

Beyond “Empowerment Lite”: Women’s Empowerment, Neoliberal Development and Global Justice*

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Abstract

An apparent paradox stalks the rise of women’s and girls’ empowerment. The instrumental case for “investing in women” has been persuasively and glossily made. Yet the “business case” is primarily underpinned by feminist research framed by materialist concerns with persistent *inequality* rather than “unleashing potential” and with structural transformation rather than simply the incorporation of women into labour markets underpinned and sustained by inequitable and discriminatory norms and practices. I situate some of the contradictions of the current conjuncture and explore the role of critical analysis in destabilising the gender myths and conflation that characterise what I call *empowerment lite*.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Empowerment, Gender, Global Justice.

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Introduction

An apparent paradox stalks the rise of women’s empowerment. The instrumental case for “investing in women and girls” has never been more persuasively and glossily made. We see an ever-growing parade of corporate actors, including major transnational corporations and investment banks, joint development banks, donors, NGOs and philanthrocapitalists in extolling the contributions women and girls make to development. As feminist concepts such as “agency” and “choice” have come to be put to the service of neoliberalism, the word “empowerment” has been eviscerated of controversial or challenging content (Batliwala 2007; Chakravarti 2008; Wilson 2008; Cornwall, Gideon and Wilson, 2008). Instead, the onus is on the accommodation of women and girls within existing social and gender orders: on putting them to work for development rather than making development work for *them*. And yet the arguments on which the “business case” are founded arise from over three decades of research and advocacy by feminist academics for whom gender equality and women’s empowerment are framed by a concern with persistent inequality rather than “unleashing potential”, and with structural transformation rather than simply the incorporation of women into labour markets sustained by inequitable norms and practices.

Paying close attention to the neoliberal appellation of women as the subject of empowerment, I highlight in this article the “perverse confluence”, to borrow Evelina Dagnino’s (2007) phrase, of feminist framings and mainstream women’s empowerment discourses. I situate some of the contradictions of the current conjuncture in the project of international development that began with colonialism and has come in the last few decades to be harnessed to what Pradella and Marois (2015) term “the new developmentalism”. Tracing the pathways through which the feminist focus on consciousness and collective action that animated earlier discourses of women’s empowerment have come to be eclipsed, I echo Schild’s emphasis on the “need to locate the

troubling convergence between projects for women's emancipation and neoliberal capitalism" (Pradella; Marois 2015:74), as central to the project of defining a "renewed critical feminism".

Framing Empowerment as *Empowerment Lite*

The narratives of empowerment that have come to prominence in the talk of mainstream international development institutions and corporations extolling their desire to enable women to realise their "potential" offer us *empowerment lite*, a version of empowerment pared of any confrontation with the embedded social and power relations that produce societal and material inequities. A panoply of gender myths (Cornwall; Harrison; Whitehead, 2007) are harnessed to re-present women as a precious development asset, the hard-working, community-minded, conscientious good mother whose empowerment can "lift" her family, community and country out of poverty. "Women's empowerment" heralds the promise of a host of developmental outcomes: better child health, better governance, improved economic outcomes, the holy grail of economic growth. Women become a means to securing those outcomes, instrumentalised to "deliver" for development.

Two attributes of *empowerment lite* distinguish it from other variants. One is the narrow focus on the economic dimension of empowerment and the way in which the power of money and the nature of the market come to be represented. The other is the causalities imputed to the interventions of development agencies, which appear to offer a huge amount for very little – not unusual for an industry that is constantly promising what it cannot deliver. UN Women, for example, chose the following language for its initial promotional glossy shortly after it was established in 2010:

A High Return Investment

Hopes are high for UN Women. So is the ambition and the need to take bold action. It is possible to imagine the end of discrimination against women *if the right investments are made...* (UN Women, 2011, my emphasis).

In a prominent box in UN Women’s glossy appears the following snippet from the *Global Gender Gap Report* produced for the World Economic Forum, 2010: “Countries with greater gender equality have economies that are more competitive and grow faster, as shown through research in 114 countries”. Naila Kabeer and Luisa Natali’s (2013) rigorous examination of the relationship between economic growth and gender equality scotches some of the simple equations that have come to be so lightly bandied around in these discourses. They show that economic growth does not necessarily go alongside gender equality, although gender equality can under certain conditions contribute to economic growth.

We see the harnessing of feminist findings to the didactic retelling of feminist fables that inscribe and re-inscribe, in different forms the world over, the “empowered woman” as economically autonomous. Evocative numerical fictions - women do 70% of the world’s work, women own 1% of the world’s property – are mobilised in favour of arguments for equality at which only the bravest feminist would dare balk. These figures and the arguments associated with them become travelling fictions, taking on a life of their own as they ripple from website to report to speech to policy. Investing in women, we are told over and over again, is the best investment development agencies can make.

Prominent examples of this narrative include the one presented in an infographic developed by Women Deliver as part of their 2014 *Invest in Women, Everyone Wins* toolkit. A woman figure is pictured, with the slogan “Girls and Women are the Heart of Development”, surrounded with four boxes: “improve health”, “strengthen economies”, “create sustainable nations” “reduce hunger”, “increase productivity” and “benefit families”. The infographic is lightly sprinkled with the magic dust of factoids: “when 10% more girls go to school, a country’s GDP increases by an average of 3%”, “girls and women spend 90% of their earned income on their families, while men spend only 30-40%”; “eliminating barriers to employment for girls and women could raise labour productivity by 25% in some countries”, “closing the

gender gap in agriculture could lift 100-150 million people out of hunger”.

In a Huffington Post article that typifies the public reach this narrative is garnering, entitled *Why invest in women?*, self-styled “social good enthusiast” Amy Schoenberger tells “stories of determination that arise out of these impossible challenges”.¹ Schoenberger’s account has all the ingredients of the American Dream and nothing of the structural inequalities that produce and sustain the poverty she describes women entrepreneurs seeking to leave behind.² From philanthropic foundations, to Western bilateral donors, to UN Women, the mantra of “invest in women and girls” has become a clarion call. Goldman Sachs assures us “investing in the power of women pays off”.³ As a Canadian women’s foundation describes it, flattering the would-be investor, such investment is “not only the right thing to do, it’s an intelligent investment in a better future”.⁴

Talk of “empowering women” implies power can be transmitted, and women are vessels that can be infused with it. Claims to be “empowering women” by engaging them in the market conflate power and money. The acquisition of money comes to be imbued with almost magical powers, as if once women had their own money, they could wave a wand and wish away the social norms, affective relationships and embedded institutions constraining them.

¹http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amy-schoenberger/why-invest-in-women_b_3245862.html

²http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amy-schoenberger/why-invest-in-women_b_3245862.html

³ <http://www.goldmansachs.com/citizenship/10000women/news-and-events/10kw-progress-report/progress-report-full.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.canadianwomen.org/why-invest-in-women-and-girls>

Visions of Empowerment

Women’s empowerment would, at face value, seem to be an odd vehicle for the development industry to use to pursue the project begun in the era of structural adjustment of the 1980s. Taking a closer look, the logic becomes clear. Valued as much for their role as consumers in stoking the engine of economic growth as for their labour in the low-paid precarious jobs created by globalising export-oriented industries and their role in permeating hitherto unreached markets, “investing in women and girls” becomes a development panacea. Ginger Boyd points out three dimensions of this move to target women as: “1) debtors in the expansion of credit markets; 2) exploits in the expansion of consumer markets, and 3) the ‘untapped resource’ for cheap labour” (2016:146). As Nancy Fraser puts it: “Disorganized capitalism turns a sow’s ear into a silk purse by elaborating a new romance of female advancement and gender justice” (2009:210).

Empowerment lite does not only sound like the real thing. Its proponents also mimic some of the strategies feminist organizations and movements have used to support women to empower themselves. Second wave feminist consciousness-raising groups, for example, were all about bringing women together to critically reflect on and analyse their lives, as crucibles for consciousness and collective action. *Empowerment lite* borrows the principle of women’s groups, but uses them as a means to secure collateral for loans, providing the social sanctions that encourage repayment, sharing business tips and providing moral support to women as they struggle with the vagaries of the market, debt and domestic tensions.

Batliwala (2007) charts the dissipation of the transformational promise of the notion of empowerment as it came to be assimilated by international development agencies. She reflects on a report of a large-scale empowerment initiative in India, from 1993, in which she defined empowerment as,

a process that shifts social power in three critical ways: by challenging the ideologies that justify social inequality (such as gender or caste), by changing prevailing patterns of access to and control over economic, natural and intellectual resources, and by transforming the institutions and structures that reinforce and sustain existing power structures (the family, state, market, education, media, etc.) (2007:xx).

Batliwala's account goes on to reflect on how completely this approach to power came to dissolve as development agencies took up empowerment as a development objective. In its place, we see the rise of an individualised notion of self-empowerment through the market. Cecilia Sardenberg (2008) draws on the work of Ann Ferguson to make a useful distinction between "liberating" and "liberal" approaches to empowerment. Writing of "liberal empowerment", she notes

the focus is on individual growth, but in an atomistic perspective, that is, on the notion of the rational action of social actors based on individual interests (Romano, 2002, *apud* Sardenberg, 2010:234).

It is an approach that de-politicises the process of empowerment by taking power out of the equation. Instead, the focus is on technical and instrumental aspects that can supposedly be "taught" in special training courses, for example (2008:19).

Liberal empowerment seeks simply to accommodate women within the market without disrupting existing social and power inequities. Liberating empowerment, in contrast, places power relations at the heart of a "process by which women attain autonomy and self-determination, as well as an instrument for the eradication of patriarchy, a means and an end in itself", in order "to question, destabilise and, eventually, transform the gender order of patriarchal domination" (2010:235). "Such an approach", Sardenberg continues, "is consistent with a focus on women's

organising, on collective action, though not disregarding the importance of the empowerment of women at a personal level” (2010:235). This is evident from feminist writings from the 1990s, such as the work of Naila Kabeer (1994) and Gita Sen (1997).

For the feminists who advanced the notion of women’s empowerment in this period, the very idea that two decades later they would witness leading figures from major transnational corporations and investment banks extolling the virtues of women enjoying greater economic autonomy and exercising their agency would have seemed like a bizarre fantasy. After struggling for many years for recognition and resources, women’s rights advocates are rightly wary of derailing what appears to be a response to their demands. What makes *empowerment lite* so difficult to contest is precisely the hold it has on the imaginations of the development agencies whose dollars and pounds are so badly needed by women’s organizations and movements. Yet the paradoxes of *empowerment lite* may make it a poisoned chalice.

Empowerment as a Buzzword: discursive processes

The term “empowerment” has a long and curious history. While its use by social movements echoes long-cherished ideals of the struggle for equality and justice, it has been popularised in recent decades as synonymous with a version of self-improvement that speaks less to Enlightenment ideals than to the individualism and consumerism of late modernity. Search for the term “empowerment” on Google and you are as likely to be greeted with a profusion of corporate consultants and Christian evangelists as with talk about improving women’s lives. Little books like *Successful Empowerment in a Week* (Morris and Willcox, 1995) feature alongside adverts beckoning consumers to “empower themselves” with the latest designer sunglasses. Small wonder that for some, empowerment is a term so debased that it is time to consign it to the dustbin and move on. Srilatha Batliwala speaks of the:

... distortion of good ideas and innovative practices as they are lifted out of the political and historical context in which they evolved and rendered into formulas that are “mainstreamed”. This usually involves divesting the idea of its cultural specificity, its political content, and generalizing it into a series of rituals and steps that simulate its original elements, but lacking the transformative power of the real thing (2007:89).

Three important points emerge from Batliwala’s analysis. The first is the extent to which all ideas have their genesis and find their meaning in relation to a particular set of cultural and political referents. This focuses our attention on what happens as these ideas travel and are translated into utterly different cultural, social and political contexts, and transmuted into other languages, other idioms, and other domains of discourse. The second is the question of the political content of a concept: the *ideological* projects it can serve to advance. As Jonathan Fox suggests, a common property of a number of today’s development buzzwords is what he calls their “trans-ideological” (2007:245) character. Trans-ideological properties are not only useful. They are also necessary to the process of enlistment that can build a sufficiently extensive discourse coalition to shift policy and practice (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). But, as Evelina Dagnino (2007) remarks, the capacity of concepts to transit through different ideologies holds its own contradictions and dangers.

What has happened to empowerment is similar to the tale of other development buzzwords (Cornwall, 2007b). Ernesto Laclau (1990) describes how when words are placed together into “chains of equivalence”, their meaning becomes contingent on the other words in the chain. Placing “empowerment” into a chain of equivalence alongside “economics”, “markets”, “credit”, “growth” lends it very different signifying qualities than when it is placed alongside “struggle”, “conflict”, “rights” and “power”. The sheer discursive power of mainstream development institutions means the chains of equivalence they construct and disseminate profoundly affect the way these terms come to be read, and what

is done with them. And from there, we find other discursive effects. Moscovici’s (1984) concept of “anchoring” makes sense of some of this: the anchoring of policies in what is familiar lends them a palatability that can be a key factor in their acceptability. And yet at the same time as the incorporation of terms within established narratives makes them sound safe, it also neutralises them.

Batliwala speaks of the transformation of women’s empowerment into a series of rituals that simulate the ‘real thing’ but lack its transformative qualities. This is at the very crux of the ambivalence some feminists have about the term: that what is spoken about as women’s empowerment is such a departure from the “real thing”, it has become a travesty. But there is another angle on this. If “empowerment” has become a simulacrum, in Baudrillard’s (1994) sense, what might it take to recuperate some of the elements it once had, to re-animate it, breathe fire and life back into it as a political concept and contest its domestication in the service of neo-liberalism? What would it take to lift it out of the current “chain of equivalence”, in Laclau’s (1990) terms — one that aligns it with the language of neoliberal marketization and the aspiration to produce a legion of individual entrepreneurs whose consumption can drive the expansion of corporate markets and profits —and reposition it within the language of global, social and gender justice?

A first step is to explore the framing of the term and its qualities in more depth. One line of influence can be traced back to the uptake of the women’s empowerment agenda by the World Bank, alongside broader moves to institutionalise community empowerment and participation to serve neoliberal economic and second-generation governance reform goals. In 2005, the bank developed a brilliant marketing slogan to accompany the promotion of *empowerment lite*: “gender equality is smart economics”.⁵ “Smart Economics” marketed “empowerment” as the new development panacea. In the newsletter of the

⁵ <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources/GAPNov2.pdf>

International Monetary Fund, Mayra Buvinic and Elizabeth King offer a set of associations that, through a series of implied causalities, creates a narrative making poverty reduction a direct outcome of women's empowerment:

... greater gender equality can...help in the battle to reduce poverty (MDG1) and promote growth—directly by boosting women's participation in the labour force and increasing both productivity and earnings, and indirectly through the beneficial effects of women's empowerment on children's human capital and well-being. The empirical evidence on these benefits is compelling. Whether self-employed or earning wages, working women help their households escape poverty. Women are more likely than men to face constraints to access credit markets, but when they are the direct users of credit rather than men, the impact of credit on several measures of household welfare is greater. When women have more schooling, the returns flow not only to themselves but to the next generation as well. And when they have greater control over resources in the family, they are more likely than men to allocate more resources to food and to children's health care and education, a finding from as diverse a set of countries as Bangladesh, Brazil, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Indonesia, and South Africa. Indeed, studies have shown that giving women more access to education, to markets (labour, land, credit), and to new technology, and giving them greater control over household resources often translates into greater well-being for themselves and their families. For women, their families, and their communities, this is smart economics (Buvinic and King, 2007:6).

There seems, at least at first sight, little to argue with here. The smart economist, however, might look beyond this chain of causalities to the bigger macro-economic picture. Here the story is not quite so rosy. As Mercedes de la Rocha (2007) argues, the rise of a narrative that applauds poor women as those who are able to lift their families out of poverty demands ever more from them, as

heroic survivors. Liberalizing reforms in countries that once had universal provision of basic social services have transformed health and education into consumer goods rather than a right of citizenship. Changes in the labour market may have created new opportunities for women. But often this has been through diminishing existing social rights and marginalising the institutions that might otherwise seek to protect workers’ rights, creating ever more fragile and precarious working conditions for working women. The informalization of labour leaves those new female entrants into labour markets vulnerable to the vagaries of the market, and to exploitation (Razavi, Danloy and Pearson 2004).

Women appear in the neoliberal empowerment narrative as wives and mothers, more able to negotiate with their husbands and provide for their children as a result of greater access to education and employment opportunities. They become, in effect, instruments for enhancing children’s “human capital” and family wellbeing. Women’s empowerment, it seems, contributes towards maintaining a residual model of the family in which women are those who do the caring, and make good for men’s inability or unwillingness to act the role of provider by generating resources to feed and educate their children, as well as doing the bulk of the work of social reproduction. (We used to talk about this as a double or triple burden. Now it is called “empowerment”).

For all the encouragement to enter the labour market, empowered women may find no relief in expectations that they will provide unpaid care work at home. As Kate Bedford (2007) suggests, there’s little in neoliberal empowerment programmes that offers working women any real help with the chores or the childcare. Indeed, there is little scope in discourses of women’s empowerment in international development for bringing into question the additional work required of women; nor is there any room to think through the implications of the reconfiguration of gender relations within and beyond the household, especially in relation to men’s under-employment in an increasingly fragile labour market. The possibility that women might use their

independence to free themselves from unhappy and violent relationships with men is nowhere to be seen.

The narrative of female industriousness appears again and again in the policies and promotional materials of international development agencies, whether those of official aid or international NGOs. An example is Oxfam's work with the Mars Chocolate corporation. A promotional blurb on the Mars' website tell us:

The company understands that women invest significantly greater proportions of their disposable income in family and community well-being. Mars Chocolate has learned that the economic empowerment of women is not only a tool for gender equity in its own right, but that it also has a powerful multiplier effect for the broader well-being of children, families and communities.⁶

The Mars-Oxfam *Vision for Change* program is oriented – as are a legion of other corporate initiatives – at training women in “developing local enterprises... which benefits both the nutritional needs of families as well as the income of women who sell surplus production in local markets”.

There's a satisfying sense of harmony to the narrative on women's empowerment that emerges from these sources. Empowering women is good for everyone. It's good for children. It's good for families and communities. It's good for economic growth and poverty reduction. Empowered women do not make choices that are not part of their script. They do not step out of line. Nor do they rock the boat politically. Far from exercising their own prerogative, women are portrayed as hard-working maternal altruists, devoted to their families and communities. *Empowerment lite* fosters compliant conformity rather than promoting reversals of

⁶<http://www.mars.com/global/press-center/press-list/news-releases.aspx?SiteId=94&Id=3990>. Mars has net sales of \$33bn as of this article, published in March 2013.

power relations, resistance or other manifestations of agency that challenge the status quo (Wilson, 2008). Indeed, for all the talk about “agency” accompanying the promotion of *empowerment lite*, what women are actually supposed to do when they’re “empowered” is to seamlessly fit within a social order in which they selflessly and cheerfully consent to the very restrictive social norms that for decades have been the focus of most varieties of feminist activism (Chakravarti 2008, Wilson 2008). Srilatha Batliwala and Deepa Dhanraj evoke the kind of woman that becomes the privileged subject of the neoliberal social imaginary:

The neoliberal rules for the new woman citizen... are quite clear: improve your household’s economic condition, participate in local community development (if you have time), help build and run local (apolitical) institutions like the self-help group; by then, you should have no political or physical energy left to challenge this paradigm (2004:13).

Sylvia Chant points out

the thinking behind ‘smart economics’ goes back until at least the 1980s, when, in the context of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs), it became strikingly obvious that women, individually and collectively, were picking up the shortfalls of SAP-induced tendencies such as rising male under- and under-employment, the declining purchasing power of household incomes and cutbacks in the public provision of services. Through women’s efforts, both in the form of increased participation in remunerative activities, usually of an informal nature, and intensified unpaid labour at household and community levels, household members were ‘cushioned’ to a substantial degree from the worst effects of 1980s and 1990s neoliberalism (2012:199).

Women living in poverty are facing ever more arduous and difficult lives in the current conjuncture. Most live in contexts where male under- and unemployment has created further fragilities in household welfare with little shift in men’s engagement

in the unpaid work of social reproduction. They have been squeezed in terms of access to welfare benefits, state services, and ever more insecure employment markets (Kabeer 2011; Sholkamy 2010). In her account of why women's economic empowerment is important, Mary Esther Iskenderian from Women's World Banking captures quite how much is now expected of women:

Women need a way to save for school fees and to reduce economic shocks that can result in removing a child from school. They need access to health care for the whole family because often, a woman will make sure everyone else in the family is healthy before tending to her own needs. Women need loans for small businesses or the ability to save for building a business. In short, they need basic financial services. For women who have been shut out of the formal economy, these services empower them to become self-directed, economic agents for the first time.⁷

What some might still regard as the obligations of the state thus become women's "needs" – such as the "need" to save for fees at the schools that no longer offer free education, for treatment in clinics that fail to offer free health services. Women and girls are required to become "self-directed, economic agentes" as part of a vision in which there is no alternative to having to meet their own needs. *Empowerment lite* becomes in this context a means of shunting burdens onto women. Men and boys are absent: their only role in the story is as bit players who are a source of potential disruption, hazard and harm (Cornwall, 2014).

The New Mantra: Uplift through Economic Growth

Empowerment lite has come to be synonymous not with mobilisation to claim social and economic rights or hold

⁷<http://www.bsr.org/en/our-insights/blog-view/womens-world-banking-what-womens-empowerment-means-to-me>, April 3, 2013

governments to account for their commitments under international treaties such as CEDAW, but with projects that enlist women in small-scale business activities. The *Trickle-Up* microfinance initiative is one of hundreds of such examples. It describes how

weaving, haircutting, tailoring, raising pigs, chickens, and goats, selling tortillas, hair clips, eggs, empanadas, rice pancakes, couscous, and ice cream are just a few of the many activities women chose that allow them to not only earn more money, but take the first step in transforming their lives.⁸

Promoting women’s entrepreneurialism has become a growth industry in itself, backed by organisations as diverse as OECD and global consultants like McKinsey. The OECD’s 2014 report, *Enhancing Women’s Economic Empowerment through Entrepreneurship and Business Leadership in OECD Countries*, opens by stating:

Gender equality is both a moral and economic imperative. Closing the gender gap must be a central part of any strategy to create more sustainable and inclusive economies and societies. It is about fairness and equity, the realisation of individual aspirations, economic empowerment around the world and growth.⁹

McKinsey’s *The Business of Empowering Women: Where, Why, and How* contains subsections headed “women matter”, and describes gender diversity as a “corporate performance driver”.¹⁰ In another example, in promoting their 2016 report, *Women’s Empowerment in Global Value Chains: A Framework for Business*

⁸ <http://www.trickleup.org/poverty/women.cfm>

⁹ http://www.oecd.org/gender/Enhancing%20Women%20Economic%20Empowerment_Fin_1_Oct_2014.pdf

¹⁰ <https://mckinseyonociety.com/the-business-of-empowering-women/>

Action, the NGO Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) affirms the narrative:

Women are an essential part of global value chains. As raw material producers, small-business owners, executives, retail workers, and consumers, women help businesses succeed and grow. Yet women continue to face barriers to achieve their full potential at work, in the marketplace, and in many other aspects of life. This not only holds women back, it impairs the growth of businesses, economies, and communities. Empowering women in global value chains presents a unique opportunity to create business value and strengthen women's health, rights, and well-being.¹¹

The vision for women's economic empowerment, however, goes beyond this. In a September 2014 speech in Japan, IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde provides us with the macro rationale:

The great Japanese writer and feminist, Raicho Hiratsuka, once famously wrote: "In the beginning, woman was truly the sun. An authentic person". Today more than ever, the global economy needs precisely this kind of radiant sun—to provide light and nourishment. To provide healing. To dry out the swamps of poverty and unrest. The reason is obvious. Seven years into the worst global financial crisis since the Great Depression, the recovery is still too tepid and too turbulent. And even after the crisis abates, we will face grave challenges to growth—as a slower "new normal" sets in, as populations age, and as economic disparities increase. Given these challenges, we will need all the economic growth, dynamism and ingenuity we can get in the years ahead. *Thankfully, a key part of the solution is staring us right in the face—unleashing the economic power*

¹¹<https://www.bsr.org/en/our-insights/report-view/womens-empowerment-in-global-value-chains-women-deliver-report>

of women. Bringing the world’s largest excluded group into the fold.¹²

Against the backdrop of the development industry’s persistent side-lining, ignoring and indeed undermining of women’s economic pursuits, this enthusiasm for investing in women seems all the more remarkable. And at first sight it seems to respond to feminist demands to pay more attention to women. But *is this* what they demanded? Or, as Hania Sholkamy (2010) puts it in the title of an article: “how can raising chicks change patriarchy?”. But *empowerment lite* is far distant from the transformative promise of the materialist feminist agenda that gave rise to Gender and Development. The incorporation of the female factor into the further expansion of neoliberalism, through *empowerment lite*, offers little prospect of unsettling the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a small principally male, elite. Nor does it offer much prospect of making inroads into transforming the structural basis of gender orders that produce and sustain inequalities of all kinds.¹³ Rather, women are enthusiastically invited into the neoliberal project, their value to the economy as service providers who combine unpaid social reproduction with servicing the expansion of consumer markets. Through virtuous promotion of consumption, they drive a cycle of corporate profit with benefits to the brand image as “socially conscious” for those who take part (Calkin 2015; Prügl and True, 2014): what Roberts (2014) dubs “transnational business feminism”.

¹² <http://www.imf.org/external/np/speeches/2014/091214.htm>, emphasis mine.

¹³ Although see the efforts of Dalberg, the Oak Foundation, ICRW and Witter, with their 2014 report, *Business Case for Women’s Economic Empowerment* to argue for the value and need to ground investments in women’s economic empowerment in a broader human rights based approach that takes these structural barriers seriously. http://dalberg.com/documents/Business_Case_for_Womens_Economic_Empowerment.pdf

A classic example of this, extolled by Ernst & Young in their 2014 report *The Beauty of Success: Going for Growth in the Household and Personal Care Sector*, is Unilever's *Project Shakti* in India. Described as a "gem for Unilever", Project Shakti recruits women as small-scale entrepreneurs who peddle sachets of shampoo and other petty self-care commodities; in doing so, they provide Lever Brothers with capillary reach into untapped rural consumer markets. Shakti has grown to a huge operation: 65,000 Shakti Entrepreneurs form a distribution network that spans more than 165,000 villages and reaches over four million rural households.¹⁴ The project does not only generate incomes for women, it also seeks to teach them about health and hygiene and expand the use of products women can use to keep themselves and their families clean.¹⁵ Thekkudan and Tandon note how the name for the agents, *Shakti Amma* ("empowered mothers"), evokes "an image of the woman entrepreneur as mother figure" (2009:16). Their study shows how for a small number of women, the program offers a pathway into politics, but for most, the demands of their businesses kept them so thoroughly occupied they had little time for engagement with such things. They note:

Although Project Shakti has led to a strengthening of individual identity for almost all, an identity formation among the Shakti Amma as a collective engaging with global economic processes has been neither promoted nor developed as a result of such engagements (Thekkudan; Tandon, 2009:21).

¹⁴ <http://www.hul.co.in/sustainable-living-2014/casestudies/Casecategory/Project-Shakti.aspx>. The program was extended in 2010 to include the husbands or brothers of the women agents, who are tasked with selling goods on bicycle rather than, like the women agents, on foot. There are now some 50,000 of these 'Shanktimaans'.

¹⁵ <http://healthmarketinnovations.org/program/project-shakti>

This kind of empowerment was not, it seems, Unilever’s intent; from a closer look at some of the financial details, we learn this initiative has generated a 20% boost in profits for their Asia operation.¹⁶ Thekkudan and Tandon reflect that while the Shakti Ammas they interviewed spoke of how contributions to the family income had enhanced the feelings of self-worth of some of them, and produced greater respect and recognition in their communities, as individuals,

... empowerment as freedom of choice and action to shape one’s life, along with control over resources and decisions, is not an evident result of the project... Increasing the capacity of women to purchase Fair and Lovely [a popular skin-whitening cream] does not translate into the automatic empowerment of women purported by advertisements that suggest it leads to greater success in professional and personal lives (Thekkudan; Tandon, 2009:28-9).

And, they go on to note, women’s entrepreneurial engagement has also had its costs in terms of collective empowerment:

To some extent Project Shakti has undermined existing collective approaches and collective forms of self-organisation as counter-hegemonic alternatives. Some SHGs have lost their strong leaders to Project Shakti. More involved in promoting the dealership to achieve the targets set by HUL, many Shakti Amma are not active in local politics, or inclined to deal with larger social issues that were often taken up by the SHGs. The actual running of dealerships has often been in the hands of the men. While HUL sought empowerment of women through Project Shakti, it may have, to a certain extent, perpetuated the

¹⁶ Pradeep Kashyap, “India’s low-cost path to rural masses offers rich rewards”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EElykA1JPTA>

existing gender relations in the larger society (Thekkudan; Tandon, 2009:30-31).

Such “empowerment” interventions can leave women little better off in terms of all the other constraints they face in their lives, as well as failing to have any effect at all on the structural power relations producing the inequities they face in the first place. An example in point is the sorry story of how the rapid expansion in micro-finance enterprises in Andhra Pradesh led to escalating debts amongst those who lacked the means to repay the loans or keep up with outrageously high interest rates, and gave rise to a wave of suicides before the State acted to shut these businesses down.¹⁷

From Collective Consciousness to the Self-Actualizing Individual

The ways in which women’s empowerment is conceived in contemporary mainstream corporate, charitable and donor discourses, as I have argued in this article, is as a process through which an individual becomes better equipped with the means to navigate a marketplace of opportunities and choices. This is conceived as a process of individuation through which women gain a clearer sense of themselves, and their potential, as well as the means – skills, assets, resources – to be able to enter the marketplace and generate the economic means with which to provide for their families, and become self-sustaining economic citizens. Infused with liberal individualism, this model of empowerment relocates what was once conceived as a collective

¹⁷ As several commentators have pointed out (see, for example, Yerramilli 2013) this is not an uncomplicated tale; the politics of micro-finance in the state – and indeed the Micro Finance Institutions Ordinance in October 2010, which substantially limited the growth and operation of MFIs in Andhra Pradesh – needs to be set against the modernizing aspirations of its ambitious Chief Minister and the competition MFIs posed for state-sponsored self-help groups.

process in the self-actualizing individual. Srilatha Batliwala observes:

... in keeping with the insidious dominance of the neoliberal ideology and its consumerist core, we see the transition of empowerment out of the realm of societal and systemic change and into the individual – from a noun signifying shifts in social power to a verb signalling individual power, achievement, status (Batliwala, 2007:xx).

Engaging critically with Nancy Fraser’s ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’ in *New Left Review*, Verónica Schild (2015) draws attention to the importance of looking beyond the absorption and institutionalisation of the narratives of liberal feminism. Indeed, as others have pointed out, Fraser’s account addresses an ethnocentric, if highly influential, form of liberal feminism that has assumed its own globalising reach rather than encompass the plurality of actually existing feminisms in locales outside the United States (Aslan; Zeynep Gambetti, 2011; Luxton; Sangster, 2013). Schild’s diagnosis of the problem with “gender-development” projects in Latin America highlights the crucial role of collective consciousness raising and action in social change, and the neglect of this by mainstream women’s empowerment initiatives:

Rather than creating collective spaces where women could articulate their own demands... institutionalized gender-development projects tended to treat women as isolated individuals, with problems that can be solved through forms of differential clientelization (Schild, 2015:7).

Schild goes on to note: “this is not simply a case of feminist ideals being ‘resignified’, but of feminist practitioners *actively seeking out* the patronage of neoliberal powers” (2015:7). And, it might be added, it is those very “neoliberal powers” that have put their money into “investing in women” at a time when the traditional sources of funds for women’s movement building and

organising have continued to shrink (Miller et al. 2013). The process of “clientelization” described by Schild is a central feature of mainstream economic empowerment narratives in which the woman features as a self-actualising individual who, through the market, acquires new-found “capabilities” and “choices”.

It is clear, however, for all that *empowerment lite* focuses on the self-actualising individual, the attention is insistently on what women and girls are able to do for *others*; their agency is implicitly relational, wedded to their families and to the vital role scripted for them as altruistic mothers. Neoliberal empowerment discourse may talk about enabling women to make choices, but it is pretty clear certain choices are normatively expected of them (Fried, 2008). The object of uplift is implicitly the good woman, one who conforms to gender and sexual norms, and dutifully uses her industry and income to look after others. Woe betide the micro-entrepreneur who spends her gains on clothes and make-up, rather than paying her children’s school fees or repaying her husband’s debts – even if, as an anthropologist could demonstrate, these kinds of expenditures may be vital for what economists like to call ‘social capital’.

When women exercise the *wrong* sort of choices in their quest for incomes, they may find themselves on the receiving end of another arm of the development industry: forcibly “rescued” and “rehabilitated”. Sex worker rights activist-scholars tell apocryphal tales of sex workers’ encounters with those who wish to “empower” them (Ahmed;Seshu 2012). One such story recounted by Nandinee Bandhopadhyay is worth citing here, as a tragi-comic classic. She tells of a transgender sex worker, Revati:

The government wanted to rehabilitate her, so they bought her a cow so she could do dairy farming. She was living in the city at the time, so she had to rent a place where she could accommodate a cow. This meant she had to have sex with her landlord to persuade her to let her keep the cow. After a while, she realised it was not quite feasible to look after a cow in the city. So she moved to a village. It was tough. There were fewer clients, and she had very little

income. So, in order to make enough money to feed the cow, she had to trek into the city to find enough clients. Then the cow needed to be impregnated so she had to sleep with even more clients just so she could pay for the cow to have sex. In the end, she returned the cow... (Seshu; Bandhopadhyay, 2009:15).

Reclaiming empowerment

Hegemonies are never completed projects: they are always in contention. There are always cracks and contradictions - and therefore opportunities (Hal, Massey; Rustin, 2013:19).

Women’s and girls’ empowerment has been co-opted and put to the service of a variant of neoliberalism that is as much about the “rolling-out” of new institutions and the production of new subjectivities as about the “rolling-back” of the state (cf. Peck; Tickell, 2002). But the very discursive slipperiness that has made the term so appealing to such a diversity of actors is a rich source of contradiction – and opportunity. Foucault (1979:101-2) highlighted the “strategic reversibility” of power through discourse:

There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy.

Development discourse is a terrain of constant contention. Empowerment is amongst the most disputed of development’s “essentially contested concepts” (Gallie, 1956). And the domains inhabited by the development industry are those in which language matters. Words make worlds. As Nancy Fraser (2009:117) writes

Having watched the neoliberal onslaught instrumentalize our best ideas, we have an opening now in which to reclaim them. In seizing this moment, we might just bend the arc of the impending transformation in the direction of justice – and not only with respect to gender.

Reclaiming empowerment as a feminist strategy calls for reframing it in ways that re-inscribe a concern with changing the structural power relations that produce inequality and oppression. We need a sharpening of tools and concepts for analysis, and the use of disruptive discursive tactics that can prise apart the popularising narratives that so powerfully harness common sense and emotional investments in service of contradiction, to paraphrase Stuart Hall. This in turn requires the repositioning of empowerment in ways that can counteract the neutralisation, as the term has come to be appropriated, of its association with radical shifts in power relations.

While Fraser rightly points to the perverse confluence between feminist and neoliberal *anti-étatisme* there is in these very elements of feminist practice – especially in the movement-building and collective action that has been so powerfully part of much feminist activism in the global south – an entry point for de-fusing the elements that the neoliberal embrace of women's empowerment has sutured together. Popular education and feminist consciousness-raising practices are integral to autonomous feminist activism.¹⁸ If a pervasive feature of the current conjuncture is the coming together of neoliberal marketization, narratives of self-reliance and the triumph of the individual subject, the versions of empowerment mobilised by many feminist movements in the global South have the capacity to disrupt precisely through their mantra of the primacy of collective action and consciousness-

¹⁸ See contributions, including these two cases by Meena Seshu and Colette Solomon, to Naila Kabeer, Ratna Sudarshan and Kirsty Millward eds. *Organising Women in the Informal Economy: Beyond Weapons of the Weak*, London, Zed Books, 2013.

raising in contesting embedded and naturalised inequalities. These and other modes of resistance and resignification open up the possibility of reclaiming empowerment as a process of transformation of power structures and relations.

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