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**The Conditions and Consequences of Choice:  
Reflections on the Measurement  
of Women's Empowerment**

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## ◆ Summary/Résumé/Resumen

### *Summary*

This paper is intended as a critical reflection on some recent attempts to construct indicators of women's empowerment, focusing in particular on the meanings given to these measures and values embedded within them. It starts out by offering a three-dimensional conceptual framework for thinking about women's empowerment: "resources" as part of the preconditions of empowerment; "agency" as an aspect of process; and "achievements" as a measure of outcomes.

It goes on to consider the ways in which these different dimensions have been measured by economists, demographers, sociologists and feminists. On the basis of this discussion a number of key methodological points are made, in particular, the need for triangulation of measures to ensure that indicators mean what they are intended to mean.

The paper then turns to the role of values in the choice and interpretation of indicators, both the values of "insiders"—those whose lives are under scrutiny—and the values of those who are engaged in the measurement exercise. It points to the importance of ensuring that etic judgements are informed by, and sensitive to, emic values if the voice and agency of subordinated groups is not to be suppressed by powerful outsiders who may have only a tenuous grasp on their realities.

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### *Résumé*

Ce document, qui est conçu comme une réflexion critique sur certaines tentatives faites récemment pour élaborer des indicateurs de la participation des femmes, porte en particulier sur les sens donnés à ces indicateurs et sur les valeurs qu'ils véhiculent. L'auteur commence par proposer à la réflexion sur la participation des femmes un cadre conceptuel à trois dimensions : la dimension "ressources", qui fait partie des conditions de la participation, celle de l'"agence", qui est un aspect du processus, et les "réalisations", qui permettent de mesurer les résultats.

L'auteur poursuit en examinant la façon dont économistes, démographes, sociologues et féministes ont mesuré ces différentes dimensions. Cet examen l'amène à faire d'importants constats méthodologiques, à noter en particulier la nécessité d'une triangulation des mesures pour s'assurer que les indicateurs signifient bien ce qu'ils sont censés signifier.

Elle s'intéresse ensuite au rôle que jouent les valeurs dans le choix et l'interprétation des indicateurs, tant les valeurs de celles dont la vie est passée au crible que celles des personnes qui se livrent à l'exercice de mesure. Elle relève combien il est important de veiller à ce que les jugements formés de l'extérieur soient éclairés par les valeurs des groupes examinés et sensibles à ces valeurs si l'on veut éviter que la voix et l'"agence" des groupes subordonnés ne soient étouffées par de puissants outsiders qui risquent de n'avoir qu'une compréhension lointaine de leur situation.

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## *Resumen*

La autora busca representar en este documento una reflexión crítica de algunos intentos de fabricar indicadores relativos a la participación de la mujer en la sociedad, prestando especial atención a los significados que se han adjudicado a las medidas y valores que estos encierran. Comienza ofreciendo una estructura conceptual tridimensional para analizar la potenciación del papel de la mujer: la dimensión “recursos” como parte de las condiciones previas de potenciación; la de “agencia” como un aspecto de proceso; y los “logros” como una medida de los resultados.

Continúa con la consideración de los modos en que estas diversas dimensiones han sido medidas por economistas, demógrafos, sociólogos y feministas. A tenor de esta discusión se formularon un sinnúmero de puntos metodológicos clave, en particular, la necesidad de establecer una triangulación de las medidas para asegurar que los indicadores signifiquen lo que realmente procuran significar.

Luego pasa a plantear el papel que juegan los valores en la opción e interpretación de los indicadores, tanto los valores de aquellas cuyas vidas están bajo escrutinio como los valores de aquellas personas que llevan a cabo el ejercicio de medición. Señala la importancia de asegurar que los juicios que se emiten desde el exterior tomen en cuenta los valores de los grupos examinados y se actúe con sensibilidad ante estos valores, si se quiere evitar que la voz y la agencia de los grupos subordinados se vean sofocadas o reprimidas por poderosos grupos externos cuyas nociones de sus realidades se atienen a no más que un mero bosquejo.

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## ◆ Abbreviations and Acronyms

BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
GDI	Gender-related Development Index
GEM	Gender Empowerment Measure
GNP	gross national product
HDI	Human Development Index
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

*Empowerment is like obscenity, you don't know how to define it but you know it when you see it (Rappaport cited in Shetty, 1991:8).*

*I like the term empowerment because no one has defined it clearly yet; so it gives us a breathing space to work it out in action terms before we have to pin ourselves down to what it means. I will continue using it until I am sure it does not describe what we are doing (NGO activist cited in Batliwala, 1993:48).*

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## INTRODUCTION

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Advocacy on behalf of women that builds on claimed synergies between feminist goals and official development priorities has made greater inroads into the mainstream development agenda than advocacy that argues for these goals on the grounds of their intrinsic value. There is an understandable logic to this. In a situation of limited resources, where policy makers have to adjudicate between competing claims (Razavi, 1997), advocacy for feminist goals in intrinsic terms takes policy makers out of their familiar conceptual territory of welfare, poverty and efficiency into a nebulous zone of power and social injustice. There is also a political logic to it: those who stand to gain most from such advocacy carry very little clout with those who set the agendas in major policy making institutions.

Consequently, when women's empowerment is argued for as an end in itself, it tends to be heard as a "zero-sum" game, with politically weak winners and powerful losers. By contrast, instrumentalist forms of advocacy that combine the argument for gender equality/women's empowerment with the demonstration of a broad set of desirable multiplier effects offer policy makers the possibility of achieving familiar and approved goals, albeit by unfamiliar means. One set of payoffs claimed for women's empowerment relates to its favourable effects for children's health, family welfare, intrahousehold equity and fertility decline. Such arguments have received a powerful impetus from the Cairo Declaration, which links women's reproductive choice with a range of favourable demographic outcomes. The other set of payoffs links women's empowerment to economic growth and is based on evidence testifying to the inefficiency of patriarchal family relations in terms of market distortions, labour supply inflexibilities and perverse allocative behaviour (Collier, 1989; Jones, 1986; Sender and Smith, 1990; Palmer, 1991).

However, the success of instrumentalist advocacy has also had costs. Instrumentalism requires the translation of feminist scholarship into the discourse of policy—and during this process of translation, the terrain of the argument has been shifted and some of the original political edge of feminism lost. This attempt at translation entails efforts to quantify the claims of gender advocacy. Measurement is, of course, a major preoccupation in the policy domain. It reflects a justifiable concern with the empirical verifiability of competing claims for scarce resources in the policy domain. And given that the very idea of women's empowerment epitomizes, for many policy makers, the unwarranted intrusion of metaphysical concepts into the concrete and practical world of development policy, quantifying empowerment seems to put the concept on more solid and objectively verifiable grounds.

Yet, as the two quotes at the start of this paper suggest, not everyone accepts that empowerment can be clearly *defined*, let alone measured. And for many feminists, the value of the concept lies precisely in its “fuzziness”. This lack of clarity about the notion of empowerment reflects the fact that its root concept—power—is itself one of the most contested concepts in the social sciences (Rowlands, 1997). It is important, therefore, to clarify at the outset how the concept will be used in this paper, since this will constitute the standpoint from which various measurement attempts will be assessed. This will be attempted in the rest of this section of the paper. Sections II and III will review various attempts to devise indicators of empowerment. Indicators can be seen as highly compressed summaries of information, meanings and values. They combine explicit empirical information with implicit assumptions about the meaning of that information. Furthermore, in selecting some categories of information over others, indicators also embody certain values about the kinds of information that “count” in capturing the phenomenon being measured. Because the nature of power is contested, it should be clear from the outset that attempts to measure empowerment are likely to be more value-laden than other, less controversial concepts in the development literature. These are some of the issues addressed in this paper: the information selected for the construction of various indicators of empowerment; the validity of the indicator as a measure of what it is intended to measure; the values it embodies; and the appropriateness of these values in capturing the idea of women’s empowerment.

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## CONCEPTUALIZING EMPOWERMENT

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### ◆ Conceptualizing Empowerment: Resources, Agency and Achievement

The notion of empowerment has been used in a bewildering variety of ways, from the mundane to the profound, from the particular to the very general. Empowerment is seen to occur at a number of different levels, to cover a range of different dimensions and to materialize through a variety of different processes. However, central to the idea of empowerment is the idea of “power”. This is the starting point for clarifying how the notion of empowerment will be used in this paper. One way of thinking about power is in terms of *ability to make choices*: to be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choice. The notion of empowerment is thus inescapably bound up with “disempowerment” and refers to

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