



Researching empowerment: On methodological innovations, pitfalls and challenges



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SYNOPSIS

In this paper, we address the methodological challenges as well as innovations made possible by a mixed methods analysis of empowerment in a multi-lingual environment. The linguistic challenge of translating empowerment fully reminds us that the concept is both time and place specific. Combining a survey with intergenerational interviews allows us to uncover both whether or not Ghanaian women are empowered and equally importantly the context that makes this possible. Such an approach also allows us to assess the extent to which researchers and the researched share similar understandings of what empowerment means.

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Introduction: engaging with empowerment beyond skepticism

In African feminist intellectual traditions, there is a long and fruitful tradition of sustained engagement with the concept of gendered power in its many ramifications by both individuals and collectives (Imam, Mama, & Sow, 1997; Gouws, 2005). Influenced by a range of feminist discourses on power and the particular conditions of African women, a set of highly influential analyses of the centrality of power in gender relations and inequalities and in women's experiences of citizenship; the nature of the power that women seek (power within and with, as opposed to power over) as well as the power of women's agency, their control of resources, ability to make decisions, to control their own bodies and sexualities, to transform ideologies which justify their oppression and to influence the way they are represented in knowledge production and the academy; have been developed. Much of this discussion has proceeded with a strong sense of the structural nature of power relations, the gendered cultures of institutions of power, the difficulties of changing structures of power, but also the agency of individual women and women's organiza-

tions. These studies have often been grounded in Africa's reality of underdevelopment, poverty and inequalities. Several reviews of gender and women's studies in Africa attest to this rich body of work (Adomako-Ampofo, Beoku-Betts, Njambi, & Osirim, 2004; Lewis, 2002; Mama, 2001).

While this literature has theorized citizenship, debated the relevance of gender as a concept, sexualities, politics and state among other things, very little of this literature has been devoted to theorizing the concept of empowerment — its meanings and how it can be measured in an African context, as happened in and about Asia (Batliwala, 1995; Kabeer, 2001; Hossain, 2002) since the DAWN network identified empowerment as the best approach to addressing the gender oppression of women from developing countries (Sen & Grown, 1987). Interestingly, one of the earliest applications of an empowerment approach in the field of development was from Africa. Sarah Longwe, engaging with Moser's triple role framework, designed a framework with five stages of empowerment — welfare, access, conscientization, participation and equality of control, with welfare as the lowest level and equality of control as the highest level of empowerment (UNICEF, 1994). The ideas in this schema are reflected in some of the refinements of the concept of empowerment. The intellectual silence on theorizing empowerment in Africa beyond its use mainly as a descriptor of improvements in women's lives is not entirely

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accidental. It is rooted in the wide-ranging and entirely valid critique of the concept as depoliticized and imprecise. While this has led to various exercises to clarify and to make it measureable (Kabeer, 2001; Narayan-Parker, 2005), a similar exercise has not been undertaken in Africa. And yet it is these efforts which provided the basis for our engagement with the concept in a global research project involving several countries on four continents — Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America known as the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Project Consortium. In addition to respecting the Project's overarching research question, our engagement with the concept of empowerment was to test some of our concerns about the concept within the Ghanaian context and also within the framework of a multiple country research project. It was helpful that the research questions and the themes of focus were no different from that which we had used in the past for researching pathways of enlarging women's citizenship and their exercise of agency; or policies which lead to the transformation of gender relations and promote gender equality and equity.

The consensus in the literature that empowerment is context specific and a process provided the additional possibility of gaining new insights into changes in women's lives in different contexts whether they are a result of everyday life processes, the exercise of individual and collective agency or deliberate policy action. Discussions within the West African hub of the Research Project Consortium (RPC) before we began research concluded that our contribution to the empowerment literature would be to identify what changes had occurred in women's lives in particular contexts over the years, which of these had been positive, which had been setbacks and which, if any, of these changes could be an indicator of empowerment. This required not only methodological innovations, but also the navigation of challenges. We decided to select research instruments which would be up to the task of plotting change within the limits of a five year research program. We agreed on first a survey of women's everyday lives focusing on the key thematic areas of the (RPC) — work, voice and body, and additional indicators such as education, health, access to justice, personal freedoms and significant relationships; and second life story interviews with three generations of women—daughter, mother and grandmother — who lived in close proximity to each other at the time of the research and identified through the survey.

The use of an intergenerational approach in both the survey and in-depth interviews was an innovative way of identifying changes in women's lives which also allowed us to focus on women's everyday lives at different stages in their life cycle. Interviewing the three generations of women in-depth was particularly exciting in its possibilities for comparison when discussed in relation to changing national contexts. The survey and life story interviews presented some methodological challenges we would like to discuss in this article. In both the survey and in-depth interviews, we explored our own assumptions about empowerment and also asked respondents what they understood by the concept of empowerment. The two approaches to researching empowerment were expected to be complementary.

The questions based on our conceptions of empowerment were quite straightforward and were based on a broad range of economic, social and political indicators by which we could

assess progress and stagnation. However, direct questions about empowerment raised all manner of questions — linguistic complications and possible biases, comparability across the different languages of the study and what meaning and weight to give to philosophical and attitudinal questions as opposed to questions about actual practice. This paper is an account of the study's methodological choices, with references to their implications for the findings of the study more specifically and the larger question of feminist approaches to researching and understanding empowerment.

The paper begins with a brief discussion about the conceptions of empowerment guiding the study and how these influenced the methodological strategies of the study. This is followed by a discussion of the two methods used in the study, the key assumptions of the study, the research questions, sampling procedures and interview processes. This is followed by a section which illustrates some of the methodological challenges, pitfalls and benefits. The last segment discusses implications for future studies of empowerment.

Conceptions of empowerment and their implications for research methods

Our conceptions of empowerment influenced our research questions and methods of research. While there was a consensus on some aspects of these conceptions within the Pathways RPC, others continued to be the subject of debate throughout the life of the RPC. For example, there was an agreement that empowerment was neither a linear process nor a destination. Thus a person empowered today might be disempowered tomorrow by changes in their circumstances. Another agreement was that there were different elements/dimensions of empowerment. Thus a person could be economically empowered but could have some social disempowerment and vice versa. At the same time, one aspect of empowerment could help to empower a person in other respects. The unresolved questions included whether it was possible to find that some people were more empowered than others, or whether comparisons were only possible with respect to the same person at different times in their life. Also unresolved was whether each individual had a particular path/trajectory to empowerment or whether some common indicators were discernible in the different pathways to empowerment.

A second set of issues was how to measure empowerment drawing on both direct and proxy indicators identified by the researchers and others before them (Kabeer, 2001; Narayan-Parker, 2005; Luttrell, Quiroz, Scrutton, & Bird, 2009) as well as subjective criteria, as identified by respondents. Thirdly, how can research account for the material and non-material dimensions of empowerment and their relationship?¹ These agreements, debates and questions about empowerment had implications for the selection of research methods and the framing of research questions and the research instruments as evident in the discussion below.

Researching empowerment: the survey and in-depth interviews

Ideally, examining empowerment both as process and continuum requires longitudinal studies. This would enable the tracking of a group of women over time focusing on both the individual and group processes of empowerment,

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