

Feminism and the Politics of Empowerment in International Development

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By the end of the twentieth century, the term *empowerment* had entered the mainstream of international development discourse. Yet, its origins in this arena derive in large part from feminists working in nongovernmental organizations (NGO) throughout the global South in the 1970s and 1980s, many of whom were interested in fostering alternative forms of development along with “women’s liberation.”¹ Considerable work has addressed the mainstreaming of empowerment, with critical commentary on how this action has brought significant shifts in its meaning and use.² In contrast to those who argue that international development institutions “have taken the power out of empowerment,” we contend that mainstream initiatives envision and further significant forms of power—forms that enable particular types of subjectivity and agency that lead to a “depoliticization” along the lines of what Wendy Brown has addressed in her work on neoliberalism and de-democratization.³ We also argue that, although the mainstreaming of empowerment discourse has brought a normalization and domestication along liberal lines, significant differences are at play within the mainstream that need to be acknowledged. In this article, we trace the emergence of empowerment discourse within the World Bank (WB), identifying a neoliberal orientation in which

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empowerment is connected to individual rational choice, efficiency, investment, free markets, entrepreneurship, and, more recently, a social-liberal framing that locates empowerment in relation to governance, poverty alleviation, equal opportunity, capabilities, and “effective asset-based choice.”⁴ We contrast these two liberal empowerment projects with the left feminist approach that developed from community-based activism in South Asia. We then conclude by considering some of the key challenges facing feminists, given the tensions inherent in a radical empowerment project, arguing that in light of the current context in which powerful liberal conceptualizations have taken center stage, it is especially important for feminists to pursue a “postcapitalist politics” that connects empowerment to alternative, noncapitalist visions of the economy.⁵

Since its inception in the midnineteenth century, the word *empowerment* has been used in two different ways. On the one hand, reflecting its early origins, it has meant that power has been “given,” “invested,” or “authorized” by a higher authority (such as the state or a religious institution). On the other hand, reflecting its contemporary usage dating from the mid-1970s, it may designate a process by which individuals come to develop the capacity to act and to acquire power. As such, it is seen as something that individuals develop themselves. Understood in this latter manner, the term came of age in a period when global/local synergies and tensions became prominent (i.e., the 1970s and 1980s). Its embrace across the political spectrum reflects a widely shared recognition of local and/or individual instances of power as crucial elements in the realization of any social project. It also reflects a common reaction against the authority of large-scale, hierarchical, and bureaucratic institutions, and a turn toward emancipatory projects based upon some vision of self-actualization and/or self-determination. Thus, empowerment as the embodiment of a “grassroots” or “bottom-up” vision of social change also came of age in a period when questions related to agency, subjectivity, and identity exploded onto the social and political landscape. By looking at the emergence of the left feminist, neoliberal, and social-liberal empowerment perspectives, we are able to appreciate the alternative politics at play in these different projects, along with the different conceptualizations of agency, subjectivity, and power.

From the “Grassroots”: Empowerment as an Alternative Feminist Approach to Development

The term *empowerment* began to be used among feminists working in South Asian community groups and NGOs in the mid-1970s.⁶ As Narayan Banerjee notes, in India “the concept of ‘empowerment’ of women is the product of [the] post 1975 women’s movement.”⁷ By the mid-1980s, the Indian government had embraced “grassroot organizational empowerment” as part of its planning agenda for rural development. Concurrently, a distinctive feminist “empowerment approach” to development emerged on the international scene in the mid-1980s through the work of one of the first transnational feminist networks—the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) project.

Throughout South Asia in the 1970s, feminists reacted against the government's top-down welfare approach to women in development and worked to break women's "shackles of the mind."⁸ In India, feminists sought to transform the meaning of the word *empowerment* to that of a woman needing to be "given self-hood and self-strength" or "to be strengthened to be herself" rather than being a "beneficiary" who needed to be "dealt out cards—welfare and money—to make her feel better."⁹ Similar to what was happening concurrently in the battered women's movement in the United States, as feminists in South Asia organized against domestic violence, rape, dowry, and *sati*—and for reproductive rights—they recognized that empowerment necessitates an internal, subjective dimension that addresses a woman's positioning of herself relative to the world.¹⁰ To them, "it was a process, that of acquiring a sense of identity that is couched in terms of self-worth and equality. . . . Until women recognize themselves as worthy of rights they are not going to get empowered."¹¹ Thus, throughout South Asia, feminist understandings of empowerment emphasized the importance of recognizing and developing a woman's sense of identity and agency through a process of consciousness raising or "conscientization."¹²

This feminist activism contributed to the Indian government's embrace of "an induced organizational approach" to rural women's development that shifted the government's understanding of empowerment toward more of a grassroots orientation.¹³ By the mid-1980s, a new meaning of empowerment had emerged within the Indian government's planning arenas—one oriented toward "grassroot empowerment" for poor, largely rural women via collective reflection, participation, and group self-organization.¹⁴

By the mid-1980s the term *empowerment* also had gained broader international political and economic recognition when at the NGO forum at the United Nations' 1985 second World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya, the nascent DAWN project of "Third World women social scientists" circulated a platform document outlining an alternative development approach.¹⁵ This widely discussed "manifesto" provided a critique of mainstream development programs and offered a vision of an alternative feminist "paradigm" in which women's empowerment figured prominently. It was subsequently published in 1987 as what has become a well-known book—*Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*.¹⁶ DAWN itself became institutionalized as "a network of activists, researchers and policymakers" from the "Third World," engaging in what Mary Hawkesworth has characterized as an "information politics."¹⁷

This above-mentioned book, dedicated to "a process of ongoing empowerment of women," is notable in several respects:¹⁸

- Written by feminist activists, academics, and policy makers from the global South, it connected the grassroots-level work that many of the women were familiar with or engaged in, to a macroeconomic analysis and critique that showed how neoliberal development practices had aggravated women's circumstances throughout the world, resulting in a food crisis in Africa, the Latin American debt crisis, a crisis of poverty in South Asia, and militarism in the Pacific Islands.

- It put forth an alternative left feminist vision of “autonomous and equitable development” oriented toward satisfying people’s basic needs. As such, it criticized the “integrationist” approach of the liberal “Women in Development” perspective that implicitly assumed that “women’s main problem in the Third World is insufficient participation in an otherwise benevolent process of growth and development.”¹⁹ Furthermore, it called for structural and systemic change so that “inequality based on class, gender and race is absent from every country, and from the relationships among countries.”²⁰
- The book argued that only by taking the standpoint of poor Third World women might one come to a proper understanding of development and be able to fashion effective alternatives.
- It posed empowerment and the self-organization of women as necessary for realizing such alternative development.²¹

Subsequently, DAWN’s alternative “empowerment approach” gained substantial recognition in more mainstream development arenas with the 1989 publication of an influential article by Caroline Moser, a social anthropologist, in the highly respected journal, *World Development*.²² By the 1990s, one could find references to empowerment in international development literature that spanned the globe.

Given the local, grassroots nature of people working to “empower women” and the considerable diversity of regions and contexts, differences exist in how women’s empowerment has been described and undertaken.²³ Yet, generally, feminist empowerment has been viewed as a *process* involving the self-organization of women in a manner that enables them to mobilize to effect transformative social changes in “structures of subordination” so as to free them from subjugation. As such, feminist empowerment necessitates work at the individual level as well as at organizational and social levels. Indeed, it involves an articulation of at least three different dimensions: (1) an internal, psychological, or subjective level of empowerment in which a person’s “power within” and individual-level “power to” are developed; (2) an interpersonal and organizational level whereby a “power with” and a “power over” are cultivated; and (3) a political or social level where institutional and/or structural change is made possible via collective action.²⁴ As Srilatha Batliwala, an Indian social worker and feminist activist, has written,

Radical transformations in society . . . cannot be achieved through the struggles of village or neighbourhood women’s collectives. . . . In the final analysis, to transform society, women’s empowerment must become a political force, that is, an organized mass movement that challenges and transforms existing power structures. Empowerment should ultimately lead to the formation of mass organizations of poor women, at the regional, national and international levels.²⁵

Thus, feminist empowerment has been understood fundamentally as a multifaceted process that explicitly addresses social power and inequality and that enables social transformation on the basis of women’s self-organization. Further, as a reaction against top-

down welfare and neoliberal approaches to women and development, this transnational feminist project of social change has been connected to a vision of alternative, noncapitalist development.

Empowerment Hits the Mainstream

Having emerged within the context of a grassroots project for feminist consciousness-raising, alternative development, and social change, empowerment was rapidly diffused within the international development community so that by the mid-1990s, it had become a buzzword that, in many respects, was domesticated or normalized along liberal economic and political lines.²⁶ Yet, the mainstreaming of empowerment discourse since the mid-1980s has not brought a monolithic or singular framing. Rather, at least two types of liberalism have been at play *within* the mainstream: a neoliberalism and a social liberalism. Here we consider the turn to empowerment at the WB to illustrate these different empowerment discourses that have taken shape within the mainstream and to contrast these two liberal, domesticated conceptualizations of empowerment relative to the left feminist approach.²⁷

The Washington Consensus, Neoliberalism, and Empowerment as “Smart Economics”

It is widely accepted that a neoliberal orientation permeated WB policy and practice during the Washington Consensus period from the early 1980s to the early-to-mid-1990s. Thus, feminists who worked assiduously within the WB to integrate empowerment and attention to gender more broadly had to “present the business case” or “give the economic rationale for investing in gender” with an emphasis upon “outcomes assessments” and “results based management.”²⁸ These efficiency-based arguments tended to define empowerment in narrow, individualistic, and static terms such as women’s increased decision-making power within the household, their greater involvement in market-oriented activity, their greater mobility, or their capacity to generate more income. Indicators such as these measure aspects of “personal empowerment,” in contrast to social, political, or collective empowerment.²⁹ This neoliberal approach to empowerment brought an instrumentalization of the term and proved most effective in generating “human capital” investments in women’s health and education (literacy training and the acquisition of marketable skills), along with microcredit and small-business development, while also imposing short-term “return on investment” imperatives.³⁰

The continued strength of such a neoliberal empowerment perspective within the WB is evidenced by the four-year Gender Action Plan launched in 2007 by then-president Robert Zoellick. With “gender equity” proclaimed to be “smart economics,” the plan sought to “empower women” by “increasing women’s access to land, labor force participation, agriculture, infrastructure, and finance.”³¹ It also shifted the focus of the WB’s Women in Development project implementation toward private-sector development and

job training, and “away from the ‘usual suspects’ in Bank GAD [gender and development] action—the International Development Association, the reproductive health projects or anti-indigence projects in social sectors.”³² Further, the International Finance Corporation—the WB institution responsible for promoting private-sector operations—emerged as the key player, charged with implementing the Gender Action Plan by developing partnerships with corporations such as Nike to undertake bank-funded activities in the areas of job training and credit provision. As Zoellick explained,

the empowerment of women is smart economics.

Despite gains in health and education, progress on women’s opportunities is lagging. Women trail men in labor force participation, access to credit, entrepreneurship rates, inheritance and land ownership rights, and income.

This is neither fair nor smart economics, and in fact studies show that investments in women yield large social and economic returns.³³

Clearly a neoliberal rationality has been alive and well within the WB, one in which empowerment is framed in a manner that connects it to efficiency, economic growth, productivity, investment, free markets, entrepreneurship, and individual rational choice.

The Post-Washington Consensus, Social Liberalism, and Empowerment as “Effective Agency”

Despite the ongoing presence of such a neoliberal, instrumental, and market-oriented women’s empowerment perspective at the WB, in other arenas of bank policy and research, a broader perspective is evident—one that incorporates a concern with addressing social conditions necessary for economic development and growth along with the institutional context needed for enabling individual empowerment via “effective” or “purposive agency.” Here empowerment in general and “women’s empowerment” in particular are seen as important for intrinsic reasons along with instrumental ones.

As many people have noted, the WB’s increasing attention to gender relations, empowerment, and participation at the end of the twentieth century arose within the context of widespread critiques of and mobilizations against failed structural-adjustment policies in the global South and “shock therapy” in Eastern Europe. This trend brought a growing recognition of problematic outcomes related to unregulated free markets, leading to a “post-Washington Consensus” codified in many respects by then-president James Wolfensohn’s Comprehensive Development Framework and subsequently operationalized in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP). The PRSP initiative has been characterized as an “inclusive neoliberal regime of development” since it has coalesced “around a number of norms and principles of inclusion, such as poverty reduction, empowerment, and economic security” while still privileging privatization, market deregulation, and traditional macroeconomic austerity policies.³⁴

Although some individuals have argued that neoliberal privatization and economic liberalization remain at the forefront of the PRSPs, there is an explicit call for empowerment within the “good governance” priority area to ensure the effective disbursement of

aid in the “right” institutional environment.³⁵ One can achieve citizen empowerment and good governance by educating people on their “rights as citizens” and by providing the mechanisms for formal political participation so that government institutions will be “held accountable.”³⁶ Under Paul Wolfowitz, good governance came to mean not only that the state has an important role to play, with the government serving “as a complement to markets, undertaking those actions that make markets fulfill their functions—as well as correcting market failures,” but also, more broadly, that there is a “combination of transparent and accountable institutions, strong skills and competence, and a fundamental willingness to do the right thing.”³⁷

Shortly after the appearance of empowerment as a key aspect of good governance in the PRSPs, the notion was taken up in a more extensive manner in WB discourse related to poverty-reduction strategies with publication of the *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty* and of *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook*.³⁸ Empowerment was recognized as “one of the three pillars of poverty reduction,” and the *World Development Report* dedicated a section to it.³⁹

With empowerment defined as “the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives,” the WB put forth a worldview in which the poor are to address their exclusion, marginalization, and dependence by negotiating “better terms for themselves with traders, financiers, governments, and civil society.”⁴⁰ Indeed, the overall thrust of the WB’s empowerment orientation in the economic sphere is for poor people to “rise out of poverty” by “build[ing] their assets.”⁴¹ *Empowerment in Practice: From Analysis to Implementation*, the most in-depth WB study to date on the theory, practice, and measurement of empowerment, elaborates more fully upon this perspective.⁴² Here empowerment is defined as “the process of enhancing an individual’s or group’s capacity to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes.”⁴³ Overall, the perspective put forth is that of “asset-based agency” operating within an “institution-based opportunity structure.”⁴⁴

Notably, the 2006 study offers a sophisticated and extensive consideration of “agency” that diverges from the rational-choice framing that characterizes free-market neoliberal perspectives. People’s agency is understood as predicated upon their “asset endowment,” which includes “psychological, informational, organizational, material, social, financial, and human assets.”⁴⁵ Drawing upon feminist work on empowerment, the study posits psychological assets as “particularly crucial” since “actors need a raised level of consciousness if they are to translate their assets into choices—that is, to become ‘agents.’”⁴⁶

Empowerment in Practice also gives some attention to issues related to unequal power. Recognizing that a “weak bargaining position” will limit one’s capacity to make effective choices, it notes that “power relations . . . need to be taken seriously” if poor people are to make their way out of poverty.⁴⁷ Generally, this concern translates into a desire to foster more “equitable rules” of the game along with “expanded entitlements” to provide an “opportunity structure” that allows people “to translate their asset base into effective agency.”⁴⁸

Finally, the study also argues for the intrinsic as well as instrumental value of empowerment, positing empowerment “as a goal in itself and as a driver of development.”⁴⁹ The intrinsic importance of gender empowerment is echoed in the *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*, with “gender equality” posed as a “core objective in itself” although it also is seen as providing instrumental benefits related to the efficient allocation of human resources.⁵⁰

In many respects, the *World Development Report 2012* illustrates the widespread presence of a social-liberal capabilities perspective at the WB that draws extensively on Amartya Sen’s work, defining development as “a process of expanding freedoms equally for all people.”⁵¹ Here, too, empowerment is linked to women’s “agency” insofar as empowered women are understood as those able to make effective choices. The report focuses on analyzing how various “structures of opportunity” within the community either foster or diminish women’s empowerment and thereby their agency or “their ability to make choices that lead to desired outcomes.”⁵² It mostly analyzes the “bottlenecks,” “barriers,” “market failures,” and “institutional constraints” that create the unlevel playing fields that impede women from engaging in effective agency. Yet, there is some recognition that women’s “social and political empowerment” is an important element for making institutions more representative and for fostering public policy changes by helping to build coalitions that mobilize around gender-reform initiatives.⁵³

Clearly then, important discursive and theoretical shifts within the WB’s empowerment discourse have coalesced around what we are calling a social-liberal approach.⁵⁴ Indeed, as Maxine Molyneux notes, “In recent years, a growing consensus in development communities associates empowerment with increased capabilities, which enlarges the realm of choice, or, as Sen expresses it, reflects a person’s freedom to choose between different ways of living.”⁵⁵ The extent to which this social-liberal empowerment perspective is operationalized in WB policies and programs remains to be seen, however. For instance, although the PRSPs incorporate a modest redistributive agenda to subsidize access to commodified education and health-care services for the poorest of the poor, the greatest emphasis has been placed upon projects oriented toward skill building, education, income generation, and women’s paid participation in the labor force. Further, several case studies have shown that empowerment has been implemented in a rather shallow and cursory fashion.⁵⁶

The Politics of Empowerment

What then to make of this mainstreaming of empowerment discourse over the past 20 years, and what challenges does such a normalization present for a left feminist approach to empowerment today? At the WB, in both the neoliberal and social-liberal approaches, empowerment takes shape within a liberal frame whose emancipatory vision is cast in terms of individual agency and choice, whether understood as rational, purposive, or effective. Thus, both types of liberal projects address subjective dimensions of power and, thereby, enable particular forms of agency and subjectivity.

In the neoliberal vision, empowerment is conceptualized in purely individualistic terms. Agency is construed as the ability to make rational utility-maximizing choices so as to profit from opportunities to enhance one's well-being in a competitive market economy. Just as at the microlevel, people are motivated by the promise of instrumental, extrinsic rewards of higher returns, so at the macrolevel, empowerment projects are evaluated in terms of their contribution to efficient resource allocation and economic growth. *Homo oeconomicus* is put forth as the "norm of the human," and all individual conduct is to be ordered by economic rationality.⁵⁷

The incorporation of empowerment within neoliberal development discourse is thus evidence of and has contributed to a broader shift in development policy from what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have called the "modernization of production" in the postwar period to a managerial modernization at the end of the twentieth century.⁵⁸ Indeed, the neoliberal agenda is an explicitly "constructivist" project that tries to develop forms of self-governance "modeled on . . . a normative social fabric of self-interest."⁵⁹ By converting political and social problems into "market terms," neoliberalism "converts them to individual problems with market solutions" and, thereby, it contributes to a "depoliticization" of social life along with the proliferation of norms of citizenship and participation based upon individual responsibility.⁶⁰ Here empowerment's emancipatory promise of self-actualization and self-determination has been harnessed to further an agenda that heralds the actions of self-interested, responsible, self-reliant, and entrepreneurial citizen/subjects oriented toward personal gain while undermining the legitimacy of social justice claims based on entitlements or rights.⁶¹

Thus, while the reality of the neoliberal world order is such that most people garner income by working for wages, the ideology of the empowered entrepreneurial citizen/subject produces an understanding of economic practices and processes that holds out the promise of any individual being able to capitalize on market opportunities. It thereby fosters a consciousness and develops human capacities that serve to reproduce capitalism rather than to transform it. As Wendy Brown has noted, "the model neo-liberal citizen is one who strategizes for her/himself among various social, political and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options."⁶²

The social-liberal perspective is also focused primarily on enhancing individuals' "power to," with empowerment defined in terms of enabling the exercise of "effective" agency or one's "power to choose." In this respect, the social-liberal approach shares with neoliberalism both an individualized understanding of agency and the concomitant goal of enhancing individual-level capacities. Insofar as agency is understood as predicated upon one's "asset endowment"—whether material, social, and/or psychological—social liberalism also fosters an individualized and ownership-based mentality geared toward entrepreneurial, opportunity-seeking behavior.

However, the social-liberal perspective differs from the neoliberal one in at least three important respects. First, agency or the ability "to envisage and purposively choose options" is not assumed to be an inherent human attribute; rather, in many cases it needs to be constructed, which entails some element of "consciousness raising." Second, the

social-liberal approach provides a broader and deeper consideration of the context within which individual choice is undertaken. It recognizes the role of both formal and informal institutions in establishing the “rules of the game” and in shaping “the opportunity structures.” It also considers “empowerment domains” beyond “the market”—namely, those of “the state” and “society.”⁶³ Third, in contrast to the overriding concern with efficient resource allocation that so thoroughly marks neoliberal approaches to empowerment, social-liberal perspectives are imbued with an egalitarian orientation that aims to address social inequalities resulting from an “uneven playing field.”

In response to these liberal interpretations of empowerment, feminists have distinguished their approach in part by insisting that “real” empowerment is a “socio-political process” that connects the growth of individual awareness, self-esteem, critical consciousness, and capacity building with collective engagement, political mobilization, and transformative social action.⁶⁴ This radical vision encompasses the multiple dimensions of individual, collective, and structural forms of power; it incorporates an explicitly emancipatory or liberatory social vision; and it aims to foster radical subjectivities or “resistance identities” interested in and capable of pursuing some type of transformative social agenda.⁶⁵ Thus, the feminist approach incorporates a social dimension in relation both to the *goals* of empowerment and the *process* of empowerment in ways that are missing from the social-liberal and neoliberal versions.

With respect to the goals, feminist empowerment is explicitly defined as a transformation in social conditions so as to address structural, systemic, and/or institutionalized forms of subordination, oppression, and/or exploitation. Social problems are understood as “rooted in structures that reproduce inequalities on a systematic basis,” and “change can only come about through challenges to these structures.”⁶⁶ With respect to the process, becoming empowered necessarily entails the creation of new subjects and actors who have developed a “critical consciousness” and who are oriented toward organizing and mobilizing to further radical social change; it also involves the formation of groups or collectivities that have a “collective agency” and a “social or collective identity.”⁶⁷

Yet, although feminists’ emphasis upon the social dimensions of empowerment distinguishes its approach in significant ways, it also raises several challenges, three of which we address here. The first relates to the empowerment process: how to foster the movement from a capacitating “power within” to a collective “power with” and “power to.” Indeed, feminist empowerment is recognized as a long, difficult, and nonlinear process since it “necessitates persistent and long-term interventions in order to break old patterns of low self-worth and dependence, and to foster the construction of new personalities with a realistic understanding of how gender functions in . . . society and strategies for its modification.”⁶⁸ In this quest, feminists have drawn upon various technologies of intervention such as consciousness-raising, “conscientization,” popular education, and community organizing. Doing so, however, has raised many interesting and thorny debates within the feminist-activist community about whose knowledge and understanding matters. Although the feminist empowerment approach clearly argues for the importance of local knowledge from the grassroots, along with the necessity for developing “women’s

self-knowledge and identity,” unmediated knowledge is not usually deemed sufficient for enabling empowerment.⁶⁹ “External agents,” “independent women’s organizations,” “external catalysts,” or “intermediate institutions” are often understood as necessary to facilitate a transformation in identity and subjectivity as a means of enabling women to develop the desire and capacities to organize for social change.⁷⁰

This raises a second set of difficult issues related to the role of professionals, experts, and intermediary institutions (such as NGOs) in the empowerment process and the manner in which consciousness-raising methods, trainings, and educational practices function as technologies of governance. In some respects, the centrality of concern about the role of intermediaries or external agents arises, in part, from feminists’ understanding of the subjects to whom they are addressing themselves. Those who are seen as marginalized, oppressed, and “disempowered” are also understood as having internalized their oppression or marginalization to some extent, thereby necessitating psychological transformation to develop a critical consciousness and an internal “power within”: “External catalysts are often critical . . . in situations where disempowerment is manifested as a lack of agency and organizational capacity.”⁷¹

This brings us to a third challenge related to the goal of feminist empowerment: how is “social transformation” or “social change” defined? On the one hand, given that empowerment is understood as a process of self-determination, many people argue that what social transformation means and how it is to be pursued must develop from the empowerment process itself: “Empowerment is not something that can be done to or for women.”⁷² Yet, on the other hand, since feminists are expressly interested in addressing structural forms of power and systemic and institutionalized inequalities, the process of empowerment is understood as oriented necessarily toward changing oppressive and exploitative social conditions and relations.

To negotiate this tension, feminists have distinguished interventions that address women’s “condition” or “practical gender interests” from more transformative ones that address women’s “position” or “strategic gender interests.”⁷³ However, the question always remains open as to what constitutes a “true” transformation in women’s social position. This question or tension is inherent in any feminist empowerment project (a good thing, from our perspective), but we maintain that in the face of powerful liberal and neoliberal understandings of what constitutes “empowering” *economic* relations, it is especially imperative that left feminists not cede the terrain of the economy. Moreover, they should develop a vision and practice of empowerment that address unequal and exploitative economic relations in ways that go beyond the social-liberal promise of “equal opportunity,” “women’s autonomy,” and “effective asset-based choice”—a “postcapitalist politics,” to echo Kathy Gibson and Julie Graham (J. K. Gibson-Graham).⁷⁴

Indeed, the power-centric focus of the feminist empowerment project has fostered more intellectual and political activity around “citizen rights” and “inclusive citizenship” than around “economic rights” and alternative economic ways of being.⁷⁵ “Deepening democracy” and “claiming citizenship” are crucial aspects of empowerment. However, unless citizenship and democracy are more fully elaborated to encompass economic rela-

tions, they are not sufficient to enable significant progressive social change—neither in a world in which “civil society” is increasingly cast as yet another arena for “exercising entrepreneurship” nor in a world in which economic practices and processes are conflated with “the market,” and women’s unpaid work, self-employment, petty trading, and capitalist wage-labor serve to delimit the range of economic possibilities.⁷⁶

Feminist concerns with empowerment have contributed to articulating a multidimensional understanding of power and the modalities by which it is manifested and exercised while also developing new participatory methods and knowledges that seek to base a feminist project of radical social transformation in part on women’s lived experiences and self-defined aspirations and social vision. Moreover, feminist theorizing and activism have contributed to shifting powerful mainstream development institutions such as the WB toward a more egalitarian, social-liberal capabilities approach that incorporates some attention to how institutional and social factors are at play in shaping “the effectiveness of agency.”⁷⁷ Yet, unless feminists can more expansively articulate, mobilize around, and build upon economic visions that offer power and sustenance beyond micro-credit, self-employment, or even “decent” waged work, we will not be able to supplant the increasingly hegemonic vision offered by various forms of mainstream empowerment, whether of a social-liberal or neoliberal bent, that serve to reproduce exploitative, capitalist class relations.

As Nancy Fraser has observed, when feminism is “unmoored from the critique of capitalism,” it may be “made available for alternative articulations” that, ironically, may reinforce class exploitation by “intensifying capitalism’s valorization of waged labor.”⁷⁸ Thus, following Wendy Brown, we argue that feminists must “emancipate the realm of production” if we “still aim at something other than liberal democracy in a capitalist socio-economic order.”⁷⁹ The radical openness that characterizes the feminist empowerment approach and its investment in fostering a “critical consciousness” oriented toward just and equitable social relations creates propitious spaces for finding ways in which “the self-organization of women” enables “alternative development,” as was so eloquently and forcefully argued in DAWN’s 1987 manifesto. This calls for a feminist politics that “resocializes economic relations” by producing and cultivating new, noncapitalist economic subjectivities, practices, and social relations.⁸⁰

Notes

1. Not until the mid-1970s did the word *empowerment* gain currency outside religious and governmental contexts. In addition to its use by feminist activists in South Asia, the term began to be used in the United States in the mid-1970s by social workers and community psychologists. See Barbara Bryant Solomon, *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); Julian Rappaport, “In Praise of Paradox: A Social Policy of Empowerment over Prevention,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 9, no. 1 (1981): 1–25; Lorraine Gutierrez, “Ethnic Consciousness, Consciousness Raising and the Empowerment Process of Latinos” (PhD diss., University of Michigan—Ann

Arbor, 1989); and Marie-Hélène Bacqué and Carole Biewener, *L'empowerment, une pratique émancipatrice* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012). It also began to appear in the US public policy arena, first in 1977 with Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus's influential essay *To Empower People: From State to Civil Society* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1977) and later in the 1980s by Republicans and the Heritage Foundation, with Jack Kemp eventually establishing an Economic Empowerment Task Force within the Republican Bush administration in 1990, prior to the Democratic Clinton administration's 1993 Empowerment Zone legislation. See Marie-Hélène Bacqué and Carole Biewener, "Different Manifestations of the Concept of Empowerment: The Politics of Urban Renewal in the United States and the United Kingdom," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, no. 6 (November 2013): 2198–213.

2. Jo Rowlands, "A Word of the Times, but What Does It Mean? Empowerment in the Discourse and Practice of Development," in *Women and Empowerment: Illustrations from the Third World*, ed. Helen Ashfar (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 11–34; Jo Rowlands, "Empowerment Examined," in *Development and Social Diversity*, ed. Deborah Eade (Oxford, UK: Oxfam, 1996), 86–92; Jane Parpart, "Lessons from the Field: Rethinking Empowerment; Gender and Development from a Post-(Post?) Development Perspective," in *Feminist Post-Development Thought: Rethinking Modernity, Post Colonialism and Representation*, ed. Kriemild Saunders (London: Zed Books, 2002), 41–56; Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock, *Beyond Buzzwords: "Poverty Reduction", "Participation" and "Empowerment" in Development Policy*, Overarching Concerns, Programme Paper no. 10 (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development [UNRISD], November 2005); Rosaline Eyben and Rebecca Napier-Moore, "Choosing Words with Care? Shifting Meanings of Women's Empowerment in International Development," *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2009): 285–300; and Cecilia Sardenberg, *Liberal vs. Liberating Empowerment: Conceptualising Women's Empowerment from a Latin American Feminist Perspective*, Pathways Working Paper 7 (Brighton: Pathways of Women's Empowerment RPC, 2007).

3. Srilatha Batliwala, "Taking the Power Out of Empowerment: An Experiential Account," *Development in Practice* 17, nos. 4–5 (August 2007): 557–65; Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory and Event* 7, no. 1 (2003): 1–19; and Wendy Brown, "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism and De-Democratization," *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (December 2006): 690–714.

4. Social liberalism became quite influential as a distinct form of liberalism in the post-World War II period. It differs from classic liberalism insofar as it views the good of the community as harmonious with the freedom of the individual. Rather than embracing classic liberalism's "laissez-faire" approach to economic and social relations, social liberals see a legitimate role for the state in promoting civil rights and redressing social and economic inequalities through both government regulation and social programs. See James L. Richardson, *Contending Liberalisms in World Politics: Ideology and Power* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001).

5. J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

6. Devaki Jain, *Women's Quest for Power: Five Indian Case Studies* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 1980); Srilatha Batliwala, *Women's Empowerment in South Asia: Concepts and Practices* (New

Delhi: Food and Agricultural Organization, Asia South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education, 1993); Srilatha Batliwala, "The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concepts from Action," in *Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment, and Rights*, ed. Gita Sen, Adrienne Germain, and Lincoln C. Chen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 127–38; Ela Bhatt, "Toward Empowerment," *World Development* 17, no. 7 (1989): 1059–65; and Kumud Sharma, "Grassroots Organizations and Women's Empowerment: Some Issues in the Contemporary Debate," *Samya Shakti: A Journal of Women's Studies* 6 (1991–92): 28–43.

7. N[arayan]. K. Banerjee, *Grassroot Empowerment (1975–1990): A Discussion Paper*, vol. 22 (New Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies, 1995), [2], <http://www.cwds.ac.in/OCPaper/GrassrootEmpowerment.pdf>.

8. Naila Kabeer, interview with the authors, Boston, MA, 25 June 2009.

9. Devaki Jain, interview with the authors, Boston, MA, 29 June 2009.

10. Bacqué and Biewener, *L'empowerment, une pratique émancipatrice*. *Sati* refers to a former Hindu practice whereby a widow immolated herself on the funeral pyre of her husband.

11. Kabeer interview.

12. While feminists in the United States engaged in what came to be called "consciousness raising," those working in the international development arena were more directly influenced by Paulo Freire's popular education methods known as "conscientization" or "education for a critical consciousness" and elaborated in his influential work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970).

13. Banerjee, "Grassroot Empowerment," 9. Since India's independence in 1947, its government had "empowered committees" to draft legislation or to take action as part of the five-year national planning process. In these instances, the word was used in a manner consistent with its early origins, with empowerment defined in terms of the state or church delegating authority or power, or giving legal rights.

14. Notably, several middle-class professional women working with community organizations were especially important in shifting the government's understanding of empowerment toward a grassroots orientation. For instance, Vina Mazumdar, a political scientist, helped found and then directed the important Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi in 1980. Earlier she authored the influential 1974 government report *Towards Equality*, which provided the first major evaluation of women's circumstances in India. This report showed the extent of women's poverty and marginalized status, triggering a series of research initiatives by the Indian Social Science Research Council (ISSRC) from 1975 to 1977 that "contributed largely to the conceptualization/formulation/clarification of the concept of empowerment among grassroot women." Banerjee, "Grassroot Empowerment," 9. Also, in 1972 Ela Bhatt, a lawyer, founded the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), one of the first organizations to employ a grassroots empowerment approach focused on organizing women workers within India's enormous informal sector. Bhatt later chaired the commission responsible for the influential *Shramshakti [Power of labor]: Report of the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector* (New Delhi: National Commission on Self Employed Women, 1988). Reflecting on SEWA's Gandhian orientation, the "basic thrust" of the report was on "grassroot empowerment through women's own organization." Banerjee, "Grassroot Empowerment," 9; see also Bhatt, "Toward Empowerment." Further, economist Devaki Jain used the term *empowerment* in her study of five community-based

women's organizations. Jain, *Women's Quest for Power*. Jain carried out her research in the late 1970s while working as director of the ISSRC. She went on to serve on the National Preparatory Committees for the 1985 and 1995 UN World Conferences on Women.

15. Devaki Jain, *Women, Development, and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 95.

16. Gita Sen and Caren Grown, *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987).

17. *Ibid.*, 9; and Mary E. Hawkesworth, *Globalization and Feminist Activism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 72.

18. Sen and Grown, *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions*, 22.

19. *Ibid.*, 15.

20. *Ibid.*, 80.

21. *Ibid.*, 82.

22. Caroline O. N. Moser, "Gender Planning in the Third World: Meeting Practical and Strategic Gender Needs," *World Development* 17, no. 11 (1989): 1799–1825.

23. The work of Srilatha Batliwala, an Indian social worker, has been particularly influential. In 1991 she prepared a background document on "innovative programmes for women's development, education, [and] empowerment in South Asia" for a South Asian Workshop on "Education for Women's Empowerment" organized by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization's Freedom from Hunger Campaign—Action for Development. Published in 1993, her study *Women's Empowerment in South Asia* became a global touchstone for the feminist-empowerment approach and provided some of the most extensive discussion and characterization of what such an approach entails. See also Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought* (London: Verso, 1994); Vina Mazumdar, *Peasant Women Organise for Empowerment: The Bankura Experiment* (New Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies, 1989); Shimwaayi Muntemba, ed., *Rural Development and Women: Lessons from the Field* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1985); and Sharma, "Grassroots Organizations and Women's Empowerment."

24. Socialist feminist critiques of liberal feminism and, more broadly, feminist debates about power in the 1970s contributed to the emergence of the feminist empowerment approach in development. Influenced by the work of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (Victoria: Penguin Books, 1976) and Nancy Hartsock's *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (New York: Longman, 1983), these discussions were often cast in terms of the need to foster "feminist" forms of power—most often articulated as a "power within," "a power to," and "a power with"—in addition to the more traditional and "masculinist" type of power, that of "a power over." See Kabeer, *Reversed Realities*; and Rowlands, "Word of the Times."

25. Batliwala, "Meaning of Women's Empowerment," 134.

26. Rowlands, "Word of the Times," 11.

27. The language of empowerment also began to appear within the UN in the mid-1990s. In this context, it was, for the most part, located within a social-liberal perspective that combines a deep and abiding concern with antipoverty measures and redistribution via development assistance and aid, along with the promotion of self-determination and the self-reliance of member nations. Thus, at the UN, feminists were able to argue for "women's empower-

ment” on equity grounds—more so than on the basis of efficiency, to the extent that “gender equality” and “empowerment” have come to be used in tandem at the UN, as illustrated, for instance, by the 2011 reorganization that centralized all UN initiatives oriented toward women in a new agency called UN Women: The UN Entity for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment. See Carole Biewener and Marie-Hélène Bacqué, “Empowerment, développement et féminisme: Entre projet de transformation sociale et néolibéralisme,” in *La démocratie participative: histoire et généalogie*, ed. Marie-Hélène and Yves Sintomer (Paris: La Découverte, 2011), 82–101; and Bacqué and Biewener, *L’empowerment, une pratique émancipatrice*.

28. Robert O’Brien et al., eds., *Contesting Global Governance: Multilateral Economic Institutions and Global Social Movements* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 47–48. Requirements for “outcomes assessments” by multilateral and bilateral aid agencies have given birth to a considerable amount of work among gender advocates for ways to measure and quantify empowerment achievements. See, for instance, Naila Kabeer, “Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment,” *Development and Change* 30, no. 3 (July 1999): 435–64, for an analysis of various measurements of “women’s empowerment.”

29. Naila Kabeer, “Conflicts over Credit: Re-evaluating the Empowerment Potential of Loans to Women in Rural Bangladesh,” *World Development* 29, no. 1 (January 2001): 63–84.

30. Sophie Bessis, “The World Bank and Women: Instrumental Feminism,” in *Eye to Eye: Women Practicing Development across Cultures*, ed. Susan Perry and Celeste Schenck (London: Zed Books, 2002), 10–24.

31. Kate Bedford, “Doing Business with the Ladies,” *Labour, Capital and Society* 42, nos. 1 and 2 (2009): 172.

32. *Ibid.*, 173.

33. “Ministers, Bank President, Tout Women’s Empowerment as Key Development Goal,” World Bank, 12 April 2008, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTGENDER/0,,contentMDK:21727751~menuPK:336874~pagePK:64020865~piPK:149114~theSitePK:336868,00.html>.

34. Arne Ruckert, “Producing Neoliberal Hegemony? A Neo-Gramscian Analysis of the PRSP in Nicaragua,” *Studies in Political Economy* 79 (Spring 2007): 93.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 101.

37. Joseph Stiglitz, “More Instruments and Broader Goals: Moving toward the Post-Washington Consensus” (WIDER Annual Lectures, Helsinki, Finland, 7 January 1998), 24, <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/209/43245.html>; and Paul Wolfowitz, “Good Governance and Development: A Time for Action” (speech given in Jakarta, Indonesia, 11 April 2006), <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:20883752~menuPK:34472~pagePK:34370~piPK:34424~theSitePK:4607,00.html>.

38. World Bank, *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/11856/World%20development%20report%202000-2001.pdf?sequence=1>; and Deepa Na-

rayan, ed., *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2002).

39. Ruth Alsop and Nina Heinsohn, *Measuring Empowerment in Practice: Structuring Analysis and Framing Indicators*, World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3510 (Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2005), 5, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPowerment/Resources/41307_wps3510.pdf. However, Prof. Ravi Kanbur, leading architect of the *World Development Report 2000/2001*, resigned when higher bank authorities insisted on reducing the report's emphasis on empowerment. See Einar Braathen, "New Social Corporatism: A Discursive-Critical Review of the WDR 2000/1, 'Attacking Poverty,'" *Forum for Development Studies* 27, no. 2 (2000): 333. Further, as Parpart notes, although the report "adopts some of the language of empowerment and participation, in its lengthy bibliography there are almost no references to the literature." See "Lessons from the Field," 42.

40. Narayan, *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction*, 14, 13.

41. *Ibid.*, 8.

42. Ruth Alsop, Mette Frost Bertelsen, and Jeremy Holland, eds., *Empowerment in Practice: From Analysis to Implementation* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006), http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPowerment/Resources/Empowerment_in_Practice.pdf.

43. *Ibid.*, 1.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*, 11.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*, 3.

48. *Ibid.*, 16.

49. *Ibid.*, 2.

50. World Bank, *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2012), 3, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDR2012/Resources/7778105-129969996_8583/7786210-1315936222006/Complete-Report.pdf.

51. *Ibid.*, 3, 47.

52. *Ibid.*, 48.

53. *Ibid.*, 22 and *passim*.

54. In "New Social Corporatism," Braathen argues that a social-corporatist vision is evident in the WB's *World Development Report 2000/2001*, and Suzanne Bergeron identifies a "new institutionalism" in "The Post-Washington Consensus and Economic Representations of Women in Development at the World Bank," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 5, no. 3 (November 2003): 397-419.

55. Maxine Molyneux, "Conditional Cash Transfers: A Pathway to Women's Empowerment?," Pathways Working Paper 5, 2008, 43, <http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/PDF/Outputs/WomenEmp/PathwaysWP5-website.pdf>.

56. Ruckert, "Producing Neoliberal Hegemony?"; and Molyneux, "Conditional Cash Transfers."

57. Brown, "Neo-liberalism," 19.

58. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

59. Brown, "American Nightmare," 692.

60. Ibid., 704.
61. Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Katharine N. Rankin, "Governing Development: Neoliberalism, Microcredit, and Rational Economic Woman," *Economy and Society* 30, no. 1 (February 2001): 18–37; and Brown, "Neo-liberalism."
62. Brown, "Neo-liberalism," 6.
63. Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland, *Empowerment in Practice*, 10, 11, 15–18, 19–20.
64. Srilatha Batliwala, "Putting Power Back into Empowerment," openDemocracy, 30 July 2007, http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/putting_power_back_into_empowerment_0; Andrea Cornwall, "Pathways of Women's Empowerment," openDemocracy, 30 July 2007, http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/pathways_of_womens_empowerment; and Sardenberg, *Liberal vs. Liberating Empowerment*.
65. Nellie Stromquist, *Feminist Organizations and Social Transformation in Latin America* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007), 13.
66. Naila Kabeer, " 'Growing' Citizenship from the Grassroots: Nijera Kori and Social Mobilization in Bangladesh," in *Inclusive Citizenship: Meanings and Expressions*, ed. Naila Kabeer (London: Zed Books, 2005), 196.
67. Ibid., 197; and Stromquist, *Feminist Organizations and Social Transformation*, 21.
68. Nellie Stromquist, "Education as a Means for Empowering Women," in *Rethinking Empowerment: Gender and Development in a Global/Local World*, ed. Jane Parpart, Shirin M. Rai, and Kathleen A. Staudt (London: Routledge, 2002), 23.
69. See Pathways of Women's Empowerment, accessed 20 December 2011, <http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/>. Pathways of Women's Empowerment is an international research consortium and communications program linking "academics with activists and practitioners to find out what works to enhance women's empowerment."
70. Batliwala, *Women's Empowerment in South Asia*, 23; Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State and Revolution in Nicaragua," *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 2 (1985): 252; "Introduction," in Kabeer, *Inclusive Citizenship*, 8; and Stromquist, *Feminist Organizations and Social Transformation*, 33.
71. "Introduction," in Kabeer, *Inclusive Citizenship*, 8.
72. Cornwall, "Pathways of Women's Empowerment."
73. Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation?"; and Kate Young, *Gender and Development: A Relational Approach* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988).
74. Gibson-Graham, *Postcapitalist Politics*.
75. "Introduction," in Kabeer, *Inclusive Citizenship*, 8; Stromquist, *Feminist Organizations and Social Transformation*; and Andrea Cornwall and Vera Schatten Coelho, eds., *Spaces for Change? The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas* (London: Zed Books, 2007).
76. Brown, "Neo-liberalism," 12.
77. Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland, *Empowerment in Practice*, 11.
78. Nancy Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History," *New Left Review* 56 (March–April 2009): 109, 111.
79. Brown, "Neo-liberalism," 16.
80. Gibson-Graham, *Postcapitalist Politics*, 79.