

For more information on the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Programme contact the Coordination Team:

Director Andrea Cornwall

Administrative Co-ordinator Jenny Edwards

Communications and Learning Officer Tessa Lewin

Global Hub Convenor Rosalind Eyben

Latin America Hub Convenor Cecilia Sardenberg

Middle East Hub Convenor Hania Sholkamy

South Asia Hub Convenor Maheen Sultan

West Africa Hub Convenor Takyiwaa Manuh

Email pathways@ids.ac.uk

Website www.pathways-of-empowerment.org

Front cover photo: Mahafuza Akhter

Discovering the paths to positive change in women's lives





Pathways South Asia ran a photography competition in 2007/8 with a group of young photographers who were sent out to capture 'Changing Images of Women in Bangladesh'. This photograph by Sheikh Rajibul Islam was selected as the winning image.

Where's the power in women's empowerment?

Women's empowerment has risen to the top of the development agenda. Millions are spent every year on implementing programmes aimed at giving women and girls more choice and opportunity. And yet surprisingly little work has been done on how women themselves experience the process of empowerment – what their journeys have been, what they have gained and what might be learnt from their experiences.

Understanding what works to enable women to empower themselves is critical to success in fostering women's empowerment. To gain that understanding we need to go beyond one-size-fits all recipes or one-shot solutions. Empowerment is not a destination that can be reached once and for all. It is a process through

which people gain consciousness of the constraints that affect their lives, and the inner strength and solidarity with others to overcome these constraints. Empowerment is fundamentally about power. It is not something that can be given, or something that can be done for someone else. In taking power, women can change societies in which women are not treated equally or fairly in any aspect of their lives.

For some development agencies, there are short cuts to women's empowerment. There is a set repertoire of interventions that are carried out in the name of "women's empowerment". All are aimed at giving women increased choices. But all too often, the choices that are available exist within – and sometimes

even unwittingly reinforce - an unchanged and unfair social and gender order.

The commitment that most development agencies and governments have to gender equality makes women's empowerment about more than this. Linking women's empowerment with gender equality bridges enabling women to gain the power to act in transforming their own lives with strategies for changing the inequitable gender relations that affect everyone. And this calls for putting power back into approaches to women's empowerment in development.

The DFID-funded Research Programme **Pathways of Women's Empowerment** (Pathways) aims to get a better picture of what works, for

whom and under what conditions. Action- and policy-oriented research in many locations across the globe seeks to do more than understand how women's lives are changing for the better. Our aim is to contribute at all levels to bringing about positive change in women's lives and to the struggle for greater equality and justice for all.



Tessa Lewin

Pathways of women's empowerment

The Pathways of Women's Empowerment RPC has as its starting point the recognition that there are no certain routes to empowerment. Rather, there are many pathways of empowerment. Some may start well, but end up leading women into thickets from which there seems no obvious escape. Others may take women back to where they began. And what enables one woman to empower herself, might lead another into a situation that is more difficult than the one she left behind her.

Naila Kabeer describes empowerment as a 'journey without maps', a process that takes women into uncharted terrain. As the horizon shifts, so too do the boundaries of the possible. Those who begin this journey may have no

real sense of where it will lead them. But by tracing the pathways they take, with a sensitivity to context and history, we can learn lessons that may be useful to other women who are embarking on similar journeys.

Pathways seeks to facilitate the process of learning from what's worked to enable women to empower themselves, through research and communication. Working in four geographical regions – Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia and West Africa – and with those located in any of these locales as well as in New York, Paris and London who make up the world of global development policy, we aim to stimulate dialogue and reflection: posing questions, exploring new ways

of thinking and doing, and learning from what works to enable women to empower themselves.

Much of the media and communications work we do is about identifying popular and politically strategic advocacy platforms – working with community groups, artists, film makers, journalists, as well as policy makers and academics. We recognise that changing hearts is as important as changing minds. By engaging people through media they can relate to and tapping into the everyday things that are changing women's realities, we seek to make our work speak to a diversity of audiences and concerns, re-energizing the “gender agenda” with new ideas and direction.



Thomas Hartwell



Tessa Lewin



Thomas Hartwell



Tessa Lewin



NEIM



CEGENSA



Tessa Lewin



Sheikh Rajibul Islam



CEGENSA

The Pathways Consortium is composed of six partners, who in turn work with partners within their regions:

BRAC University, Bangladesh, working with partners in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan, convened by Maheen Sultan
www.bracuniversity.net

Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA) at the University of Ghana, working with partners in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, convened by Takyiwaa Manuh
<http://cegensa.ug.edu.gh>

Nucleus for Interdisciplinary Women's Studies (NEIM) at the Federal University of Bahia, Brazil, working with partners in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Nicaragua, convened by Cecilia Sardenberg
www.neim.ufba.br

Social Research Centre (SRC) at the American University in Cairo, working with partners in Palestine and Sudan, convened by Hania Sholkamy
www.aucegypt.edu/src/

UNIFEM
www.unifem.org

The Consortium is co-ordinated by the **Institute of Development Studies**, in the UK, www.ids.ac.uk, and directed by Andrea Cornwall. IDS also hosts Pathways' Global Hub, which is convened by Rosalind Eyben.

Our aim

Through exploring women's pathways of empowerment, our goal is not just to understand how change happens in women's lives. It is to contribute to positive change. We aim to do this by generating knowledge, building constituencies, creating spaces for reflection and dialogue, and using what we know to advance women's struggles for rights and recognition in global and local spaces. We seek to do this by actively reaching out to and engaging diverse constituencies of activists, academics and practitioners - whether they are involved in global or national policy processes or grassroots activism, in academic establishments or local councils.

Our research framework and topics represent a journey of engagement that took shape through an extensive

process of engagement over a nine-month period. It included multi-stakeholder scoping workshops, cross cutting reviews and intensive discussion amongst members of the Consortium. This process helped us not only identify burning issues for women's empowerment in each of our contexts. It also allowed us to home in on entry points for change - whether in the form of neglected topics or well-trodden debates in need of a new perspective.

What the resulting projects have in common is that they have been identified for their potential for making change. This chimes with the overall philosophy of the programme, which is to look and invest where the energy is, where change is happening and where we can tap into processes,

politics and passions that can advance women's rights and justice and equality for all.

Three themes mirroring the principal demands of feminist and women's movements over the last three decades gave us entry points with which we began this process:

- **Body** – from rights over our own bodies, to choose when and with whom we have children and sexualities of our own choosing to the ways our bodies are represented in media and religion;
- **Voice** – from women's ability to exert control over the decisions that affect her everyday life to issues of representation and political effectiveness in political institutions at all levels;

- **Work** – from getting in touch with what it is that can make work empowering for women and understanding better the shifts in women's work that have taken place to such dramatic effect in recent years to exploring how women mobilize to claim rights as workers, especially in poorly paid and stigmatised professions.



Tessa Lewin

Our themes

Out of these three entry-point themes came a complex kaleidoscope of projects and interventions – each seeking to provide a perspective that would help lend food for thought and strategies for action. These, in turn, gave rise to thematic clusters that link together research and communications work across our regions:

From the entry point of **Body** came the theme **Changing Narratives of Sexuality** that aims to go beyond a problem and victim focused approach to issues of sexuality to celebrate the positive dimensions of women's sexuality, and explore what it takes to bring about change that can enable women to enjoy rights to their own bodies, sexualities and pleasures.

From the entry point of **Voice** came the theme **Building Constituencies**

for Equality and Justice which looks at both how to change institutions to make them more accountable and responsive to women and at processes of policy change, alliance and coalition building that can bring about and support these changes.

From the entry point of **Work** came the theme **Empowering Work** and its enquiries into the conditions under which work and welfare can be empowering for women, and what it takes to realise them – whether in terms of mobilizing women to claim their rights as workers, or designing cash transfer programmes with a more explicit feminist perspective.

Lastly, recognising that “empowerment” has become such a nebulous term, reduced in much mainstream development talk to

“empowerment lite”, a fourth theme emerged: **Conceptions of Women’s Empowerment**. Work associated with this theme is at once conceptual, creative and intensely practical. It includes regional and international dialogues between diverse people from within and beyond the world of development, with the aim of seeking new ways of understanding and explaining the process and dimensions of women’s empowerment. It also includes experimenting with representation, using photography, TV dramas and digital shorts, and animation – to explore visual languages with which to communicate and interrogate notions of empowerment. Another dimension of this work will be using the written word as a medium for telling stories of change - readable tales told from the

perspective of people who have made or seen changes happen in women’s lives from which others can learn.

Multiple intersections bring our own pathways together. We meet in different combinations, for different purposes, in different parts of the world, building our network and evolving our own analyses through dialogue. We all work with students and other researchers, building capacity as we learn together. And in all our work, we aim to build communication in from the start, rather than as an afterthought, using YouTube, podcasts and other internet-based communications alongside more conventional channels.

Our aim is to better understand how empowerment can contribute to justice and equality for all.

Our work

Pathways researchers are challenging some of the orthodoxies that run through conventional development narratives, producing new empirical data and analysis that suggests a different story. The Empowering Work group in South Asia, for example, are investigating whether earning income automatically brings about empowerment for women – as is often assumed by development agencies. Initial findings here suggest there is a continuum between women fully employed outside the home and women carrying out various activities inside the home with more or less of the production being for sale. Depending on the definitions of paid work, women’s degree of participation also varies and this variability has not been captured by official statistical definitions of labour force participation.

Making the most of our international connections enables us to inject new ideas into ongoing policy processes. Linking global debates with highly localised and finely grained ethnographic work, the Middle Eastern hub is conducting an action research project designing a pilot Conditional Cash Transfer scheme (CCT) in Ain el-Sira, a slum area of Cairo, and then studying what effects it has on the lives of women who participate in it. The project is being developed under the auspices of the Egyptian Ministry of Social Solidarity, who will be responsible for supplying social workers and providing the cash transfers. This pilot is intended to inform government plans to scale-up CCTs in different geographic regions.

Other Pathways researchers are looking at but also beyond the

conventional repertoire of interventions to promote women's empowerment, in order to explore new ways of representing and communicating. Researchers in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, who are part of the West African hub, are carrying out projects ranging from exploring the role of institutions in providing the context, policy frameworks and policies for women's empowerment in Ghana, to a project looking at the representation of women in music lyrics and TV soaps and at how new, more, empowering representations of women can be created using popular media.

From orchestrating a high-level seminar on women and political reform, jointly with four Congressional commissions, in the Brazilian National

Congress, to tracing generational changes in women's everyday lives in a poor neighbourhood in one of the fastest growing cities in Brazil, the Latin American hub brings together analysis with action. The Global Hub's work allows us to explore the links – and the disconnects – between the way women's empowerment is talked about in global policy documents and what those working within global policy institutions understand by and do with this term. Resisting identification with “the global” as a supra-national space, the Global Hub focuses on very real institutions and processes whose effects can be felt in multiple locales, including in the places where they are physically located.

