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WORDS FOR DEVELOPMENT: PATHS, TRANSFORMATIONS, AND POWER RELATIONSHIPS

EMPOWERMENT: THE HISTORY OF A KEY CONCEPT IN CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

Anne-Emmanuèle Calvès*

The notion of “empowerment” features prominently in the contemporary discourse of international institutions on “participation of the poor” in development programs. This article traces the history of the word in the field of international development, namely its origins, influences, first appearances in feminist theories from the Global South and in radical activism in the 1980s, and its gradual institutionalization in the policy vocabulary of international development organizations. Along with its cooptation, empowerment has shifted course from its beginnings as a process of conscientization and grassroots political mobilization aimed at the radical transformation of inequitable political structures, to a vague and falsely consensual concept. It has come to assimilate power with individual and economic decision-making, de-politicize collective power, and is used to legitimize existing top-down development policies and programs.

Key words: Empowerment, poverty reduction, gender, development policy, discourse.

Since the late 1970s, the term “empowerment” has been liberally applied by academics and aid workers in the English-speaking world, including in social services, social psychology, public health, adult literacy and community development (Simon 1994). Today the word is even more in vogue and has even entered the worlds of politics and business. From popular psychology to self-help, the infatuation with empowerment in the English-speaking world appears boundless: in 1997 there was even a book published in the United States on “self-empowerment” for dogs (Wise 2005).

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The field of international development has not been immune to this enthusiasm for the term, and the idea of empowerment features prominently in the current discourse of international development organizations. From the 1990s, the concept began to gradually gain a footing in the international gender and development agenda. By the end of the decade it had definitively entered the new credo of international development organizations on poverty reduction. Generally used in combination with other fashionable terms, such as “community,” “civil society,” and “agency,” the idea of empowerment is now at the heart of the rhetoric of the “participation of the poor” in development.

Though the term’s adoption by international institutions was initially welcomed enthusiastically by a number of intellectuals, activists, and development professionals (Wong 2003), it is strongly criticized today. In order to understand the current controversy and debate around the use of this idea in mainstream development discourse, we must revisit the origins of the concept. The purpose of this article is to trace the history of the term “empowerment” as it applies to the field of development. We will discuss its origins and influences, its initial appearance in radical and feminist discourse in the 1980s, and then its gradual institutionalization in the political language of international development organizations, particularly the World Bank. We will examine the evolution of the term’s meaning and ensuing policy prescriptions over time, and also provide a summary of the strong criticism that its cooptation evokes today.

I – ORIGINS AND FIRST APPEARANCES

1 – Pioneering Works in the 1960s and 1970s

The many origins and sources of inspiration of the notion of empowerment can be traced back to such varied domains as feminism, Freudian psychology, theology, the Black Power movement, and Gandhism (Simon 1994; Cornwall and Brock 2005). Empowerment refers to principles, such as the ability of individuals and groups to act in order to ensure their own well-being or their right to participate in decision-making that concerns them, that have guided research on and social intervention among poor and marginalized populations for several decades in the United States (Simon 1994). Not until the 1970s, and especially the 1976 publication of *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities* by Barbara Solomon, however, does the term formally come into usage by social service providers and researchers. In the context of various social protest movements, the word begins to be used increasingly in research and intervention concerning marginalized groups such as African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and people with disabilities.

Thus, early theories of empowerment that developed in the United States are anchored in a philosophy that gives priority to the points of view held by oppressed peoples, enabling them not only to express themselves, but also to gain power and overcome the domination to which they were subject (Wise 2005). Among the many inspirations for these writings on empowerment, one of the foremost is the *conscientization* approach developed by the Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published in 1968. In fact, the vast majority of works on empowerment make some reference to Freire. According to Freire (1974), in every society a small number of people exert domination over the masses, resulting in “dominated consciousness.” From the dominated consciousness present in rural Brazil, Freire wants to attain “critical consciousness.” He advocates an active teaching method that would help the individual become aware of his own situation, of himself as “Subject,” so that he may obtain the “instruments that would allow him to make choices” and become “politically conscious” (Freire, 1974). For Freire, “the role of the educator is not simply to transmit knowledge to the student, but to seek alongside him the means to transform the world that surrounds him.” (p. 9).

Freire’s concept of “developing critical consciousness,” which makes it possible for the oppressed to move from understanding to acting, did not take long to appeal to American researchers and aid workers, but as also activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in international development. Starting in the late 1960s, the dominant model that reduced development to economic growth is increasingly criticized. The failures of development policies and programs lead a growing number of researchers and non-governmental organizations to campaign for greater awareness of the social dimensions of development. On the basis of initial field evaluations of development projects, particularly by anthropologists, alternative models based on “endogenous” and “self-focused” development are proposed (Tommasoli 2004). There are a rejection of the asymmetrical principal of technology transfer, and of “top-down” planning, information flow, and decision-making. In opposition to these, “bottom-up” approaches are put forth, in which aid recipients are considered active, not passive, participants in development. The creation in 1976 of the “International Foundation for Development Alternatives” (IFDA) is an indication of the growing recognition, in the Global North as well as in the South, of the drawbacks of the “vertical” development model where “political and economic power drift away from the people” (IFDA 1980, 20). The Third System Project launched by the IFDA in 1976 is the result of demands voiced during the 1972 conference on the environment held in Stockholm and in the 1975 Dag Hammarskjöld report titled *What to Do: Alternative Development* (Friedman 1992). This project calls for an alternative development model anchored in the “local space,” and the “primary community, whether geographical or organizational” (IFDA 1980, 11). The project aims

at “improved forms of political decision-making – facilitating people’s access to power and resources both locally and nationally,” (IFDA 1980, 20) “so that they may regain their autonomous power from organized business.” (IFDA 1980, 21)

Although the idea that power held by individuals and communities should play a central role in alternative development models starts to gain traction by the late 1970s, as Friedman (1992) points out, it is still limited to a handful of academics and development professionals. Not until the mid-1980s will the term empowerment begin to be used formally in the development field.

2 – Feminist and Radical Discourse on Empowerment in the 1980s

The feminist movement in the Global South can be credited with the formal appearance of the term “empowerment” in the field of international development. A turning point in the concept’s history came in 1987 with the publication of *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women’s Perspectives* (Sen and Grown 1987). This book is the result of the reflection of feminist researchers, activists, and political leaders from the Global South, who collectively formed the network known as DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) founded in Bangalore in 1984. It introduces broad principles for a new approach to the role of women in development. This approach will soon be labeled the “empowerment approach” (Moser 1989).

Pointing to the failure of the orthodox “top-down” development model, DAWN’s publication calls for “new approaches to development” (p. 10) and discusses perspectives and methods needed by women “to begin transform gender subordination and in the process to break down other oppressive structures as well” (Sen and Grown 1987, 22). The authors are very critical of the “women and development” programs instated during the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985), and reject the premise that the primary problem facing women in the Global South is that they are not sufficiently integrated in the development process. For the DAWN feminists, economic independence and the satisfaction of basic survival needs are not sufficient means for reinforcing women’s power. Rather, this will come about through a radical transformation of the economic, political, legal, and social structures that perpetuate gender, race, and class dominations. These are the very structures that prevent the satisfaction of strategic needs related to the creation of egalitarian relationships in society. The advocates of the empowerment approach are critical of past approaches in favor of women that tended to come from the top down. They regard grassroots women’s organizations as the “catalysts of women’s visions and perspectives,” the spearheads that will bring about the structural changes needed to satisfy their strategic needs (Sen and Grown 1987, 114). In addition to legislative changes, “political mobilization, conscientization and education

for the people” are at the heart of the strategies for “the promotion of development free of all forms of oppression based on sex, class, race, or nationality” (Sen and Grown 1987, 1).

Following the release of Sen and Grown’s book, the number of feminist publications on empowerment, gender, and development explodes throughout the 1990s, particularly in Southeast Asia and Latin America. For example, in *Women’s Empowerment in South Asia: Concepts and Practices*, published in 1993, Indian researcher and activist Srilatha Batliwala defines empowerment as a process of transforming the power relationships between individuals and social groups. Batliwala argues that power relationships can only be changed through action on three different fronts: by questioning the ideologies that justify inequality (such as social systems determined by gender or caste), by changing the means of access and control of economic, natural, and intellectual resources, and by transforming the structures and institutions that reinforce and preserve existing power systems (such as family, the state, the market, education, and media). Joining Batliwala are other feminists, such as Naila Kabeer (1994), Magdalena León (1997), and Jo Rowlands (1995), who emphasize the multifaceted nature of the empowerment process for women in the Global South and developed theories on the links between empowerment and power. For these feminists, empowerment differs from holding “power of domination” over someone else (“power over”); it is more of a creative power that can be used to accomplish things (“power to”), a collective political power used by grassroots organizations (“power with”), and also a “power from within,” referring to self-confidence and the capacity to undo the effects of internalized oppression.

In Latin America, according to León (2003), the four meetings of the *Movimiento de Mujeres de Latinoamérica* which take place in Taxco, Mexico in 1987, are the setting for discussions that move beyond the discourse of victimization of women, and evoke other forms of power than that of domination by men (“power over”) to acknowledge that power can be a productive source of change. During this period, the concept of *empoderamiento* advocated by several feminist NGOs and “popular sector” activists proposes, in the tradition of Paulo Freire, efforts to provide a feminist education to poor women from slums and rural areas by means of “consciousness raising workshops” with the aim of bolstering self-confidence as well as women’s individual and collective capacities to transform oppressive social structures (Fischer 2005, Sardenberg 2008). Empowerment initiatives also proliferate in Asia and Africa among grassroots feminist organizations such as the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) and Working Women Forum in India, Gabriela in the Philippines, Proshika in Bangladesh, and the Green Belt movement in Kenya.

Though feminist literature focuses on the process of empowerment for women, most of these publications recognize that the issue of empowerment is relevant to women as well as men. In fact, in response to widening inequalities between the Global North and the Global South, and to the increase in poverty in many developing countries during the first decade of the structural adjustment policies, a growing number of intellectuals and activists begin to consider alternative development models. Several authors reject the Western development model and return to the rhetoric of participation and the “bottom-up” models of the 1970s, wherein the engine of development is the empowerment of the poor and the local community, rather than the market and the state. For example, in *Empowerment: The Politics of Alternative Development*, published in 1992, John Friedman describes poverty in the Global South as a historical process of exclusion from economic and social power, or “disempowerment,” rather than as an absence of material and financial resources. To combat poverty, Friedman advocates moving away from the dominant classical economic model in favor of an alternative model focused on people and the environment, rather than production and profit (Friedman 1992, 31). His model of empowerment is not only social and political in nature, but also relates to the psychological empowerment of individuals and households. According to Friedman, society’s unequal power structures must be rebalanced, so that the state becomes more responsible for its actions, the power held by civil society increases, and large corporations become more socially responsible (Friedman 1992, 31). Like the feminist authors, Friedman indicates that empowerment begins with the mobilization of civil society around local issues, before the movement gains ground and takes on oppression at the national and international levels.

II – THE GRADUAL ASSIMILATION OF THE TERM INTO THE VOCABULARY OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

1 – From Women’s Empowerment. . .

At first deemed too radical, the empowerment approach developed in the 1980s by the feminists of the Global South initially received no support from governments or bilateral and multilateral development agencies (Parpart 2002). Increasingly numerous and well-organized feminist NGOs pled for the term’s use, however, and by the mid-1990s, it had entered institutionalized discourse on women in development.

The International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 is one of the first UN conferences to give the concept international visibility. Though the conference is not specifically focused on women,

the action plan adopted in Cairo identifies women's empowerment and gender and sexual rights as central to population issues. Feminist activist networks such as the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC) and DAWN, which are strongly represented at the conference and at the preparatory meetings and discussions, contributed significantly toward focusing the agenda on these issues. Two chapters in the action plan explicitly address the issues of equality between the sexes and women's lack of power around the world. Among the issues discussed in these chapters relating to the strengthening of power are the following: political representation and participation, education, employment, reproductive and sexual health, violence and rape, equality in the justice system, property rights, income inequality, and the distribution of work (Halfon 2007, 71). According to Gita Sen, "Chapter 4 on women's empowerment abandons the old and neutral language of women's status for a more proactive acknowledgment of gender power relations" (Sen 1995 in Halfon 2007, 71).

The following year, the fourth United Nations conference on women takes place in Beijing. This conference marks another decisive moment for the entry of the term empowerment into UN discourse on women and development. According to official documents, the platform for action adopted at the conference constitutes "an agenda for the empowerment of women" (United Nations, 1995). The report clearly states, "women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace" (United Nations 1995, 8). Following the Beijing conference, the term is rapidly picked up by bilateral aid agencies such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), which in 1999 defines the empowerment of women as one of the eight basic principles of its policy on gender equality (Parpart 2002). By the end of the 1990s, women's empowerment had become a notion, as described by Bissiliat, that is "politically correct, and which all international organizations, at least in public communications, cannot afford to do without" (2000, 26). To "promote gender equality and empower women" is actually the third of the eight Millennium Development Goals set in 2000 by the United Nations at its Millennium summit.

2 - . . . To the Empowerment of the Poor

The increasingly virulent and widespread criticism of the social consequences of structural adjustment, the increasing poverty in many developing countries, the financial crises of 1997-1998, particularly in Asia and Latin America, the rising debt burden, and the resulting crisis of legitimacy besetting the Bretton Woods institutions lead the latter to gradually refocus their discourse on the issue of poverty. The eradication of poverty have become the credo

of all these international organizations by the end of the 1990s, as evidenced by a number of international summits, including the Millennium Summit in New York in 2000, the sustainable development summit in Johannesburg in 2002, and the Monterrey conference on financing for development in 2002. As for the World Bank, the publication of the *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty* marks the institutionalization of the term “empowerment” in this new poverty alleviation discourse.

“Empowerment” appears in the report alongside “opportunity” and “security” as the three pillars of the fight against poverty. As observed by Wong (2003), this unprecedented inclusion of the term “empowerment” evoked surprise but also some enthusiasm among many development professionals. Having long been accused of avoiding any mention of power in its discourse on poverty, or limiting it to discussion of the poor’s lack of power, the World Bank explicitly recognizes with the use of the concept, the political dimension of power (Wong 2003). According to the report, “empowerment means enhancing the capacity of poor people to influence the state institutions that affect their lives, by strengthening their participation in political processes and local decision-making” (World Bank 2001, 39). As “voicelessness and powerlessness are key dimensions of poverty » (World Bank 2001, 112), the fight against poverty thus becomes inseparable from empowerment of the poor. In keeping with the discussion of “good governance” already in vogue in the Bretton Woods institutions, the *World Development Report* goes on to suggest that fostering empowerment requires “making state institutions more responsive to the poor” (especially through democratization, decentralization, the development of associations for the poor, and collaboration among communities and local authorities).

On the heels of its development report, under the direction of Deepa Narayan in 2002 the World Bank releases a publication entitled *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook* which aims to refine and render operational the empowerment concept (Narayan, 2002). Referring to the work of Amartya Sen on individual liberties and “basic capabilities,” empowerment is defined as “the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives” (Narayan 2002, xviii). Following the publication of the sourcebook, discussion of the concept continues at the World Bank, particularly in the Poverty Reduction Group and the Empowerment Team led by Ruth Alsop. Two works devoted to measuring empowerment (Narayan, 2005) and making the concept implementable (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland, 2006) are published. These two works bear testament to a noticeable change in the perception of the term “empowerment,” now defined as “the process of enhancing an individual’s or group’s capacity to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes” (Alsop, Bertelsen, and

Holland 2006: 1). Empowerment is now no longer simply a matter of increasing the assets, capacities and capabilities of poor people and groups, enabling them to make choices (which became known as “agency of the poor”); it also depends on the way in which social relations in the broadest sense (institutional and otherwise) determine individuals’ and groups’ capacities to transform these choices into action.

The central position of empowerment in Post-Washington Consensus rhetoric on poverty reduction was soon reflected in the programs and policies implemented in the Global South. In 2005 more than 1,800 projects financed by the World Bank mentioned “empowerment” in their documentation (Aslop, Bertelsen, and Holland, 2006). Empowering the poor is also an integral part of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), which are key tools of contemporary international development policies.

III – A CONTESTED COOPTATION

The enthusiasm initially spawned among many intellectuals, activists, and development professionals by international development agencies’ adoption of the concept of empowerment did not last. The cooptation of the term in the predominant discourse drew vehement criticism directed at the concept’s definition and implementation, for the vision of power that it represents, and its goals.

1 – A Vague and Falsely Consensual Term

Though the term “empowerment” is used widely in international development language, it is in fact rarely defined (Oxaal and Baden 1997). The lack of definition is particularly striking in “women’s empowerment,” which is the term that has replaced “gender equality” and “women’s status” in many policy and program documents (Batliwala 2007). In situations where the term is defined, the definitions vary considerably from one agency to another. Sometimes, multiple conceptions of the term even exist within a single organization. As was shown in the previous section, the World Bank offered three different definitions of the term between 2001 and 2006, in three key documents addressing empowerment (World Bank 2001; Narayan 2004; Aslop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006). The term therefore remains ill-defined by international development organizations, and it has repeatedly been associated or even merged with other approaches such as democratization, decentralization, and political participation (Wong 2003).

Without any clear definition, empowerment has become a vague goal, a fashionable term that is impossible to implement in the field (Oxaal and Baden

1997; Bebbington, Lewis, Batterbury, Olson, and Siddiqi 2007). The word's extraordinary success among activists, women's associations, NGOs, but also among bilateral and multilateral development agencies is in fact due to the very different meanings employed in each setting. As emphasized by Cornwall and Brock (2005), empowerment is one of the vague, resolutely optimistic, and "just" terms which, like poverty alleviation, can only bring about consensus. By drawing on radical terminology and appropriating and reshaping a concept to reflect the preoccupations, hopes, and values of those working in the field – albeit without appearing threatening for the governments in place in poor countries (Moore 2001) – international institutions have created a catchy but hazily defined term that has become "hegemonic" and incontestable (Cornwall and Brock 2005).

2 – The Domestication of the Concept: An Individualistic, Harmonious Vision of Power

For many authors, especially feminists, the word "empowerment" has been "taken hostage" by development agencies – whether multilateral, bilateral, or private – and stripped of its original emphasis on the notion of power.¹ While the initial conception of empowerment concerns a complex and multifaceted process that focuses on the individual and collective dimensions of power, the term's cooptation in mainstream development discourse has been accompanied by a more individualizing notion of power. Empowerment has become synonymous with individual capacity, realization, and status. According to Sardenberg (2008), the concept's cooptation entailed a transition from "liberating empowerment" to "liberal empowerment," the latter hinging on the maximization of individual interests. For example, in his analysis of population policies and programs implemented following the Cairo conference, Halfon (2007) shows how the vision of women's empowerment, particularly in discussions on contraception, has focused on issues of individual choice, access, and opportunity, while avoiding any discussion of women's collective political struggles to obtain power. He argues that measures of empowerment are centered on indicators such as women's access to services, employment, and education, and put little focus on political mobilization or participation.

While the collective dimension of power is highlighted, the tools favored by international organizations to promote empowerment of the poor, such as community-based projects and, more recently, the participation of civil society and particularly "associations of the poor" brought about by PRSPs, all reflect a "romantic" vision of local and community-based power wherein internal power relations, conflict, and social inequalities are deemphasized or ignored

1. The absence of references to power is well-illustrated in the French translations of the term in official documents. These opt for the neutral terms *insertion* ('integration'), and *autonomisation* ('granting independence').

(Wong 2003; Cling, Razafindrakoto, and Roubaud 2002). Postcolonial feminists also reject the essentialism that characterizes institutional approaches to women's empowerment, which continue to view women from developing countries as a single homogeneous, monolithic category, without considering the diversity of power relations that exist within this group of women (Mohanty 1988, Ferguson 2009). Feminists argue that, because institutionalized programs for empowerment often disregard the "intersectional" nature of power, particularly the ways in which racism, social class, and patriarchy all work to articulate, reinforce, and create inequality within groups of women, these programs often only benefit the women who are the least marginalized. In Latin America, indigenous women's organizations such as the Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Rurales et Indígenas (ANA-MURI) in Chile, the Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas (CONAMI) in Mexico, and the association for black women in Brazil also criticize the total disregard for the voices of indigenous women, rural women, and women of African descent in institutionalized programs for empowerment (Bodur and Franceschet 2002; Sánchez Néstor 2005).

The "participation of the poor" in the policy formulation process – particularly within the PRSP framework – is generally reduced to its simplest form (informing and consulting the poor), and only concerns a handful of urban NGOs, which are considered the agents of project implementation rather than real policy actors (Cling, Razafindrakoto, and Roubaud 2002). As noted by Bendaña on the topic of PRSPs, "political development processes may vary, but the policy was largely determined in Washington and in local finance ministries. It is therefore not surprising that major social movements and unions have refused to participate or be included in lists of those 'consulted'" (Bendaña 2007, 115). Many autonomous-leaning feminists from Latin America and the Caribbean also condemn the "NGO-ization" of feminism and social movements, brought about by neoliberal reforms and the ballooning of international financing for gender issues, which concentrates participation mechanisms on a small group of large professionalized NGOs and marginalizes the more radical grassroots organizations (Falquet 2007, Fischer 2005).

In its individual and de-politicized form, empowerment is also often reduced in practice to its economic dimension, while the psychological and social dimensions of power are ignored (Wong 2003). This is well illustrated by the exponential increase in microcredit initiatives and "self-help groups" (SHGs), which international development organizations present as the empowerment tool *par excellence* for women and the poor. In a recent assessment of several SHGs funded by the World Bank and the government in the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat, the Indian feminist organization Nirantar (Sharma et al., 2007) shows how these initiatives are based on the widespread assumption that access to financial resources suffices to empower

women economically, and that this will automatically lead to social empowerment. The study shows an entirely different reality. Loan repayment and saving dominate SHG agendas, leaving little room for education efforts or for the “conscientization” of women. Despite greater access to credit, the control of funding remains in the hands of men, while workload and pressure to repay loans are increasing for women.

3 – A Concept at the Service of the Status Quo

While, originally, empowerment was conceived as a strategy in opposition to the mainstream top-down development model, today it is viewed by international organizations not as a mechanism for social transformation, but rather as a means to increase efficiency and productivity while maintaining the status quo (Parpart 2002). The World Bank, for example, which appears less concerned with the transformation of power relations in favor of the poor than with the creation of a propitious environment for market penetration, has imposed an “instrumental” vision of empowerment that is more interested in how the poor can contribute to development than how development can contribute to increase the power of the poor (Wong 2003, Mohan and Stokke 2000). Thus, the 2000-2001 report clearly stipulates that the goal of empowerment is to “build the assets of poor people to enable them to engage effectively in markets” (World Bank 2001, 39). In the field, the study of SHGs conducted by the Indian feminist organization Nirantar, for example, shows that, despite the official goal of women’s empowerment, the creation of SHGs in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat above all allowed a less costly way for international banks to penetrate the rural credit market (Sharma et al. 2007).

Similarly, despite the ostensible desire to encourage “participation” by the poor, and despite the emphasis placed on financing community-based development projects, many studies show that there has not been any real questioning of the top-down approach, wherein the needs and interests of women and the poor are predetermined and imposed from above. As Halfon (2007) emphasized with reference to international development agencies, “women do not take power, it is given to them.” This observation is more compatible with the top-down approaches in the Decade for Women than with the bottom-up processes advocated by the DAWN feminists. Pereira’s analysis (2008) of the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEED) implemented between 1999 and 2007 by the Nigerian government illustrates this point. Despite a new rhetoric on the empowerment of women, in reality the national strategy consisted of “managing the status quo,” recycling the old approaches to integrating women into the development process (affirmative action, legislative change, literacy programs), without ever addressing the structural factors that perpetuate domination or considering the many forms of domination experienced by Nigerian women. For international development

institutions, empowerment is not a long, bottom-up process of transformation that is difficult to measure. Rather, it is a predetermined state or result to be achieved. The indicators used to measure women's empowerment, such as, for example, the UNDP's Gender Empowerment Measure, or the "wealth" indicators of access to water or the amount of food consumed in one household used by the World Bank, do not communicate anything about the means employed to attain these results, though these are precisely the means that constitute empowerment (Agot 2008). The process of empowerment cannot be reduced to standards, objectives, or measurements decided "from above" and applied to all, as is the case with the Millennium Development Goals. The very essence of empowerment is to leave the main stakeholders in the field to define the goals and methods of action (Batliwala 2007).

The history of the word "empowerment" in the field of development is rooted in a philosophical vision that gives priority to the viewpoints of the oppressed and in a radical critique of the vertical development model in the 1970s. Today, this same concept has become perfectly integrated with the rhetoric of the most influential institutions in international development. The feminists of the Global South, and the radical activists who popularized the term in the 1980s, define empowerment as a multifaceted process of transformation from the bottom up. For them, it is a process that permits women and the poor to gain awareness, individually or collectively, of the dynamics of dominance that marginalize them, and to build up capacities to radically transform inequitable economic, social, and political structures. As international development institutions gradually coopted the term, starting in the 1990s with its discourse on women, gender, and development, and then in the 2000s in the predominant discourse on poverty reduction, empowerment slowly became a vague and falsely consensual concept. It has come to assimilate power with individual and economic decision-making, has de-politicized collective power into something seemingly harmonious, and has been employed to legitimize existing top-down policies and programs.

In light of the degree to which the word's meaning, means of implementation, and goals have all shifted, today many scholars are questioning its value (Batliwala 2007, Cornwall and Brock 2005). Should we simply reject and abandon it, and invent a new term to replace it? Or should we reinvest in it and restore its original meaning? Many researchers and activists, particularly feminists, have chosen the second option. For the feminists, it is important to protest and resist the way in which empowerment has been neutralized and thrown off track (Pereira 2008; Staudt, Rai, and Parpart 2003). Many argue that the resistance must be local as well as global, and it must be part of a larger protest against the neoliberal, patriarchal and neocolonial development model that perpetuates and reinforces inequitable power relations. Resistance has already begun in the field. Around the world, women and feminists of

the Global South are organizing associations, cooperatives, and national and international political alliances to reduce poverty, social injustice, and environmental degradation (Verschuur 2003, Blasco 2008), as well as the intersectional oppressive effects of capitalism, racism, patriarchy and heteronormativity (Fischer 2005, Falquet 2007, Sardenberg 2008, Ferguson 2009, Bodur and Franceschet 2002). While these empowerment initiatives may be quite varied and are implemented in specific cultural contexts with varying degrees of success, they all began with collective, grassroots action, engage in raising critical consciousness among individuals about their conditions, and aim to transform inequitable power relations. In this way they reconnect with the original conception of empowerment and reject the individualist, de-politicized, vertical, and “instrumental” definition of empowerment imposed by international development organizations,

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