

*Feminism, Empowerment and Development: Changing Women's Lives.* Edited by Andrea Cornwall and Jenny Edwards, 2012, Zed Books, London

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*Feminisms, Empowerment and Development: Changing Women's Lives* edited by Andrea Cornwall and Jenny Edwards (2014, Zed Books) provides a thorough, and very necessary, examination of the empowerment model that straddles feminism and development principles and rhetoric. An output of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment research programme, a five-year project conducted by an international network of researchers, the impressive collection of conceptual and empirical research investigates the meaning of empowerment in women's lives in diverse settings.

The introduction highlights, quite brilliantly, how the feminist principles of empowerment that developed in the 1990s with a clear focus on women's consciousness has been watered down beyond recognition as a tool of the aid industry. Echoing the feminist writer, Srilatha Batliwala (1994) who has warned that empowerment is in danger of losing its transformative edge, the chapter provides a specific example of the World Bank's selective interpretation of Naila Kabeer's (1999) definition of empowerment reducing it to a measurable outcome and as something one can do for others, stripping the concept of its politics of consciousness and the emphasis on women's relationship with each other.

In many of the case studies, the programme examines the effects of interventions executed by well-meaning development agencies, drawing a distinction between policies, programmes and laws, thereby 'complicating' the narratives of empowerment. Subsequent chapters investigate other well-traveled paths of empowerment such as legal reform in Egypt (the author concludes that there is no direct path to empowerment and that processes need to be participatory), and quotas as a tool of political empowerment for women in Latin America which, while chronicling impressive, effective

feminist activism surmises that a successful outcome of more women in political leadership does not necessarily lead to the empowerment of women as a collective.

Two chapters study women's organizations in Bangladesh, drawing a picture of strategic engagement with political parties and the case of a fundamentally feminist NGO that was once defunct and has since been resuscitated, the notion of loyalty to an entity that, by most accounts provided a real path to empowerment. The chapter on Palestinian women's resistance to occupation asserts boldly that empowerment is a new concept imposed following the Oslo Agreements and pushed through "an aggressive wave of funding of projects to women's organizations"(p 200). Economic independence from men guaranteed through work in a large factory, with associated matrifocal residence and families being predominately organized around a mother and her children was observed to contribute to women's empowerment and female solidarity in Bahia, Brazil.

These case studies demonstrate that unlike the simplistic by-the-numbers approach espoused by the aid-development sector, which has largely failed to empower women while even improving their lives, empowerment is a process as opposed to a linear, measureable trajectory. Specifically, this book reminds us that empowerment is relational in terms of time – disempowerment now to an empowered future – and that it requires women's collective action as exemplified by the case studies on Brazilian domestic workers. We also note that one woman's empowerment may be another woman's oppression as discussed in the analysis of the Lady Health Workers' project in Pakistan which while largely lauded as a successful economic empowerment initiative for participating women resulted in many of the daughters or sisters-in-law of the health workers taking up more household chores to make up for the absence of 'Lady Health Workers'.

In addition, *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development* teaches us to pay attention to context. As the research by Akosua Darkwah shows, for older Ghanaian women, education provided a pathway to empowerment, while for younger women, the contemporary labour market has expanded women's means. Representation as a feminist issue was highlighted by the dilemma faced by Bangladeshi activists in the characterization of acid-attack survivors as non-victims. In terms of strategies, tactical accommodation and compromise with the state-aid industry machinery by 'feminist bureaucrats'

engaged in gender mainstreaming is analyzed in one of the case studies.

Furthermore, what the editors refer to as 'hidden pathways [to empowerment]' were investigated by the Foucauldian analysis of religious education classes studied by Neelam Hussain in Pakistan and by the qualitative analysis into television watching as an unlikely avenue to empowerment for poor women in Bangladesh in order to help the reader conceptualize empowerment outside the development box.

There is contained within this book, a wealth of feminist critique of 'empowerment lite' (Cornwall, 1997) that greatly resonated with this reviewer who, as a feminist, has observed the same gaps in her experience of 'women's empowerment' projects in the East African region. The book re-complicates empowerment as a feminist tool, recalling its transformative edge beyond the relatively simplistic 'invest in girls and women' model employed by the development sector. Most significantly, the importance of shifting women's and men's consciousness and the process of people developing the power to act, which has largely fallen by the wayside of the rush to empower the women of the developing world, is reclaimed by this important book.

However, the volume is not without its faults. It may be considered too long, with too many case studies which because they all discuss important topics, deserve more attention than may reasonably be given to a book of such length, particularly when there is more than one case study from one country as is the case for Brazil, Ghana, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Egypt. Perhaps two volumes would have done better justice to the wealth of reflection produced by this project. Although most of the authors indicate their participation in the Pathways of Women's Empowerment programme, it would have been useful if beyond the information on contributors, the voices of the authors and their personal reflections on the respective projects they are writing about was reflected as it is in the 'Subversively Accommodating' article by Rosalind Eyben. In addition, the volume could use more thorough editing: while it is clearly written for the most part, there are more than a few typographic and grammatical errors and some sentences in a few of the narratives are too long with more than a few repetitions. In some instances, categorical statements are made without proof or a source being cited.

Some of the arguments in a couple of case studies seem obvious, particularly to a reader familiar with feminist and development discourses, which would presumably consist of a majority of the intended audience of

the book while other narratives could use more details. Lastly, a few of the case studies include non-English terms without their English equivalents, and narratives are attributed to persons whose identity is not explained.

Despite these minor mishaps, *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development* is a wonderful, and refreshing addition to the Development canon. Refreshingly feminist, the volume takes development planners and practitioners to task in getting women's empowerment back on a feminist track.