EMPOWERMENT

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Introduction

This chapter examines the concept of empowerment from the conventional 'malestream' conceptualisation to a feminist perspective on the term. Using Nigeria as a case study, it assesses some of the strategies that have been used to empower women. The chapter explores feminist contributions to the empowerment debate and the implementation of associated practices and argues that the conventional approaches are inadequate because they often are too mechanistic and too focused on goals and not on the dynamics of the process. The chapter takes as its starting point the conceptualisation of empowerment as a process of providing women with the tools and resources needed to live independent, productive and dignified lives. However, it questions the notion of power as something to be given and it argues that the feminist perspective provides a more dynamic and effective approach to the understanding of empowerment.

The chapter's argument is presented in three parts. The first explores the mainstream conceptualisation of empowerment in development/political discourse and practice. The second examines how feminism challenges this understanding and assesses the implications of a feminist perspective on the concept. In the third section it uses Nigeria as a case study to illustrate how the feminist critique of empowerment has reshaped empowerment strategies in practice.

'Malestream' framework of empowerment

Empowerment is not a new concept but an open-ended and flexible catchword that has gained popularity in a variety of contexts ranging from the social to the political. Despite being a buzzword (Rowlands 1998; Cook 2002), it lacks explicit and conclusive definitions. It is, as Marilee Karl puts it, 'a word widely used, but seldom defined' (1995:14). Flexible and plastic in nature, it takes on a variety of definitions, and is subject to a wide range of explanations and interpretations. Disciplinary differences have also introduced nuances in definitions but even when such differences are taken into account, the term remains implicit and ambiguous. This could be due to the contested terrain of its root word: power. Given this, any discussion on empowerment calls for a clarification of the term to delineate the premise of the analysis. This chapter explores the concept from a political and development perspective and particularly in the context of the empowerment of women.

One mainstream conceptualisation of empowerment is the allocation of power through delegation and authorisation. The World Bank defines it as 'the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes' (World Bank 2001:39). It is generally associated with the 'sense of gaining control, of participation, of decision-making' (Karl 1995:14) and with the process of 'bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it' (Rowlands 1995:102). Historically traced to the 'dominant culture' of Western capitalism, (Cook 2002; Rowlands 1998), as evident in the emphasis on

individualism, personal achievement and economic goals, empowerment is traditionally defined in the context of power and its allocation.

Power is a contentious concept, not only in its interpretation but also in how it is experienced by different people. It has been described as 'a social relationship between groups that determines access to, use of, and control over the basic material and ideological resources in society' (Morgen and Bookman 1988:4, as cited by Stacki and Monkman 2003:174). It also refers to the capacity to do something. The literature is replete with several levels of meanings and a variety of definitions. These range from covert to overt power and from the subtle to the forceful. At one end of the scale is the ability of one person to coerce another or group to do something against their will and at the other is the ability to extend power and empower others (Rowlands 1995; Corrin 1999). Conventionally, it is defined in relation to obedience or 'power-over' others (Rowlands 1995).

One dimension of power presents it as 'the capacity not only to impose one's will, if necessary against the will of other parties, but also to set the terms of the argument' (Ward and Mullender 1991:23-24). Dahl offers a simple and useful framework to understand how this works: 'A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something B would not otherwise do' (as cited by Lukes 1986:2). This could be summed up as 'power-over' and 'power-to' and it is this dimension that dominates the malestream conceptualisation of empowerment.

Garba (1999:131) has noted that the conceptualisation of empowerment as the allocation of power, particularly in the context of women, suggests being allowed to exercise power. In specific terms, being

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empowered to 'participate in making decisions that directly or indirectly affects their lives, and to influence those decisions'. Subjected to Dahl's framework, it means those with power-over others could control, influence them and authorise them to exercise power. This speaks of 'power over' and 'power-to' dominate the disempowered. To become empowered, the disempowered has to submit to the powerful. There is a suggestion of a transition from a position of powerlessness to that where one is endowed with power.

The 'malestream' understanding of empowerment presupposes that powerlessness is a result of a lack of necessary tools and resources for the exercise of power. Empowerment then becomes the process of providing these tools. Wong (2003), in his reflections on the World Bank's conception of power, argues that there is a common assumption that power can be delivered through development projects and that these are seen to be capable of allocating power through the support and benevolence of external interventionists. Empowerment is achieved when set goals and objectives such as economic and political power are met. Missing from this conjecture is the vital issue of the social context of power such as relationships and setting.

The 'power-to' understanding is reflected in development programmes, which tend to focus on assisting the marginalised to gain control. In the context of the empowerment of women, the assumption is that they 'should somehow be "brought into development" and become "empowered" to participate within the economic and political structures of society. They should be given the chance to occupy positions of "power" in terms of political and economic decision making' (Rowlands 1998:12).

Barry Barnes (1988) was not directly concerned with empowerment but his discussion on power as 'downward' delegation provides a kind of explanation of empowerment. The delegation of power, he argued, entails a 'power-holder delegating some of his capacity for action to a subordinate' while still remaining more powerful than the subordinate and capable of exercising control (Barnes 1988:71). A genuine delegation, he pointed out, empowers and transfers capacity for action to those who otherwise would not be capable.

Two key strands of the malestream conceptualisation of empowerment can be identified as being 'power-over' and power-to'. Empowerment entails powerful individuals exercising power over the disempowered by investing in them the ability to exercise power, assigning them a place of power and bestowing and facilitating a change from powerlessness to that of power.

There is no obvious recognition of the limitations of empowerment from this perspective, although the idea of the allocation of power to the disempowered also suggests its denial, for the power to give has a flip side - the power to deprive. Consequently, the process of becoming able or allowed to do something suggests domination of some kind: the recipients of power are often still disadvantaged in power relationships.

It is apparent from the above that the 'malestream' understanding of empowerment underscores the divide between those who wield power and are able to apportion a part to those who have little or none. This endorses a dominant-subordinate relationship and also adopts a top-down view, an approach that has structured development programmes across the world. This approach often entails external assistance, which under close

consideration raises a number of questions. Does the mere act of providing the marginalised with resources to access political and economic structures translate into being powerful? When do the disempowered become empowered? How do the powerless evolve into the powerful? Is power a property which can be given away?

Feminising empowerment

Feminists of all strands have for centuries challenged the position of women in society and in doing so, have broadened debates on issues that concern women (Corrin 1999). Corrin has noted the incorporation of feminist thinking into most debates on women related issues and the generation of new perspectives as a result of this. This is equally true of the empowerment discourse. Viewing the empowerment debate through the eyes of feminists provides nuances and texture that are absent in the 'malestream' position. Stacki and Monkman (2003) have noted a variety of definitions or dimensions of empowerment that exist for women. These range from psychological to cognitive, from political to economic empowerment. While the association of empowerment with the allocation of power, delegation, domination and at the end of the spectrum, subordination and subjugation, can be traced to the conventional definition of the concept, feminist explanations are more layered and engage with the distinction between the uses of power either to control or empower.

Although there are several strands of thought within feminist thinking, a common thread of understanding runs through the empowerment debate and that is the emphasis on power as a relational concept. While the 'malestream' understanding emphasises the 'power-over' and 'power-to' dimensions,

feminist thinking stresses 'the multi-dimensional nature of power at different levels: personal, group, regional, national and international (Wong 2003:310). A feminist framework of power takes on different perspectives of power: 'power-from-within', 'power-to', 'power-with' and 'power-over' and is concerned with the social context of power.

It is instructive that feminist thinking does not only challenge the notion of power as something that could be given or bestowed but questions the narrow conceptualisation of empowerment as a top-bottom relationship, which is externally driven, and broadens it to make it inclusive. The perspective of 'power-from-within', for example, describes personal power, an idea that sounds strange from the 'malestream' position, despite its association with individualism. Stacki and Monkman describe this as psychological empowerment. This, they explain, 'relates to the development of self-esteem and self-confidence enabling women to recognise their own power and to motivate themselves into action.' (2003:181) Wong sums it up as the 'development of trust in terms of self-knowledge. Its main objective is to develop a sense of ability to overcome internalised oppression.' (Wong 2003:311)

'Power-with' emphasises the collective forces of people cooperating with each other to solve problems and attain set goals. It celebrates collective action and is concerned with 'capacity building, social networks and organisational strength. It is intended to demonstrate the idea of "I cannot, but we can"' (Wong ibid.). The collective dimension of empowerment becomes a reality when 'individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone' (Rowlands 1995:103). Again, this

understanding downgrades the notion of power as something to be given and focuses on power as the ability to discover inner strength, collective energy and capacity to take action not just as a response to external promptings but also in recognition of one's personal and group experience.

While the mainstream notion of empowerment appears mechanistic and instrumental, a feminist position distinguishes it from the simple idea of the allocation of power to a multi-dimensional process that results in increased equity in the exercise of power. Feminist thinking emphasises empowerment as among other things, 'the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them' (Kabeer 2005 as cited by Santillán et al 2004:535). Margaret Synder and Mary Tasesse expand the scope and argue that empowerment as 'autonomy for women, for the poor, and for nations of the developing world, means that they are able to make their own choices in the realms of politics, economics and society' (1995:15) while Carolyn Baylies, using the experience of women with AIDS in Zambia, contends that empowerment is 'best understood as a process applying in respect of specific context, as contingent upon time, place and sphere of action or thought and as relational in respect of the roles, capacities and resources which may be brought to bear in any particular instance' (Baylies 2002:369). Pulled together, these offer a more layered insight into a complex concept.

Feminist of all leanings critique the conventional or 'malestream' understanding of empowerment for its underestimation of the social context of powerlessness and this is evident in recent debates. The emerging literature points to a significant shift in the discourse, especially in the context of the

empowerment of women (Kabeer 2005; Stacki and Monkman 2004). The World Bank's expanded definition for example, sees it as 'the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to *participate in, negotiate with, influence, control,* and *hold accountable* institutions that affect their lives' (worldbank.org author's emphasis). In the past the Bank had been more focused on formal systems and structures and had conceptualised empowerment as a means to economic goals. The 'power-over' approach was in operation in its development programmes but that has now been expanded to include the 'power-with' dimension, and though this is still economically oriented, it indicates a major shift in its position (Wong 2003).

The inclusion of power to negotiate with and to influence relevant institutions recognises the right of the marginalised to have a say in what concerns them instead of simple submission to programmes designed and implemented by external agents with the goal of equipping them with skills for set goals, as the 'malestream' understanding of empowerment tends to imply. The broadening of the narrow, instrumental agenda to incorporate collective action, community participation, and self-actualisation can be traced to the feminist critique of the conventional approach. Some writers, Santill´an and colleagues argue, have even introduced linkages to other related concepts in order to illustrate the complexity of the empowerment of women. Some now associate it with agency and individual self-reliance. Taken to mean 'women's ability to make decisions and affect outcomes of importance to themselves and their families or, put another way, as women's control over their own lives and over resources' (Santill´an et al 2004:535), agency is considered to be one of the indicators of empowerment. Naila Kabeer writing on gender

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equality and women's empowerment identifies agency as one of three closely interrelated perspectives of the concept. She notes that agency 'implies not only actively exercising choice, but also doing this in ways that challenge power relations. Because of the significance of beliefs, values in legitimating inequality, a process of empowerment often begins from within' (2005:14).

The 'malestream' perspective on empowerment pitches its debates mainly at the economic and political level with an emphasis on macro-economic and political restructuring without overt concern with the social context of women's lives (Wong 2003; Sprague and Hayes 2000; Longwe 1998). It overlooks power dynamics, which often deny women access to the resources needed to be empowered. In contrast, feminist writers situate empowerment in a social context and link it to women's struggles to 'create and enact their lives in the context of the social relationships in which they live their daily lives' (Sprague and Hayes 2000:680). They resist the notion that women can be 'added-in' to the sphere of power without a restructuring of the social context where traditional and cultural values and even personal obstacles imposed by relationships undermine women. To them, empowerment for women is impossible without structural transformation, as opposed to the malestream point of view, which seems to ignore structural restrictions in society (Longwe 1998).

Traditionally, empowerment seems to celebrate individualism, self achievement and economic goals while feminist thinking includes a sense of community. Thus, empowerment can be described as 'a process by which oppressed persons gain control over their lives by taking part with others in development of activities and structures that allow people increased

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involvement in matters which affect them directly' (Bystydzienski 1992:3). This expanded view incorporates the idea of acting collectively.

Empowerment and the public/private dichotomy

The centrality of economic power in the malestream perspective is not the only problematic issue; political power has also sparked feminist critique. Notwithstanding radical feminists' disdain for participation in practices of formal politics such as elections, voting and political parties, the political empowerment of women has occupied the attention of some commentators (Corrin 1999; Rowlands 1998; Randall 1987). Radical feminists argue that engaging in conventional politics within the existing cultural and ideological context is not a rewarding experience, while the more liberal call for a model of power that incorporates a 'gender analysis of power relations' that includes an understanding of how "internalised oppression" places barriers on women's exercise of political power' (Rowlands1998:14). And given that the arena of politics underlines inequality between men and women because of its male-dominated settings, Bookman and Morgen (1988:14) have pointed out that, 'until we broaden our definition of politics to include the everyday struggle to survive and to change power relations in our society … women's political action will remain obscured' (cited by Jill Bystydzienski 1992). The feminist position seeks to bridge the dichotomy between the public and the private and to offer relevant and meaningful approaches to the political empowerment of women.

The malestream notion of the public and private sphere is premised on the argument that these are separate domains, and are a reflection of the

positions and roles of the sexes in society (McDowell and Pringle 1992). (For further discussion of the public/private dichotomy see Georgina Blakeley's and Ruth Lister's chapters in this volume). Politics as a male-dominated process routinely isolates women and even when they join political parties, they are assigned designated roles and often these are closely linked to their gender. Feminists do not only challenge this entrenched practice but call for a restructuring of the political sphere. They argue that women's efforts to gain control of their lives, participate in decision-making processes and organise themselves to take action at grassroots levels count as political (Karl 1995). Politics is not limited to the allocation of resources and the exercise of power within clearly defined structures and activities, as is the case from a conventional perspective, but it is also about the consideration of power relations (Corrin 1999).

A conventional understanding of politics, Vicky Randall says, is 'the conscious, deliberate participation in the process by which resources are allocated amongst citizens'. She offers an alternative view, which sees politics 'as a process of articulation, a working out of relationships within an already-given power' (as quoted by Corrin 1999:9-10). Others have argued that any activity or relationship based on power being exercised by one group over others is political and some have pushed this notion further to see the personal as political (Eisentein 1983; Wandersee 1988, both cited by Bystydzienski 1992). Politicising the personal, Randall (1987) argues, reveals that women have been involved in 'less conventional politics' (Bystydzienski 1992:2). Against this backdrop, a change in the structure and organisation of party politics becomes critical given that political parties and electoral

processes often raise barriers against women. As the case study that follows illustrates, the increased participation of women in political activity does not necessarily reflect political empowerment.

Case study: women's empowerment strategies in Nigeria

In principle, the Nigerian state acknowledges the need to empower women. Over the years, different strategies have been implemented to achieve this goal. However, most have been driven by the conventional understanding of the concept. The state and development agencies have attempted to plan for women and have exercised power over them as evident in the approaches adopted.

Empowerment strategies in Nigeria broadly fall under three headings: political empowerment, economic empowerment and empowerment through integrated rural development (Garba 1999). The economic approach entails 'improving women's economic status by providing them with employment, improving their capacity to be involved in income-generating activities, and in improving their access to credit facilities (Garba 1999:135; Izugbara 2004). The political strategies focus on mobilising women through political education and awareness programmes on their rights and responsibilities to engage in party politics and to seek elective office. This approach is particularly favoured by development agencies. The third strategy, the integrated rural development, is a composite of the first and the second and much more. In addition to the provision of tools and resources to improve women's entrepreneurial capacity and participation in politics, the approach also takes on issues such as literacy, reproductive health, sanitation and environmental protection.

While some women have been 'helped' to gain access to resources for economic activities, political empowerment appears to have been less successful partly because shackles imposed by tradition and religion remain intact despite institutional and legal reforms. In Nigeria, as is the case in some other places, party politics as an exercise of power in the public sphere is the domain of men. Women's participation remains limited to the fringes and attempts to move from the margin to the centre have been challenged by forces ranging from the traditional to the religious. For example, when Sarah Jibril declared her intention to run for the presidency of Nigeria in 1992, her political dream was ridiculed and reduced to a joke.

The place of women in Nigeria is culturally determined. In the south, women play key roles in the social and economic sectors and secondary roles in political affairs. However, in the north, which is predominantly Muslim, they are more restricted on religious grounds. Until 1999 Nigeria had successions of military administrations interspaced with short spells of democratic politics. During the country's brief forays into party politics, women played insignificant roles in political parties and were indirectly restricted to their own wings where they were not in any position to wield significant power within the parties. Moreover, there were no women in the upper echelons of the parties to swing support in their favour. Besides, the women did not seem to believe that they could make a difference. As the view of the female politician who criticised Jibril suggested, the women were not prepared to challenge the socio-cultural barriers imposed on them. This is not peculiar to Nigerian women as surveys of women's wings of political parties in Africa have shown. Many of them are glorified 'housekeeping' sections of the parties (Karl 1995).

Most of the women's wings were made up of elite women and their contributions were limited to glamorising political rallies. Under military rule, women were relegated to the background, in accordance with military traditions where obedience is the rule, but a few were given political positions to silence critics. Under General Ibrahim Babangida, (in power from 1985-1993), significant changes took place because his wife Maryam, took on a high profile role as first lady. She made herself a champion of women's empowerment and launched a strategy, the Better Life Programme (BLP), in 1987 to mobilise women to play an active role in national development and to raise consciousness about women's rights.

The first lady ran the organisation like a pseudo-charity and conscripted the wives of other military officers to supervise it according to their status. Although a lot of money was pumped into the organisation, it was accountable to no one and was seen more as a pet project of the first lady rather than a strategic programme for the empowerment of women (Garba 1999). The organisation claimed dramatic results including the launching of co-operatives, cottage industries, new farms and gardens, new shops and markets, women's centres and social welfare programmes. (www.Ibrahim-babangida.com).

The outcomes of BLP were more visible in the media than in reality. Critics insisted that 'what were known were its advertised attributes: glamorous meetings celebrating the elites that made up the national, state and local leadership. But the real benefits in terms of empowerment of rural women whom it was intended to target were never recorded in relation to the level of public funds used to finance it' (Garba 1999:136).

The fact that some of the structures of the programme collapsed long before the Babangida administration ended confirmed its failure to empower rural women. The failure could also be attributed to the implementation approach that was adopted for it. It was, as Ibrahim puts it, a forum for 'the display of power, influence and prestige by privileged women. Indeed, Maryam Babangida's style of running the BLP was authoritarian and indeed militaristic. She issued orders and expected them to be obeyed without discussion, much less criticism' (Ibrahim 2004).

Beyond the personal style of the founder was the problem of a top-down model of empowerment that attempted to 'add in' women to the programme. Production machines were installed for women although they had no training on how to use or maintain them. Cottage industries and shops were built with little input from the women who were meant to use them and on paper thousands of women were 'empowered' but, in reality, little changed. The highly bureaucratic and authoritarian approach of the BLP only reinforced the division between the powerful and the marginalised.

While one cannot reject the merit of the programme, given its potential to provide initial access to women, it has to be acknowledged that it still smacked of domination. Reducing empowerment to the provision of resources and opportunities to acquire production tools and entrepreneurial skills without any input from the would-be beneficiaries of the programme undermined its success. Studies (Bystydzienski 1992) have shown that the empowerment of women is more likely to be successful when they work together to bring it about.

Empowerment in practice

It is probably in the area of the implementation of empowerment programmes that the impact of the feminist perspective has been most noticeable. Feminist critiques of empowerment have evolved from the theoretical to the practical. In fact, many feminists have raised questions about empowerment programmes based on the top-bottom approach and have advocated strategies that recognise women as agents of change (Afshar 1998). Although perceptions of empowerment are not universal but context dependent, some feminists agree that 'to be considered empowered, women themselves must be significant actors in the process of change – in other words, they must exercise agency (Santill´an et al 2004:535). Put differently, power cannot be bestowed or allocated because empowerment has to be self-determined. This understanding has re-defined the implementation of empowerment programmes by making women agents of change and not just beneficiaries of power allocation. It has informed a number of development programmes, for example, literacy programmes where women have been 'empowered by entering into dialogue with their peers. Through this dialogue they learn to read and write as they experience and speak about their world' (Paulo Freire cited by Bystydzienski 1992:3). In other words, the women learnt to exercise 'power to' change their lives.

In contrast to programmes driven by the conventional perspective, which are often implemented from the top-bottom approach, development programmes based on the feminist position start from local grassroots groups and target particular problems. Implemented alongside efforts to mobilise support at the macro-level, such programmes put women at the centre, not as

recipients of power but as sharers of power and promote awareness building, which Karl describes as 'a basic component of the process of empowerment' (1995:36).

As explained earlier, most empowerment programmes in Nigeria have been driven by the traditional understanding of the concept. But a few organisations have adopted a feminist approach. The Country Women's Association of Nigeria (COWAN) and the Women in Nigeria (WIN) exemplify this. The first was started in 1982 by a woman and from the beginning, adopted a bottom-up approach. Its main goal was to empower rural women towards self-sufficiency. Although that may sound like the objective of any empowerment programme, COWAN is different because not only do the women have a say in the organisation, they are also involved in the planning and implementation of programmes. They are agents of change and are empowered to have an effective voice in what concerns them.

Its name may evoke a national and all encompassing status, but Women in Nigeria (WIN) is a radical and somewhat confrontational group. Formed in 1983, WIN has worked for the emancipation of women by drawing attention to all forms of oppression and discrimination against women. It has been described as the 'only organisation promoting all women's interests with the potential to mobilise women and men in combining the concern for gender equality with popular democratic struggles' (Corrin 1999:187). However, its approach has been described as having a 'uni-directional goal of struggling for the economic, social, and political conditions for women's autonomy without placing limits on such autonomy' (Garba 1999:137). WIN's successes include the prosecution of incidences of abuse of `child-wives'; raising

awareness about discrimination against women; early marriages and its negative consequences; and rendering financial assistance to indigent female students (ibid.). Although its membership is predominantly professional class, its focus covers a wide range of issues but its feminist identity alienates it from conservative women's groups and gives it an elitist image.

In comparison to the BLP, WIN and COWAN have achieved some degree of success in empowering women thus confirming that a feminist perspective of empowerment is a more useful way of increasing the capacity of women to make choices and exercise control over their lives.

The Nigerian situation reflects the growing trend in empowerment practices. Majorie Mayo (2004) has explored empowerment in the context of women developing their own agenda to empower themselves in ways that reflect feminist thinking. Community participation in capacity building is emerging as the thrust of empowerment programmes thus downplaying individualism and self-sufficiency. 'Community participation and empowerment have been increasingly widely advocated, both in the North and the South,' Mayo explains (2004:139). She cites policy change by the World Bank and the IMF as evidence that women are being supported to develop their own agenda for empowerment.

This trend contradicts the 'malestream' notion of 'power-over' and lines up with the feminist position of 'power-from-within' and 'power-with'. The idea of empowerment as gaining power by learning and accepting the rules and conforming has given way to a feminist understanding of active participation in the process of having an effective voice. The United Nations and other major international organisations have declared a commitment to the promotion of

the empowerment of women (United Nations 2005). Development

programmes now acknowledge and incorporate feminist perspectives.

The increasing relevance of empowerment in development discourse

was highlighted when The World Bank (2001) acknowledged its importance in

the fight against poverty. This was seen to demonstrate the Bank's shift from

its top-bottom approach by which power was to be allocated through projects

designed and implemented by external agents to a more inclusive approach

that recognises the role of beneficiaries of development programmes. In

practical terms intervention strategies to increase women's empowerment

have been introduced. These range from those that focus on education to

efforts to increase women's representation in formal political structures

(Longwe 2000).The role of external agents has also been redefined to move

them away from exercising 'power-over' to being facilitators of the

empowerment processes (Rowlands 1995). However, it remains to be seen

whether this discursive shift represents a genuine attempt to achieve feminist

goals or a rhetorical device to legitimise the World Bank's neo-liberal agenda.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to explore the differences between the

conventional and feminist conception of empowerment using Nigeria as a

case study. It has argued that the political as well as the economic

empowerment of women is best served by a feminist perspective. This

conclusion echoes recent changes in the implementation of development

programmes by the World Bank and other external organisations. In the past

empowerment was conceptualised in the context of investing power in the

disempowered by providing them with resources to access the economic and

political spheres. Emphasis was often placed on the acquisition of skills and the capacity to participate in development projects without deliberate consideration of possible internalised oppression or social and cultural obstacles that could make such participation unproductive. Recent trends show a shift from a unidirectional and externally driven approach to empowerment as a multi-dimensional, personal and collective process. A focus on access to resources and tools has given way to an understanding of empowerment as a process that must emanate from within disempowered individuals.

As the case study showed, the adoption of an approach that is shaped by a traditional understanding of the concept reduces empowerment to a simple process of the allocation of power through the provision of access to resources to participate in the political or economic spheres. Not only does this approach emphasise the 'power over' perspective but it also overlooks critical issues such as the social context of women and the realities of their lives.

The chapter has made a case for a feminist perspective both at theoretical and practical levels for as Haleh Afshar argues, empowerment is a process that cannot be 'done to or for women' (1998: 4). It must emerge from women themselves.

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