

biological sex, what political values and priorities do they represent? Gender equality is not going to be determined by how many women are elected but rather by the politics and visions of the men, women and (if we ever get to this place) transgender people we can bring into decision-making positions.

We need to spell out that gender equality is not about numbers, nor is it just about women. Masculinities and femininities move in complex ways in different bodies. We cannot grasp what goes on in military and armed conflict without talking about gender relations. Gender-based violence in the military and against civilians is a complex issue. Men are raped. Women are torturers too. We need a nuanced and contextualized sense of gender if we are to talk about power and change.

Towards a more nuanced understanding of power

I also think we need to go beyond gender. By that I do not mean just going beyond the binary of gender and talk about transgender, for me that is

a given, but also to talk about transhuman ethics. Now that might be a bit confusing given the problematic 'transhumanism' movement related to genetic engineering. But what I mean is that we have to think in less anthropocentric ways, and embrace other species as well as people who are not 'like us'. I would say something like the cosmovision that Arturo Escobar, Sylvia Marcos and others talk about in relation to Indigenous groups and their world view of the Earth as a living subject should be getting more of our attention.

There are tensions around essentialism and romanticism in these debates which I see us needing to navigate carefully, but for me it is very interesting.

I also think we need to break down divides among not only people and nature, among genders, but also North and South. It is important to see women of the Global South neither as victims nor as heroines. It is crucial to see that transnational concerns are layered and complex as we link issues of power around body politics and sexuality with economic justice/injustice and the environmental/sustainable development agenda.

Sexuality, Gender and Empowerment

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Empowerment in context

Empowerment is a complicated issue. The context of empowerment – the when and the where – determines what sort of empowerment you are speaking about. The concept of empowerment as it is now commonly understood emerged in the 1990s. But understanding of empowerment is not universal. It has been shaped within a particular history and set of debates and within those debates it depends on where you are sitting and thinking about the term and how it fits your specific issue. Empowerment within development has been shaped by different places and different trajectories.

The gender and development discourse I am speaking about evolved around the early 1990s conferences on rights, social development, sexual health and rights and women. Engaged in those debates I liked how power was being addressed. I became interested in the concept of empowerment because I saw the potential of understanding in a Foucauldian sense how power is embedded in legal and biomedical discourses informing those debates and grounded in diverse disciplining of the body and relations (such as between women and men) at micro levels. I thought this way of understanding empowerment could be useful to arrive at the complexities of the debates and allow for a multiplicity of actions based on diverse readings of power.

Unfortunately the dominant understanding of empowerment in the gender and development discourse does not take up empowerment within this type of conceptual framework that would enable us to address the more complex and interesting ways of understanding power. Instead it tends, by and large, to translate the term as a rather simplified and mechanical reading of power, that would simply mean unilateral patriarchal power which men would hold over women. So that instead of a nuanced, complex and intricate understanding of power, the dominant use of the idea is confined within a binary way of thinking in which men have all the power and women have none. To put it simply, empowerment became the strategy used to reverse that binary logic: empowering women, mainly seen as 'victims' of their lack of power,

through development programmes aimed to enhance their agency'.

This is certainly one dimension to be addressed, in specific contexts and circumstances, both at micro and macro levels. However, the conception of power that informs my own thinking perceives in a deeper way the extreme complexity of power from which nobody is completely excluded, including women. At the very minimum we need to acknowledge that anyone who has found themselves in conditions of inequality has the power to resist and this resistance transforms the way power operates. However I suspect I am a something of a minority within the field of feminist activists to think about power like that.

Within gender and development most people understand women on one side of the binary equation of power inequality between women and men. The task then for gender and development programmes are to provide forms of mediations which allow women to understand and find agency over men, within institutions, despite tradition etc. and in this way arrive at power. As Paula England has said, in trying to define what empowerment is, maybe the best way to move forward is simply to talk about resources. So education and access to all types of resources symbolic and otherwise will allow women to exercise their power. This is certainly appropriate if we are placed within the limits of the *real politic* of (binary) gender. However, in my view we should also recognize that these strategies must also be critically situated in relation to the constraints and distortions of the overarching system women are entering when empowered. These pitfalls are easily identified in the doing of politics, as in recent years I and other feminists have been compelled to ask: does having a woman as president or prime minister or secretary of state resolve gender and other inequalities? In addition, we need to explore the ways in which through empowerment women (and other so called under-represented groups) are caught in new webs of self and other means of disciplining. Or as Foucault would say increases in power may not mean greater freedom but rather intensification of increasing control.

Empowerment: uses and limitations

Let me talk about Brazil, where I live. At least 80 percent of women between 24 and 40 are in the labour market. These women are therefore, according to a simplified understanding of empowerment, would be said to be empowered. The Brazilian cash transfer programme that has women as main beneficiaries is constantly described by government officials as a means of empowering poor women. Never mind if half of the female labour force is still in the informal market and experiencing poor conditions of labour. Nor that the cash transfers are limited to US\$ 80 per month and in many ways such transfers only serve to transform poor women into household managers of poverty alleviation (you could say this also means more state control over their lives). In terms of women in politics, however, women are not well represented – there are 6 percent of women in parliament – even if in the upcoming elections we will have two female candidates running for the presidency. Consequently, by and large, in the Brazilian context today empowerment is predominantly used to mean expanding women's presence in formal politics. On the other hand, young women and girls are fairing much better than boys and young males in education and those who use empowerment in its more conventional sense become totally confused as how to address this reversal of the gender gap.

Observing the dominant and simplistic uses of empowerment makes me concerned with the epistemology of the term. A first step to move beyond simplification and reductionism would be to recognize that neither in the past nor today are women totally disempowered. In modern and complex societies and in traditional societies there are multiple forms of power from which women are not at all excluded. All gender systems are based on complex power formations. One quite evident domain of women's power within gender systems is the realm of procreation. Not surprisingly it has been throughout history a focus of control, regulation and disciplining. But also, even when important currents within feminism consider sexuality to be the realm

where women are constantly submitted to male power, I disagree. Sexuality is and has been a domain where women exercise their power over other women and also men. Sexuality is a place of both agency and control, of both vulnerability and restrictions and major breakthroughs in what concerns personal freedom. Sexuality may not always be a place of power for women but I am convinced that in Brazil and elsewhere women do not always experience sexuality as disempowering. Sexuality is far more complex and in terms of understanding empowerment needs to be contextualized in relation to gender.

Gender and sexuality: expanding the frame

In this context, the binary way of understanding gender is very limited. It is important to look at gender away from a binary frame, though we all, including myself can fall into the limited view of gender as understanding relations among women and men. We need to take into account how gender is enmeshed and yet at the same time different from sexuality. We cannot address sexuality in isolation away from gender and vice versa.

Development, though 'desexualizes' us. Gender has become anaesthetized in the understanding of gender in today's gender and development discourse on empowerment. In the World Bank official discourse, for example sexuality is almost synonymous with gender. Sexuality becomes encapsulated within gender rather than explored and seen as a complex fluid phenomenon of cultural, social and political relations. The World Bank does not concern itself with the complex power relations of desire. Economic development connects gender with sexuality in a general framework as part of binary understanding of men as one gender, women as another. But just as sexuality is complex and fluid, gender is also a continuum with men and women at extreme points. There are different positionings of gender entities along the biological spectrum from man to woman, with complex gradients of masculinity and femininity as Anna Fausto Sterling

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beautifully describes and analyses it. What is amazing and inspiring in her research and thinking is that she is working not from the point of view of social science or philosophy, but from within the hard science of embryology and molecular biology. Her theoretical contribution should be acknowledged and better known in the contexts in which the intersection between gender, sexuality and development are being debated. If nothing else because she shows the strict binary sexual division of human bodies and beings is a creation of a certain type of science.

Rethinking empowerment

So given the far more complex reality of both gender and sexuality what does that mean for our understanding of empowerment? First of all empowerment is not simple. It is much more complex than how it tends to be discussed in gender and development. There are no easy reversals of hierarchies. I would argue you need a more nuanced Foucauldian understanding of power which encompasses gendered realities.

As we know, within the LGBT movement there are tensions around power between gays and lesbians. There are also harsh tensions and disputes among lesbians and feminists about the acceptance and political placement of transsexuals. Feminist voices have produced discourses around HIV and AIDS that exclude different genders and different forms of sexual desire and practice. Quite often gay men are described by women as 'patriarchs' within the LGBT and HIV movements. Does this description really make sense? Moving forward towards the extremities, while sex workers are seen as victims by most feminist strands, sex

workers themselves often speak of male sexual frailty. In many settings there are also territorial and political tensions between female and transsexual sex workers. Can one really view such complex lives made up of competing politics and complex desires, unstable gendered roles and fluid identities so simply? Is it correct to see it as explained by some sort of patriarchal hierarchy of bad men and good women? We leave out so much of humanity and diversity of lived embodied experience.

Or to take another example, how do we understand power among women who have sex with women, or who desire to have sexual relations with women? There are power relations among women, among lesbians. The failure to discuss the power imbalances and tensions among women is one blind spot in the gender discourse. Nor is there easy mention of violence by women to men, or of men who are subjected to sexual violation and exploitation as it extensively occurs in prisons worldwide. These are blind spots that must be named and more closely examined from an expanded empowerment perspective.

Last but not least, even when getting back to the more conventional *real politic* of gender, a quick observation of the world as it will tell us that if one remarkable trend of the last 30 years has been, in fact, the empowerment of women – in education, labour and even politics – the other key trend has been the evident increase of inequalities among women themselves, along the lines of races, class, cast, ethnicity or simply educational opportunities. The binary and simplistic translations of empowerment are incapable of capturing and transforming these realities.