

# Chapter 7

## From Power to Women's Empowerment: The Missing Links



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**Abstract** This chapter explores the instrumentalization of women's empowerment in agricultural research for development, with particular attention on critically examining how the concept of empowerment has become understood as an externalized process that can be bestowed on women through production-oriented interventions. The chapter explores multiple manifestations of power and depicts their occurrence through experiences of women and men farmers in the Andean region. It analyzes how the use of empowerment has deviated from building agency and disrupting power dynamics, highlighting the need for a feminist and transformative conceptualization and operationalization of empowerment in the agricultural sector.

### 7.1 Introduction

When researchers, policy makers and development practitioners in the agricultural sector use the word empowerment to refer to research and development goals, the underlying assumptions may vary significantly from the way the concept of empowerment evolved through philosophical, social, political, and feminist thinking.

Analyzing the adequacy of multiple accounts of power is no easy task. If we focus on feminist conceptions of power, we see that many of them have been reconstructed out of debates on critical topics such as pornography, motherhood, marriage, sexual harassment, care, and equality (Allen 1998). However, few accounts have analyzed the conceptualization and manifestation of power and empowerment in technically entrenched masculine topics such as agricultural research and development.

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This chapter will walk us through the evolution of the term empowerment, often questioned for its instrumental use. It will start by analysing the concept of power as it emerges from philosophical and political thinking, and how it relates to concepts introduced by feminist scholars. Finally, using diverse lines of thinking, a holistic definition of empowerment is presented to visualize how the agricultural sector has focused its attention on specific aspects that address an incomplete image of empowerment, divorced from its political and transformative nature.

## 7.2 Disentangling the Definition of Power

Modern notions of power began in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nicolo Machiavelli in his famous book “The Prince” describes power as a resource and analyses the strategies and management of power (Machiavelli et al. 2006). A century later Thomas Hobbes, in “The Leviathan” represents the causal thinking of power as a hegemony and conceptualizes it as the means to obtain some future apparent good; classifying it as inherent and acquired (Hobbes and Tuck 1996). These two contrasting representations, the first focuses on the mechanisms of power and the second visualizes it through a moral perspective, continue to be the two main routes of thought about power (Clegg 1989).

In the latter half of the Twentieth Century, the definitions of power advanced focusing on it as a relational phenomenon, reflecting the relationship between the powerful and the powerless. Max Weber linked power with concepts of authority and law, visualizing power as a factor of domination which he defines as *‘the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance...’* (Weber et al. 1979). This definition was the cornerstone of an interpretation of power as ‘power-to’, meaning ‘power to accomplish some purpose’. Robert Dahl located the discussion of power inside the boundaries of a community. Within this framework, power is exercised by particular individuals to prevent others from doing what they would rather do, or to follow the preferences of those who possess the power (Dahl 1971). This perception of power is the origin of what later has been called ‘power-over’. These two definitions of power (power-to vs power-over) have been central to an on-going debate amongst social scientists.

A series of models and theories have emerged to explain the nature and occurrence of power. Three dimensions are often presented to explain the different ways in which power is manifest. The first manifestation of power, also referred to as the “overt face of power”, is an intuitive idea (Dahl 1971) that considers action over decision making. The second dimension or the “covert face of power”, touches on the prevention of decision making (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). The third dimension is what Lukes calls the ‘latent dimension’ that refers to the implantation in people’s minds of interests contrary to their own good (Lukes 2005). In the same line of thinking, John Gaventa in his power cube recognizes three degrees of visibility of power, distinguishing between visible, hidden and invisible manifestations of power (Gaventa 2006). This three dimensional perspective is challenged by Michel

Foucault who systematically rejects the existence of power as a source from which actions stem and pictures only an infinite series of practices, thus decentralizing the concept and extrapolating it from sociology to all fields of the social sciences and humanities (Foucault and Faubion 2002). Even though the roots of power as a concept are grounded in political theory and philosophy, its importance has gradually been established in contemporary sociological discourse.

More recent definitions of power and their related theories have continued to evolve in search of models that explain the way power processes are effected in society. For example, Gaventa's model of power and powerlessness that emerges from Lukes's tri-dimensional view and seeks to explain situations of social inequality, uncovering the direct and indirect ways in which social powerlessness is created and maintained (Gaventa 1980). Giddens' theory of structuration is a dialectic vision of power where all human actions are at least partly predetermined by the varying rules of a specific context (Giddens 1984). Both lines of thinking show an evolution of the concept of power. The debate reflects new dimensions of an analysis that began in the political sciences, but has since entered vigorously into other social sciences.

### ***7.2.1 Mainstream Definitions of Power***

There are two main models or definitions of power with a clear division established between 'power-to' and 'power-over'.

#### **7.2.1.1 Power to**

'Power-to' is defined as the capacity to have an effect. It is about agency and is regarded as generative or productive power which creates new possibilities and actions (Rowlands 1997). The definition of 'power-to' views power as ever-expanding energy (Hartsock 1985; Parsons 1963). It uses an image of human development and considers power to be infinite and innocuous in its effect over others. The danger with this perspective is that it can suggest that power is a personal attribute (Nelson and Wright 2001), thus placing responsibility for powerfulness and powerlessness on the individual. This definition of power informs the capability approach of Amartya Sen, who asserts that people are not free when they do not have power to make choices about their lives (Sen 1995). Therefore, 'power-to' focuses mainly on behaviour (Lukes 2005) of decision making or its prevention (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). Building on the same argumentation, concepts of 'power-with' and 'power-from-within' emerged to describe the power phenomenon from collective and internal perspectives; building on the experience of women as mothers and caregivers, giving way to power definitions that reproduce transformative growth for oneself and for others (Held 1993):

**‘Power-with’** is a collective ability based on relationships of reciprocity between members of a group (Follet 2003). It is regarded as collective action in response to powerlessness (Eyben 2005), reflecting a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals. Hence it is a positive-sum phenomenon (Rowlands 1997). This definition of power highlights solidarity and a collective ability based on reciprocity and reciprocity within the group (Allen 1998). Power-with results from individuals organizing and acting together on common concerns (Gammage et al. 2016).

**‘Power-from within’** reflects the inner strength of every individual, and is based on self-acceptance, self-respect (Rowlands 1997) and self-worth (Eyben 2005). In feminist thinking this concept is visualized as positive, life-affirming, and an empowering force antagonistic to power understood as domination.

**‘Power-through’** captures an involuntary manifestation of power that operates at the intersect of power to and power over. It is a distinctive and personal manifestation of power but mediated through the existence of others as individuals, communities and values (Galiè and Farnworth 2019). Power through takes a step towards making sense of complex and multifarious power relations by evidencing how elements of domination and culture manifest to shape individual actions and experiences.

### 7.2.1.2 Power-Over

‘Power-over’ is based on a different image. While ‘power-to’ reflects on an infinitely expanding and innocuous process, ‘power-over’ pictures a closed system of power fluctuation, a zero-sum phenomenon where one gains power at the expense of another, and where power relations are coercive. It is perceived as controlling power to which the response may be compliance, resistance or manipulation (Rowlands 1997). This definition includes a behavioural component, yet it is also a critique of the behavioural focus since its main characteristic is the analysis of observable and latent conflict. It illuminates the systematic ways in which power is perpetuated and exercised to prevent conflict (Gaventa 1980; Lukes 2005).

### 7.2.1.3 When Power-to Meets Power-Over

Definitions of power highlight distinctive features and manifestations that aid their classification. However, the way they operate and interact in real life is complex and intertwined, as illustrated in the following cases. Case 7.1 describes an intervention that sought to empower men and women farmers by building individual and collective agency in a community in southern Bolivia. In Case 7.1 we identify how the intervention sought to build **power-from-within** through enhancing individual capabilities in project management and self-esteem. The intervention developed **power-with** by strengthening the local farmer organization, and fostered **power-to** by building capacity for collective negotiation to access technical assistance. Case 7.1 is a good example of how all three types of power operate. Intense negotiations by the farmer organization show clear evidence of the exercise of power-to, the strength of the farmer organization is a reflection of power-with because as a team their voices are heard and motivate government officials who would otherwise not

respond to individual requests. Farmers exercise power-from-within when they individually decide to stand and reject the equipment that does not meet their needs.

While Case 7.1 shows clear evidence of the expansion of different forms of power, there is a barrier that limits the achievement of positive outcomes. **Power-over** in this case is evident in the actions of the local government that holds total decision-making power about how funds are ultimately allocated. Their attempt to deliver sub-optimal equipment in a public space was a form of coercion where they tried to swing public opinion in their favour and pressure farmers to accept the equipment.

### **Case 7.1 “We Will Not Take This Equipment”: Defining the Terms of Service Provision (Yacuiba—Bolivia)**

In an agricultural development project in the Chaco region of Bolivia, the service provider hired by the local government had committed to providing technology advisory services and equipment for maize processing to farmer organizations. Men and women farmers participating in the project engaged in discussions about technical characteristics of the equipment and the nature of advisory services. In parallel the farmer organization received capacity building in Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E) as a mechanism to foster individual and collective empowerment. As the agricultural project unfolded, farmers applied a simple (PM&E) approach and used the information to alert the service provider and the local government about strong dissatisfaction from farmers.

Technical staff reported that although capacity building events had good participation and farmers were satisfied with the information provided, the negative overall assessment was because the equipment committed was not being delivered. The service provider explained to farmers that the local government had not yet provided the funding for the equipment. In response, a delegation from the farmer organization decided to escalate the complaint and engaged in several meetings with local government officials to request payments for the service provider and the delivery of the equipment.

The local government had unilaterally decided to re-allocate the budget for equipment to other activities but under the intense pressure from farmer groups, government officials negotiated with the service provider and other donors, purchased equipment for maize processing and organized a big event including the media to deliver the equipment. However, during the event, farmers rejected the equipment publicly because they realized it did not meet the technical standards required and previously agreed.

Ultimately, despite the intense negotiation and pressure from the farmer organization, they were never able to access equipment that met the standards required. The PM&E skills, intended to empower farmers, built project management skills, individual self-esteem and collective capacity to negotiate but the lack of positive outcomes left them with a lower sense of empowerment after the intervention (Polar 2013).

Based on participant observation and results from the implementation of Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation in an applied agricultural innovation project in Yacuiba—Bolivia (Fernandez et al. 2012).

In addition to the observable power dynamics in Case 7.1, there are also multiple other layers of power-over being exercised. The farmer organization was essentially led by medium and large-scale male farmers. The processing equipment demanded was more suitable for medium scale farmers and not as efficient for smaller scale farmers. Very few women were present in negotiations and their presence was used to strengthen the collective's image. However, women were never asked if the equipment delivered would fit their needs. Most women were actually small-scale producers more interested in the capacity development and in simple and manual equipment, rather than the equipment demanded by men, which required an external power source. Their preferences were not considered in the definition of technical specification, but their presence was used during delivery negotiations. This shows how despite being part of "power-to" and "power-with" dynamics, the underlying structures of power-over that shape the agenda of collective action may dilute the possibilities of positive outcomes for women.

### ***7.2.2 Power in Postcolonial, Decolonial and Analytic Feminism***

If we understand that our conceptions of power are themselves shaped by power relations (Lukes 2005) and that differentials of power come already embedded in culture (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995), we must delve into the realm of postcolonial and decolonial theory that questions if the oppressed can actually speak (Spivak 1988), or exercise any type of power while caught between imperial discourse and patriarchal tradition. Furthermore, postcolonial feminism also questions the overly simplistic understanding of power and oppression as reductive, homogenizing class, race, religion, and daily material practices of women in the Third World to create a false sense of the commonality of oppressions, interests, and struggles between and among women globally. Post-colonial feminism builds on the work of Quijano and Lugones to analyze the coloniality of power as a system strictly characterized by sexual dimorphism (Lugones 2007, 2010; Quijano 2019) where gender becomes another element of oppression, and a mechanism to exercise the agenda of patriarchy, capitalism and the state (Apffel-Marglin and Sanchez 2002).

In a similar path, Cudd uses the framework of rational choice theory to analyze oppression and power, conceptualizing oppression as normative or structural. By appealing to a structural theory of choice, Cudd disentangles oppression from assumptions about the individual's capabilities. Agents behave rationally, choosing actions that maximize their utility but, in a context where individual choice is constrained within socially structured payoffs (Cudd 2006).

Case 7.2 shows clearly how Spivak's questioning the effective role of someone who has been marginalized or oppressed -a subaltern -operates in a patriarchal and postcolonial context. Despite the presence of technical service providers dedicated to the dissemination of agricultural technologies, women do not ask questions about the information being shared, because the forum is one of men speaking to men. Their social position as women and the dominant language, both inherited from colonial rule limit women's access to technological alternatives. Their capabilities to exercise choice of agricultural innovations are constrained.

### Case 7.2 Invisible Twice: A Woman and an Aymara Speaker

In Jacopampa— on the high Altiplano of Western Bolivia, women and men potato farmers received technical assistance and adopted technologies for seed production. During focus group discussions women were consulted about the information received, the technologies they used most and the technologies they decided not to use. Follow up interviews further explored the reasons for not using some specific technologies such as the bio-insecticide (Matapol-Plus) referred to below. An Aymara woman, approximately 40 years old, mentioned:

*I have Matapol-Plus but I don't use it. I received Matapol-Plus as a prize at the local fair two seasons ago but I did not use it because I don't know if it's toxic or not and also I don't know how to use it and what it is for. The technician came to the community to talk about it and showed pictures of potato storage but it was presented in Spanish and I did not understand.*

During capacity building events women would sit at the back. Some of them attended their small children, and rarely asked questions or volunteered to participate in practical exercises led by technical staff. Many of them spoke limited Spanish and could not read. In this context agricultural technology options were twice invisible, once due to gender roles and socially accepted norms that limited women's engagement in capacity building, and the second time due to the presentation of technology in verbal and written form in a language in which the women had limited understanding.

Based on a qualitative study conducted in the context of the IssAndes project in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru (Polar et al. 2015).

### 7.2.3 “Power Feminism”—Post-feminism

“Power feminism” is a school of thought that seeks to recapture progressive politics, reorienting discussions within feminism away from the excessive attention to women's victimization, to one that highlights women's newfound power (Caputi 2013; Hains 2009; Wolf 1994). Power feminism may also be considered to fall under the umbrella of post-feminism, that draws on the first and second waves of feminism but rejects their most provocative challenges such as those linked to critiques of capitalism and class privilege, as well as concepts of patriarchy and collective action (Hains 2009; Vavrus 2002).

The dichotomy of power feminism vs victim feminism described by Naomi Wolf in the power feminism approach also emphasizes individualism, conceiving it as a binary opposed to collective action (Hains 2009). The emphasis on individualism

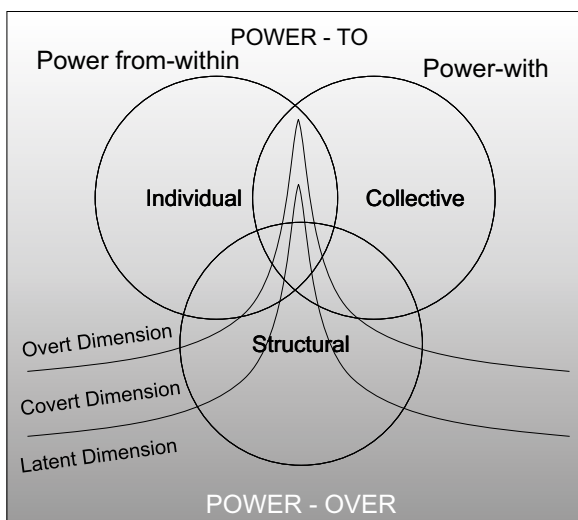
and triumph creates a shadow that enhances the gap between those who can experience enhanced individual capabilities and those who operate in collective environments and who continue to experience oppression and oppressive structures such as those described in Case 7.2.

Poverty itself creates an environment that shapes priorities differently. For example, in a dialogue of women's movements in Bolivia, Alexia Escobar, a Bolivian anthropologist and communicator asserts that: "Feminist groups vindicate as a main topic the right to decide over our own bodies while sisters from indigenous and farmer organizations raise malnutrition as their main issue. We've had difficulties to advance in agreements because we essentially have different codes"(Wanderley 2010).

### 7.2.4 Power and the Spheres of Life

There are varied spaces, places and domains where power is exercised in its multiple forms. However, to facilitate analysis we will connect the different definitions of power to three main spheres of life or domains of action: individual, collective and structural. Figure 7.1 shows a graphical understanding of power definitions and the spheres of life.

Power-over, often perceived as domination, is strongly linked to the structural sphere that relates to legal frameworks, institutional processes and mechanisms, culturally accepted structures, norms and other formally and informally established structures of power (Polar 2013). However, power-over does not exclusively



**Fig. 7.1** Definitions of power and their interaction with different spheres of life. (Source: From Polar, 2013)



manifest in the structural sphere, it expands to influence directly the individual and collective spheres (notice the intersecting areas of the spheres) and indirectly through the action of the structural sphere (notice the shade of power-over reaching out to all spheres in different degrees). The different levels or dimensions of power-over also change from the latent dimension to the covert and overt dimensions connecting with all spheres of life in the process. It is in this complex of interactions where insights from post-colonial, de-colonial and analytical feminism need to be included.

The concept of power-to, on the other hand, is closely related to the individual and collective spheres. Power-with is linked to the collective sphere, reflecting collective action and solidarity. In parallel, the individual sphere is better explained by the power-from-within concept, as shown in Case 7.3.

Case 7.3 exemplifies how gender norms and roles that operate in the context of native potato cultivation and conservation shape individual and collective experiences, ultimately shaping emerging social structures. At the individual level women's reproductive roles at home, reinforced by local beliefs and cultural traditions, restrict their mobility and limit their involvement in some agricultural practices while strengthening their productive role in seed management and diversity conservation. However, it is this same reproductive role that has shaped culturally accepted norms about mobility and participation in public spaces, that ultimately influences women's collective experience and shapes emerging structures such as the AGUAPAN Association.

The underlying question is: how can institutional and organizational structures be designed to bridge or resist pressure from persistent gender norms and roles that limit women's participation? While incorporating quotas to enhance women's participation is a good starting point, Case 7.3 shows that it is not only about having a space to participate or the recognition, but also about having the time and mobility to engage. In the context of generalized poverty where women are responsible for most reproductive labor, such as those experienced in the high Andes where native potatoes are produced, a push towards further productive demands on their time and labor may enhance disparity and affect their overall sense of wellbeing. In such cases an empowerment and development agenda must centrally address the transformation of social relations of production.

### ***7.2.5 Power and the Driving Forces of Change: Agency and Structure***

The relationship between individuals and society or agency and structure is one of the central and contested issues in social sciences. The concepts of agency and structure are organized around two axioms: (a) individuals (human beings and organizations) act purposefully to transform the society in which they live; and (b) social

### Case 7.3 A Mother to Her Children, a Mother to the Seed

A study on gender roles in native potato diversity management in highland communities of Peru showed that a traditional and quasi-religious view of women's reproductive roles flows across the different spheres of life and shape the way native potato diversity is managed and conserved.

In the Peruvian highlands, tradition asserts that women are not supposed to use the "*chaki tacla*", the Andean foot plow, due to their child bearing roles. Local tradition also asserts that a woman should not enter a potato field when menstruating, because she could cause the crop to develop late blight disease. Although these beliefs are being challenged today by many young women who do use the *chaki tacla*, and frequently perform agricultural activities, it is still a common belief that women are less skilled and not able to perform farming activities at the same level as men. This shapes the way women farmers access labor. Both men and women participate in the labor reciprocity system called *huaypo*, but when women reciprocate for work done by men, they are expected to perform activities that are appropriate for their gender, which can make it more difficult for women to get men to reciprocate on their farms.

On the other hand, women's roles as mothers and care givers have been associated with seed management practices. In the Central Andes, potato is considered a living being that needs to be raised and cared for by farmers. Seed potatoes are like children and women are traditionally in charge of selection, storage and management of potato diversity. Tradition claims that men should not handle potatoes in storage because they may damage them.

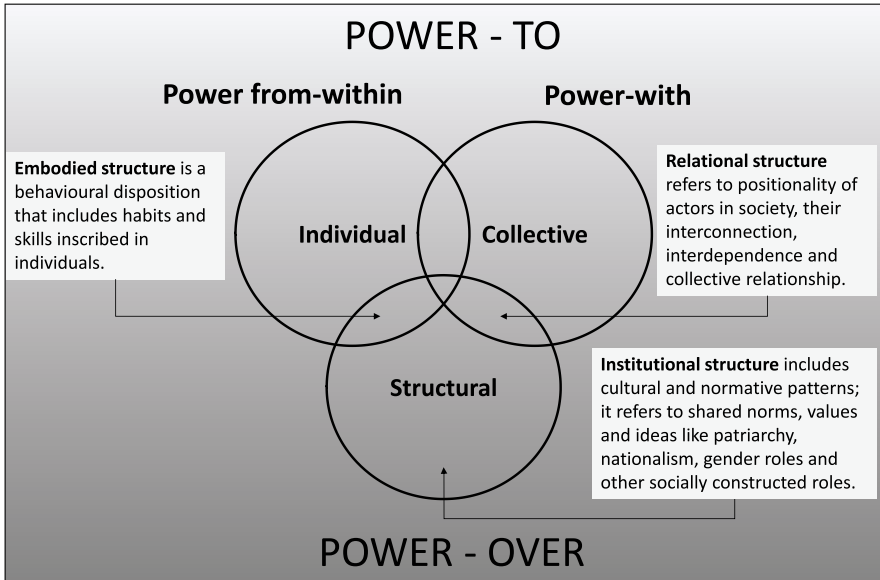
In order to foster potato diversity conservation, external actors have promoted in-situ conservation and supported custodian farmers to participate in seed fairs and increase the number of varieties they conserve. However, due to gender norms women have traditionally enjoyed less visibility and mobility than men, especially women with young children, which restricted them from participating as diversity custodians, occupying public spaces and receiving full recognition from their deep knowledge of native potato diversity management and conservation. More men than women have come to occupy the role of potato custodians due to their socially recognized participation in public spaces.

A qualitative study conducted with members of the Association of Native Potato Custodians (AGUAPAN) revealed that efforts to strengthen *in situ* conservation have contributed to empower custodians. Yet, ensuring that empowerment processes are gender inclusive remains a challenge. While one third of the members of AGUAPAN are women, they clearly experience difficulty to fully participate in meetings and events due to their numerous responsibilities at home, so they delegate representation to their husbands. Women who reported more participation were often single mothers or older women with adult children.

Based on a qualitative study conducted in the highlands of Peru (Molina et al. 2022).

relations structure the interaction between actors (Wendt 1987). Structure and agency are historically interdependent opposing forces that jointly produce social outcomes (Akram 2010). Thus structure and agency need to be analysed as interacting social fields including a wider perspective of social phenomena incorporating history (Sewell 1992), culture (Archer 2005), consciousness (Elder-Vass 2006; Akram 2010), reflexivity and intentionality (Akram 2010).

**Structure** refers to social factors including: social arrangements, social relations and social practices which exercise power and coercion in the lives of individuals (Musolf 2003). Initially originating from collective habits, structure finds expression in definite forms such as legal rules, organizational frameworks, moral obligations, popular proverbs and social conventions (Durkheim 1964); it organizes social positions hierarchically where power emanates from those who own the means. Some factors that make up the structural dimension of social life are race, class, sex, ideology, institutions, organizational hierarchy, groups, geographical location, period of history, mode of production, generation cohort, family culture, roles and rules (Musolf 2003). Ultimately, structure can also be divided into three sub sections (Durkheim 1964; López and Scott 2009) connected to the different spheres of life (Fig. 7.2) and Case 7.4.



**Fig. 7.2** Types of power and their relationship with sub-sections of structure. (Source: Adapted from Polar (2013))

### Case 7.4 Pachamama, from Deity to Servant: The Evolution of Gender in Agriculture in the High Andes

Modern gender constructs do not necessarily reflect past ones. Archeological evidence shows that early females in the Andes were big-game hunters (Haas et al. 2020). There is also evidence of the recognition of female supernatural beings among the earliest cultures and first civilizations of the Andes prior to the rise and expansion of the Inca empire. Early cultures such as the Chavín and Yaya Mama conceived supernatural power as both male and female, and work patterns in everyday life appeared to have been mostly egalitarian with indication of women also holding institutionalized roles of authority (Kellogg 2005). Early chronicles of the Inca and Post Inca periods register multiple expressions of deification of feminine sculptures in gold (di Salvia 2013). Yet, the most outstanding representation of the feminine is “Pachamama” or mother earth believed to be the mother of all things, the representation of an animated natural world, and with whom Andean people are in continuous dialogue through tributes and rituals (Pineda 2018).

While Pachamama has been part of the culture and belief system in the Andes since the first recorded chronicles, its representation, meaning and importance in everyday life has evolved through incoming concepts from Christianity and most recently from the green revolution development approach. An example of this evolving process are the comments from Maria (fictional name, approximately 45 years old) farmer and “Mama T’alla” (female community leader) to justify the low attendance of people an agricultural development that started with a local ceremony to Pachamama.

*We used to be united in this community. Always men and women would work together and be leaders. Women select the seed in the house, we separate what is for food and for planting. Mama T’allas were consulted about seed and where to plant. We also read the signals that Pachamama gives us in the local indicators.<sup>1</sup> Now you see our payment to Pachamama is reduced to spilling some alcohol and sharing some coca leaves. Only this is not enough, we need to listen. We are forgetting how to listen to Pachamama because some people say this is not real. Some Christian churches came, they told community members that we should not thank Pachamama, that coca leaves are bad. People have started to skip community meetings; they don’t want to share coca anymore. They have told people that men should decide in a family. Now there are fewer people coming to decide together.*

Juana (fictional name—approximately 35 years old), a farmer producer of Andean grains, comments in relation to her efforts to produce and participate in organic certification.

*Now people don’t produce the same as before. Now when we go to the community fair there are many outsiders. Strange men come to sell products that we don’t know, and they convince men that it is good to produce more and more... always more, and to have fewer insects. Pachamama is angry, this is why she sends more insects and production is lower. Now she doesn’t speak to us anymore because we are not respecting her.<sup>2</sup>*

Based on participant observation in rituals to Pachamama in multiple communities in Pacajes (Bolivia, 2015–2017).

Religion—more specifically, religious beliefs—is one of the blind spots of gender that the international political and academic communities appear to be scared to open up in the context of agriculture and development (Rao and Cagna 2018). Religion is a structure in itself that permeates all spheres of life. As is presented in Case 7.4, the “Mama T’alla” is a leadership position based on the duality of the Andean world view. It is a right to lead conferred to women in specific domains such as seed management in the household (as reflected in Case 7.3). But the leadership position of the Mama T’alla extends to the collective as they negotiate geographical planting distribution and selection of crop rotation among other details of agricultural practice. The Andean belief system linked to Pachamama also created shared norms and values and an “institutionalized” dialogue with mother earth through the language of indigenous knowledge about indicators to forecast the weather.

The superposition of a new religious system happened over centuries and decades after the Spanish conquest, but in Aymara communities of Bolivia and Peru one can still observe the syncretic evolution. Tribute is still paid to Pachamama but her role shifts from deity and mother to a servant of productivity. The original practice of drinking and pouring on the planting plots fermented maize drinks—rich in bacteria that produce bioactive components with enhanced health benefits for humans (Meena et al. 2022), and nitrogen fixing bacteria able to foster plant growth promotion by a variety of mechanisms (Reis and dos Santos Teixeira 2015), has been discontinued. It has now been replaced by pouring distilled cane alcohol (as mentioned in Case 7.4) or drinking and pouring any beverage including industrial beer, soft drinks and tea (Pineda 2018). Basic elements of the practice remain but its reciprocal and regenerative nature has been lost with the incorporation of a new religious structure that relates deity with power, hierarchy, worship and patriarchy.

In the same way women’s roles have gradually shifted from complementarity to dependence particularly in collective spaces of the agricultural domain. Duality in representation and dialogue has been replaced by men speaking to men, as mentioned by Juana. As Case 7.4 presents, in regulating women’s roles, responsibilities and hierarchical positioning, religion embodies a structure of power that governs individual behavior, regulates relational structure and provides a framework for evolving institutional structures.

**Agency** refers to the capacity of an agent (person or collective) to act through the independent exercise of their own power based on the meaning they assign to objects and events (Musolf 2003). While some sociological traditions frame agency on the premise of reflexivity from the agent and full consciousness (Archer 2005; Hay 2002; Andersen 2009), others argue for an unconscious component that reflects the effect of structure over the actions of agents (Akram 2010; Elder-Vass 2006). The exercise of agency can both perpetuate or challenge structures of power.

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<sup>1</sup>Refers to local indigenous knowledge about forecasting weather, by interpreting the signs of nature such as animal behavior, plant distribution, the appearance of stars, wind and other elements (Choquetopa Rodríguez 2021).

<sup>2</sup>In reference to climate change that is generating changes in the manifestation of local natural indicators, making them harder to interpret over time.

Case 7.5 shows how two women leaders assign different meaning to somewhat similar events and how contextual factors influence their exercise of agency to challenge structures. The story of Sara exemplifies agency and full consciousness about her representation role. The experience from Luisa on the other hand exemplifies the unconscious component of structure limiting her participation in the exchange visit. Her concern of what people would say, how others would perceive her travelling alone with strangers, and being absent from her household responsibilities is much too strong. In Luisa's experience, power exercised through gender norms blocks the exercise of agency and perpetuates the structure of power by replication. Sara on the other did not even think about rejecting the invitation. She and other people in the family had heard about Bolivian female migrant workers in Europe. This precedent and her continued work with female agricultural service providers could have acted as a catalyst to enable her exercise of agency.

### **Case 7.5 Two Women Leaders: Two Distinct Outcomes**

Luisa (pseudonym—approximately 57 years old) is a community leader working alongside many other women developing and adapting agricultural innovations to the local context. She tapped into indigenous knowledge to foster the utilization of Andean grains for home consumption when plants were at various stages of development. As a leader of a group of women she worked along side nutritionists and agronomists conducting research and prompting the consumption of leaves and seedheads of Andean grain species, as they matured up to milky stage of grain formation. This enabled farmers to secure nutritious and iron rich food during periods of food scarcity before harvest. Luisa won the first prize in a national agricultural innovation contest, a prize consisting of a fully paid visit to meet and exchange experiences with other farmer innovators in another Andean country. While initially very happy at being recognized publicly as the best innovator, when she understood the full extent of the prize she commented: *“I should have won the second prize, not the first... I will not be able to travel, I have too many responsibilities and what are people going to say? The second prize was a backpack sprayer, that would have been better for me so I can use it for my organic liquid fertilizers. Even some tools for the field or the kitchen would have been better.”*

A few days before the trip when tickets had already been purchased, Luisa communicated that she would not travel and seemed discouraged from further participating in other events.

Sara (pseudonym -approximately 35), a community leader and a custodian of agro-biodiversity of Andean grains was globally recognized for her dedication to conserving traditional varieties and local knowledge. She was invited to participate in a global event to share her experience in Rome, Italy. Upon learning that she would be travelling, she happily accepted, packed her bag with her best and most colorful traditional clothing and embarked in a once-in-a-lifetime adventure. Dressed up for the occasion she appeared in a conference

room full of foreign strangers and shared her story in Spanish with simultaneous translation to English and web broadcasting to the world. Her colorful “cholita” clothing (with its sweeping skirt, embroidered blouse and round felt hat) raised attention everywhere, with people asking to snap selfies with her, even on sidewalks outside the event venue. When asked about her perception of the event she mentioned: “I should have brought my other outfit too, to use in the evening dinner. I’m an ambassador of quinoa and of my culture. This I will tell women in the community. People don’t always value what we do as women planting and storing and managing so many seeds of quinoa and also other plants. They think we are just playing around, and that we should produce all the same variety for the market, but we know the different seeds will help us in hard times. Our mix of varieties always produces, even in the worst years you have something. Now I know others see this too”.

With her newly strengthened conviction of the importance of agrobiodiversity fairs, Sara in coordination with other community custodians and agricultural service providers lobbied with her municipal government to institutionalize agro-biodiversity fairs. Moreover, the gender-related prescience concerning the importance of plant varietal diversity and conservation under conditions of increased climate change is now evident globally.

Based on participant observation in capacity building activities for organic production of Andean grains in Pacajes and conservation of Andean grains diversity in Cachilaya (Bolivia, 2015–2017).

As the multiple cases presented above depict, both agency and structure and their observable manifestation connected to power need to be considered to build a holistic conceptualization of empowerment.

### 7.3 The Concept of Empowerment

The concept of empowerment emerged with feminist movements and since then has been associated with a wide range of disciplines. While recognizing that there is a form of power-over, empowerment theorists choose to focus on women’s power to transform themselves, others and the world (Allen 1998; Held 1993; Hoagland 1988). This conception of power-to and its complementary forms of power-with and power from within frame empowerment as a complex, multidimensional process that operates both at the individual and collective levels.

In the development arena, empowerment is associated with an alternative perception of development, one that recognizes poverty as disempowerment, and empowerment as the process that reduces inequalities (Friedmann 1992).



Empowerment implies a holistic understanding of context and environment (Esquivel 2016; Titi and Singh 1995), it implies the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people (Narayan-Parker 2005). Under this perspective empowerment is dependent on two variables: agency as the ability to make meaningful choices; and opportunity as the aspects of context that affect the ability to transform agency into effective action (Eyben 2005). Thus, empowerment is mainly about agency and it relates to the way development agencies have used the term empowerment over time (Narayan et al. 2000; Narayan-Parker 2002,2005).

This practical conception of empowerment in the development sector builds fully on the philosophical perspectives of empowerment theorists and their definitions of power, ignoring the conceptualization of domination theorists. One sidedness in the conception of power is problematic for it obscures forms of oppression that are intertwined with subordination (Allen 1998; Spelman 1990). Power relations are complex and multifarious. An actor can be both dominated and empowered at the same time and in the context of the same norm, institution or practice (Allen 1998). A clear example of this is presented by Galiè and Farnworth in the analysis of local understandings of empowerment and the way empowerment-related experiences are lived by women and men in agricultural communities in Syria, Kenya and Tanzania. The study coins the concept of “power through” to depict how an individual’s ability to exercise agency or not, is connected to processes beyond their control (Galiè and Farnworth 2019).

While the dichotomy of power-over conceived from the perspective of domination vs power-to conceived as empowerment has been debated and questioned by feminist philosophers more than two decades ago (Allen 1998), this debate has not affected the concept of empowerment used in the development sector. While the concept of empowerment has been useful to introduce issues of rights onto the international agenda, it remains a buzzword devoid of its political and transformative essence (Cornwall and Rivas 2015). One clear example is the Sustainable Development Goals agenda 2030 that focuses strongly on gross domestic product growth, conflating economic growth with social progress (Adams and Tobin 2014). The only mention of power in Agenda 2030 is a mention of disparities in wealth, opportunity and power, without any analysis of macro and micro relations that leverage the persistence of such disparities, nor any follow up actions to address them (Esquivel 2016). In contrast, the word empowerment is written into Agenda 2030, mostly in reference to women’s and girls’ empowerment, yet the term is loosely defined and aligned with an apolitical usage (Esquivel 2016).

The elements of power-over are not addressed in practical empowerment interventions or measurement approaches, despite the fact that in developing countries power has been exercised for centuries through colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism, religion beliefs and cultural practices, and is still being exercised as power-over. This exercise of power through time has created formal and informal structures (Weber et al. 1979), that cyclically legitimize the exercise of power (Martin 1971). In time it has even created psychological barriers (Sampson 1965) that work adversely, disempowering people, robbing them of their self-esteem and individual sense of potency. In this context development that seeks to truly achieve sustainable



development must tackle empowerment holistically encompassing: a) the multiple definitions and manifestations of power; b) agency and structure as driving forces of social change; and c) the spheres of life or spaces where power manifests itself (see Figs. 7.1 and 7.2).

#### **7.4 Empowerment in Agricultural Research for Development: To Measure or Not to Measure? that Is the Question!**

In the field of agricultural research for development (AR4D) the concept of empowerment is recognized essentially for its instrumental value. While empowerment is generally considered a process, it can also be perceived as an outcome (Carr 2003), with different experiences in the agricultural sector highlighting its contribution to desirable outcomes in nutrition and health, productivity, and management of resources (Elias et al. 2021).

The largest proportion of literature on empowerment in the agricultural sector is devoted to assessment. Assessment of projects, interventions and processes and their effect on empowerment can play an important role in advancing empowerment in at least four ways (Elias et al. 2021): (a) support the design of holistic interventions and policies; (b) monitor the positive or negative effects of interventions on empowerment; (c) build accountability and credibility of interventions; and (d) to use participatory assessment to challenge power relations. However, assessment is not necessarily empowering or desirable. Measurement itself holds an embedded bias aligned to the purpose of measurement, actors involved, knowledge system and methods used.

In a mapping of methods used to assess empowerment in AR4D, 15 different methods were found, most of them emphasizing on assessing agency at personal and relational levels (Elias et al. 2021). Most of the emphasis on measurement is dedicated to show results and outcomes of short- and medium-term interventions to donors and other development actors. This premise has shaped the way measurement is conducted, creating bias by privileging the exploration of agency and shaping the definition of indicators important for external actors who are the final users of the information. Research and development paradigms tend to favor quantifiable knowledge (Nazneen et al. 2014) specially in the agricultural sector. In this scenario the main issue is not about how we enhance or improve assessment, but actually how are all these assessments shaping the way the agricultural sector evolves to foster women's empowerment and truly enhance livelihoods.

In order to re-shape the development agenda to address the multiple manifestations of power that influence women's empowerment, we have to ask different questions during assessment. Perhaps questions should not be about what has changed and the levels of participation, decision or income are, but about what has prevented

decisions, income or participation from full realization. These are questions that are unlikely to emerge in a detailed questionnaire or even key informant interviews. Answering these questions may require more in-depth analysis with and by the main actors experiencing the limitations and barriers that thwart empowerment and development.

## **7.5 Toward a Feminist and Transformative Conceptualization and Operationalization of Empowerment in agriculture**

Out of the theoretical analysis presented above and the examples explored in the cases, three main conclusions can be drawn:

**Patriarchy, colonialism and religion are strongholds of power that need to be properly disentangled in their relation to gender, class, ethnicity and language, as a step towards addressing empowerment.**

Specific power dynamics need to be called by their name and looked in the eye. Many invisible forms of power-over come from patriarchy, colonialism, religion and politics. Avoiding confrontation with such forms of power creates a block that prevents true progress towards empowerment. We must ask how do local women of specific ethnic groups conceive empowerment and agricultural development in their own context? What are their limitations, aspirations and achievements and how do these differ from the ethnocentric perceptions of development agents?

**Power is in everything, everywhere and manifests in multiple overt and covert forms facilitating or limiting empowerment.**

Empowerment is not something that can be conferred or bestowed on people. It is not an ultimate goal. Empowerment is an intermediate outcome towards wellbeing that requires actors to navigate the ocean of power dynamics. There is no shortcut and there is no area of power that can be avoided in the journey. The empowerment process will necessarily involve a re-negotiation of roles, decisions and spaces across multiple actors. For example, donors and policy makers should be prepared to re-negotiate their development agenda. Researchers must be open to alternative research pathways and knowledge construction processes.

**Agricultural development, in its multiple forms is not an ultimate goal but an intermediate outcome towards wellbeing.**

For agricultural development to transform into wellbeing for women and other segments of the population, multiple types of innovation need to take place. It is not only about the technology, the productivity, or the income. It is mostly about how these outcomes ultimately translate into positive life experiences and wellbeing. An evolving agenda or agricultural research must be coupled with an agenda of social innovation to address different manifestations of power that prevent women and specific social groups from fully benefiting from agricultural development processes which lead towards broader societal wellbeing.

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