

# Women empowering themselves: A framework that interrogates and transforms

## Summary

This book lays out an innovative framework for understanding issues of women's empowerment. This is the framework conceptualized and used by the Research Programme Consortium on Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts: Gender, poverty and democratisation from the inside out (WEMC). In this book the Consortium shares its concepts, analyses and research findings some two years after the framework's inception. It includes grounded narratives of how women can be and are being empowered in their lived realities, derived from the Consortium's research in China, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and in cross-border situations.

**Chapter 1** introduces the WEMC Research Programme Consortium. It explains what WEMC stands for, why it deals with Muslim contexts and why WEMC has selected particular research foci. The research framework discussed in this book:

1. Makes explicit the key concepts that underpin the work of the WEMC Consortium
2. Indicates what is innovative about these concepts – that is, how these structure a new narrative of women's empowerment
3. Sets out the core research questions addressed by WEMC across all sites
4. Provides a heuristic, open-ended guide for further learning
5. Draws out implications for capacity strengthening, communication, and areas for future development

**Chapter 2** lays out WEMC's conceptualisation of women's empowerment. The WEMC Consortium understands women's empowerment as an increased ability to question, challenge and eventually transform unfavourable gendered power relations, often legitimised in the name of 'culture'. This conceptual framework highlights the significance of the critical meso level, where local power structures stand between women and the state. It explains why women's indigenous strategies of empowerment – that is, endeavours to assert their rights in their own socio-cultural context, according to their specific circumstances – are particularly relevant at micro and meso levels.

**Chapter 3** discusses cultural complexities in conceptualizing 'empowerment'. It explains the core research questions used by WEMC researchers to undertake comparative studies of women's empowerment across different countries and contexts. Of particular importance is the documentation and analyses of how women strategise to empower themselves. These include individual, collective, organized and institutionalized strategies.

**The Conclusion** identifies the book as an evolving map to guide our collective journey to chart alternative narratives of women's empowerment. It promises another edition of this framework as another milestone in our learning, expanded and re-oriented by new findings, lessons and reflections.

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The Research Programme Consortium on Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts was launched on 1 July 2006, to:

- A. Make visible the strategies that are indigenous and meaningful to women in asserting their rights
- B. Support women who resist oppressive systems, including Islamist political agendas and other forces that impoverish and marginalise women, and
- C. Promote women's empowerment as democratisation from the inside out

The Consortium has eight key partners:

1. Southeast Asia Research Centre (SEARC), City University of Hong Kong – Lead Partner
2. Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre (SG), Pakistan
3. Department of Community Health Sciences, Aga Khan University (AKU), Pakistan
4. Centre for Environment, Gender and Development (ENGENDER), Hong Kong
5. International Gender Studies Centre (IGS), Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford University, United Kingdom
6. Semarak Cerlang Nusa (SCN), Indonesia
7. Solidaritas Perempuan (SP), Indonesia
8. Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), Regional Coordination Office – Asia

We invite your comments on the publication and about our Consortium. Please write to us at [info@wemc.com.hk](mailto:info@wemc.com.hk). A PDF version of this book will be downloadable from the Web site of SEARC, City University of Hong Kong at <http://www.cityu.edu.hk/searc>

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