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Abstract

This review discusses the religious and cultural challenges to the empowerment of women in some patriarchal societies in Africa. The article takes a critical reflection on some of the contextual deficiencies of the gender empowerment measure (GEM) developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as a universal benchmark for assessing gender inequality. It has been highlighted that agency is a necessary component in the conceptualisation and realisation of women empowerment particularly in Africa. The article further demonstrates that the GEM has capitalist, elitist and Eurocentric biases that account for a relatively small percentage of women in the formal sector of the African economy. The nuances of multiple and overlapping identities of women in many African countries that are not adequately encapsulated in the scope of the GEM are discussed. It is thus concluded that women empowerment measures and indicators should be sensitive to the context and values of those it seeks to assess rather than adopting abstract mappings that tend to reduce and universalise all women in all societies.

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Background

Over the past three decades, the discourse on women empowerment in our society has been and continues to be the central theme of international and national debates and discussions on human development. The existing gender disparities in human development have been so acute that global war continues to be waged against various forms of discriminations against women. All too often, women and girls worldwide constantly face various forms of disempowerment in many respects: health, economic, social and politics (UNDP, 2010). To help arrest the situation of women marginalisation, a number of international treaties and instruments that uphold the principle of non-discrimination and equal rights have been deliberated upon, debated and endorsed by the United Nations (UN).

The 1945 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Covenant on Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil Political Rights are among the key components of the international bill of rights that promote and safeguard all persons and ensure that every person regardless of race, sex, creed or colour is treated equally. The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), an international treaty to which most nations have acceded, and its optional protocol deals directly with women's rights and empowerment. The CEDAW provides the framework on gender equality and empowerment in terms of access to social, economic and political opportunities that are available to all in society (Catharine, 2006).

The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and its follow-up plans for action continue to provide an overarching international structure for gender equality, particularly women empowerment in 12 critical areas of development: poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, economic disparity, power sharing, institutions, human rights, mass media, environment and the girl child (African Development Forum, 2008). The Millennium Declaration of 2000 also resolved to promote gender equality in all shades of economic, social and political life in order to stimulate sustainable human development. The promotion of women empowerment as a development goal is premised on two fundamental arguments:

that social justice is central to human welfare and is intrinsically worth pursuing; and that women empowerment is a means to other ends of human development (Malhotra, Sidney and Boender, 2002). However, women in most societies, particularly in most patriarchal societies of Africa face social exclusion, marginalisation and powerlessness.

The UNDP Human Development Report for 2010 indicates an upsurge in sex ratio (ratio of male birth to female birth) with an increase from a stable 1:05 in the early 1970s to a recent 1:07. This global preference for boys is traceable to sex-selective abortions much of which is attributable to China (UNDP, 2010). The report again indicates that there are 134 million 'missing women', almost a third more than previous estimates (UNDP, 2010: 76). 'Missing women' refers to 'mortality patterns and sex ratios at birth (the ratio of male births to female births) that disadvantage women' (Sen; Narayana, as cited in UNDP, 2010: 76). These and many unsavoury pictures of gender disparities have engendered several academic research and discourse on women empowerment. The international research community, both advocates and academics, persist relentlessly to focus their attention on finding a lasting solution to the toxic orthodoxies of women disempowerment. While many researchers and the extant literature are directed at women's participation and inclusion in economic, social and political spheres of life (African Development Forum, 2008; Catharine, 2006; Hodgson, 2002; Miraftab, 2004; Moghadam, 2010; UNDP, 2010), research and analysis that take into account the socio-cultural and religious contexts especially in non-Western societies remains largely unexplored (Syed, 2010).

This has generated gender researches that are dominated by Euro-centric ideologies and paradigms characterised by secular and capitalist orientations (Essed, 2002; Steady, 2005) further leading to 'an abstract mapping of systems of gender stratifications rather than to a contextualized interrogation of gender differentiation in organizations and societies' (Syed, 2010: 283). This review critically explores the cultural and religious barriers to women empowerment in the context of Africa and reflects on the challenges of evaluating women empowerment in this context with measures (such as gender empowerment measure (GEM)) developed with Western societies in view. The article suggests a context-appropriate empowerment measures as alternative to the universally developed gender empowerment assessment indicators. I begin in the following sections with an attempt to conceptualise empowerment, a review of the GEM and then point out some of the barriers to women empowerment in Africa. I will round up by suggesting a few remedies to some of the identified deficiencies of the GEM.

Theorising Empowerment

The discourse on empowerment is so paramount to human development and alleviation of poverty that it is found in the documentation of over 180 World Bank aided projects (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005). The concept of empowerment has been contested and conceptualised differently by various researchers and advocates. In a preliminary study, Bennett (2002) conceptualises 'empowerment and social inclusion' as a closely related but separate concepts. Bennett defines empowerment as 'the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence, and hold accountable institutions which affect them' (p. 13). On the other hand, 'Social inclusion' has been described as 'the removal of institutional barriers and enhancements of incentives to increase the access of diverse individuals and groups to assets and development opportunities' (Bennett, 2002: 13). To Bennett, both concepts are operational in the sense that they describe process rather than an outcome. It is further noted that empowerment involves people and groups or actors who have agency to do things in a manner that will result in a desired outcome, whereas social inclusion requires institutional transformations to establish people's obligations and their claims on assets and capabilities (*ibid.*).

In other words, empowerment may operate from 'below' and involves agency (ability) as exercised by individuals and groups while social inclusion requires a top-down approach (institutional and systemic change). It is thus through the process of social inclusion that constraints on human interactions are removed and opportunities and boundaries for social, economic and political development shared by all. Empowerment has also been viewed as changing the relations of power which limit women's options and autonomy and adversely impact on their health and well-being (Sen, 1999). In this view, empowerment is captured as a process of transforming institutional dynamics of power in human interactions such that the marginalised and oppressed people in society will be free from the constraints of choice and independence.

Community psychologists have conceptualised empowerment both as a process and an outcome occurring at the individual, organisational, community and societal levels of analysis (Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2009; Zimmerman, 2000). For example, while Rappaport (1981) sees empowerment as a mechanism by which individuals, organisations and communities gain control over their lives, Maton (2008) asserts that it is a developmental process through which marginalised individuals and groups gain greater control of their lives and acquire valued resources and basic rights in their community.

Women empowerment is often seen as a mechanism by which women become able to organise themselves to increase their own self-sufficiency, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control valued resources which will enable them to challenge and eliminate their own subordination (Keller and Mbwewe, 1991). The most essential element to the different understandings of women empowerment is human agency and women's self-efficacy (Malhotra et al., 2002). Feminists and human right perspectives on empowerment contain the notion that fundamental shift in perceptions or what Malhotra and colleague call 'inner transformation' is essential to the exercise of choices. Thus, women should be able to define self-interest and choice and consider themselves as not only able, but also entitled to make choices (Kabeer, 1999, 2001; Malhotra et al., 2002).

A useful definition of empowerment that takes into account the nexus of the different conceptualisations of the concept which may be applicable across contexts has been offered by Kabeer. Empowerment, in Kabeer's (1999) view, is 'the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them' (p. 437). Essentially, this framework of empowerment takes into account the agency of people to make choices in life within a given context where the power to exercise these important choices was hitherto absent. Accordingly, one way of thinking about women empowerment is in terms of their 'ability to make choices': to be disempowered thus implies to be denied a choice. To this end, the idea of empowerment is inextricably connected with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the process by which those who lack the ability to exercise choices acquire such power (*ibid.*). Put differently, empowerment entails a process of change from disempowerment to empowerment within a specific domain or context. People who exercise great deal of choice may be powerful, but they are not 'empowered' in the sense of Kabeer's framework of empowerment, because these people were never disempowered in the first place. The notion of choice in the empowerment conceptualisations indicates the possibility of alternatives, the ability to have chosen otherwise (Kabeer, 1999).

Again, Kabeer draws a logical connection between poverty and disempowerment because a want of resources and means for meeting one's most basic and pressing needs rules out the ability to make meaningful choices. She further distinguishes between first- and second-order choices. First-order choices are those 'strategic life choices' which are critical and relevant for people to live meaningful lives. These strategic life choices or first-order choices include choice of livelihood, whether

and who to marry, whether to have children, whether and when to have sex in marriage among others. These strategic life choices, frame other second-order, less consequential choices which may be necessary for the quality of one's life but do not necessarily make up the defining parameters of life (Kabeer, 1999).

It is important to also highlight the connectedness of women empowerment to concepts such as 'gender equality' and gender equity. For example, it has been argued that 'women empowerment', 'gender equality' and 'gender equity' are separate but closely knitted concepts (Malhotra et al., 2002). Gender equality can be expressed in terms of equality under the law and equality of opportunities and access to productive resources that enable opportunity (World Bank, 2001). Gender equality thus implies 'equivalence in life outcomes for women and men, recognizing their different needs and interests, and requiring a redistribution of power and resources' (Malhotra et al., 2002: 7). Gender equity also 'recognizes that women and men have different needs, preferences, and interests and that equality of outcomes may necessitate different treatment of men and women' (Reeves and Baden, 2000: 10). It must be noted that regardless of the similarities in the concepts underlying gender equality and gender equity, the concept of empowerment is distinctive and unique because of its process orientation. Whereas none of the other concepts clearly encompass a progression from one state (gender inequality) to another (gender equality) (Malhotra et al., 2002), empowerment is a process (Kabeer, 2001) which embodies a progression from a state of disempowerment to empowerment.

It is apparent that there have been attempts by various researchers and policy commentators to develop a more comprehensive understanding of empowerment by breaking the process into major components. Although the components differ from one writer to another according to the goal and orientation of a particular writer, generally, there is a greater consensus that empowerment is both a process and an outcome. For example, Kabeer's (1999) strategic choice was construed in terms of three inter-related dimensions: resources which are pre-conditions under which the choices are made; agency or the 'power within' (the ability to define one's goals and act upon them); and achievements which are the outcomes of the choices one makes (p. 438). The World Bank's report (2001) describes rights, resources and voices as three basic and critical components of gender equality. Resources, perceptions, relationships and power have also been defined as the main taxonomies of empowerment (Chen, cited in Malhotra et al., 2002). Batliwala (1994) also characterises empowerment as the right of control over resources and ideology. Agency is at the heart

of most conceptualisations of empowerment. Resources and agency together contribute to the ability of people to live the lives they so desire and to achieve the valued ways of 'being and doing'. It is reasonable to suggest from the foregoing analysis that lack of agency does not imply disempowerment. Certainly, where the failure to achieve valued ways of 'being and doing' is attributable to laziness, incompetence or individual preferences and priorities, then the issue of power becomes immaterial. It is only when the failure to achieve one's goals can be traced to some deep-seated constraints on a person's ability to choose that it can be considered as a manifestation of disempowerment (Kabeer, 1999).

The central idea of empowerment, therefore, is in the possible existence of disparities in the abilities of people to make choices rather than the differences in the choices they make. For instance, if a girl out of personal preference opts for an Art programme of study instead of a natural science at a college, the choice as exercised by the girl cannot be understood as a want of power (disempowerment). Disempowerment can be said to exist only when the power to exercise choices is hampered by structural or systematic bottlenecks but not as an outcome of individual preferences. An experiential lack of uniformity in functioning achievements cannot be necessarily construed as evidence of inequality because it is highly unlikely that every member of a given society will give equal value to different possible ways of 'being and doing' (Kabeer, 1999).

It is worth noting that while various available literature have argued that agency should be treated as a focal point of the dynamic process of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999), and resources and achievements as necessary enabling conditions and outcomes respectively (Malhotra et al., 2002), these concepts are not mutually exclusive in the development of empowerment indicators.

Benchmarking Women Empowerment and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM)

In 1995, UNDP developed a gender-disaggregated Human Development Index and GEM or index as a universal benchmark for evaluating gender inequality globally (UNDP, 1995). The UNDP uses the GEM as a composite index to evaluate 'gender inequality in three basic dimensions of empowerment: economic participation and decision-making, political participation and decision-making, and power over economic resources'

(UNDP, 2004: 270). The GEM tracks the percentage of women parliamentarians and legislators, senior officials and managers; and of female professional and technical workers and the gender inequalities in earned income, reflecting economic autonomy (Syed, 2010), and uses this to compute a country's standing on women empowerment. A few existing literature on gender and empowerment have embraced the universalist view of assessing women empowerment arguing that empowerment indicators must involve standards that lie outside the purview of localised or context-specific gender beliefs and systems (Bisnath and Elson, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Sen and Grown, 1987). This view is ostensibly premised on the fact of a general recognition of gender subordination across contexts and cultures.

However, other researchers, including those associated with UNDP, have debated and discussed the problems of a 'universalist' measure of gender empowerment as conceptualised by the UNDP (Beteta, 2006; Klassen, 2006). A few more have expressed doubts about the suitability of a universally mapped system of gender stratification that fails to recognise and integrate contextualised gender differentiations in organisations and societies (Economic Commission for Africa, 2004; Kabeer, 1999, 2001; Syed, 2010). For example, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA, 2002) has raised reservations about the limited scope and coverage of the GEM as currently conceptualised by UNDP. The commission argues that the GEM and other related gender development index (GDI) by the UNDP are highly correlated with the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country and thus measures the general well-being instead of gender inequality itself. In this view, gender equity is substantially explained by the income level of a country rather than gender equity or women empowerment which is more than just the income of a country. Also, the political power as measured by women's share of parliamentary seats has a reliability problem because parliament is not the only locus of power in a given country (ECA, 2002). The commission questions the kind of power on the basis of which the GEM is framed, and further accuses the GEM of neither capturing issues of women body and sexuality, nor does it cover religious, legal and cultural issues (*ibid.*).

Syed (2010) also critiques the GEM of being elitist, capitalist and Euro-centrally biased. He posits that a narrow focus on women's access to paid work per se does not result in their empowerment. Women though may have access to paid work; they may be occupying the lowest ranks or may be employed in the lower paying occupations. It has been noted

that women in paid work frequently experience the problem of slow career progression and rigid gender stereotypes that make them remain a social minority (OBrien, 2001). The 'Engelian myth' perspective of the GEM, 'the view that women's empowerment, or emancipation as it used to be called, lies in their incorporation into the paid workforce' (Pearson, 2004: 117), is problematic. Klasen (2006) also problematises the earned income component of the GEM as embodying elitist posture. He points out that a poor country, for instance, cannot achieve a higher value of the GEM even if it has equality of earned incomes. However, there is a possibility that a rich country might do well in the GEM by virtue of the fact that the country is rich and has a high earned income component. The GEM, thus only accounts for women who belong to the upper class of society with access to scarce education, political and economic networks (Beteta, 2006). In fact, most of the variables used as proxies to traditionally measure empowerment, such as, education and employment, might at best be described as 'enabling factors' or 'sources' of empowerment (Kishor, 2000a). It is significant to state that employment and other resources such as education should, in the context of policy and evaluation, be thought of as enabling factors or conditions; that is, as potentially relevant ingredients to foster an empowerment process, rather than as part of or as the end result of empowerment itself.

Again, it has been underscored that the GEM does not include important non-economic dimensions of decision-making power, such as a country's effort to reduce violence against women and increase the protection of women's right (Beteta, 2006). A focus of the GEM on women's participation in professional and technical jobs potentially leads to a bias towards measuring inequality exclusively in the formal economy, a sector that is relatively small in some developing countries with large agricultural sectors (*ibid.*). For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, women are under-represented in sectors outside the agricultural sector with 36 per cent outside the sector (UNDP, 2010).

The participation of women in national parliaments, which the GEM captures as an indication of empowerment, has also been regarded as elitist because it could potentially be an outcome of political decisions, such as, affirmative action (Syed, 2010), rather than an exercise of personal agency. It has been further argued that female participation in political decision-making may not necessarily translate into empowerment especially in societies where religion has a considerable sway in everyday life and existence (Syed, 2010). For example, in addition to an elected parliament, a council of religious scholars in Iran has the power and authority to disqualify candidates and parties for membership in

their national legislature (*ibid.*). In other words, women's participation in decisions-making and parliament should be tied to their participation in religious institutions as these religious bodies may be as powerful as national legislature.

The foregoing preponderance of research evidence clearly suggest that a narrow focus on women's access to the paid employment without critical reflections on other relevant socio-economic aspects of their life holds no promise of alleviating women disempowerment. It is certain from the literature on gender and empowerment that the role of gender in development cannot be understood without understanding the socio-cultural, political and economic contexts in which development takes place (Malhotra et al., 2002). However, empowerment will be much meaningful only in the taken-for-granted traditions and culture that are specific to contexts and groups. The constructions of the GEM fail to account for individual's unpaid economic activities within or outside the household (Syed, 2010). The varied economic activities that fall outside the coverage of the formal economic sectors of a given country are apparently kept beyond the purview of the GEM. Empowerment assessment and measure should not fall short of simple access indicators (such as, participation in national parliaments or professional and technical employments), rather, it should be defined in terms of the potentials for human agency and valued achievements (Kabeer, 1999).

Women Empowerment and the GEM in Africa

In spite of the gains made by the international community with respect to fighting power imbalances which resonates throughout societies, the situation in Africa is gloomy. Some cultural and patriarchal tendencies are still a major source of gender inequality and discrimination in Africa (African Development Forum, 2008). There are a number of customary practices (relating to land and inheritance, the right to divorce, right to choose a partner and to negotiate for sex) in Africa which have for years hampered the power of women to exercise choices but which the GEM unfortunately ignores in terms of its scope and assessment.

For example, in Uganda, women account for most agricultural production in the country but own only 5 per cent of the land with a highly unreliable tenure system (UNDP, 2010). Even in countries where legal reforms allow for asset ownership by women as in Namibia, Rwanda and Tanzania, religious beliefs and customary laws largely undermine legal

advances (UNDP, 2010). Although there is enough evidence of reversals in women empowerment on the African continent due mainly to upsurge in traditionalisms and patriarchal tendencies, the GEM's scope of empowerment assessment does not include traditional and religious impacts on women empowerment or the lack of it thereof. Rather than its capitalist and elitist posture which may account for only 36 per cent of women in sub-Saharan Africa who work outside the agricultural sector, the GEM would be reasonable in terms of coverage, reliability and validity of assessment if it takes into account the agricultural and traditional sectors of most African economies where majority of women are represented. It should be noted that empowerment as stated elsewhere (Kabeer, 1999, 2001) is fundamentally premised on the ability of women to exercise choices in the face of opposition and not just technical and first class professional employments and political positions as it appears to be the main focus of the GEM.

Apart from the fact that most statutory, general or civil laws in most African countries are embedded in patriarchy and enforced in discriminatory manner, African culture, tradition, beliefs and practices are even more discriminatory and result in an increased propensity for women disempowerment (Kelin, 2004; Okereke, 2002). For instance, despite the health problems of female genital mutilation (FGM), the custom is still practiced by 28 African countries where the prevalence ranges from 5 per cent in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Uganda to 90, 97 and 98 per cent in Ethiopia, Egypt and Somalia respectively (African News Agency, 2000, 2003; Amnesty International, 2003). Another traditional practice that adversely affects women empowerment in Africa is the marriage by abduction (Okereke, 2006). In Ethiopia, for example, a man may kidnap and rape a girl he wants to marry and as long as the abductor appropriately pays the girl's family some money and agrees to marry the girl, he is absolved from punishment for the rape (BBC, 2001; Equality Now, 2002; Women's Action Network, 2005).

Women in many African countries cannot formally terminate violent marriages through divorce because of legal obstacles (Okereke, 2006). Their autonomy in marriage is restricted by customary practices that favour a patriarchal social structure. Abuse and adultery on the part of men in these countries are not sufficient grounds for divorce unless the abuse claim is backed by cruelty and/or desertion or the adultery was incestuous (Hajjar, 2004). The paradox is that there are no such restrictive legal requirements for men (Okereke, 2006). In other words, whereas divorce is a permissible option under marriage and divorce

laws in most African countries, the reality is that divorce is entirely a male prerogative. Men can divorce their wives without any justifiable reason (Amnesty International, 2005). For example, section 27 of the Divorce Act in Uganda indicates that if a wife's adultery is the cause of a divorce, a court may order that the whole or part of her property be settled for the benefit of the husband and/or the children (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Meanwhile, there are no such laws and provisions for men in Uganda (Okereke, 2006). Indeed, the patriarchal social structure in many African countries, which the GEM fails to take into account in its gender empowerment and inequality index, potentially restricts women from exercising their naturally bestowed rights. The situation becomes more complex when women in these communities identify with what Willig and Wendy (2008) call 'cultural costume'—'the beliefs and values that people may hold and have inherited from their particular community' (p. 547). This according to them may lead to the abuse of culture by both men and women in making certain decisions. People can refuse to change oppressive practices and gender oppression in particular due mainly to the fact that these practices are part of an unchanging culture which is immune from outside scrutiny (Gibson, Swartz and Sandenberg, in Willig and Wendy, 2008).

Apparently, there are practices in the family and community that are violent and discriminatory towards women but have avoided national and international scrutiny on the basis of the fact that they are seen as culture and traditions that deserve tolerance and respect (Coomaraswamy, 2002). Since women's sense of identity and dignity are inextricably connected to their general attitude towards their community, and that their self-respect comes from being members of their community, they feel offended sometimes by what they may consider as an arrogant gaze of outsiders who critique their way of doing things (Coomaraswamy, 2002). When women internalise their subordinate status and think of themselves as persons of lesser value, their sense of their own rights, entitlements and empowerment becomes diminished. They may acquiesce to violence against them, and make 'choices' that only seek to reinforce their subordinate status in society (Malhotra et al., 2002). Empowerment measures that emphasise the need for these women to be psychologically conscientised, to make them aware of the structural and contextual factors that may militate against the realisation of their full potentials (rather than their political and economic inclusions) will be ecologically valid criteria for most African countries. It should be stressed that social change and the journey to personal empowerment begin with disadvantaged

people's awareness and understanding of the unjust psychological and socio-political circumstances that oppress them (Lord and Hutchison, 2007; Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2009).

In Ethiopia, most rural people apply customary laws and practices to their economic and social existence and interactions (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005). Customary conflict resolution mechanisms and civil courts are legally integrated in order to enable Ethiopians retain their ethnic and religious identities (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005). In as much as this arrangement allows for retention of religious and ethnic identities, it may be detrimental to women in practice. Again, Article 34(7) of the Ethiopian constitution reserves the option to settle disputes related to personal matters in accordance with religious or customary laws, rather than the civil code, if the parties to the disputes agree (*ibid.*). The common practice, as Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) indicate, is that personal disputes, especially those between men and women, are mostly directed to traditional adjudication mechanisms by the choice of men without regard to the consent of women. In Muslim dominated areas, if the husband appears before the 'sharia' court first to initiate divorce proceedings, then the wife in most cases does not have recourse to the civil court (World Bank, cited in Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005). Traditional arbitration of disputes in Ethiopia is so important part of the everyday episodes of conflicts that even if one goes to formal courts as a first instance, the case would be transferred to traditional courts for adjudication (Legovini, 2004).

It has been observed that, though traditional courts are the first recourse for settling disputes in Ethiopia, these courts generally favour men (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005). For example, Legovini recounts the story of a 32-year-old well-educated woman who was the head of a woman's association in Ethiopia as follows:

My husband does not give me enough money for household expenses... He gets drunk every night and disturbs our peace. One day I had had enough of him and asked him to leave the house, which I own. Surprisingly, the community elders said I should leave the house... At the end, I had no choice than to continue living with him.

The foregoing account of an educated woman and leader clearly exemplifies the extent to which women in most African countries may be disempowered by customs and traditions despite their level of education and/or leadership positions (though education as enabling variable may be important for empowerment). The 'universalist' principles around which the GEM is conceptualised and its cross-cultural expectations and

applicability are thus problematic as it may lack ecological validity. A woman who participates in professional economic activities and decision-making; who may score high on the earned income component of the GEM (as in the case of the Ethiopian woman), may not be empowered after all if the family system, patriarchal social structure and customs do not allow her to exercise choices. It is significant to reiterate the point that while studies that apply indicators across cultures to assess women empowerment may be useful only for international or inter-regional comparisons, the suitability and validity of these same indicators across settings can be questionable (Malhotra et al., 2002).

Women and men in most African countries are products of their traditions and operate within the boundaries of culture. The ultimate outcome of power is grounded on the constant interaction and reciprocal determinism of agency and contextual dynamism (Alsop, Bertelsen and Holland, 2006). These women have come to regulate themselves through the internalisation of cultural prescriptions and have formed their identities around them. The fact is that our choices in life are highly circumscribed by norms of conformity we have made our own, not because they are necessarily good for us, but because we are subjected to social influences all the time; these are psychological chains we wear all the time (Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2009). Women's acceptances of their second fiddle role and secondary claims on household resources, their acquiescence to violence at the hands of their intimate partners, their readiness to bear children at the expense of their health and survival to satisfy their own preferences for sons, are all behaviours by women which undermine their own well-being (Kabeer, 1999). Women have internalised values and social norms of their own lesser status in society and this largely contributes to their disempowerment.

In a research conducted by Shaffer (1998) in Guinea, it was found that both men and women, though recognised the existence of gender inequalities in terms of the heavy workload of women and men's control of decision-making, did not consider these inequalities unjust. The 2011–2012 UN Women's report also indicates that over 40 per cent of Ghanaians think it is justifiable for a man to beat his wife (UN, 2011). In a more comprehensive multiple indicator cluster survey (MICS) conducted by Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) in 2011, 60 per cent of women as against 36 per cent of men believe it is justifiable for husbands to beat their wives in Ghana (Ghanaweb, 2012). Evidently, universal empowerment assessment criteria that quantitatively headcount number of women in key political and economic positions, without a corresponding qualitative and contextual analysis of women's own diminished sense of their

rights and entitlements due largely to socio-cultural constraints, risk context minimisation error. Regardless of their leadership and economic positions, women in Africa may still be psychologically (internal) and structurally disempowered. It should be noted that the agency of women makes access to resources and opportunity structures meaningful to result in a desired outcome. A country may provide resources by way of policy commitment (e.g., affirmative action) but if women themselves lack the ability to exercise choice, the provision of structural opportunities per se will not result in empowerment. The dimensions of the GEM at best preach and measure social inclusion rather than empowerment as most of its indicators require systemic transformations which may operate from 'above' (governmental level) instead of from 'below' (involving agency of individuals).

For example, if women in a particular country have unimpeded access to resources or to contest in national elections but fail to utilise their opportunity because, perhaps, they regard politics as more of male preserve than female, their access to resources may not translate into agency to exercise their rightful choices. They may voluntarily waive that right to men because of their internalised social norm. Clearly, women's right must be vindicated but women should themselves win those rights in a manner that allows them to be full participants in a community of their choosing (Coomaraswamy, 2002). Their apparent lack of agency may not necessarily translate into disempowerment; neither will political or chief executive positions of women in Africa change the internalised sense of their lesser status in society, and thus may not be a significant index of empowerment.

Furthermore, lack of agency by women may be traceable to faith-based traditions in many religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism (Syed, 2010). In Jewish traditions, a wife is often referred to as a homemaker, who is largely responsible to determine the character and atmosphere in the home. She is thus expected to place her family above her career (Levertov, 2004). In the Christian literature and tradition, there is a high emphasis on women's submissiveness and role in the family. For example, Prophet Isaiah rhetorically asks 'can a mother forget a baby at her breast and not have compassion on the child she has born?' (Isaiah 49:15, New International Version). Again, Apostle Paul admonishes in Titus 2:4–5 (NIV) that 'Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands, and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one maligns the word of God.' These teachings based on Christian principles define gender roles and who they are. The life of

Christian women is constantly shaped by these (and other similar) teachings and they come to accept them as part of their social reality and religious piety. 'Christian teachings hold that gender differences between men and women are constructive; they contribute to what we do and who we are' (Syed, 2010: 287).

The Islamic tradition equally places some value on the family as an integral part of the faith. Also, in Qur'an (4:31, as cited in Syed, 2010), the responsibility to provide adequate economic resources for the family, including wife and children is placed on men. Islamic teachings generally absolve women of any economic responsibility in the household unless they decide to contribute financially to the household (Hassan, 1999). These accounts apparently demonstrate the influence of religion on the social and economic realities of women. It goes without saying that any empowerment assessment or measure that fails to substantially integrate religious belief systems and their impact on the agency of women, particularly in Africa where religion is of paramount interest to the people, risks the danger of failure.

Although religion influences social policy and everyday life of people in many societies, such influence is most visible and, at times, state sponsored in Muslim countries (Syed, 2010). It has been noted that religion is the foundation of many societies in which Islam is practised (Lazreg, 1990). The GEM unfortunately ignores religious interests in its conceptualisation of empowerment. The GEM does not take into consideration the relative agency of males and females with respect to their religious choices and commitments (Syed, 2010). For example, it does not take into account an Islamic premium placed on the traditional family in which men have the moral duty and responsibility to provide economic support for the household or the family. In other words, since Muslim women are generally absolved from any financial or economic burden within the household, by reason of their religious belief, they are less likely to be economically active in the formal sector (Syed, 2010). The GEM thus fails to explain the participation in the care economy in context, such as Africa and thus embodies a 'universal breadwinner' bias that treats all males and females as potential breadwinners of their family, a phenomenon which feminist researchers have often criticised (Folbre, 2006).

In many African countries, the primary responsibility to provide financial support in the family lies solely with men (see Adinkrah, 2012; Silberschmidt, 2001). This dichotomously gendered-role is so absolute that even if wives have independent means of subsistence or earn higher income, their husbands are culturally expected to provide for them

(Adinkrah, 2012). This breadwinner ideal defines the social and cultural identities of men in Africa, and serves as a necessary material and patriarchal condition for male authority and control over women (Adjei, 2012). In this context, women may often fall short of the GEM's criterion of economic empowerment because they may not see the economic sphere of life as a necessary part of their responsibility and social role in society, and thus may find it inconsequential to compete with men in this regard. The secular and capitalist orientations of the GEM make it inadequate to capture the nuances of context and content of gender empowerment in the African context, particularly Muslim and other faith-based societies (Syed, 2010).

Recommendations and Conclusion

This article has argued that women empowerment requires the agency and the instrumentality of women themselves to win power in their respective communities for their welfare. It has also been argued that the indicators of women empowerment are diverse and multifaceted that the current conceptualisation of the GEM does not adequately reflect. As this article has revealed, the GEM is embedded with capitalist, elitist and Euro-centric prejudices. Any empowerment indicator should be sensitive to contextual possibilities and encapsulate value orientation (Syed, 2010). A relational framework for the reconstruction of gender empowerment has thus been suggested (Syed, 2010). According to this framework, women empowerment should have three levels or hierarchies: macro, meso and micro levels of relations. The relational levels, though hierarchical, are overlapping and interconnected across the levels. From the relational viewpoint, women empowerment is not an isolated form of identity, exclusion and discrimination. Instead, it is a combination of all these factors across multiple levels (Syed, 2010).

At the macro level of gender empowerment, legal, political, economic and social empowerment should be the central focus. According to Syed, legal empowerment requires a legislative framework that grants equal opportunity for all (e.g., anti-discrimination laws, and functional institutions to implement these laws and monitor progress). Political empowerment at the macro level should take into account women's participation in all institutions of power; political parliaments, religious institutions, provincial and local councils and other grass-root organisations. Economic empowerment includes women's access to economic resources

and that also should include ownership of property and participation in the formal and the informal sectors of the economy. The social empowerment addresses social stereotypes such as devaluation of women's role as mothers or carers and the restrictions on their mobility. At the meso level of empowerment, Syed (2010) describes legal compliance and diversity policies as significant to women's self-determination. These include the provision of flexible employment to accommodate women's and men's life cycle routines and domestic commitments, and affirmative action to allow for women's participation in political and economic life.

Inter-sectionality, identity and agency, autonomy and literacy are the concerns of the relational framework at the micro level of empowerment. Inter-sectionality deals with issues relating to women's multiple identities such as those arising from gender and religion or gender and class. Women's cultural, work, religious and family identities and their agency to exercise choices which border on their welfare should be relevant for empowerment assessment. The Economic Commission for Africa (2004) has also developed the African Gender and Development Index (AGDI) to take care of the contextual issues of gender empowerment in Africa that are not reflected in the GEM. The AGDI basically has two parts; Gender Status Index (GSI) which quantitatively measures indices, such as, social, economic and political power, and the African Women Progress Scoreboard, a complementary measure to the GSI. The Women Progress Scoreboard explores and itemises elements, such as ratification of CEDAW, legal commitments, free contraception policy, land rights, family violence elimination, institutional mechanisms, and sexual health education, as issues that are critical to women empowerment in Africa. In other words, a country can be deemed to have taken steps necessary for achieving women empowerment when there are legal and policy commitment, budgetary resources, institutional mechanisms, information and training that directly respond to cultural and structural practices that are harmful to women and that inhibit them from exercising unfettered strategic life choices.

It is important to state that empowerment measure should consider the diverse ways of society and take into account the informal sectors of the socio-economic life of women. Women's participation in non-electoral positions and community-based organisations should be factored in the analysis, discussions and measurement of gender empowerment as they form part and parcel of the social, political and economic realities of women in most non-western societies. Any road-map to equal opportunity for men and women will remain a dream

unless it takes into account gender differences, its inter-sectionality with other structures of power, and its implications on gender empowerment within the family and work related roles (Syed, 2010).

Clearly, the need to factor agency and context in GEM cannot be overemphasised. To attempt to define from the outset of an intervention exactly how it will change women's lives, without some knowledge of ways of 'being and doing' which are realisable and valued by women in a given context, runs the risk of prescribing the process of empowerment and thus violating its essence, which is to enhance women's capacity for self-determination (Kabeer, 1999). Indeed, GEMs should be sensitive to the values within the domains of possibilities in which women are located (Kabeer, 1999), rather than imposing outsider values that tend to reduce and universalise women in all societies.

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