

ADVANCES IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

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ADVANCES IN GENDER RESEARCH VOLUME 29

ADVANCES IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: CRITICAL INSIGHT FROM ASIA, AFRICA AND LATIN AMERICA

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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PREFACE

Marta Ochman and Araceli Ortega-Díaz have brought together the chapters in this volume problematizing the idea of women's empowerment as it relates to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality. The chapters focus on three continents: Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Using both quantitative and qualitative data analyses, authors deconstruct the part education, fertility, and laws pertaining to marital and conjugal living contribute to women's empowerment on a collectivist or individual basis. They consider the difference between women's female labor force participation in slum and non-slum urban areas, the difference between women's income mobility as a function of their mother's versus their father's status, and the geography of women's homicides within a context of weak government support and strong civil society presence. They find that within a neoliberal economic context, empowerment may satisfy a short-term practical need, but it falls short of women's strategic interest in transformational change.

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ADVANCES IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: AN OVERVIEW

Marta Ochman and Araceli Ortega-Díaz

Today, the concept of women's empowerment has been embedded in the official discourse against poverty and development promotion. Its inclusion in the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Agenda made it mandatory as an objective for national governments and civil society organizations. While in the 1990s, feminists deconstructed, analyzed, and questioned the concept; empowerment has now been accepted and assimilated as a desirable and attainable goal by assigning public and private resources. In the academic sector, evaluating and analyzing women's empowerment has become a common practice. By only looking into the Scopus journals database, the search produces more than 2,600 results. While in the 1990s, there were about 10 articles per year, in 2019, 378 articles were published. Also, the fact that a vast majority analyze cases from developing countries and regions confirms that the objective of empowerment has been focused on women living in poverty in Latin America, Asia, or Africa. Nevertheless, the results are not encouraging. Women continue to be discriminated against, and even more when factors such as ethnicity or poverty are also present.

In this context, the book here presented has two objectives. The first one aims to provide new evidence on the progress (or lack thereof) regarding the fifth goal of the Sustainable Development Agenda. The second intention is to deepen into the conceptual debate on women's empowerment. We believe that it is imperative to show the results of public programs aimed at promoting women's empowerment and assess their impact not only on socioeconomic indicators but also on the process of changing relations of power between men and women.

However, the purpose of this book goes beyond presenting new contributions to the assessment of public policies related to the Development Agenda. It also seeks to place the concept of empowerment, its implication for women, its scope, and limitations at the center of the political and academic debate, when it is declared as an objective of public policies.

Advances in Women's Empowerment: Critical Insight from Asia, Africa and Latin America

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As stated by [Richardson \(2018\)](#), to measure a social phenomenon without defining its theoretical conceptualization leads to confusion and limits the value of studies that assess the impact of public programs. Even more importantly, it limits the understanding of the causes that lead to low levels of women's empowerment, despite decades of efforts apparently targeted to its promotion.

Even if since the 1970s, there is recognition that the development strategies have a differentiated impact on men and women, it is until the mid-1980s, the concept of women's empowerment becomes a paradigm of public policies and international strategies, replacing the previous approach of well-being which conceptualized women as a vulnerable group and a passive receiver of welfare policies. Empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviors to social policy and social change ([Rappaport, 1981](#)), emphasizes the active role of the women as receivers of social policies and as citizens who define their priorities and participate in the implementation of development strategies ([Klein, Ralls, Smith-Major, & Douglas, 2000](#)). The etymological root of the concept suggests a process to redefine power relations by learning how to access and exercise power to improve economic and symbolic conditions. In the words of [Fraser \(2000\)](#), the concept of empowerment has the potential to redefine redistribution and recognition practices.

In the 1980s, there is an advent of Neoliberalism as a paradigm of economic and social policies, and States withdraw as providers of welfare, particularly in developing countries. For neoliberals, the concept allowed emphasizing the individual dimension of empowerment, built upon the idea of economic rationality and freedom, which made invisible the importance of social movements and encouraged individuals to assume an entrepreneurial persona, shifting the responsibility for development from state to civil society and the poor themselves ([Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018](#); [Roberts & Zulfqar, 2019](#)).

The instrumental and political use of the concept of empowerment in the decades of Neoliberalism has had two highly negative consequences for women. First, the broad interpretation of psychological, social, political, or cultural empowerment was reduced to the economic sphere. As stated by World Bank, "economic empowerment is about making markets work for women and empowering women to compete in markets" (World Bank, 2006, cited in [Kabeer, 2012](#), also [Schech & Vas Dev, 2007](#)). This understanding assumes that an independent income increases women's self-esteem and their position in the community. In practice, this understanding is translated into a preference for conditional transfer and microcredit programs for women. The design of these strategies does not question the predominant gender roles in patriarchal societies but uses them to achieve greater efficiency of the invested resources, and thus turns women into engines of growth and drivers of development ([Friedson-Ridenour, Clark-Barol, Wilson, Shrestha, & Mercy Ofori, 2019](#); [Riquer, 2000](#); [Roberts & Zulfqar, 2019](#); [Young, 1998](#)). Many studies accept this instrumental use of women as a legitimate and unquestionable argument in favor of empowerment strategies. For example, [Akram \(2018\)](#) states in his study on women's empowerment in Pakistan the following:

The women's empowerment is considered a pathway to reduce child and infant mortality through the mother's education and health, and it enhances economic growth through female labor participation. Given the all-important role of gender equality in economic development, the world community promised at the Millennium Summit held in 2000 to empower women and promote gender equality. (Akram, 2018, pp. 755–756)

Consequently, the structure of these programs not only loses perspective about the objective of redefining power relations between genders, but also takes advantage of the traditional role of women in reproductive tasks adding the responsibility as an economic resources provider. Productive projects available to women reinforce traditional roles as cooks, seamstresses, and caregivers. Those jobs add extra working hours and have a very low investment in technology (Enríquez, Michel Kauffer, Tuñón Pablos, & Soto Pinto, 2003; Molyneux, 2006; Rowlands, 1995; Schmukler, et al., 1998). The loans granted to women increase their levels of indebtedness, without modifying the patterns of decision-making at home. Women are responsible for paying mortgages, while men continue to make decisions about the origin of the money (Isserles, 2003; Roberts & Zulfiqar, 2019). The conditional cash transfer programs follow the maternalistic model, focusing on the responsibility of women on money, without considering the tension between productive and reproductive work (Provoste Fernández, 2013; Riaño Marín & Okali, 2008).

The instrumental use of women in this limited vision of “empowerment” carries the other negative consequence: the strategies implemented in the 1990s do not question the dominant cultural model, but rather retake and reaffirm it, inducing women to accept the male-oriented ideal of efficiency, independence, and economic success (Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018; Riger, 1993). The struggle of women to seek substantive equity has always been supported by collective movements, networks of mutual support, and the perception of shared destiny.

The emphasis on the individual dimension of empowerment uncritically assumes that individual empowerment necessarily leads to the collective one. This assumption is not always the case. The economic success of entrepreneur women increases their opportunities to control their life, make strategic decisions, and even participate in political decision-making. However, this not necessarily challenges or changes social structures of power or even lead to a critical analysis of power itself. For example, Roberts and Zulfiqar (2019) analysis of workshops for entrepreneurial projects for women in Pakistan shows how female instructors exercise power over under-educated women, and legitimize relations of subordination of domestic workers and business employees, women included. Even if the self-sufficient, independent, and assertive individuals have better capacities to influence their environment, they do not necessarily know or have interest in this influence being used to modify social structures, including those of gender roles. The freedom for the self is not always freedom for others.

Considering these conceptual debates, why choosing empowerment as the framework that encompasses reflections on violence, fertility, work, or community organization of women? Despite the use and political abuse that the concept has suffered, it remains an essential reference, which allows us to understand the challenges that women face when seeking to build new power relations, not only between men and women but also with political and economic structures. From

the perspective of feminist theory, the concept of empowerment has been deconstructed, and it allows us to understand better not only the theoretical model of empowerment but also the reality of women who daily struggle to take control over their lives, define their agendas, and make things that did not occur before happen now.

First of all, nobody empowers women. Public policies, programs, or strategies implemented by civil society may create conditions and opportunities a little easier for them. However, empowerment is a process that each woman experiences in her way, through her effort and according to her personal history and context. There is no universal model of success or a list of achievements that define an empowered woman. Women's empowerment is always bounded empowerment (Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018; Gill & Ganesh, 2007), frequently marked by paradoxical achievements and contradictory experience. To evaluate the empowerment progress, we must consider not only achievements but also situational constraints that every woman has been facing. That is why empowerment's indicators should be context-specific. As stated by Richardson (2017), for example, freedom to visit the market alone is not relevant for Western societies, it is a standard indicator of agency in many nonwestern contexts, but particularly in Bangladesh, it is an indicator of low social class and not a sign of agency. Also, the autonomy of making and carry out decisions can be expressed directly or through negotiation, even deception or manipulation (Kabeer, 1999; Rezazadeh, 2011).

Evaluating advances in empowerment's progress is essential in acknowledging the distinction between resources, agency, and outcomes (Bayissa, Smits, & Ruben, 2018; Grabe, 2012; Kabeer, 1999). Resources are preconditions, enabling factors of empowerment. Structural inequality in power causes unequal access to material, legal, or symbolic resources, and fixing this inequality is where public policies may have a relevant impact. For more effective planning and implementation of policies aimed at ensuring access to resources, it is crucial to consider the distinction between women's practical needs and strategic interests (Kabeer, 2012; Molyneux, 1985; Young, 1998). Women's practical needs are closely related to the role and responsibilities associated with their position in the social hierarchy and the gender division of labor. Several public programs are limited to the satisfaction of practical needs because they do not challenge gender roles. All the programs that instrumentally frame women's empowerment, as a means to improve the well-being of the family, children's health, or decrease the fertility rates, are aimed to satisfy the practical needs, to make it lighter to comply with the reproductive tasks at home. In contrast, strategic interests are deduced from the structural subordination of women, and their satisfaction impacts structural changes. The access to work opportunities is a practical need; meanwhile, the transformation of the labor market to end gender segregation is a strategic interest and involves the confluence of much more complex educational, labor, and social policies.

Access to resources provides the ability to define objectives and take action to achieve them. Being able to determine the goals has a more significant impact on empowerment, which leads us to the distinction between policy and implementation decisions (Kabeer, 1999; Richardson, 2017). It is not the same thing to decide

when and how many children a woman chooses to have to select a contraceptive method. For public policies, it is essential to recognize that not only parents, but also spouses or siblings deny women the right to make strategic decisions. Also, governments, development agencies, and experts, who design conditional cash transfers programs that not only define which women can spend the few resources that are transferred to them, but also subject them to control processes that treat them as eternal minors, stigmatize them as irresponsible and unreliable in the eyes of society (Ochman, 2016).

Finally, the empowerment process is translated into results, real control over material and symbolic resources, and greater well-being and self-esteem. These are the intended results, but an insight of women's empowerment has also indicated the existence of unintended results such as a higher workload, increased violence against women, stress, anxiety, and loneliness. The empowerment advancement cannot be comprehended if we only focus on the achievements. Slow progress cannot be comprehended if we ignore the costs assumed by women seeking to redefine power relations.

Because power is omnipresent and multidimensional (Rowlands, 1995), the personal dimension implies not only self-worth and self-confidence in the ability to carry out actions but also the understanding of context and the condition of oppression that a woman lives. It is to aspire to change this condition, to rely on one's capacity to do so, but also to understand that this change cannot be done alone. Hence, the importance of the collective dimension of power, that is the ability to act together, should be done in order to achieve collective and individual goals. We have already pointed out that a woman's individual success does not necessarily translate into a collective advance, sometimes it is rendered into selfish individualism, or into a paternalistic behavior (yes, paternalistic) toward other women who live in less favorable conditions. Finally, there is the dimension of close relationships, that is, the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of day-to-day relations along with the spouse, friends, and family. This dimension is critical and difficult to change because inequality and conflict coexist with love, support, and recognition.

Empowerment is a complex process. In the words of Kabeer:

It touches on women's sense of self-worth and social identity; their willingness and ability to question their subordinate status and identity; their capacity to exercise strategic control over their own lives and to renegotiate their relationships with others who matter to them; and their ability to participate on equal terms with men in reshaping the societies in which they live in ways that contribute to a more just and democratic distribution of power and possibilities. (Kabeer, 2012, p. 6)

Such a complex phenomenon is not easy to document, evaluate, or accompany with recommendations. Any intent will be incomplete if approaches, attempts, and evaluation proposals are not made in conjunction to change the current situation among women. This book is not intended to address all dimensions of empowerment directly, nor to exhaust the debate on the progress achieved in Objective 5 of the Sustainable Development Agenda, but to update the discussion on the effectiveness of the policies and programs that declare their objective to contribute to women's empowerment.

Therefore, the book also serves to reflect on the world public policies that would contribute to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls as specified in the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5). As established by United Nations, in order to measure advancements in women well-being across the world, the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG indicators (IAEG-SDGs) set six different indicators for SDG5, with several sub indicators, using as a base of departure the year 2015, with the aim to be achieved by 2030. The philosophy is that when these indicators reach their target, then all forms of discrimination against all women and girls will end (SDG-5.1), both in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation will be eliminated (SDG-5.2); all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation will no longer be practiced (SDG-5.3); the world will recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate (SDG-5.4); women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life will be guaranteed (SDG-5.5); universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences will be ensured (SDG-5.6).

Additionally, three more compromises for nations are to undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance, and natural resources, in accordance with national laws (SDG-5-A); enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women (SDG-5-B); and adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels (SDG-5-C).

The current book includes eight chapters in which research points out important challenges that some countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa must undergo to contribute to reach some of these SDGs and how reaching the goals will contribute to women's empowerment as the whole purpose.

Using a multidimensional approach, Chapter 1 teaches us how reproductive health, among many other factors, is a precondition for women to improve their well-being and that of their children, this chapter is aligned with SDG-5.6.1 which aims that women make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use, and reproductive health care because high levels of reproductive health and high levels of labor participation have been associated with higher levels of women's empowerment. The previous have been analyzed more deeply in Chapter 2 for Sub Saharan Africa, showing the need for laws and regulations that guarantee women aged between 15 and 49 years access to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education (5.6.2) because currently their fertility choice is induced by household decisions related to cultural background showing that women's empowerment varies according to the union characteristics, such as

age at marriage, age difference among spouses and polygamy. This finding would help policymakers to draw attention to the need to rule marriage laws in this region in order to reach SDG-5.3.1, and decrease the proportion of women aged between 20 and 24 years who were married or are in a union before the age of 15 years and before the age of 18 years. Reaching this goal will imply that women will arrive in marriage after getting more educated and will have more opportunities in their life trajectory to participate in remunerated labor (SDG-5.4), which would help their daughters to scale in their income position.

In addition to evaluating the advances in the objectives of the Agenda, these two chapters contribute to the complex problem of measuring empowerment in comparative studies. The importance of quantitative measurement of women's empowerment is widely recognized as "poor measurement hampers efforts to find the causes and consequences of low empowerment and to assess the impact of social policies aimed at increasing empowerment" (Richardson, 2017). In Chapter 1 "Recent Evidence on the Evolution of Women's Empowerment Across Dimensions and Countries: A Multidimensional Index of Women's Empowerment Across Countries," by Eva Medina Moral and Ainhoa Herrarte Sánchez discuss the difficulties of a comparative measurement in 96 countries in all regions of the world and different socioeconomic contexts. The composite indexes they propose are aimed at better understanding obstacles each country faces, as well as identifying successful actions and the most significant barriers in the complex process of women's empowerment. The analysis of indicators over 20 years, between 1995 to 2015, allows not only to assess the current state, but also to assess the dynamics of progress that each country has experienced. The chapter focuses on three dimensions considered as vital resources for women's agency, such as reproductive health, participation in the economy, and elementary education. Those dimensions have independent behaviors, which require specific policies focused on the challenges that each of these resources implies. The ratings that the authors provide allow us to identify that economic empowerment, that is, the participation of women in the economy, show slow progress.

Chapter2, "Empowerment and Desired Fertility in Sub Saharan Africa," by Anne-Sophie Robilliard discusses the relationship between desired fertility and five direct and indirect indicators of women's empowerment in 34 countries of Sub Saharan Africa. In her review of the relationship between empowerment and desired fertility, the author deepens the complexity of capturing women's agency and the need to recognize that empowerment is determined by context. Although most studies establish a positive association between empowerment and a low number of desired children, a high number of children can be the effect of women's strategic decisions to improve their family position and economic situation in an African context. It thus reflects the importance of the dimension of close relationships, family dynamics, which largely determine the agency of women, and which, as the author points out, are much more difficult to be modified through public policies. This chapter endorses the importance of education as a resource that exceeds the level of practical needs and becomes a strategic interest, which makes it easier for women to exercise the agency in other areas of their lives.

Education as a strategic resource to improve the living conditions of women is also the conclusion of the Chapter 3 “Gender Differences in Intergenerational Income Mobility in Brazil” by Gabriela Freitas da Cruz and Valeria Pero. In terms of gender differences in intergenerational income mobility, the research conducted in Brazil, one of the countries with the highest income inequality, shares the same conditions with most Latin American countries. It is a matter that comprises several aspects of gender inequality, which is expressed in both opportunities and results, as stated by the authors, it has more impact on daughters than sons. Considering the difficulties that women experience in accessing decent work and the structural gender-related constraints that women face in the labor market, it is not surprising that the father’s income plays a more important role in children’s mobility. However, the authors find that in the case of daughters, the mother’s income is more critical, thus underlining the relevant role of women in the fight against poverty, but also aiming at the collective dimension of women’s empowerment and the virtuous circle that empowerment creates. Women’s independent income is widely recognized as a factor that promotes self-esteem and social recognition and increases decision-making power in households.

Access to a decent job is a fundamental indicator of women’s economic empowerment. Even if it does not lead automatically to social-cultural, legal, or psychological empowerment (see the study of [Bayissa et al., 2018](#)), the economic dimension of empowerment is central to studies on women and development. Chapter 4 “Urban Female Labor Force Participation and Its Correlates: A Comparative Study of Slum Dwellers and Their Urban Counterparts of Three Metro Cities in India,” by Sugata Bag on urban female labor participation in India assumes a comparative perspective between slum and non-slum areas in three cities of India. The conclusions presented by the author reinforce the complexity of economic empowerment and its relationship with other areas of women’s life: religion, family, and social status. This case shows the need for interventions about whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce, and monitor equality and non-discrimination based on sex (SDG-5.1.1). The author mentions interesting findings by stating that women’s education is positively related to their participation in the labor market, while men’s education, as household heads, restricts their access to independent income, assuring the importance of socio-cultural changes. The power of close relationships remains decisive in understanding and evaluating the results of the empowerment process. Marriage laws affect woman’s well-being as they have been written in many cases several decades ago and are not protecting females and children to the new social norms, living tendencies, and up to date couples’ choices, from the marriage regime rules that give priority to preserve the assets for males stating that assets belong to spouse that paid for them. This is the case of Mexico analyzed in Chapter 5. This analysis shows the importance of SDG-5.A.2 to increase the proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women’s equal rights to land ownership and assets control.

Even if the dimension of power can hardly be modified only through public policies, those are vital to eradicate the cultural biases behind the law and regulations, as Araceli Ortega-Díaz, Chapter 5: “Marital Status and Poverty