



Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts
gender, poverty and democratisation from the inside out

**Interrogating gendered power structures:
developing a transformative research framework
for women's empowerment in Muslim contexts**

**25 February 2009 (2 – 5.45 pm),
Lecture Theatre 14, Level 4, City University of Hong Kong**

A Symposium

**organised by the Southeast Asia Research Centre, City University of Hong Kong
in collaboration with Key Partners of the Research Programme Consortium on
Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC):**

Shirkat Gah Women's Research Centre, Pakistan

Centre for Environment, Gender and Development, Hong Kong

Department of Community Health Sciences, Aga Khan University, Pakistan

International Gender Studies Centre, University of Oxford, UK

Semarak Cerlang Nusa, Indonesia

Solidaritas Perempuan, Indonesia

Women Living Under Muslim Laws – a 70-country international network

Abstracts

Vivienne Wee

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Why women's empowerment in Muslim contexts? Developing an interrogative and transformative research framework

The concept of 'women's empowerment' became prominent in international debates on gender and development in the mid-1980's, propelled by feminist critiques of development. Since then, 'women's empowerment' has been adopted as the third goal of the nine Millennium Development Goals, agreed upon by member states of the United Nations. However, as noted by Radhika Coomaraswamy, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women observed: 'There's a lot of law writing, standard setting, programmes being planned, but the biggest problem...is that people are using culture and religion to deny women's rights.' This use of 'culture and religion to deny women rights' is a global phenomenon rather than specific to Muslim contexts. Nevertheless, Muslim contexts provide a highly significant example of the

power dynamics that actively disempower women because of the growing influence of political Islamists claiming that religion itself legitimises – even demands – the disempowerment of women. An in-depth, context-specific understanding of such dynamics is thus essential. With this aim in mind, the Research Programme Consortium on Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC) is developing a research framework to explore, interrogate and make visible the varied ways in which women are being empowered or disempowered in four countries (China, Indonesia, Iran and Pakistan) as well as in cross-border contexts that include Indonesian migrant workers and Afghan refugees. This research framework, published recently by the Southeast Asia Research Centre, City University of Hong Kong, serves as the foundation for building a knowledge base that encompasses diverse narratives of women's lived realities. The new knowledge gained from this research is intended to point the way to possibilities for transforming gendered power structures.

Maria Jaschok

(Director, International Gender Studies Centre, University of Oxford)

Indigenous feminism as a locus for development?

Indigenous strategies for women's empowerment are understood, so the WEMC project holds, as an 'assertion of rights in women's own socio-cultural contexts.' A theoretical and empirical examination of such strategies may be considered important for the following reasons: to highlight (ordinary) women's agency in the empowering processes, to challenge the political Islamists' diktat which denies women who follow Islam the entitlement to their own thought and action, and to question certain modes and methodologies of development processes which infantilize and moreover disempower their target populations. This presentation elaborates on a number of issues in an attempt to problematize the notion of the 'indigenous' in women's empowerment strategies, in relation to both local and familiar expressions of women's own ideals and aspirations and to their obstructions by an intimate patriarchy. The questions to be asked seek to explore both the indigenous as 'feminist progressive' and as a field of dialectical tension between identity and strategy. In relation to the former, the presentation will outline the argument presented by Sarab Abu Rabia-Queder, an Israeli Bedouin anthropologist of development, as representing a school of thought which treats women's 'habitus' and spheres of occupation as containing 'alternative geographies of modernity'. In relation to the problematic of identity and strategy within the indigenously constituted feminism, illustrations from WEMC work conducted by various Chinese participants in the Research Consortium will suggest the contextual contingencies that shape the intersections of local conditions and global influences. A concluding presentation of our findings indicate a wide spectrum of meanings by which 'indigenous feminism' plays itself out in the localized global: - from 'women's tradition as space of social transformation', 'women's tradition as trajectory from relations to organization' to 'tradition as institutionalizing women's social exclusion.' It is the argument of this paper that such notions deserve much more attention on the part of development practitioners than is usually accorded to them and, by the same token, that academic research on the contingencies of time, place and context-sensitivity raises poignant questions about the implications of their absence in much of mainstream development practice.

Catherine C. H. Chiu

(Associate Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences; Associate Head and Associate Professor, Department of Asian and International Studies, City University of Hong Kong)

Researching with a transformative agenda: the challenge of producing knowledge for action

WEMC combines research, capacity building and communication. Its long term goal is to bring about transformations in the structural conditions that shape women's lived realities. Research in WEMC is not just to produce knowledge but to implement knowledge for action. Due to social and political obstacles, and personal constraints, the author's research in Guangzhou failed to realize the goal of engagement in action. This presentation first spell out the benefits of the WEMC research framework for analysis, and then

discusses the challenges posed by a transformative research agenda. This presentation is meant to be a self-critique in participating in research with a transformative agenda which does not end with action.

Samina Choonara

(Research Consultant, WEMC at Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre, Pakistan)

Women on women: exploring the possibilities of a feminist ethnography in Pakistan

In terms of methodology, a primary concern in field research by feminists on women's issues has been to acknowledge the power differential between the researcher and the researched and how to negotiate this. Such an inquiry is of necessity political, even prescriptive, which sometimes creates a hindrance to analytical work. This paper is therefore not about the subjects of research – the women who were interviewed during the project – but about writing the feminist researcher into the text and her ability for self reflexivity in unpacking relations of power within and across gender regimes, in reading field encounters as epistemological testaments, and presenting these texts before an audience to whom the context is unfamiliar. This paper will examine the responses of women to the question of their empowerment to register the cognitive dissonance between the researcher's assumptions and the language of the research participant. The structured interaction that begins by asking the participant the most innocuous of questions, for instance, to give her name, immediately sets up the dialogue across a power differential. In asking a woman, 'What is your name?', there are assumptions concerning the constitution of subjecthood and identity where the subject is assumed to be individuated, a citizen of the State, a subject of history, and a self-willed participant in her own social transformation, among other things. This paper will examine the resistance to research in the silences, the derisive laughter, and the purported hostility of participants that signals their suspicion of the modernising project and their defense against the intrusive activity of ethnography. The so-called failures of research may then yield results that were not factored in because in an exploration of context, the definition of what constitutes success may change.

Kausar Khan (with Ayesha Aziz; Narjis Rizvi)

(WEMC at the Department of Community Health Sciences, Aga Khan University, Pakistan)

Women's empowerment for health: a new public health framework

The right to health is often not seen as an entitlement by many developing countries. In South Asia, Sri Lanka and the state of Kerala in India present an enviable example of where women's health entitlements are ensured by the state. Other countries of South Asia, including Pakistan, have to struggle to achieve this goal. This social struggle is not robust in Pakistan. The clinical modal of health does not prepare health professionals to make health a human rights issue. The People's Health Movement that strives to make 'the right to health' a global issue is dormant in Pakistan. A new conceptual framework is needed to transform health as a rights issue and to legitimise empowerment for better health. Although two milestones of health – the 1978 Declaration of Primary Health Care and the Ottawa Charter of 1986 – provide the needed conceptual legitimacy to people's participation and state responsibilities towards health needs, they do not provide a framework for interpreting participation as empowerment. Health policies and programmes in Pakistan focus primarily on health services, but health outcomes for women are embarrassingly poor and health inequities persist. The research framework of WEMC (women's empowerment in Muslim contexts) has been interpreted to provide an empowerment framework for health. It focuses on women's health and how women's agency can be released for influencing the social determinants of health. The framework allows for analysis and action for specific concerns of health – example, mental health, reproductive health, disabilities, and community health. Three elements of the WEMC research framework have been central to the development of this new framework:

1. Definition of empowerment and the flagging of factors that impede and facilitate empowerment;

2. The three levels, macro, meso, micro, as the parameters for assessing/analysing the context for health policies, programmes and health outcomes. These levels also provide a framework of analysis of action for change.
3. The ladder/pathway of progress in empowerment, from individual, to collective, to organization institution.

Action research approach was adopted by WEMC-AKU. The four objectives of WEMC were instrumental in choosing the approach. Moreover, debate in health research is increasingly leaning towards making research address issues of development and equity, and not merely generate knowledge.

No excuses for violence against women

(A video-documentary, directed by Nancy Tong and other members of WEMC at SEARC, CityU)

This video-documentary is about how the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women was commemorated on 26 November 2007 in Istanbul by international women's rights advocates who gathered under the banner 'No excuses for violence against women' to launch a global campaign *Stop Killing and Stoning Women!* and to share their experiences and strategies at an international conference on '*Culture, Women, Violence: rejecting 'cultural' justifications for violence against women.* [15 min, in English]

A Small Dream

(A video-documentary, directed by Gulnar Tabbassum and other members of WEMC at Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre, Pakistan)

This video-documentary is about a young girl who started educating children especially girls in her community from a very early age. It highlights her commitment and dedication to bring about change in her community. [24 min, in Urdu with English subtitles]

90 Minutes to Equality

(A video-documentary, produced by trainees of WEMC in Iran)

This video-documentary is a piece of self-documentation about how a group of Iranian activists for women's equality work together to smuggle a girl into a football stadium, from which all women are banned. [10 min, in Farsi with English subtitles]

Timetable

Session 1

- a. Vivienne Wee and Farida Shaheed: 'Why women's empowerment in Muslim contexts? A research framework in process' [30 min: 2 – 2.30 pm]
- b. Discussion [15 min: 2.30 – 2.45 pm]

Session 2

- c. Maria Jaschok: Indigenous feminism as a locus for development: a critique of assumptions in the WEMC Research Framework in the light of China-based work' [20 min: 2.45 – 3.05]
- d. Catherine Chiu: Researching with a transformative agenda: the challenge of producing knowledge for action [20 min: 3.05 – 3.25]
- e. Samina Choonara: Women on women: exploring the possibilities of a feminist ethnography in Pakistan [20 min: 3.25 – 3.45]
- f. Kausar S. Khan: Women's empowerment for health: a new public health framework [3.45 – 4.05]
- g. Discussion [40 min: 4.05 – 4.45]

Session 3

- h. WEMC films [total 55 mins]:
 - i. *No excuses for violence against women* [15 min: 4.45 – 5.00]
 - ii. *A small dream* [about 25 min: 5.00 – 5.25]
 - iii. Homa Hoodfar: Introduction to the film from Iran [5 min: 5.25 – 5.30]
90 minutes to equality [10 min: 5.30 – 5.40]
- i. Discussion [20 min: 5.40 – 6.00]

Refreshments and mingling [45 min: 6.00 – 6.45]