

Strategizing for Women's Empowerment

Presentation at ESCAP-WEMC Forum
Where's the Power in Women's Empowerment?
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First, I would like to thank Madam Under-Secretary General, Ms Noeleen Heyzer for giving us this wonderful opportunity to address such a large gathering of key planners in the Asia-Pacific region. I shall be speaking about the issues that arise in terms of women's strategies for empowerment from the individual to the institutionalized levels and how this relates to development planning.

I agree that it is important to acknowledge progress. In this respect the growing consensus that women's empowerment is necessary to reduce poverty, to implement the Beijing Platform for Action, to attain the MDGs, to give effect to CEDAW etc. is an achievement. The problem is that no one seems to know what exactly "empowerment" is, how women become empowered and, therefore, how women's empowerment can be supported or catalyzed.

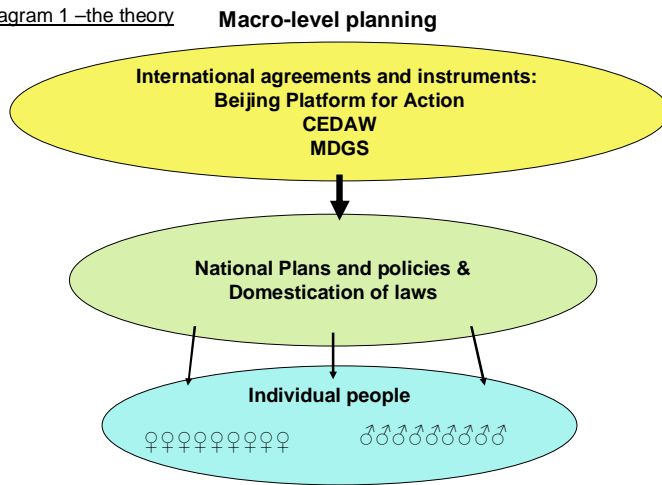
One widespread strategy for women's empowerment has been 'gender mainstreaming.' WEMC believes that to be effective 'gender-mainstreaming' must translate into promoting gender equality for which women's empowerment is essential. Gender mainstreaming sounds easy enough, but has proved very difficult indeed. So the question is why? WEMC posits that one reason relates to how planning is undertaken.

Planning is carried out at the macro level - meaning the provincial, national, regional or international levels - and focuses either on developing infrastructure or human resources. Planning for human development largely addresses people as citizens of states and sees those they are planning for as individuated and uniform within set categories of population: peasants, urban workers, students, professionals, rural/urban populations etc. The problem is that women can be and are in all and any population categories but still have differentiated needs from those of men. Focusing on state citizens also means that planning tends to overlook certain categories of people, such as migrant workers, whose needs tend to not be addressed. At the same time development planning tends to ignore, or make abstraction of, the question of people's rights and power structures, implying that development can be effective without rights.

But people do not inhabit statistical data sheets. People live in societies. More specifically people's lives are located within particular social collectivities and systems each with their own norms and values. These social collectivities operate at the meso level which WEMC defines as starting with the family and expanding outwards to different local administrative levels in specific countries. It includes parallel systems of

adjudication and social organizations such as councils of village elders. For women this meso-level defines the gender system they inhabit, where they most immediately experience the influence and control exercised by gender systems. Yet planning completely ignores this critical meso level. Theoretically once policies are translated into plans they should benefit individuals directly. (Diagram one)

Diagram 1 –the theory



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The reality however is that there is a complicated meso level of structures and power relations (Diagram 2) This WEMC diagram illustrates what we believe is a central challenge for planning. There is a presumption that if effective plans are developed the benefits will automatically reach individual citizens. Our contention is that plans and policies not only do not but *cannot* reach individuals directly. Plans filter through the meso level where they are negotiated and changed and can actually be blocked altogether.

Diagram 2 - Reality



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So what does this mean for women's empowerment?

For one thing the existence of power dynamics at the meso level means that when women at the grassroots act to empower themselves, to demand their rights and benefits, their efforts are confronted – and often blocked - by the forces operating at the meso level. This impedes institutionalisation of any gains they may make.

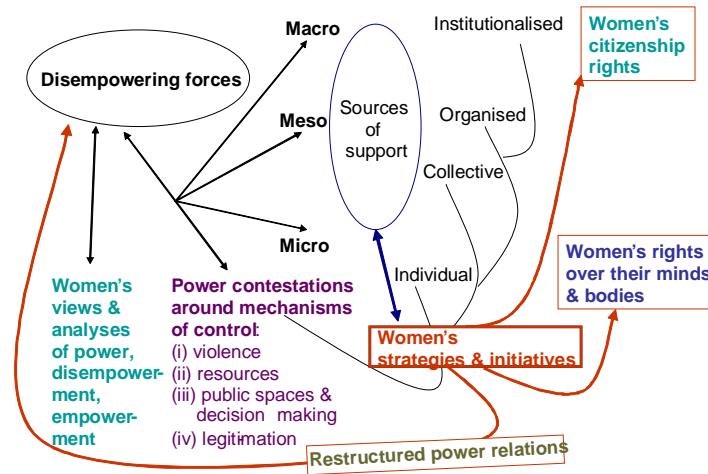
It means women are caught between the promises of equality and benefits held out by citizenship on the one hand but by the imperatives of maintaining their societal belonging in their smaller more immediate social collectivities on the other; between formal systems which may be encouraging them and informal systems that may be restraining them. The fear of being ostracized by and from their own communities is a very powerful force in negating women's agency. This is especially true in those situations where the state institutions and benefits do not reach women directly. Forces operating at the meso level often keep women isolated; they obstruct women's access to information, including about existing state laws and entitlements, and their access to opportunities, whether in terms of health, economic or educational benefits.

The Asia Pacific region prides itself on its culture and values. I think it is time we re-examined which aspects of our culture and values we want to retain and which we need to change and discard. We need to remember that, as Ashish Nandy saidⁱ, the greatest tradition is the tradition of re-inventing tradition. We must not allow culture to be used as an excuse to deny or to dilute women's rights and gender equality or to justify inaction for women's equality.

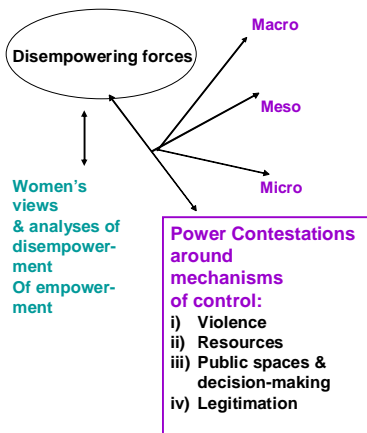
We need to examine who is defining 'our' culture and values? Who speaks on behalf of the community as spokespersons who then function as the gatekeepers of the community and especially the community women? We also need to examine who authenticates these spokespersons, by accepting them as the spokespersons – in terms of inviting them to the decision-making tables.

So for all these reasons, WEMC has focused on this rather messy meso level. In brief what we are studying is as follows:

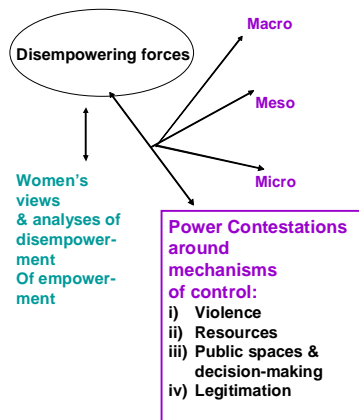
WEMC: SCHEME OF WHAT WE WANT TO STUDY



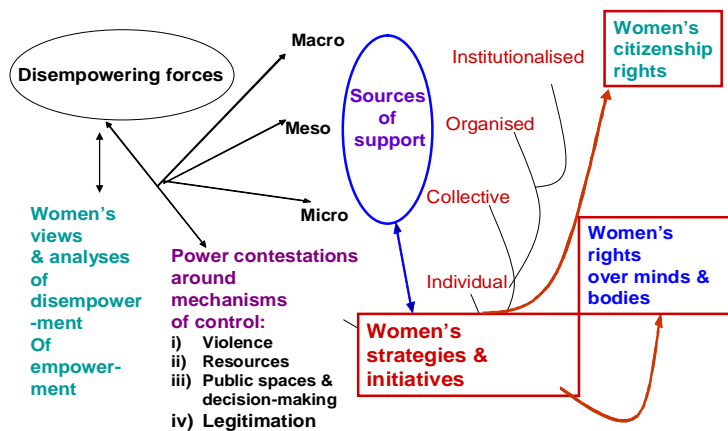
The diagram reads from left to right: We start with women: their lives, perceptions and analysis: who and what they identify as obstacles and who and what they identify as sources of support



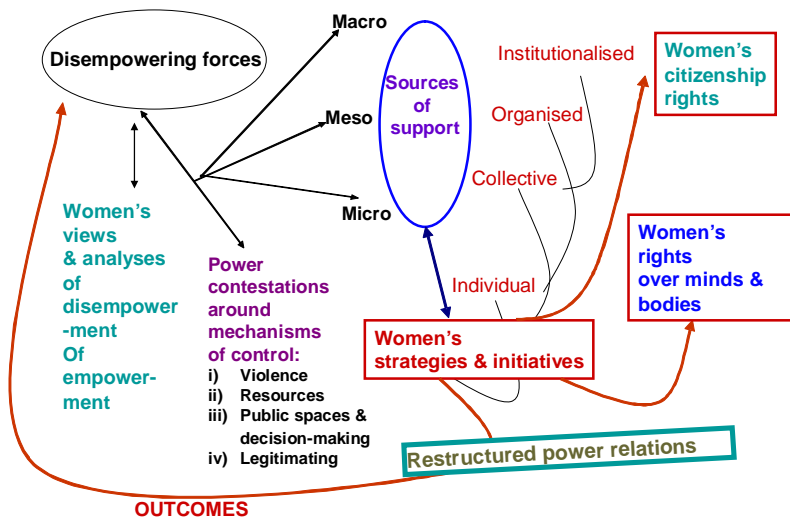
WEMC has posited four main mechanisms of control: violence against women, access to resources as potential building blocks of power (health, education, economics resources and information); access to public spaces and decision-making and fourthly the sources used to legitimate the existing arrangements of power. We believe women engage in resistances to these mechanisms at the micro, meso and macro levels. As a research programme we seek to understand and document women's initiatives that enable change from the individual to the institutionalized levels.



When successful, women's strategies enable change in terms of rights over their minds as well as bodies and have implications for changing rights as citizens.



It is the outcome of such strategies at multiple levels that eventually lead to restructured relationships of power that reduce the impact of disempowering forces.



So what does this have to do with you as planners? Let me highlight a few aspects I think are critical at the macro, meso and micro level.

Many states in the Asia-Pacific region have introduced affirmative action to bolster women's political representation, this has been done, for example through measures that reserve quotas from amongst electoral constituencies (India) or seats (Pakistan and Bangladesh). But such measures have been instituted without any consideration of – let alone linking with - other aspects of women's lives. The result is that we expect women on such reserved seats to sit in decision-making arenas and take decisions on behalf of their communities and constituencies effectively (or indeed the country as a whole), ignoring that many of these same women are denied decision-making rights in their own personal lives starting with the critical decision of who they marry. How can women be empowered in such a truncated fashion? There is a disconnection here that needs to be addressed.

Vivienne has already mentioned how de-centralisation sometimes creates situations where the space is then occupied by local forces as in the case of Indonesia. The same applies to planning health facilities and education opportunities. In societies where women's mobility is highly restricted and controlled, even if the best of facilities are planned and even if these are effectively implemented, should the distance be too far for a woman to walk, she cannot access it.ⁱⁱ Other problems to accessing health facilities are unrelated to distance and placement. Research in Pakistan has found that many adolescent girls in need of medical advice will not be taken for medical examinations and assistance for fear of giving rise to community gossip and questions along the line of "what's wrong with the girl?" - gossip that will undermine her marriage prospects.

In the short time left, let me highlight some recommendations at the macro, meso and micro levels.

Macro level

Taking the Beijing Conference slogan: “Look at the world through women’s eyes,” there is a need to re-think some of our presumptions for macro level planning.

1. Cross-sectoral issues in sector-specific structures: For some time now, efforts have focused on establishing and strengthening specific mechanisms to address women’s needs. However most governments are organized in sector-specific structures that impede cross-sector planning and implementation both. Gender mainstreaming becomes problematic: women-specific mechanisms have neither the financial means nor the institutional resources to address the myriad problems of half the country’s population; other sectors are not geared to addressing the specific needs of women. Recently the neglect of cross-sectoral issues has become visible in the UN Aid Effectiveness process where only one out of 54 paragraphs of the Paris Declaration even mentions gender equality. Perhaps we need to consider strengthening the role of women’s mechanisms as the strongest advocates of women’s needs across sectors, starting by ensuring that they have a seat at the table of all key national decision-making forums. This also means that women need to be effectively represented in all inter-governmental bodies, including throughout the UN system.
2. Representation in administrative structures: While the UN recommendation for a minimum 30 percent representation of women in the political decision-making is a welcome measure gaining consensus; there is a need for parallel actions to overcome the absence of women in the administrative structure of states.
3. Documentation: there can be no effective planning without effective documentation: the registration of births, and any change in marital status; measures to ensure that to all women obtain national identity cards and other documentation necessary to access benefits and rights are essential.
4. Gender-disaggregated data is an old but persistent problem. There is a need to collect nuanced gender appropriate as well as gender-disaggregated data
5. Defining gender-mainstreaming and allocating financial resources: Gender mainstreaming cannot be accomplished without allocating sufficient financial resources. At a recent meeting of INGAD that brings together some 33 bilateral donors and international agencies in Pakistan working on gender, the consultant tasked with reviewing gender mainstreaming had great difficulty in completing the assignment since there was no clear definition of what constituted either a ‘gender mainstreaming’ or ‘gender’ project. Clearly there is a need to define what characterizes ‘gender mainstreaming’. She also found that almost none of the institutions provide information on the financial allocations for ‘gender’ or perhaps more importantly, for women’s empowerment or development.
6. Monitoring mechanisms There is a need to revise planning, monitoring and evaluation performas or documents as well as processes so that assessing the likely gender impact of any plan is institutionalized.

Finally a problem in tackling gender imbalances is the tendency to conceptualise the problem in terms of a generalized patriarchal system when in fact women confront localized and differing patriarchal societal norms.

Meso-level

At this level the focus must be on changing the attitudes of duty-bearers through out the system, not just at the top.

1. **Information:** There is a need to ensure that when a policy is made, the political commitment is followed through at all levels and by all means so as to effectuate meaningful transformation. In Pakistan we know that despite good legal amendments made in the area of family matters, lower court judges are unaware of these and continue to give their rulings according to the old provisions.
2. **Gender orientation** Meso level implementers of policies and plans need to be re-oriented to gender issues, to the MDGs, to CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. It is not enough for planners to be acquainted; the implementers need to have equivalent knowledge. We need to ensure that the policeman on the street and the health dispenser is familiar with these policies. Otherwise policies will only remain nice paperwork in restricted circles that do not reach women.

Micro: Women as Rights Claimants

At the micro level the aim must not be just to enable women to make choices, but to enable women to formulate the choices that exist. WEMC outlines four mechanisms of control that women need to overcome for their empowerment. These are

- Violence against women
- Access to resources: e.g. education, health, and economic resources, which we define as potential building blocks to empowerment
- Access to both formal and non-formal decision-making fora,
- Sources of legitimization of the existing disempowering structures of power

Measures to address these and to support women's empowerment processes include:

1. **Information:** women must be informed of the policies and the rights to which they are entitled under the law by all means possible: the educational system as well as mass media. Without this information, women cannot be expected to exert their agency to access rights
2. **Resources:** Women's access to and control over resources, especially economic resources, is critical and needs to be promoted. Resources, however, include information and skills as well as supportive measures to act upon their choices. Knowledge about the law for example strengthens the ability of women to bargain and re-negotiate relationships within the household.
3. **Claiming the right to define culture:** Measures need to be taken to help women to claim the right to define their culture and norms, from the family and household to the global level. Women's agency will not be unlocked until women feel that their demanding rights as women is not alien to their culture or tradition (however that is described)

In planning measures for women's empowerment it is important to realise that empowerment, meaning a relaxation or redefinition of the gender rules, in one area or domain in life does not transfer automatically to another. For example, a woman may be able to break previous rules in order to earn a livelihood, but this does not at all mean that she will therefore gain the right to socialize with whom she wants.

Planning needs to be cognizant of the fact that unfortunately there are no easy solutions.

A key finding across the WEMC research sites, however, is the critical role played by the availability (or lack thereof) of spaces for women organizing. The coming together of women is vital whether it is in the context of China, or Indonesia, Pakistan or Iran; whether the women are rural or urban, migrant workers or home-makers; whether the domain is political participation or health or economic well-being. The existence of spaces that bring women together enables the transformation mentioned by Bina of enabling tongues to speak and feet to walk. So one factor planning needs build into programmes for women to is to support women's collective organizing and the spaces they need to do this

Poverty reduction is a key objective of planning everywhere and Goal 1 of the MDGs. But of interest is that women do not define poverty in exclusively economic terms. They link poverty with power and define poverty as resulting from imbalances in power derived from social belonging (class but also ethnicity), political influence, family connections, and religion as well as economic assets and control. Planning that aims to reduce poverty without addressing these qualitative dimensions will simply not work. There is no point in merely passing laws of inheritance if we cannot address the causes underlying women's decisions to forego their inheritance, as for example, their desire not to alienate their brothers who may be the main source of support should problems arise in their marriages. To exercise an 'exit option' (mentioned by Bina), would require ensuring women's access not only to inherit but to safe spaces (e.g. shelters) that would enable them to make these choices in meaningful ways.

Let me end with a few thoughts:

1. Latin American women have a saying: "Without women, rights are not human"
2. In Pakistan, we have a saying that men and women are the two wheels of a cart; but if one wheel is damaged or weak the cart cannot make progress; and if one is actually punctured all you will end up doing in trying to drive forward is to go round and round in circles.
3. The Asia Pacific region is the most populous in the world – we make up two-thirds of the world's population. So clearly, if the Asia-Pacific region does not change, the world cannot change either.
4. Finally, I have long been active in the international solidarity network: Women Living Under Muslim Laws. The network believes that the single worst oppression we suffer in the name of collective identity and culture is not the violence and silencing, but preventing us from even dreaming of a different reality. It is this equation we need to change since we cannot possibly change the present reality until we are able to envisage an alternative more gender equal future.

ⁱ Ashish Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. Oxford University Press. Delhi: 1983

ⁱⁱ Thaddeus S. & Maine D. *Too far to walk: maternal mortality in context*. *Social Science and Medicine*, 1994 Apr;38(8):1091-110.