

Trócaire



The Space Between: an Analytical Framework of Women's Participation

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April 2014

**Working for
a just world.**

Cover Photo: Beatrice Abee speaks at a meeting to discuss the needs of the community in Pageya Parish, Koro Sub County (near Gulu town), northern Uganda. These meetings are supported by Trócaire partner Gulu NGO Forum. Photo: Alan Whelan.

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an analytical framework for research Trócaire is undertaking on women's participation in Nicaragua, DRC and India. It explores key concepts found in the literature relating to participation, spaces, power and women's empowerment and the value and importance of these to women themselves in bringing about positive and transformational change.

The paper considers participation from the perspective of citizenship participation drawing on the work of Gaventa (2004). The chosen lens within this area is that of 'spaces', drawing on Cornwall's (2002) seminal work on participation. Recognising that participation does not occur in a vacuum but as part of the social world where power dynamics shape the boundaries of action, the paper explores the ubiquitous and complex nature of power and domination in order to understand the potential that spaces and women's participation in these spaces provide for transforming power relations.

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INTRODUCTION

Trócaire's rights based approach to global development has identified gender inequality as a key driver of injustice and poverty. Trócaire's overall strategy aims to promote gender equality as a priority, by implementing dedicated women's programmes and by ensuring that gender issues are addressed across all Trócaire's work. The dedicated programmes for promoting gender equality address women's empowerment, promote women's participation and aim to combat Gender Based Violence (GBV). In addition, a high proportion of programmes that work on other justice areas also prioritise gender equality and implement strategies designed to promote women's participation and empowerment.

There are many and varied expectations of the role, relevance and power of women's participation to enhance women's empowerment within Trócaire. These range from increasing women's status in the home and community, to building women's self-confidence, enhancing their mobility and visibility, and developing their skills to participate in a range of activities outside the home – for example, enabling them to earn an income, participate in decision-making and become involved in democratic processes through participation in formal politics at local and national levels. Participation is seen as the key, in many programmes, to changing women's position in the family, community and wider society. Through participation women can take more control of their lives, make decisions, engage in development activities of all kinds and develop their skills, confidence and standing.

Given the central role of women's participation in Trócaire's work a three-year research project is being undertaken in order to deepen understanding of the issue, support learning across programmes and offer insights to the wider development sector. The purpose of the research is to understand how different approaches to participation enable positive change. The research was jointly commissioned by Trócaire's Governance and Human Rights and the Gender teams

A review was undertaken in 2012 of current theory and practice around women's participation, both within the formal political spheres and at the level of relationships within household and communities. This was done with a view to learning from past experience, and identifying gaps in evidence and knowledge. It looked at the different strategies being used by NGOs, UN agencies and governments to promote women's participation. Significant literature was found on promoting women's participation in formal political structures, including the use of quota systems to ensure women's representation, the role of training, and the impact of decentralization in opening up opportunities for women. Evidence was reviewed from many different countries highlighting the opportunities and barriers experienced in promoting women's political participation in formal democratic structures.

Less material debate and evidence were identified around the role and experience of promoting women's participation within their communities. There was little available analysis of what worked well and what did not work to enable women to participate outside the home in different contexts, and what participation achieved and meant for women and their communities. There was limited data about whether women's participation supports empowerment, or how women benefit from participating in different groups and organisations, and what are the costs to women, if any. Numerous assumptions were found in the documentation about the importance of women's participation in, for example, health care, income generation, wider decision making, and about how women's participation improves family and community development. There was little available evidence in the literature or case studies to allow analysis of these assumptions, or to discuss what women's participation can achieve for women themselves and how they experience and understand participation, its benefits and costs.

Two critical gaps in the literature were identified, which helped focus the research project: these were an absence of women's voices in the literature and a heavy emphasis on formal political structures, especially at the national level¹. As a result the research project chose to focus on women's participation in informal community decision-making spaces and adopt a methodology that prioritised women, their views and experiences.

This paper reviews the literature on women's participation, exploring especially the dynamics and interaction of power, voice and agency through their participation in different forums or spaces. It explores key concepts within the literature relating to participation, spaces, power and women's empowerment and the value and importance of these to women themselves in bringing about positive and transformational change.

The structure of the paper

The paper will analyse the core concept of women's participation, drawing on the wider participation literature to highlight its contested and varied meaning. It has become a 'fuzzword' (Cornwall and Eade, 2010) in much development literature and it is critically important to understand which concepts of participation are of most relevance and use to Trócaire, which can be used to analyse the data collected through the research and promoted to improve practice within the programmes.

The participation debate draws especially on the work of Gaventa (2004) and the concept of 'citizenship participation' because this approach relates directly to Trócaire's rights based approach and the methods adopted in the research. At the heart of this type of participation is the desire to create new opportunities for citizens and to transform existing systems to allow them voice and agency over community decisions.

As participation, even within this specific approach, is a malleable concept it is essential for this research to approach women's participation from a particular analytical lens. The chosen lens is that of 'spaces', drawing on Cornwall's (2002) seminal work on participation. She looks at the different spaces people can participate in, who created them, how they can access these spaces, the rules governing access and performance, how far people can influence and express their voice in the different spaces, and what is being achieved. This analytical framework provides the research with clear bounded arenas within which to analyse the interaction of power, voice and women's agency and to explore the possibilities of transformation and empowerment for women within specific spaces.

Although the research is designed to look specifically at participation within different, identified and mapped spaces, in each research context it is essential that women's participation work is located within the wider social context. Participation does not occur in a vacuum but as part of the social world where power dynamics shape the boundaries of action. Without exploring how power functions it is impossible to locate participation and understand its potential. Therefore, the paper explores the ubiquitous and complex nature of power and domination in order to understand the potential that spaces and women's participation in these spaces provide for transforming power relations.

¹ Painter (1995) defines formal politics as the operation of the constitutional system of government and its publicly-defined institutions and procedures. In relation to the women's formal political participation this definition then refers to women as elected representatives in government systems, presence in government mandates citizen spaces and activities that are directly engaged in trying to alter laws and policies which mandate these systems.

PARTICIPATION

The failure to theorize the potential contribution of participation to a transformative political process has resulted in the depolitization of participation and its rendering as a technical fix to problems of uneven development. (Mohan and Hickey 2004, p. 59)

Participation as a concept within development theory and practice has proved infinitely malleable and used to refer to many different approaches, practices and methodologies. Hickey and Mohan (2004) discern nine different eras in relation to participation within development work since the 1940s, and within each of these nine they highlight a variety of different approaches². Much of the work is under theorized, as their quotation above shows and participation has often come to mean 'all things to all people'. Cooke and Kothari (2001) brought together many leading thinkers to question the theory and practice of participation dominant in development work; many challenges to the use and practice of participation were raised in their well known book, *Participation The New Tyranny*.

The following extended quote excellently captures much existing development practice. Participation remains a key approach, much is claimed for it and yet the claims are poorly evidenced and often challenged:

Over the past thirty years participation has become one of the shibboleths of contemporary development theory and practice, often directly linked to claims of 'empowerment' and 'transformation'. Initially a marginal concern within development, most development agencies now agree that some form of participation by the beneficiaries is necessary for development to be relevant, sustainable and empowering. However, the past decade has witnessed a growing backlash against participation (e.g. Cooke and Kothari, 2001), on the basis that participatory approaches have often failed to achieve meaningful social change, largely due to a failure to engage with issues of power and politics. Despite the veracity of this critique, particularly in relation to particular forms of participation, it has notably failed to halt the spread of participation as a development concept and strategy. Apparently undeterred, and increasingly underwritten by policy and funding support from virtually all major development agencies, the participatory turn has actually become expressed more deeply and diversely within development theory and practice over recent years. (Hickey and Mohan, 2005, p 238)

Notwithstanding the way it is often used to mean whatever protagonists want it to mean, participation is still a valid and useful concept if it is properly defined and what it can and cannot do is better analysed and understood. Hickey and Mohan found through analysing a large body of work that participation can bring about transformational change if three conditions are met:

- participation is pursued as part of a wider radical political project;
- participation is aimed at securing citizenship rights and participation for marginal and subordinated groups;
- the work engages with development as a process of social change rather than a series of technocratic interventions.

Trócaire's work on women's participation meets these underlying criteria and the concept certainly has value and potential in the contexts where Trócaire works.

² The nine eras are: social capital, participatory governance, emancipatory participation, liberation theology, alternative development, participation in development, community development (colonial), community development (post-colonial) and political participation. For a detailed breakdown of this typology see Hickey and Mohan (2005) p7-8.

Cornwall (2008) wrote an article on 'unpacking participation', which analysed the several 'ladders of participation' in use (the typologies of Arnstein, Pretty and White are well discussed for example); however, she stressed that these lacked specificity and emphasised the need to understand participation as it is practiced. She highlighted the need to regain meaning for the concept of participation by being clear who is invited to participate or is participating, in what and for what purpose, the nature of the participation and when participation is encouraged. She talked of 'clarity through specificity' and proposed that participation needs to be understood in its context, by its purpose and through what kind of participation is taking place. The research takes this approach by studying who is being encouraged to participate, where, when and why, and what it means to the women themselves, as well as exploring what happens as a result of participation.

Citizen Participation

This paper will not end these many debates about participation but instead aims to alert development academics and practitioners to the need to be very specific about what is meant by participation in each context and under what conditions it is a powerful tool for change. In an attempt to respond to the plethora of meanings, models and approaches and the critiques of participation, and to provide clear guidance for the research, this paper will draw on a body of work that clearly defines and locates participation within the political sphere. Gaventa (2004) argues that the agendas of *Good Governance* and participation have merged to form the concept of 'participatory citizenship', linking participation in the community and social spheres.



Women participating in a block level meeting around forest rights, Odisha, India.

This area of participation within development programmes includes: rights education, citizen mobilisation, citizen lobbying on public policy, citizen monitoring, and government and citizen consultations. This term recasts participation as not just something that people are invited to partake in but as autonomous action where people have the chance to shape engagement in community decisions and interaction with authorities.

Participation as a platform for citizenship not only emphasizes community involvement in the processes of local development, but also demands that social development lead to substantive empowerment of community members in terms of rights, power, agency and voice” (McEwan, 2005, p. 9).

The core component of this concept is citizenship. The concept of citizenship is widened and extended, by Mohan and Hickey (2005) cited earlier, who argue that the best conception of citizenship in relation to participation is civic republicanism ‘the collective and participatory engagement of citizens in determination of the affairs of their community’ (Dietz (1987), cited in Lister 1998, p. 24). This definition clearly demonstrates that political participation is more than voting in elections; it is about ordinary people having a voice in decisions that affect their lives. This definition works well alongside feminist critiques of citizenship theory, which argue that citizenship traditionally has focused only on ‘formal’ political spheres, overlooking localized activities such as self-help groups and thus excluding the experiences of the majority of women (Lister, 2003). Using these definitions of citizenship and tying the concept closely to the idea of participation emphasises the role that agency, specifically in this case women’s agency, plays within the process. From a citizenship analysis participation becomes a right and those who participate have agency:

Citizenship as participation can (then) be seen as representing an expression of human agency within the political arena (Lister, 1998, p. 228).

Women’s participation is not limited to engagement in local spaces and needs to be understood and located within the wider structural mechanisms and gender power dynamics that support or restrain this exercise of their rights and agency. Citizenship participation is working to create new spaces and ways of engaging citizens in the decisions that affect their lives; to do this successfully - so as not to reinforce existing and entrenched hierarchies, interests and the status quo - these spaces must be transformative. This is especially important when encouraging women into this kind of engagement in order to avoid the replication or reinforcement of their inequality.

The concept of participatory citizenship captures key elements of Trócaire’s participation work with women; it builds on a rights based and empowerment approach to addressing gender inequality, and provides a clear foundation on which to build the analysis of the programmes in the three research sites.

SPACES

There are numerous different facets to citizen participation so again it is necessary to use an analytical lens to define the areas of women's participation to be studied. This research will build on Andrea Cornwall's (2002, 2004, 2007) work on spaces, viewing participation as a spatial practice within bounded yet permeable arenas.

Looking at who accesses which spaces and how particular sites come to be populated by particular actors allows the interaction of power, voice and agency, within clearly defined arenas to be explored. Citizen participation argues for the inclusion of citizens within different spaces so that they can shape the decisions and needs of their communities; in examining spaces we must consider the dynamics of the actual spaces but also the arenas of power (Gaventa, 2004). Space cannot be analysed without understanding power dynamics:

analysing participation as a spatial practice helps draw attention to the productive possibilities of power as well as its negative effects, to the ways in which the production of space itself creates- as well as circumscribes –possibilities for agency (Cornwall 2002, p. 8).

Different types of space

Cornwall differentiates three different categories of spaces:

- **Closed Spaces:** these are hard to enter, where decisions are taken by a specific set of actors behind closed doors, usually non-participatory. These are often hard for women to enter
- **Invited Spaces:** spaces created by external agencies (local Government, NGOs for example, community management) in which people are invited to participate; the rules are usually framed by those who create them. They are often constructed opportunities specifically designed to enable women to participate.
- **Claimed/organic Spaces:** created by people themselves from/against power holders. These are often collective and popular spaces united around a common cause, they are self organising.

These spaces are not separable from one another, what happens in one space impacts on the other spaces. When a new invited space is created, for example, this can draw people away from existing spaces of self-organisation. These categories also need to be split in terms of their temporal nature: there are durable spaces and transient spaces, which create different opportunities for participation (Cornwall 2002). Within this taxonomy Cornwall separates out four types of spaces: two durable spaces - one for interaction with/in the state, the other for interaction without and on the state.

- **Regularized institutions-** these serve as an interface between authorities and people, including bodies conferred with statutory power to allocate resources, co-management committees to implement policies and service user groups.
- **Alternative interfaces-** there are institutionalised spaces, outside the state, where citizens engage in governance work through lobbying and advocacy on various public policy issues. These also include associations where citizens gain a collective voice.

Within the transient spaces there are again two types: one for interaction with/in the state the other for interaction without and on the state.

- **Fleeting formations** - this type includes "one-off meetings, events or exercises aimed at opening up deliberation over policies or service delivery priorities, rather than making decisions" (2002, p. 19). They emerge for a particular purpose at a particular time and then dissolve or fade away.

- **Movements and moments** - this type includes “any expression of voice outside the structured invited spaces of invited participation or the regularized institution of civil-society” (2002, p. 22). They come and go as they are shaped by particular issues and include: popular protests and campaigns.

This taxonomy of spaces is very useful for mapping and analysing the available spaces for women's participation; it is then necessary to explore how far these different spaces offer a voice for marginalised groups, especially women - who speaks for and about whom and how this is established and contested? As Lefebvre (1991) has argued, spaces are instances of lived experience that reflect their contextual reality. Creating new spaces might not be enough to empower citizens or bring about greater participation in decision making unless action is taken to ensure they are sites of transformation or support the transformation of power dynamics. They need to be sites that enable women to participate, challenge dominant gender norms and address barriers to their voice and agency.



Salvadorian Women's Movement marching for rural women's rights, El Salvador. Photo: Michelle Moore

Power dynamics within these spaces

In understanding these dynamics it is necessary to consider:

- Who created the space and the rules governing entry
- Who accesses the space, how well prepared are they and the barriers to access
- The purpose and nature of the space
- Who participates in the space and how well they can perform, given the rules- are these empowering and enabling or limiting and obstructive?
- What enables success

Who creates the space

The creation of one space impacts on other existing spaces, it does not emerge in a vacuum. Invited spaces by their very nature require construction by an outside entity, for example, by the government or officials of a particular locality or an NGO. The creation of new space does not happen outside power relations but is shaped by the existing boundaries of those relations, to regulate the agenda, the discussion, and also what is imagined as possible within that space. By creating a space and inviting people to join, the rules of those spaces are being shaped and the possibilities for action are being forged through the invitation of some and not others. To understand participation within the space the dynamics of who created it must be explored.

Who can access the space

How inclusive or exclusive are these spaces? What requirements are there for entering the space and how well prepared are the women? Who is excluded on grounds of age, marital status, health, education, disability and who feels they are excluded for a range of other reasons, including lack of time and domestic responsibilities that prevent mobility and the time to attend? Issues of inclusion and exclusion as well as who represents and speak for whom are all critical issues in defining the value and role of participation in any given space.

There are many barriers to women entering different spaces which need to be addressed as an integral part of the work to promote access and ensure women's inclusion. Some of the barriers identified in the literature include social and gender norms, limits to women's mobility, women's lack of education and skills, their low confidence and self-esteem, male opposition, violence, and lack of time due to heavy domestic duties. Given that women are not a homogenous group and have multiple aspects to their identity, besides their gender, and unique personal experiences it is important to be aware of how barriers are not only context specific but affect women in different ways.

The purpose of the space

The purpose of the space has an impact on the participation within that space. Invited spaces may be created with only very limited room for citizen influence rather than genuine participation. These spaces are embedded within existing power structures and therefore 'participatory processes may serve simply to reproduce echoes of dominant knowledge rather than to amplify the alternative' (Cornwall, 2002, p. 9). However, there is always scope for resistance and agency- meaning a space's purpose can be transformed as it is constantly evolving through the struggles of power within and outside it. Where spaces are set up as sites of resistance to create change women may still have to play by the rules; what is needed to ensure these spaces are transformative spaces?

Even organic spaces that may emerge through community action can be co-opted by powerful forces. NGOs trying to support these self-organising or social movements can, through formalising them, change the shape of their action. Also, organic spaces that emerge around an issue and then disperse do not always provide the necessary time for their participants to gain the skills necessary to be able to pressure for change at a societal level, providing only transient and not sustained participation (Fung & Wright, 2001).

Who participates in the space?

In invited spaces specific people are often chosen to participate, making these spaces closed for others in the community. Especially if the 'community' is taken as a homogenous unit it is possible for the chosen to become gatekeepers of power, excluding the views of others and reinforcing social divides and undermining the existing rights of more marginal actors, especially women (Agarwal, 1997). Furthermore, specifically because these spaces exist within the gender power dynamics of societies even if marginalized groups, such as women, are actively invited in, it is unclear if and how they will be transformative for those whose marginalization is more to do with relations within households and communities than their position in wider society (McEwan, 2000). Within invited spaces there is also an inherent presumption that people want to participate and this presumption can lead to the exclusion of the most marginalised people and groups. However, through changing the dynamics of the space it is possible to change the participation of those within the space. Taking steps to introduce as much neutrality as possible can help to disrupt existing power dynamics and allow a space for a different form of participation (McEwan, 2005).

Additionally even invited spaces that are specifically trying to recognise difference and marginalisation create their own narratives that only exist within the space, artificially fostering collective identity. Women do not necessarily see themselves as a collective entity in the way development agencies, governments or other creators of the space do (Escobar, 1995). The introduction of this narrative can create its own power relations, which can lead to some having power over others (Cornwall, 2007). Organic spaces are often, in contrast, said to be spaces of radical possibility where people are able to carve out their citizenship through debate and dialogue, without corruption from external actors. However, these spaces may sometimes be defined through identity and can perpetuate the same exclusionism found in invited spaces (McEwan, 2005).

What enables success?

Cornwall stresses several factors that are key to success, such as wider enabling policies, responsive bureaucrats, and coordinated and articulate people; these are critical for enabling change through participation in different spaces. There is also evidence to suggest that where women are able to succeed through participation this is actually because they are able to exercise control over other women. Rather than participation in the space itself being successfully transformatory for all those who participate, certain women are able to exercise greater power for their own gain at the expense of other women in the group (Cornwall, 2007).

In this research the focus will be on understanding what has enabled success in different spaces and more especially on understanding how the women themselves define positive change and what does or does not enable success. All these issues and questions are interrelated and work concurrently to shape each particular space and women's participation within that space. They will help the research to map, understand and analyse the different spaces, how women use and benefit from them, what barriers exclude them and how these are overcome or lock women out, and what they use their participation in different spaces for.

In order to understand how, and if it is even possible for these spaces to become transformatory spaces able to support a citizenship participation agenda, it is necessary to understand the power relations at play and undertake a power analysis to explore how power functions, both at the level of theory and then in practice through the research itself.

POWER

Although the term participation is used to refer to a variety of different approaches, what is central to the concept is that its main objective is to support the transformation of social relations and the causes of exclusion (Hickey & Mohan, 2004, p. 13). However, participation has been criticized for failing to deliver on its promise of empowerment and transformation due to a lack of understanding of power and how it operates; all too often it ignores issues of agency and therefore how to support empowerment (Cleaver, 2001; Kothari, 2001).

Specifically, as the section on spaces shows, where participation ignores power relations participation in spaces risks reinforcing power relations and poor people, women in particular, are overlooked, excluded and voiceless. If the goal of participatory citizenship is the collective engagement of citizens in determination of their community affairs then programmes seeking to achieve this are focused on transforming social relations through empowerment. To understand how this is possible it is necessary to situate the debate within an understanding of power and how power functions.

The debates about power vary within different ideologies, disciplines and methodologies. This paper does not seek to address all these debates but rather aims to explore some theories about different types of power in order to situate women's participation within a wider understanding of how power shapes social dynamics. Four different expressions of power are discussed; these are concepts widely in use within the development sector and have proven a useful way to understand the nature of the different kinds of power that shape relationships (VeneKlasen, et al., 2007).

The four concepts being used in this research are:

- **'Power over'** is the most commonly discussed form of power and refers to domination, control and repression to varying degrees. This form of power is seen as a negative force that controls the oppressed person's ability to take action.
- **'Power within'** is the internal capacity that all humans possess; without this all other types of power are not possible. Self-confidence and self-worth are regarded as measures of 'power within.'
- **'Power to'** refers to the unique potential of every person to be able to take action to influence their world and can be considered as the visible manifestation of 'power within.'
- **'Power with'** refers to the power created through collective action, where the whole is greater than the sum of the individuals.

This section will explore these four different manifestations of power drawing on key theorists to understand the force that 'power over' dynamics have had and continue to have in shaping women's lives. It also considers the role that agency and transformative action have in challenging these, drawing on the three other types of power to challenge the dominant 'power over' dynamics.

Power over

Despite this being the most researched and theorised type of power there is still no consensus on how 'power over' functions. However, a body of work drawing on Lukes (1974) has emerged arguing that this type of power has three dimensions or faces: visible power, hidden power and invisible/internalised power (VeneKlasen & Millier, 2002).

- Visible power is when "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl 1957, p. 203)

- Hidden “power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A” (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970, p. 7).
- Invisible/Internalised power is when “A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping and determining his very wants” (Lukes, 2005, p. 27). This internalisation of power does not have to be a direct result of A actively oppressing B as it can result from historical trends and social patterns (or norms) that place A and B within different positions within the social system.

This third face of ‘power over’ is the most difficult for the oppressed to recognise. The grievances of those that are oppressed are defined as ‘natural’ or normal; they are not perceived as things that can be changed or challenged. This kind of domination is reinforced by wider social norms and defined as the status quo; it is not located in the hands of any one person. This creates a culture where ‘public challenges by the non-elite, as candidates or as critics, are deterred by feelings of inadequacy, fear of reprisal, or simply the sense that the outcome of the challenge is a foregone conclusion’ (Gaventa, 1982, p.144).

Many feminists have critiqued the above authors for their gender blind interpretations of power. Feminists from many different theoretical standpoints have debated how ‘power over’ functions in relation to women but the narrative of the ‘internalisation of inferiority’ is a central tenant of feminist writings on power. Power is held by men; while this can be exercised through physical control over women it is also present in the gender norms and rules that reinforce women’s inequality and inferiority in most societies, from birth onwards. Religion, discriminatory laws, traditions and customs combine to prevent many women – especially poor women- from having equal rights to men. These prevent female access to key resources and services, including decision-making and participation in many public forums; they are not able to influence or shape the rules that govern them. The fact that this is an integral part of the socialisation of women from birth – and also men, who see their status, roles and responsibilities very differently - means that these gender inequalities (played out differently in different contexts and modified by class, race and ethnicity) are often internalised. The marginalisation that women experience is seen as the natural order and so their ability to question or exercise power to change things is reduced and the situation is accepted.

Another useful body of work which can be described as the fourth face of power builds on Foucault’s analysis of power (Digeser, 1992). This body of work fully de-faces power by arguing that power goes beyond its possession by agents to the idea of fluid, ubiquitous and inescapable power where both A and B can exercise power but are only vehicles of that power (Foucault, 1980). This paper will use Nancy Hayward’s (1998) articulation of the idea:

I propose reconceptualising power’s mechanisms, not as instruments powerful agents use to prevent the powerless from acting independently but rather as social boundaries – such as laws, rules, norms, institutional arrangements, and social identities and exclusions – that constrain and enable action for all actors (1998, p. 2).

Hayward argues that it is necessary to de-personalise power to remove the focus from individual behaviour and to focus instead on understanding the role that social boundaries play in shaping all action and actors. In Hayward’s analysis it is not possible to distinguish ‘free action from the action shaped by the action of others’ (1998, p. 11). Power is fluid; social norms and historical forces limit not just the powerless in their actions and perceptions but also the powerful. ‘The field of what is socially possible can be shaped at a distance’ by events and historical trends that are not explicitly intended to affect a given group but can significantly alter their field for action (ibid:18). There are no relationships without power; this reality is inescapable because all relationships exist within a social system and are shaped by the boundaries of that system. This view of power argues that power can then be productive as well as repressive:

One might envision a continuum of power relations on which domination forms one end-point. At the opposite end would be the fluid power relation defined by social boundaries that are understood by all participants and that allow the maximum possible space, not only for action within, but also effective action upon the boundaries themselves (1998, p.21).

Transformative power

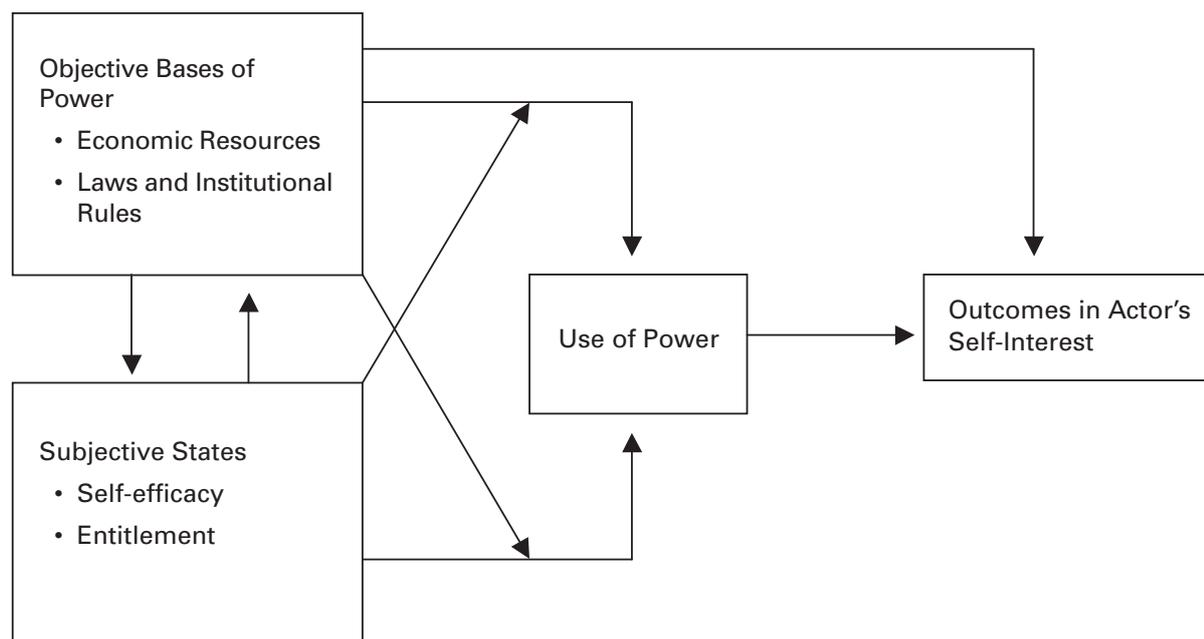
All of the theorists mentioned above agree that even within the oppressive dimensions of 'power over' there is - to some extent - room for resistance or agency. Some writers have taken this concept further and considered how power can be used for transformation. Given that the research is interested in exploring the possibilities for transformation and empowerment for women within specific spaces the paper will concentrate on transformatory power. Hartsock (1998) criticizes a focus on resistance arguing that in order for the marginalised to have a voice power must not be resisted but transformed. This concept of the transformation of power relations has been central to the feminist movement. Many feminists have argued that the 'power as domination' conception of power is patriarchal and women can provide a different perspective, which is not a zero-sum game:

There is enormous validity in women not wanting to use power as it is presently conceived and used. Rather, women may want to be powerful in ways that simultaneously enhance, rather than diminish, the power of others. (Miller, 1992, p. 247).

This feminist discourse centres on the idea of struggle to change existing power relations; power is still conceived as 'power over' but it is argued that this can and should be transformed by women within the feminist movement for equality. This approach is central to the idea of empowerment and fits with the model of power proposed by Hayward (1998); power cannot be escaped as it shapes our field of action but it can be manipulated and altered and this requires an understanding of the other side of the power coin, where power can be conceived as resistance or energy. Empowerment then is the process of actors pushing against the boundaries to shape new fields of possible action. This understanding of transformative power focuses on the three manifestations of power: 'power within', 'power to' and 'power with'.

To understand this transformative power it is necessary to consider the debates about women's empowerment. It is generally agreed that the goal of empowerment is 'a political and material process which increases individual and group power, self-reliance and strength' (Feguson, 2004, p. 1). However, the approaches to achieving this goal and therefore the very definition of empowerment have become contested to the point where it is necessary to distinguish some of the differences to gain clarity. Sardenberg (2008) has contributed two practical and usable concepts to the debate on women's empowerment: empowerment can be either liberal or liberating.

The liberal approach sees empowerment as achievable through an individual journey, which supports development outcomes; it does not require any fundamental shifts in wider power relations. The liberal empowerment process is summarised best by Paula England's (2000) model of empowerment:



The model shows that economic resources and subjective states interact with each other and impact on the extent to which women can exercise power to achieve outcomes they desire. The key outcome of the liberal empowerment process is that 'exercising power enables women to make changes to achieve outcomes in their self-interest' (2000, p. 61). This liberal model is more concerned with the 'power to' and 'power within' aspects of transformative power and is not interested in achieving changes in the structures of domination; it is about creating the "rational action of actors towards individual interests" (Sardenberg, 2008, p. 22). Even when working in groups the goal is not to achieve 'power with' but to develop women's individual ability to exercise power and achieve key development aims for herself and her family.

The liberating approach maintains the focus on transforming power relations at a structural level and views this as only achievable through a process of conscience raising, organisation and challenge. Manela De Montis summarises this approach as 'a process through which women become conscious of their personal, private and public subordination, of their rights and of the need to organise to transform the situation to establish new power relations among people' (quoted in Sardenberg 2008 p 27). Essential to this view are all three transformational power concepts. In contrast to the liberal model 'power with' is essential and can be achieved through participation within groups that provide women with space to share and explore their experiences of oppression and through this organising challenge the status quo.

Batliwala (1993, 1994) lays out clearly this liberating model of the process of empowerment:

- Due to the multi-faceted nature of 'power over' women have internalised and legitimized their own oppression therefore empowerment must be externally induced through external forces which spark an awareness of injustice. External agents of change may take many forms but must be able to bring "ideas and information that not only changes consciousness and self-image but also encourages action" (1994, p. 132).
- The process of empowerment must occur through organising women into collectives so they have the space to unite and challenge their subordination. However, "the process of empowerment really begins in the mind, with the glimmers of a new consciousness which questions existing power relations and roles" (1993, p. 10).
- Empowerment is not a top down process it is a spiral which "affects everyone involved: the individual, the activist agent, the collective and the community" (1994, p. 132).

- “These women’s collectives then begin to seek access to resources and public services independently, demanding accountability from service providers, lobbying for changes in laws and programmes that are inaccessible or inappropriate (1994, p. 137).
- For change to happen in higher power structures women’s collectives must become a political force through networks and mass movements, combining to ensure that structural change in society and power relations can occur.

There are two key aspects to the liberating empowerment approach: participation in collectives and building a critical awareness. The main difference to the liberal empowerment model is the role of solidarity through participating in grassroots groups and movements. This ‘power with’ element is essential to the progression of empowerment and the true transformation of power.

Both these models provide alternative ways of understanding women’s empowerment and critiques exist for both; they can, however, be useful in categorising and analysing different development programmes and their purposes in changing the dynamics of voice, agency and power through women’s participation. Given that ‘power over’ can exercise such strong oppression, especially for so many women in the world, it is clear that any transformative power must overcome significant impediments. If citizen participation is to achieve its goal of the engagement of citizens in deciding their community affairs then it must embark on a transformatory path of liberating empowerment, able to change power relations at structural level. However, to do this the spaces where participation occurs also need to become transformed and foster new forms of power.

Finally, it should be noted that much of the existing empowerment literature does not address women’s empowerment specifically, yet understanding the opportunities and constraints around women’s empowerment is essential if the goals of participation leading to empowerment are to be achieved. Malhotra (2002) usefully reviews the existing literature and highlights three key areas where women’s empowerment differs significantly from the empowerment process more generally. First, ‘women are not just one group amongst several disempowered subsets of society (the poor, ethnic minorities, etc.); they are a cross-cutting category of individuals that overlaps with all these other groups’ (Malhotra, 2002, p. 4). Secondly, women’s disempowerment starts in the home; inter family relations are the first source of disempowerment and household level relations have to be part of both policy and practice around empowering women and girls. Third, many institutions in different contexts actively support the discrimination and marginalisation of women and addressing and transforming those patriarchal institutions and the social norms that reinforce women’s inequality need to be part of women’s empowerment programming.



Florence Ganye, member of the HIV advocacy team in Magombedzi, Uganda. Photo: Michelle Moore.

CONCLUSION

The arguments presented in this paper form the basis of a theoretical framework that will be used to analyse the research findings. The central approach focuses on women's participation as this is a key methodology within Trócaire for promoting positive social change and women's empowerment.

Given the multiplicity of definitions, expectations, and claims made about participation and the value of women's participation it was decided to select two core approaches:

1. To take the concept of citizenship participation, which fits well with Trócaire's social justice approach to ending poverty and inequality, and using a feminist perspective of citizenship to include women's participation within decision-making spaces beyond the state and formal democratic processes. Given that the sites of women's disempowerment are located within households and communities as well as more formal institutions the importance of women's participation in these contexts cannot be overemphasised.
2. Given the wide and unclear use of the concepts of participation the research will take the approach of 'clarity through specificity' and root the meaning and practice of women's participation within each of the research locations, learning from local definitions, understandings and practices. The voices of the women themselves are central to the understanding of the meaning and value of participation in this research.

The analytical lens to be used to study women's participation in each context is that of spaces. This analytical approach to participation allows the research to map the specific arenas of participation within each community studied, to explore the rules and norms that govern the creation of different spaces, access, performance, influence, representation and whose voices are heard. This approach allows the research to deepen understanding of where women participate, what kind of spaces they can and can't enter, under what conditions and with what influence, and to explore the interaction of voice, agency and power of women within those spaces.

Underpinning this framework is an understanding of the importance of power in shaping relationships, norms and possibilities. The framework uses the four types of power developed for use in practical programming, but underpinned by strong theories of power, to analyse the different strategies supporting participation that have been developed and whether and how they are able to change the dynamics of power for women. This approach recognises the oppressive and omnipresent nature of 'power over', working to shape minds as well as actions, which significantly shapes women's lives and can constrain the ways in which participation can be empowering for women. However, it also acknowledges the fluidity and opportunity for transformation embedded within the concept of power, drawing on the definitions of 'power to', 'power with' and 'power within' to explore how far different approaches to participation in different spaces can in reality become empowering for women.

Finally, the research brings in the concepts of liberal and liberating empowerment for women as a way of categorising and understanding the purposes of different approaches to women's empowerment currently in use in the NGO sector. The liberal model focuses on the personal empowerment of women to achieve their own specific goals, often promoted as a good way of achieving good development outcomes more widely as women are seen as key drivers of positive change in their families and communities. Liberating empowerment focuses on transforming social relations and challenging the deeply entrenched social norms that exclude and discriminate against women. It is rooted in a rights approach to women's empowerment and involves work on knowledge, attitudes and behaviour as well as women organising for change.

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