

Name of research project *'Conceptualising empowerment in global spaces and the shaping of international policies and practice about women'.*

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RPC theme: Conceptualising empowerment: Global hub.

Summary This is a one year project that will be a critical review of conceptual assumptions about women's empowerment that are being globally developed and communicated and the relation between these assumptions and evolving international policy and practice in relation to alternative pathways of empowerment. The principal methods will be an analysis of the secondary literature, semi-structured interviews and a workshop towards the end of the project.

1. Justification

The change this project seeks to bring about is to expand the group of policy actors working in global spaces who can critically reflect on the current concepts and discourses related to women's empowerment and use this reflection for helping shape policies and associated programmes that can be more effective pathways of women's empowerment.

Thus the rationale for this project is to explore the meanings and debates within and among sets of actors with a global reach that are shaping values, ideas and policy actions (or absence of actions) on women's empowerment. This section briefly identifies the current state of play and the actors that would be the focus of the research:

Among international aid agencies 'women's empowerment' is less commonly used than the concept of 'gender equality' which became prominent at the time of the Beijing Women's Conference, along with ideas of gender mainstreaming that most agencies and observers believe have not lived up to their promise. Many global civil society groups who have been significant actors in shaping global policy agendas for women's empowerment have expressed discouragement that the vision and commitments of Beijing have become largely eroded. Many recent evaluations of INGO and bilateral aid agencies' gender work have been negative with evidence that less staff time and financial resources are devoted to the issue than ten or even five years ago. The current reform process in the United Nations has so far failed to make women's empowerment central to the international development agenda.

At the same time, because the last few years have been a time in which donors have sought to more closely co-ordinate their work in support of common objectives and have sought to increase financing for development, there has been a growing interest in the efficiency of aid and a resurgence of a view that aid must be seen to contribute

to economic growth to justify its investment. Gender advocates inside international bureaucracies are returning to the efficiency arguments of the 1980's in order to make a case for financing women's empowerment. The World Bank has very recently successfully attracted substantial funding in that regard.

On the fringes of Aidland are women's global civil society networks who have been significant actors in shaping global policy agendas for women's empowerment. They and their ideas on women's empowerment have been fairly substantially researched (as discussed in the full version of the global hub's scoping report). Also on the margins of Aidland, or completely independent from it, are other global policy actors who are shaping discourse, including the role of global religion as a possible source for individual empowerment, as well as disempowerment, depending on how one understood empowerment. The global politics of religious identity has become an issue of central pre-occupation in international relations since the start of this decade and it is thus an important subject of research as to how these politics shape and constrain debates and decisions in global policy for in relation to women's rights. These include the discourses on women related to 'the war on terror' and 'the rights to life'.

Another potentially highly significant shaper of policy ideas concerning women's empowerment are the global mass media, particularly television. While there are examples of the media being used deliberately by feminist activists¹, very little is known concerning who and how creates and reflects discourses about women in the commercial world of television such as News International.

Finally are other women's networks, not concerned with development in any sense of the term but rather organised around shared interests in business and politics and developing their own concepts of what is empowerment.

Thus this research will look at the history of the concept and enquire into how and why we have reached the present moment.

2. Methods

Research questions would include:

- A consideration of different understandings of how change happens that informs contrasting assumptions about the role of global policy and international practice;
- How feminist scholarship has contributed to shaping these assumptions, using specific examples from economics, political science, philosophy etc;
- Connect with these, an examination of the assumptions driving the work of trans-national networks and how these have been used by those within both international agencies and global networks working for women's

¹ An example is "Women Make Movies" a multicultural, multiracial, non-profit media arts organization which facilitates the production, promotion, distribution, and exhibition of independent films and videotapes by and about women.

empowerment, including assumptions about the usefulness of working on international standards (such as CEDAW) and internationally agreed commitments (such as the PfA);

- A preliminary investigation of how the other global actors mentioned in section 1 are conceptualising empowerment with some propositions as to how these may be shaping the international development agenda.
- The relevance of current debates beyond feminist and development studies on scale, discourse coalitions, spaces, cosmopolitanism, globalisation etc in relation to these assumptions

The project would be a critical review of the secondary literature, combined with some interviews with some carefully selected persons known to be informed about one or more of the specific sets of actors mentioned above. In addition, would be organised a workshop at IDS with a group of feminist activists working in different global policy spaces to debate and interrogate the initial research findings and to consider how their own assumptions may have been shaped by the outcomes they were seeking to achieve, as well as how their assumption shaped what they thought was feasible in terms of strategic choices in working for women's empowerment.

3 Communications plans

The workshop described above is one communication vehicle. Findings would also be communicated widely across the RPC and its advisory groups as the work progresses, through the newsletter and the website. An eventual published output would be in the form of a journal article.

4. Capacity building:

We understand identifying and critiquing prevailing and often implicit assumptions is an important step to transformative learning. The workshop will be designed to contribute to this aim.

5. Collaboration and ways of working

Two other global hub proposals would both feed into and directly benefit from this project,, the co-enquiry panel of feminist activists in international development organisations (Eyben) and the project relating to mobilising resources for women's organising (UNIFEM)).

The project would also link up with the research on concepts of women's empowerment at the regional level, particularly with regard to those countries which are heavily aid dependent and therefore include international development actors as potential shapers of ideas and policy action (Palestine, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Sudan, Ghana and Bangladesh)

Researchers from the other four hubs would participate in the workshop that will be organised towards the end of the project.

6. Learning and Accountability:

We understand this proposal to enable the RPC as a global actor in its own right to reflect and learn to critique and challenge our own assumptions. In addition, the two researchers will periodically meet to share and reflect on the progress of the project and the challenges it presents.

7. Project Milestones

Use this section to itemise project milestones (i.e. timing of key events, when you will start the research and when you plan to finish it, including any visits you plan to make excluding thematic workshop events)

2007

Activity	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Co-researcher planning meeting	x									
Literature review	x	x	x							
interviews			x	x			x			

2008

Activity	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Report writing	x											
workshop		x										
Final report/article drafted			x	x								