

March 9, 2021

CanWaCH GEWG Complex Issues Brief #1

Empowerment

What is a Complex Issue?

An issue with multiple and interconnected parts, a quick fix is not possible. Instead, complex problem solving requires innovation, multiple, sometimes competing, perspectives. It involves considering the impact of the solution on the surrounding environment and individuals.

Empowerment

While there is not a universal or agreed upon definition of empowerment, a feminist or human rights perspective would roughly say it is a transformative process of self-actualisation or realizing one's potential through overcoming challenges or achieving a goal either alone or with a common interest community.

Why is Empowerment a Complex Issues?

Evolved over time: The term and concept first used by Feminists in India during the 1970s, pedagogy and international development thinkers Paulo Freire in late 60s-1970s, Robert Chambers in 1980s integrate the concept in their work, the famous global south DAWN network challenges Women in Development (WiD) liberal approach to development throughout 80s-90s. Mainstream use in development by the end of 1990s and the private sector appropriated it shortly following World Bank publications on it.

Problem: Instrumentalized by many sectors including development/humanitarian sectors, financial institutions, private sector, governments, etc. Many sectors have depoliticised the term and rendered it results and efficiency-based, linear and individual; the collective dimension is often removed.

Discussion

How can we ensure that the word empowerment does not reinforce gender inequalities and expands on organizational capacity when using the term in our work?

1. GE practitioners should critically assess the use of the term “empowerment” and advise against instrumentalist use of the term or in lofty results for complex gender-based inequalities; instead specifying “income generation” or “increased agency” in projects that do only that;
2. GE practitioners can advise communications colleagues to avoid taking credit for empowerment on our “What we do” sections on websites, this is a colonial approach suggesting we had power and granted it to someone else;
3. GE practitioners can assess organizational understanding or use of the term Empowerment for example through a survey or quiz “what does empowerment mean to you?”;
4. Empowerment should be reserved for equity seeking groups and we should be careful when using it in male engagement initiatives to ensure that its use is defined and justified (i.e. poor men in informal settlements feel empowered to stand up against GBV);

How do we put the power back in empowerment?

1. Empowerment should not be disassociated with social power or depoliticized; it should be used in initiatives that seek to challenge unequal power structures.
2. Support localisation colleagues or conversations to use Empowerment in its political sense i.e., localisation is to build power away from the source of the problem/funds.
3. GE practitioners can put the power back in empowerment by including objectives that challenge patriarchy and a participatory process for defining and measuring empowerment
4. Include GE objectives that seek to challenge and dismantle systemic discrimination and barriers

How can INGOs truly support/champion empowerment initiatives while striving for a decolonised solidarity approach to it?

1. GE practitioners can insist on participatory, localized definitions and measurement of empowerment;
2. GE practitioners in HQ can advocate for decentralized positions to transition our role to where the work is done.
3. Emphasis on process is key, for example insisting on co-design, using feminist meal or ColMEAL to define the objectives, ways of working, evaluations and results of empowerment initiatives;
4. GE practitioners can use our privileged positions to amplify local feminist agendas

Resources

In English:

- [Feminism and the Politics of Empowerment in International Development](#) (Biewener & Bacqué, 2015)
- This is an 18 page heady read that walks through the evolution of the term from a feminist perspective and critically analyzes how its grassroots origins in India have been instrumentalized in social liberal and neoliberal development functions on individualist economic fronts.
- [Women's Empowerment: What Works. Cornwall 2016](#) - A critical but hopeful 18 page read, that provides an overview of the herstory of empowerment including its instrumentalization. It goes on to demonstrate in 4 case studies how empowerment initiatives, true to feminist origins, work in different parts of the world to balance gendered power dynamics.
- [Confessions of a gender advisor: Why I avoid the word "empowerment" by Maria Faciolince](#) (posted on Oxfam's From Poverty to Power in 2020) - A short, light read specifically on women's economic empowerment that suggests the term empowerment is sometimes used too ambitiously in development and that we should try to call our work what it is.
- A very short overview from [WHO Track 7: Community Empowerment](#), on how important empowerment is for health outcomes, it includes a brief case study.
- [USAID: 2023 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy](#)
- [Gates Gender Equality Toolbox](#)
- [A "How To" Guide to Measuring Women's Empowerment: Sharing experience from Oxfam's impact evaluations](#)
- [Evidence-based Measures of Empowerment for Research on Gender Equality](#)

In French:

- <https://www.cairn.info/revue-idees-economiques-et-sociales-2013-3-page-25.htm>
- [L'empowerment des femmes dans les politiques de développement : Histoire d'une institutionnalisation controversée](#) (Calvès, 2014) - Calvès traces back the evolution of the word "empowerment" in the development sector. First used by feminists, it has since been "mainstreamed", institutionalized and at times instrumentalized thus losing its original roots and meaning.