under Islam to look after their sisters, the waiving of land rights by sisters in favour of brothers gives a material basis to a moral entitlement. The necessity for such an exchange may reflect women's subordinate status within the community but the fact that women's land rights are in principle recognized by their community gives them a resource to bargain with in a situation in which they have few other resources. Moreover, as the situation changes, they may begin to press their claims on such a resource. I found evidence of women beginning to claim their inheritance rights in rural Bangladesh, although sometimes under pressure from their husbands (Kabbeer, 1994), while Razavi (1992) also notes evidence from rural Iran of a greater willingness of women to press for their property rights in court, this time to compensate for their diminishing entitlements to common property resources which provided a subsistence base. These are potentials which are not easily available to women in communities where such rights were not recognized by customary law and tradition, even if they have, as in India, subsequently been brought into existence by legislative action. Indeed, Das Gupta (1987) has pointed out, in the context of her study of the Jat kinship system in Punjab, that there was no question of a woman owning land: 'If she should insist on her right to inherit land equally under civil law, she would stand a good chance of being murdered' (ibid: 92).

The main methodological point to take out of this discussion, therefore, is that if it is to be useful as a measure of empowerment, the 'resource' dimension has to be defined in ways which spell out the potential for human agency and valued achievements more clearly than simple 'access' indicators generally do. One of the limitations of *de facto* measures of land entitlements discussed here is that they ignore the diverse processes by which the *de facto* possession or dispossession occurs and hence fail to appreciate possible differences in women's choices implied by differences in the *de jure* position. In addition, the power of *customary* constructions of *de jure* rights over recently-introduced legal ones noted by these studies also raises a question about processes of social change which has yet to be satisfactorily answered in the empowerment literature: how do attempts to change deeply entrenched structures, in this case, pitting the law against rules legitimized by custom and religion, translate into changes in individual agency and choice?

The recognition by many analysts of the need to go beyond simple 'access' indicators in order to grasp how 'resources' translate into the realization of choice has led to a variety of concepts seeking to bridge the gap between formal and effective entitlement to resources, generally by introducing some aspect of agency into the measure. The most frequently used of these bridging concepts is that of 'control', usually operationalized in terms of having a say in relation to the resource in question. However, while the focus on 'control' is an important step forward in the measurement of empowerment, control

is not an easy measure to operationalize. Consequently, what we find in the literature is a tendency to use concepts such as access, ownership, entitlement and control interchangeably so that there is considerable semantic confusion about what 'control' actually means.

Sathar and Kazi (1997), for instance, equate both 'access' and 'control' with having a say in decisions related to particular resources within the household. Their measure of 'access to resources' is based on whether women had a say in household expenses, cash to spend on household expenses and freedom to purchase clothes, jewellery and gifts for their relatives, while 'control over resources' is measured by asking who kept household earnings and who had a say in household expenditure. In Jejeebhoy's (1997) analysis concepts of 'access', 'control' and 'decision-making' are all used in relation to resources, with 'control' sometimes referring to ownership and sometimes to decision-making. In Kishor's (1997) analysis, empowerment is defined as women's control over key aspects of their lives: here 'control' indicators vary between control defined in relation to resources, e.g. earnings and expenditures; control defined in terms of self reliance (can women support themselves without their husband's support); control as decision-making (who has the final say in making decisions about a variety of issues); and control as 'choice' (choosing own spouse or being consulted in the choice of marriage partner). In methodological terms, the point to make is that while 'control' is often used as a means of operationalizing empowerment for measurement purposes, it is as elusive to define and to measure as power, except in the purely formal and legalistic sense.

### Measuring 'Agency'

Indicators which focus explicitly on the measurement of agency include measures of both positive as well as negative agency: women's mobility in the public domain, their participation in public action, the incidence of male violence and so on. However, the form of agency which appears most frequently in measurement efforts, and hence the one we will be focusing on here, relates to *decision-making agency*. This is not surprising since decision-making in some form is at the heart of some of the best known attempts to conceptualize power (Lukes, 1974; McElroy, 1992). Measures of decision-making are usually based on responses to questions asking women about their roles in relation to specific decisions, with answers sometimes combined into a single index and sometimes presented separately. Below I have summarized some examples of decisions which typically appear in measurement efforts and the geographical context covered:

#### *Typical Decisions in Decision-making Indicators*

**Egypt:** Household budget, food cooked, visits, children's education, children's health, use of family planning methods (Kishor, 1997).

**India:** Purchase of food; purchase of major household goods; purchase of small items of jewellery; course of action if child falls ill; disciplining the child; decisions about children's education and type of school (Jejeebhoy, 1997).

**Nigeria:** Household purchases; whether wife works; how to spend husband's income; number of children to have; whether to buy and sell land; whether to use family planning; whether to send children to school, how much education; when sons and when daughters marry; whether to take sick children to doctor and how to rear children (Kritz, Makinwa and Gurak, 1997).

**Zimbabwe:** Wife working outside; making a major purchase; the number of children (Becker, 1997).

**Nepal:** What food to buy; the decision by women to work outside; major market transactions; and the number of children to have (Morgan and Niraula, 1995).

**Iran:** Food purchase; inputs, labour and sale in agricultural production and other income-earning activities; sale and purchase of assets; children's education; seeking health care for children (Razavi, 1992).

**Pakistan:** Purchase of food; number of children; schooling of children; children's marriage; major household purchases; women's work outside the home; sale and purchase of livestock; household expenses; purchase of clothes, jewellery and gifts for wife's relatives (Sathar and Kazi, 1997).

**Bangladesh:** Ability to make small and large consumer purchases; house repair; taking in livestock for raising; leasing in of land; purchase of major assets (Hashemi et al., 1996).

**Bangladesh:** Children's education; visits to friends and relatives; household purchases; health care matters (Cleland et al., 1994).

Even a preliminary reading of these different decisions suggests that they are not all equally persuasive as indicators of women's empowerment because not all have the same consequential significance for women's lives. Few cultures operate with starkly dichotomous distributions of power with men making all the decisions and women making none. More commonly we find a hierarchy of decision-making responsibilities recognized by the family and community, which reserves certain key areas of decision-making for men in their capacity as household heads while assigning others to women in their capacity as mothers, wives, daughters and so on. Broadly speaking, the evidence from studies on South Asia suggests that, within the family, the purchase of food and other items of household consumption and decisions related to children's health appear to fall within women's arena of decision-making while decisions related to the education and marriage of children, and market transactions in major assets tend to be more clearly male.

This is illustrated by Sathar and Kazi (1997). They found on the basis of data from Pakistan that the only area of decision-making in which women reported not only participating but playing a major decision-making role was in relation to the purchase of food. They participated, but did not have a major role, in decisions relating to numbers of children and their schooling and even less of a role when it came to children's marriage and major economic decisions.

In methodological terms, such distinctions suggest the need for greater care in selecting and quantifying the decisions which are to serve as indicators of empowerment, with attention given to consequential significance of

areas of decision-making or of different stages in the decision-making process. Evidence that women played a role in making decisions which were of little consequence or which were assigned to women anyway by the pre-existing gender division of roles and responsibilities, tell us far less about their power to choose than evidence on decisions which relate to strategic life choices or to choices which had been denied to them in the past.

We could also distinguish between various critical 'control points' within the decision-making process itself where such control is defined in terms of the consequential significance of influencing outcomes at these different points (Beneria and Roldan, 1987). Pahl (1989), for instance, distinguishes between the 'control' or policy-making function in making decisions about resource allocation and the 'management' function, decisions which pertain to implementation. This distinction might explain the finding by the Egyptian Male Survey in 1992 (cited in Ali, 1996) that men were dominant in the decision to adopt contraceptives — the policy decision — but tended to leave the choice of contraception largely to women (although Ali's qualitative study found men's continuing involvement in women's choice of contraceptives as well).

'Statistical' perspectives on decision-making, however, should be remembered for what they are: simple windows on complex realities. They may provide a brief glimpse of processes of decision-making, but they tell us very little about the subtle negotiations that go on between women and men in their private lives. Consequently, they may underestimate the informal decision-making agency which women often exercise. This can be illustrated by comparing Silberschmidt's (1992) account of formal and informal decision-making among the Kisii in Kenya. The formal account of decision-making given by women ascribed most of the power to men: the husbands were said to be 'heads' of households and their 'owners'; as an afterthought the wives might add, 'they can buy us just like cattle'. Their accounts of 'actual' decision-making, however, gave a very different picture:

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

The inability of a purely statistical approach to capture this informal aspect is not simply a measurement failure. It has conceptual implications. There is an important body of research from the South Asian context which suggests that the renegotiation of power relations, particularly within the family, is often precisely about changes in informal decision-making, with women

opting for private forms of empowerment, which retain intact the public image, and honour, of the traditional decision-maker but which nevertheless increases women's 'backstage' influence in decision-making processes (Basu, 1996; Chen, 1983; Kabeer, 1997). Such strategies reflect a certain degree of caution on the part of women — a strategic virtue in situations where they may have as much to lose from the disruption of social relationships as they have to gain.

### Measuring Achievement

As with the other dimensions of empowerment, the critical methodological point to be made in relation to achievement indicators relates once again to the need for analytical clarity in the selection of what is to be measured. I have already pointed out the need to make a distinction between achievement differentials which signal *differences* in choice and those which draw attention to *inequalities* in the ability to make choice. An examination of some of the studies which have included indicators of achievement in their analysis of women's empowerment will help to throw up other criteria for the selection of such indicators.

Kishor (1997) has used national Egyptian data to explore the effects of direct, as well as indirect, measures of women's empowerment on two valued functioning achievements: infant survival rates and infant immunization. These achievements were selected on the basis of her conceptualization of women's empowerment in terms of 'control' which she defined as their ability to 'access information, take decisions, and act in their own interests, or the interests of those who depend on them' (ibid: 1). Since women bore primary responsibility for children's health, Kishor hypothesized that their empowerment would be associated with positive achievements in terms of the health and survival of their children. Her analysis relied on three categories of composite indicators to measure empowerment: 'direct evidence of empowerment', 'sources of empowerment' and 'the setting for empowerment'. I have summarized these below, together with the variables which had greatest weight in each indicator:

#### (1) Direct evidence of empowerment

Devaluation of women: *reports of domestic violence; dowry paid at marriage.*

Women's emancipation: *belief in daughters' education; freedom of movement.*

Reported sharing of roles and decision-making: *egalitarian gender roles; egalitarian decision-making.*

Equality in marriage: *fewer grounds reported for justified divorce by husbands; equality of grounds reported for divorce by husband or wife.*

Financial autonomy: *currently controls her earnings; her earnings as share of household income.*

(2) Sources of empowerment

Participation in the modern sector: *index of assets owned; female education.*  
Lifetime exposure to employment: *worked before marriage; controlled earnings before marriage.*

(3) Setting indicators

Family structure amenable to empowerment: *does not now or previously live with in-laws.*

Marital advantage: *small age difference between spouses; chose husband.*

Traditional marriage: *large educational difference with husband; did not choose husband.*

The results of a multivariate analysis found that the indirect source/setting indicators of women's empowerment had far more influence in determining infant survival and immunization. There are two possible and mutually compatible explanations for this finding. One is that Kishor's direct indicators of empowerment did not in fact succeed in capturing empowerment particularly well. This is quite plausible given that many entailed highly value-laden information about attitudes and relationships within marriage (such as, the grounds on which women believed that a husband was justified in divorcing his wife; whether women should speak up if they disagreed with their husbands). However, other more factual direct indicators ('financial autonomy' and 'freedom of movement', for instance) also proved insignificant.

The other possible explanation was that the achievements in question did not in fact depend on whether or not women were directly 'empowered' but on other factors which were better captured by the 'source' and 'setting' variables. A further 'deconstruction' of Kishor's findings suggests that child mortality was higher in households where women were currently, or had previously been, in residence with their parents-in-law as well as in households where there was a large difference in the age and education levels of husband and wife. Child mortality was lower if the mother had been in employment prior to her marriage. As far as immunization was concerned, children were more likely to have been immunized in households where their mothers had extended experience of employment, where they reported exposure to the media, where they were educated and where they were not under the authority of in-laws as a result of joint residence. In addition, where the age difference between husband and wife was small and where women expressed a belief in equality in marriage, children's survival chances were likely to be higher. Thus the only direct measure of empowerment which proved significant in the analysis was her 'equality of marriage' indicator and it proved significant only in relation to child immunization.

Returning to a point made earlier, if, as is likely, the care of infants came within women's pre-assigned sphere of jurisdiction, then improvements in this sphere should be seen as increased efficacy in pre-assigned roles rather than as evidence of empowerment. In other words, what mattered for achievements in relation to children's well-being was women's agency as *mothers* rather than as *wives*. This is why the direct measures of empowerment, which dealt largely with equality in conjugal relationships, proved insignificant in explaining the achievement variables. Instead, it was variables which captured women's ability to take effective action in relation to the welfare of their children which played the significant explanatory role. For instance, women who lived, or had lived, with their in-laws, were more likely to have been subordinate to the authority of a senior female, with less likelihood of exercising effective agency at a time when such agency was critical to children's health outcomes. Women who were less educated than their husbands or much younger were also likely to have been less confident, competent or authoritative in taking the necessary actions to ensure their children's health. Female education and employment both had a role in explaining child welfare outcomes but with slight variations. Lifetime experience of employment by women had a *direct* positive effect on their children's chances of survival as well as the likelihood of child immunization. Female education influenced children's survival chances indirectly through its association with improved standards of household water and sanitation but had a direct influence on the likelihood of child immunization. The differences in the determinants of the two achievement variables are worth noting. The fact that women's education and employment as well as 'equality in marriage' all had a direct influence on the likelihood of child immunization but only women's employment affected their children's survival chances, suggests that the former activity may have required a more active agency on the part of mothers than did the more routine forms of health-seeking behaviour through which child survival is generally assured.

The case for analytical clarity in the selection of 'empowerment-related' measures of achievement can also be illustrated with reference to a study by Becker (1997) which used data from Zimbabwe to explore the implications of women's empowerment on a different set of functioning achievements: the use of contraception and the take-up of pre-natal health care. Regression analysis was carried out in two stages. First of all, Becker explored the effects of some likely determinants of these outcomes. He found that contraceptive use appeared to be positively related to household wealth, as measured by a possessions index, the number of surviving children, the wife's employment and husband's education. Older women, women who lived in rural areas and who had polygamous husbands were less likely to use contraception. The likelihood that women received pre-natal care was positively related to household possessions, rural residence, women's age, education and employment and husband's education. In the second stage, Becker added a measure of women's empowerment to his equations to see what difference it made.



Empowerment was measured by an index of women's role in decision-making in three key areas: the purchase of household items, the decision to work outside and number of children to have. Adding the empowerment indicator did little to improve the fit of the equation in relation to contraceptive use, but significantly improved the fit as far as take up of pre-natal care was concerned.

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

In both studies discussed here, direct measures of women's agency were far more significant in determining outcomes when women were required to step out of routine forms of behaviour — getting their children immunized, in one case, and seeking pre-natal health care in the other — than outcomes which allowed them to conform to prevailing practice. However, apart from the extent to which outcomes require women to go against the grain of established custom, achievements also have to be assessed for their transformative implications in relation to the gender inequalities frequently embedded in these customs.

While both child survival and immunization are highly valued achievements from a variety of perspectives — of policy makers, of the family and, above all, of women themselves — and while both were the product of women's greater effectiveness as agents, neither achievement by itself necessarily implied a shift in underlying power relations. In this sense, women's ability to access pre-natal health care is more indicative of the kind of transformative agency we are talking about.

A similar distinction between achievements which testify to women's greater efficacy as agents within prescribed gender roles and those which are indicative of women as agents of transformation would apply to the determinants of under-five child mortality and gender differentials in child mortality in India reported by Dreze and Sen (1995). They found that female literacy reduced under-five child mortality while both female labour force participation and female literacy reduced excess female mortality in the

under-five age group. They interpreted these effects as evidence that women's access to education and employment enhanced their ability to exercise agency. While accepting this interpretation, I would nevertheless argue that the meanings conveyed by these two indicators carried rather different implications in terms of women's empowerment. The reduction in under-five mortality can be taken as evidence of more *effective* agency on the part of women but does not, by itself, testify to a *transformatory* agency on their part. On the other hand, the reductions in excess female mortality does suggest something more than greater efficacy of agency. Given that the reduction in excess female mortality represented an increase in the survival chances of the girl child, rather than a decrease in the survival chances of boys, it suggests that women who have some education and are economically active are more likely than others to give equal value to sons and daughters and to exercise equal effort on their behalf.

### **Triangulation and Meaning: The Indivisibility of Resources, Agency and Achievements**

This review of the 'fit' between the dimensions of empowerment and the indicators used to measure them has essentially been a review of the 'fit' between the meanings attributed to a measure and the meanings empirically revealed by it. What the discussion has thrown up very clearly is that it is not possible to establish the meaning of an indicator, whatever dimension of empowerment it is intended to measure, without reference to the other dimensions of empowerment. *In other words, the three dimensions are indivisible in determining the meaning of an indicator and hence its validity as a measure of empowerment.* Specifying 'access' to a resource tells us about potential rather than actual choice and the validity of a 'resource' measure as an indicator of empowerment largely rests on the validity of the assumptions made about the potential agency or entitlement embodied in that resource. It is similarly difficult to judge the validity of an 'achievement' measure unless we have evidence, or can make a reasonable guess, as to whose agency was involved and the extent to which the achievement in question transformed prevailing inequalities in resources and agency rather than reinforcing them or leaving them unchallenged. Similar considerations apply to evidence on 'agency': we have to know about its consequential significance in terms of women's strategic life choices and the extent to which it had transformatory potential.

In methodological terms, the point to emphasize is the critical need to triangulate or cross-check the evidence provided by an indicator in order to establish that it means what it is believed to mean. Indicators not only compress a great deal of information into a single statistic but make assumptions, often implicit, about what this information means. The more evidence there is to support these assumptions, the more faith we are likely to have in the validity of the indicator in question. The importance of triangulation can

be demonstrated by examining the very conflicting conclusions arrived at by a number of evaluations exploring the impact on women of a very similar set of credit programmes in rural Bangladesh. As I have sought to argue in greater detail elsewhere, these conflicts lay less in their empirical findings and more in the very different understandings of power on which they were based (Kabeer, 1998).

In one study by Pitt and Khandker (1995), the attempt was made to infer gender differences in bargaining power within the household from the extent to which decision-making outcomes varied according to the gender of the loanee. In terms of the terminology used in this paper, they were seeking to make assumptions about agency on the basis of evidence on the relationship between resources and achievements. However, the value of their analysis was undermined by the fact that there did not appear to be any clear-cut rationale for the selection of the particular achievement indicators in the study, and the bearing that these achievements might have on the question of empowerment was by no means clear. It is difficult, for instance, to know what to make of their finding that loans to men were likely to have a far greater fertility-reducing effect than loans to women, a finding that goes against received demographic wisdom and for which they do not offer any explanation themselves. Other findings generally lend themselves to alternative and equally plausible interpretations.

For instance, the authors themselves interpreted their finding that women loanees spent *more* time on market-related work than did women in male loanee households as evidence of women's empowerment, but explained as an 'income effect' the finding that men in households that had received credit spent *less* time on market-related work, and probably more time on leisure, regardless of whether the loan in question had been made to a man or a woman. However, the increase in women's market-related work as a result of their access to credit has been given a much more negative interpretation by others who have suggested that increases in women's loan-generated labour may simply add to their increased work burdens, overwork, fatigue and malnutrition (Ackerly, 1995; Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1996). Similarly, men's greater leisure as a result of loans to their household, regardless of who actually received the loan, could quite plausibly be interpreted as evidence of male privilege and power rather than (or as well as) an 'income effect'. Further information on what their findings actually meant would have helped to distinguish between these alternative hypotheses.

A similar absence of information on the agency involved in the achievement of particular decision-making outcomes also characterizes a study by Rahman (1986). However, her selection of 'functioning achievements' at least had a plausible bearing on women's empowerment since she focused on gender differentials in basic welfare outcomes in a context where women have suffered considerable gender discrimination in these areas. She found that women who had received loans enjoyed higher levels of welfare (food, clothing and medical expenditure) compared to women in households where

men had received the loans or in economically equivalent households which had not received any loans at all. Her findings would lead us to conclude that women's access to credit reduced, but did not fully eliminate, gender differentials in intra-household welfare. As evidence on women's empowerment, they would have been strengthened by information on whose agency was involved in translating loans into impact. Did increased expenditures on women's well-being represent the more active and direct exercise of purchasing power by women? Did it represent their greater role in decision-making about the distribution of household resources? Or did it represent the greater weight given by the household head to women's well-being in recognition of women's role in bringing in economic resources? Clearly each of these possibilities throws a different light on the issue of power and agency within the household, and women's empowerment.

If there are problems with inferring agency on the basis of inadequate information about achievements, attempts to infer achievement possibilities on the basis of restricted understandings of agency are equally problematic. This is evident in a study by Goetz and Sen Gupta (1996) in which they used an index of 'managerial control' as their indicator of women's empowerment. This index classified women who had no knowledge of how their loans had been utilized or else had played no part in the enterprise funded by their loans as having 'little or no control' over their loans, at one end of the spectrum, while at the other end of the spectrum were those who were described as exercising 'full control' over their loans, having participated in all stages of the enterprise, including marketing of their products. The large numbers of women found to be exercising 'little or no control' over their loans according to these criteria led the authors to extremely pessimistic conclusions about the empowerment potential of credit programmes for women.

However, if we return to our earlier point about the hierarchy of decisions, a major problem with their index of 'managerial control' was that it conflated quite distinct moments in the decision-making processes by which access to loans translates into impact on women's lives. In particular, it conflated 'control' and 'management', making no distinction between the *policy* decision as to how loans were to be utilized and repaid, and the *management* decisions by which decisions regarding loan use were implemented. If this distinction had been taken into account, then apart from the 22 per cent of women in their 'no control' category who reported that they did not even know how their loans were used, the remaining 78 per cent of women in their sample could, *in principle*, have exercised much greater control over their loans than was allowed for by the authors. Putting this point to one side, if, as Goetz and Sen Gupta appear to be hypothesizing, control over the loan-funded activity is in fact a critical 'control' point in the process by which access to loans translates into a range of valued achievements, then certainly 'managerial control' can serve as an *indicator* of empowerment.

However, this hypothesis is directly contradicted by yet another evaluation of a similar set of credit programmes in rural Bangladesh. Hashemi et al.

(1996) classified all the women loanees in their sample according to the categories of 'managerial control' spelt out by Goetz and Sen Gupta. While the results varied considerably according to both the length of women's membership of credit organization as well as by credit organization, they confirmed that a large percentage of women in certain villages did indeed 'lose' control over their loans by Goetz and Sen Gupta's criteria. By then going on to examine the relationship between women's access to loans and a range of empowerment indicators, Hashemi et al. (1996) were essentially asking whether women's access to credit could have any transformatory significance for their lives, *regardless* of who exercised 'managerial control'. The indicators they used were: mobility in a number of public locations; the ability to make small purchases as well as larger purchases, including purchases for women themselves; involvement in major areas of economic decision-making; land-related decisions or purchase of major assets; whether women had suffered appropriation of their money or any other asset; been prevented from visiting their natal homes or from working outside; the magnitude of women's economic contribution to the family; participation in public protests and campaigns; political and legal awareness; economic security, viz. assets and savings in their own names.

The results of their analysis suggested that women's access to credit contributed significantly to the magnitude of the economic contributions reported by women, to the likelihood of an increase in asset holdings in their own names, to an increase in their exercise of purchasing power, and in their political and legal awareness as well as in the composite empowerment index. Furthermore, access to credit was also associated with higher levels of mobility, political participation and involvement in 'major decision-making' for particular credit organizations.

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

## MEASURING EMPOWERMENT: THE PROBLEM OF VALUES

### Status, Autonomy and the Relevance of Context

I have so far focused on the problem of *meaning* in the selection of indicators of empowerment — the need to be sure that indicators mean what they are

intended to mean. I want to turn now to the question of values and how they complicate attempts to conceptualize and measure women's empowerment. Let me start with the question of 'emic' or insider values before going on to consider the complications introduced by outsider values. The main way in which 'insider values' have been captured in studies dealing with women's empowerment has been through variables measuring 'cultural context'. Such studies tend to be comparative in nature and explore how differences in cultural context influence resources, agency and achievements. For instance, we have already noted the findings reported by Dreze and Sen (1995) that women's literacy and employment status helped to explain variations in overall child mortality and in excess female mortality among children across India. However, the single most important variable in their study explaining excess female mortality was a 'dummy' variable standing for geographical location: gender differentials in mortality rates were far less striking in the southern states of India than in the northern and western states.

These regional 'dummy' variables can be seen as compressing information about a whole range of inter-related norms and practices relating to marriage, mobility and inheritance which make up gender relations in different parts of India. If we accept that investments in the survival and well-being of a family member tell us something important about the value attached to that member, then the analysis by Dreze and Sen tells us that the structural variables which make up gender relations in different parts of India were far more important in determining the extent to which the girl child is valued within the family than the individual characteristics of her parents.

Jejeebhoy's (1997) study, which compares Tamil Nadu, one of the southern states of India, with Uttar Pradesh (UP), one of its northern states, offers some lower-level insights into the relationship between cultural context and individual preference. Her study explores the effects of a range of variables on women's autonomy. Measures of women's autonomy included their role in decision-making; mobility; incidence of domestic violence; access to, and control over, economic resources. Predictably, women in Tamil Nadu fared better on most indicators of autonomy than women in UP. However, she also found that the determinants of women's 'autonomy' varied in the two regions.

In general, the traditional factors conferring status on women — the number of sons they bore, the size of their dowry and nuclear family residence — were more closely linked with the autonomy indicators in the restrictive context of UP than they were in the more egalitarian context of Tamil Nadu. In UP, women who had brought large dowries to their marriages, who lived in nuclear families and who produced sons were far more likely to report a greater role in household decision-making and greater freedom from domestic violence than others. While female employment also had significant and positive implications for most of the autonomy indicators in UP, education had a far weaker and less significant impact. In Tamil Nadu, however, the effects of these more traditional 'status'-related variables

were far weaker, while female employment and, even more strongly, female education were both more consistently related to women's autonomy.

Jejeebhoy's study points to the strong rationale that women are likely to have in certain contexts for making choices which are essentially disempowering. The contextual variables in her study, as in Dreze and Sen's, are a shorthand for the deeply-entrenched rules, norms and practices which shape social relations in different parts of India and which help to influence behaviour, define values and *shape choice*. Since women are likely to be given greater respect within their communities for conforming to its norms, and to be penalized if they do not, their own values and behaviour are likely to reflect those of the wider community and to reproduce its injustices. There is evidence, for instance, that women in the northern states like UP are far more likely to express strong son preference than those in southern states like Tamil Nadu (Dyson and Moore, 1983). The apparently 'voluntary' nature of such choices should not detract our attention from their consequences. If empowerment is simply equated with a role in decision-making and 'control' over household resources, then having sons and bringing in a large dowry would be considered conducive to women's empowerment. Yet dowry is a practice which simultaneously expresses and reinforces son preference and transforms daughters into financial liabilities for their parents. Both dowry and son preference are central to the values and practices through which women are socially defined as a subordinate category in a state which is associated with some of the starkest indicators of gender discrimination on the Indian subcontinent.

A number of points can be made on the basis of this discussion. First of all, there is a point about strategies of empowerment. The studies here suggest a role for individual agency in challenging gender inequality but they also point to the importance of larger structural change. In a context where cultural values constrain women's ability to make strategic life choices, structural inequalities cannot be addressed by individuals alone. We have cited evidence that individual women can, and do, act against the norm, but their impact on the situation of women in general is likely to remain limited and they may have to pay a high price for their autonomy. The project of women's empowerment is dependent on collective solidarity in the public arena as well as individual assertiveness in the private. Women's organizations and social movements in particular have an important role to play in creating the conditions for change and in reducing the costs for the individual.

In methodological terms, the discussion in this section reminds us why empowerment cannot be conceptualized simply in terms of choice, but must incorporate an assessment of the values embedded in agency and choice, values which reflect the wider context. It points, in other words, to the need to make a distinction between 'status' and 'autonomy' as criteria in evaluating agency and choice. 'Status' considerations relate to the values of the community, whether these communities are hierarchical or egalitarian, and

they draw attention to the influence of the larger collectivity in ascribing greater value to certain kinds of individual choices over others and hence in giving greater value to those who abide by these choices.

When such considerations set up a trade-off for women between their ability to make independent choices in critical arenas of their lives — such as marriage, reproduction, friendship and so on — and their ability to enjoy status within the family and community, status becomes antithetical to autonomy. As Gita Sen (1993: 198) comments in relation to reproductive choice: ‘The point is especially apparent in gender hierarchies where, for example, a woman’s status may be linked to her fertility. Bearing the approved number of children will grant a woman the rights and privileges accorded to a fertile woman, but do not necessarily give her greater autonomy in decision-making’.

More strongly, in such contexts, status is also likely to be antithetical to empowerment. The need to bear the approved number of children in order to secure social status and family approval takes its toll on women’s bodies and on their lives as they bear children beyond their capacity. Furthermore, status considerations in cultures of son-preference require women to give birth to a certain number of sons, to favour their sons over their daughters, thereby acting as agents in the transmission of gender discrimination over generations. Status considerations also lead to the more hidden costs of dependency, difficult to measure but testified so eloquently by women all over the world (Kabeer, 1997; Rowlands, 1997; Silberschmidt, 1992). Finally, in the extreme, status considerations can lead to cultures where female infanticide and foeticide, female circumcision, and widow immolation all become ‘rational’ responses to social norms (see Das Gupta and Li, and Sudha and Irudaya Rajan, this volume).

### **Outsider Values and Women’s Empowerment: Between Altruism and Autonomy**

The discussion in the preceding section spells out in greater detail the rationale for the highly qualified notion of choice which informs the understanding of empowerment in this paper by pointing to the significance of social values in justifying the subordinate status of women and to the internalization of these values by women themselves. However, these qualifications require us to bring in an external normative standpoint, a set of values other than women’s own, as the basis for assessing the meaning of their choices. The problem that this raises is not one of a normative standpoint per se — the whole idea of development is, after all, based on some kind of normative standpoint — but in determining the extent to which this normative standpoint expresses values which are relevant to the reality it seeks to evaluate.



The tendency to re-present 'the self' in representing 'the other' has been noted by Mohanty (1991) who describes the way in which Third World women from a variety of contexts tend to get reduced and universalized, particularly in texts coming out of the field of women and development. Although this portrayal of the 'average' disempowered Third World woman was intended to evoke sympathy and action on their behalf, its reductionism reflected the fact that the social distances of location, class, nationality and language which often separate researcher and 'researched' in the social sciences tend to be particularly large in the development field.

The same distances help to explain why attempts to define and measure women's empowerment have given rise to similarly averaging tendencies in the portrayal of the *empowered* woman. I want to point to two distinct examples of these 'averaging' tendencies, coming out of quite different strands of scholarship and advocacy, addressing different dimensions of 'cooperative-conflict' within the household, both containing some elements of truth, but large elements of simplification.

One model promotes what could be called the 'virtuous model' of the empowered woman and is associated with the instrumentalist forms of gender advocacy that we noted earlier. It draws on various examples of gender scholarship which document the greater social connectedness of women in order to endow them with various traits which form the basis of policy advocacy on their behalf: altruism and dedication to the collective family welfare; thrift and risk-aversion; industriousness; a sense of civic responsibility, manifested in their willingness to take on unpaid community work and so on.

While the instrumentalist notions of empowerment tend to emphasize women's greater altruism and 'connectedness', an alternative model of empowerment is also evident which focuses far more on the conflictual element of gender relations and hence favours a more separative model of the empowered woman. What is valued as evidence of altruism in the former model is interpreted in the latter as evidence of women's internalization of their own subordinate status, their tendency to put the needs of others in the family before their own. Fierbeck (1995), for instance, argues that women would be much more likely to expand their ability to make choices if they were to view themselves as individuals rather than members of a social group, while Jackson (1996: 497) comments: 'It may well be true that women prioritise children's needs, but there is a sense in which one might wish women to be a little less selfless and self-sacrificing'.

It is certainly the case that in contexts where the separation of resources within the family, and indeed, some degree of separation within the family, has cultural sanction, women may view greater autonomy as a desirable goal for themselves. In such contexts it may make sense to ask, as Lloyd (1995: 17) does: 'If income permits, wouldn't a mother-child unit prefer to form a separate household with its own decision-making autonomy rather than join a more complex household under other (most likely male or older female) authority?'.

In the US context, England (1997) suggests that the increasing access to employment by women since the 1950s and the rise of single motherhood, as a result of divorce or non-marital births, is not coincidental: the short version of the story is probably that employment gave women the freedom to leave unhappy marriages. Literature from sub-Saharan Africa points to women setting up on their own households once they have independent economic resources (Roberts, 1989). Hoogenboezem (1997: 85) found that several of the women who had participated in a legal literacy programme run by the Women's Action Group in Zimbabwe stated that once they knew about the procedures to be followed, they sued their husbands for divorce. Moore (1994) cites evidence from Thailand that access to an independent income has given many women the ability to walk out of unsatisfactory marriages. My own research in Bangladesh found that the emergence of new waged opportunities as well as access to loans made it possible for many women to either leave unsatisfactory marriages, or to effect a 'divorce within marriage', remaining with their husbands, but setting up their own parallel economy (Kabeer, 1997, 1998).

However, in contexts where households are organized along more corporate lines, where a powerful ideology of 'togetherness' binds the activities and resources of the family together under the control of the male head, such a question would have very little resonance. In such contexts, even in the situations of rising female employment and wages cited earlier, women do not *actively* seek the opportunity to set up separate units from men because such autonomous units are neither socially acceptable nor individually desired. Instead, they invest considerable time and effort in maintaining their marriages, in strengthening the 'cooperative' dimension of 'cooperative-conflict', seeking separation only in exceptional circumstances.

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

## CONCLUSION

The ability to choose is central to the concept of power which informs the analysis in this paper, but the notion of 'choice' has been qualified in a number of ways. One set of qualifications refers to *the conditions of choice*, the need to distinguish between choices made from the vantage point of alternatives and those reflecting the absence, or the punishingly high cost, of alternatives. A second set of qualifications referred to the *consequences of*

*choice*, the need to distinguish between strategic life choices, and second-order choices. The consequences of choice can be further evaluated in terms of their *transformatory significance*, the extent to which the choices made have the potential for challenging and destabilizing social inequalities and the extent to which they merely express and reproduce those inequalities.

Our conceptualization of empowerment has also highlighted the interdependence of individual and structural change in processes of empowerment. Structures shape individual resources, agency and achievements. They also define the parameters within which different categories of actors are able to pursue their interests, promoting the voice and agency of some and inhibiting that of others. And finally, they help to shape individual interests so that how people define their goals and what they value will reflect their social positioning as well as their individual histories, tastes and preferences. The qualifications on the notion of choice adopted in this paper represent an attempt to incorporate the structural dimensions of individual choice: the criterion of *alternatives* relates to the structural conditions under which choices are made while the criterion of *consequences* relates to the extent to which the choices made have the potential for transforming these structural conditions.

Methodologically, the review of attempts to measure empowerment has been about the 'fit' (or lack thereof) between the meanings attributed to an indicator and those revealed by it empirically. It is not possible to establish the meaning of an indicator, whatever dimension of empowerment it is intended to measure, without reference to the other dimensions of empowerment specified in this paper. Access to a *resource* tells us about potential rather than actual choice and the validity of a resource measure as an indicator of empowerment largely rests on the validity of the assumptions made about the potential agency or entitlement embodied in that resource. It is similarly difficult to judge the validity of an *achievement* measure unless we have evidence, or can make a reasonable guess, as to whose agency was involved and the extent to which the achievement in question transformed prevailing inequalities in resources and agency rather than reinforcing them or leaving them unchallenged. Similar considerations apply to evidence on *agency*: we have to know about its consequential significance in terms of women's strategic life choices and the extent to which it had transformatory potential. The more evidence there is to support these assumptions, the more faith we are likely to have in the validity of the indicator in question.

By definition, indicators of empowerment cannot provide an accurate measurement of changes in women's ability to make choices, they merely have to indicate the direction and meaning of change. However, we have noted some of the reasons why they are likely to be inaccurate and even misleading. Disembedded from their context, indicators can lend themselves to a variety of different, and contradictory, meanings. Given the value-laden nature of the concept of women's empowerment, there is a danger that analysts opt for those meanings which most favour their own values regarding what constitutes appropriate choices for women. We have also noted the

importance of ensuring that the values which inform definitions and measures of empowerment are sensitive to the domain of possibilities in which women are located.

Finally, there are measurement and conceptual problems associated with capturing particular kinds of social change. There is an implicit assumption underlying many attempts to measure empowerment that we can somehow predict the nature and direction that change is going to assume. In actual fact, human agency is indeterminate and hence unpredictable in a way that is antithetical to requirements of measurement. Thus giving women access to credit, creating constitutional provision for political participation or equalizing educational opportunities are unlikely to be automatically empowering in themselves, but they do create the vantage point of alternatives which allows a more transformatory consciousness to come into play. The translation of these resources and opportunities into the kinds of functioning achievements which would signal empowerment is likely to be closely influenced by the possibilities for transformation on the ground, and how they are perceived and assessed. To attempt to predict at the outset of an intervention precisely how it will change women's lives, without some knowledge of ways of 'being and doing' which are realizable and valued by women in that context, runs into the danger of prescribing the process of empowerment and thereby violating its essence, which is to enhance women's capacity for self-determination.

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